

Samadhi (36) Approaching Subject Well Being

Gil Fronsdal

2025-03-17

Keywords:

samādhi, jhāna, access concentration, five hindrances, sensual desire, subjective experience, pīti, mindfulness, well-being, objectifying mind

So, welcome to this series on *samādhi*, and today also marks the, maybe the five-year anniversary of beginning these YouTube mornings together. Some of you have been along for the whole ride for five years, and I'm very grateful for all of you who come. And I have some confidence that the goodness of our time together spreads from you into the world. So this kind of network, this kind of radiating network of bringing good to the world is a great thing to be part of. And thank you for these five years.

So, *samādhi* this week—we're going to kind of cover the territory more of the approach called access concentration, usually in English, but the stage of approach, approaching *samādhi*. This is when it's relatively easy to stay in the present moment. If we lose the present moment, it's almost like it's obvious, it's easy to come back, or there's almost a call inside to come back, be here. And there starts to be a shift of orientation, where the orientation is towards the goodness of meditation, the joy, the happiness, the well-being of meditation, or of concentration, of really staying present, over the mind, not wandering, not being scattered, not being caught by other things. Really be here.

And it's almost a little bit of a quantum shift, like, okay, now we're here. And it is a reorientation of some kind. With that reorientation, it becomes a form of joy, a form of delight, or this is good. So in the classic teachings about going into *samādhi*, going into *jhānas*, the penultimate activity that is done is to learn to let go of the hindrances. We've talked about this before.

But here, the five hindrances are very subtle. They can be very big forces in the mind, huge, and that can be very destructive for people. But in deeper meditation, we're getting into the subtlety of it, how easy it is to drift off into thoughts, concerns of sensual pleasure. Easier to

get involved with movements of aversion. How easy it is to move into getting kind of sloth and torpor, rigid and resistant, the subtlest versions of restlessness and regrets, the subtlest versions of uncertainty, like what am I doing here?

And so it's somehow settling those and appreciating the goodness, the rightness, the pleasure, the well-being of not having the mind caught in those kinds of concerns. I think of this as a shift from objectifying thoughts to a subjective feeling. What I mean by objectifying thoughts is that when we're caught in desires, for sensual desires, sensual pleasures, they usually go with thoughts about the experience of sensual pleasure, about the object of sensual pleasure. Same thing with aversion. There's no aversion without something we're averting, pushing against, wanting to go away. That involves engaging the thinking mind, where whatever we have aversion for or desire for is now an object of the thinking mind.

To the degree we're not strong, it keeps us disconnected from ourselves. We're no longer present for the deeper subjective experience of what's actually the feeling of being alive, the vitality of being here. So the shift now, to really begin happening deeper and deeper in as we approach, is that we're no longer satisfied, content to be objectifying, to be caught in thoughts that are about the world, about desires, about diversions. There's a shift to trusting or resting in the subjective experience. So with the breathing, for example, it's the deep subjective experience of the breathing that we linger with, we stay with.

To give a little sense of what the subjective experience is like, how directly, almost somatic it is, it's kind of like you take two fingers, your thumb and your pointing finger, and press them together. You'll feel some sensations, maybe of pressure, maybe heat, maybe firmness, something. Some of the sensations are there. Those sensations you feel as you press your fingers together occur together with sensing them. If we didn't have the capacity to sense, to feel, we wouldn't know that there was pressure. The sensing of the pressure and the sensation of pressure are one and the same.

You can't really separate them. Linguistically, we can say there's a sensation as a thing out there, that we're aware of something, that's the sensation. But in order to sense the sensations, that's not out there, that's in the fingers. So the sensing and the sensation together make up the subjective experience. Now, I can be objectifying it by saying I'm not having the right kind of feeling of pressure, there's a particular right way of doing this and I'm not quite getting what the sensation is supposed to be—it's supposed to be maybe harder or softer or more pointed or more spread out—and this makes me think about why is Gil doing this as an exercise.

