

Samādhi (13) Steady with Breathing

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Hello, and welcome to this series on *samādhi*. Monday, I talked about *samādhi* as simplicity. Yesterday, I discussed *samādhi* as settling, or settledness. Today I will look at *samādhi* as steadiness, or a steady attention to the present moment. It is a steady attention to the experience we are having that we are settling on.

This idea of steady attention is closely connected to the idea of continuity of attention, or continuity in the present moment. The idea is to hang out with the breath so we get absorbed, or more engaged in it. Some people find this hard to do because they expect to find something wonderful in their breathing. It is like there is a key or some pleasure there. There is something profound to be found. If they keep looking, breathing is a solution.

The real warmth, beauty, and delight of *samādhi* are not found in the object we pay attention to. It is in the subjective experience of being intimate, connected, steadied, or absorbed in the experience we are having. We don't want to look for a solution in the experience of breathing. It is in the interaction between us and breathing, us and the object of concentration. It is found in the way we attend to the object of concentration, in the steadiness, the subtleness, and the simplicity. It is found in the continuity of attention that is more continuous than the continuity of being lost in thought. We can stay and rest there.

One of the things that supports this steadiness and continuity of attention is the wise use of our imagination. It can be easier to have continuity of attention if we can imagine in our own way, some form that connects and inspires us to ride along with the breathing. I will offer you some examples. If you want to do this, find an example that works for you.

In my early years of practice, I would imagine that my in-breaths and out-breaths were like the slow, gentle movements of the wings of a large bird. Breathing in and out was the way the wings went up and down. If the exhale was extended, it was like I was gliding along in the wind. Then I would lift up again and let them go down. There was something about this imagery of being in the high sky, and the breathing being gently and intimately connected to the wings flapping that got me engaged, staying right there with it.

The other thing that I have imagined is riding a scooter. I have told this story many times before. When I was a little kid, I loved going on a push scooter. The way that a push scooter works is that I would kick the ground with one foot to push the scooter forward. Then I would ride the momentum until it started to slow. Then I would gently push again. Ride, push. The meditation on breathing was like this. The inhale was like the push. The exhale was riding the momentum. It felt good to ride that momentum to the end of the exhale, and then gently push with the next inhale. That imagery harnessed my imagination to help me be present, rather than the imagination taking me off to some other lands and times, or things that were going on.

Counting breaths is taking thinking and using it to be present. The wise use of imagination can also bring us into the present rather than taking us away. I used the example in this last meditation of putting our gentle, safe hand on someone's back or feeling someone there for us, holding us. Maybe we are walking in an unsteady way in a place that is a little dangerous, and someone is just there. They are letting us know that they are there to catch us. If we fall, they will take care of us. It is nice if we know that this is the case. They are just right there.

Many years ago, when I was in college, I took a massage class. When we were massaging someone, the teacher taught us to always have one hand connected to the person being massaged. Then there is no interruption or surprise of being touched again if we needed to reach for some massage oil for the massage.

Always have that contact. I found that to be a nice imagery of being with the breath and meditation. Never lose contact. Stay there.

That image does not work for everyone. The bird flying may not be the right image for some people. I have been doing this for 50 years, so I have a series of images that I use. Another image that I have enjoyed is thinking of the exhale as riding a slide. I am just riding down the slide like a little kid, "Oooh." That just kept me right there. It made it kind of fun, like being on a slide.

You might have an image that works for you. I know some people have the image of breathing as being a big wheel. The sense of this wheel turning helps them stay with the inhale and exhale. The turning of the wheel can be a simple image that keeps them connected and involved.

For some people, the imagination is not going to help them stay steady and continuous with the breathing. There might be something interesting or pleasant about the sensations of breathing. I generally find exhaling to be more pleasant than inhaling. One can have the opposite experience. Be sure to be there for whatever pleasantness, pleasure, or satisfactory sensations are in the cycle of breath. Just ride it. Feel it. Sense it.

Some people find that they can get absorbed in breathing because they begin tuning into wherever there is a sense of pleasantness or pleasure in the breath. I have known some people who adjusted their breathing so it could be more pleasant or enjoyable. They sometimes breathe a slightly bigger breath or relax the belly and soften the body. Some parts of the breath cycle can be pleasant. Rather than the imagination helping one to be present, it is the ability to tune into something pleasant with breathing. We ride that pleasure, allowing ourselves to feel the pleasure, taking it in.

All along, this idea of steadiness and continuity of attention with breathing should be done without any strain. It should be done without any expectation or measure of how well we are doing. Of course, we are going to wander off. Of course, the continuity is not going to be continuous. Find a way to meditate so that the loss of touch with the breath, the loss of staying connected and steady, is folded in as part of a healthy meditation. It is not a problem. Of course, our mind will do that. Then find a relaxed way to begin again – to come back again and again.

Here, I also used imagination. I don't think it was a choice, or that I thought about it. It was just an image that arose as I was doing the practice. At some point in the practice, I learned to have a friendly attitude towards my breathing and my thinking. I didn't set it up as a tension or as a problem. When I found myself wandering off in thought, I wouldn't tense up, I wouldn't be critical or see it as a problem.

The image I had was of a horse that had escaped the corral. I would bring it back by riding another horse up next to it. We were like companions, riding together. I would go along with the horse that escaped for a little while, and then take a big arc to come back to the corral. I would come back to where I was supposed to be.

That imagery came up as I noticed I was thinking. I would go along with the thinking for a little bit. I wasn't going to immediately tense up or do something about it. I just knew I was thinking. I would accompany the thinking for a bit. Then, gently, I had this idea, "Okay, come back. Let's go back. Let's make a big circle, not a jerk back. We would turn around 180 degrees and not just jerk back, but a gentle, long curve." How long would that take? Maybe it took two or three seconds to do that process.

When I came back to breathing that way, I was much more settled than I was before wandering off in thought. It was, "Okay, here I am. Let us have continuity. Let us be steady here. Let's be committed lovingly or absorbed in just the simplicity of this. Simple, settled, and steady here." I hope these ideas help you find something that supports you with steadiness and continuity of attention.

So, thank you very much, and I look forward to being here again tomorrow morning.