It could be doing it with some really pleasant, delightful sensations of the body. That would be the way to get my attention. Those thoughts are in the objectifying world. The subjective world here is a place where sensing and sensations occur together. So with the breathing, it's those sensations of breathing that are known where they're being sensed, where the awareness is, the attention is. To stay right there in that subjective world of sensing and sensations.

As we stay there, the subjective experience can grow because there's a goodness, there's a sweetness, there's a well-being that can arise. That is not the well-being that comes from physical pleasure, sensual pleasure. So there's a shift of orientation in the approach stage from being concerned, interested, enamored with the objectifying thinking mind, and instead feeling like we're at home and this is where it's good. It feels delightful to be here in this subjective experience where sensing and sensation occur together. That subjective experience can be quite broad through the body. It could be a tingling, a warmth, a vibration, a flow, an opening, a lightness that happens even as we stay very close to the inhale and exhale, maybe counting them.

So really stay right there with them. But the idea is not to be in the control tower, tightly focused, but rather to be relaxing into the subjective experience, letting go into it, trusting it. Thinking of that subjective experience of breathing is kind of like the nest, the resting place, the grounding place for our sense of being and our life. The Buddha talks about how as we make this shift from the hindrance of sensual desire to this deeper subjective experience, just that feels good. It can feel like a relief. It can feel like a happiness or contentment that now we know something that's more satisfying.

This is good. And it's less exhausting, less tiring. Thinking about sensual desire is exhausting. The mind is kind of restless, kind of forceful, kind of agitated, and you sometimes have a contraction and tightness in the mind. Resting in the subjective experience allows the mind to soften, to open. The control tower no longer has to work so much.

It can just settle back and allow for the subjective experience to inform it, to arrive, to be there. There can be a great sense of well-being. In the approach stage of practice, this is where you're allowed or encouraged to start feeling the well-being that's there in meditation now. However subtle it is, to recognize it and trust it, allow it to be there. There's something about giving our attention, giving awareness, making room for what is wholesome that lets the wholesome grow. The wholesome gives us a different subjective way of being with everything in our life.

I know that our lives are difficult. I know that there's all kinds of difficult emotions, sensations in the body that can happen. But as we get into this approach stage, we've learned how to be mindful of them, how to relate to these difficulties in a good way through mindfulness practice. It's okay to recognize and allow them to be there on the edges. Now it feels, in this approach stage, it feels just right to open to the deeper feelings of well-being, however subtle they are. So the breathing into the sweetness, breathing with the beauty, with the subtleness, with the contentment.

This is the work of the approach stage. But maybe I shouldn't use the word work. Some people think of it as play. Some people think of it as an act of love, lovemaking. Some people think of it as nurturing and caring and nourishing ourselves. The deeper experience of this kind of joy sometimes is because of a word play in Pāli, where *pīti* in Pāli also means to drink.

We're drinking the goodness. We're drinking the wholesome. So for today, as part of this ability to make a shift of orientation, I'd encourage you to spend a day kind of feeling the difference between the objectifying world of thoughts, especially thoughts of sensual desire, whether it's food or sex or some other pleasant, wonderful experience, that the objectifying, that living the thoughts of that versus deeply subjective experience. The metaphor that I have for this is that a person can be on a hot day or a cold day sitting at the edge of a beautiful lake and thinking about all kinds of sensual pleasures that would be wonderful to have, daydreaming, wishing, being angry for not having them, and preoccupied by how difficult it is to have these sensual desires. Right there in front of the person is this delightful lake, pond.

On a hot day, it feels so refreshing to go into it. On a cold day, it's maybe hot pools. It's so good to go into it. As soon as we go into it, what brings a tremendous sense of relief, joy, happiness, is the subjective experience. It is not just simply the subjective experience of being in the wonderful water. It's also the subjective experience of putting to rest, putting aside all those objectifying thoughts on the control tower.

Ah, this is good. So study that. During the day, the objectifying mind versus the subjective mind. Maybe you can step into the lake more often through the day than you realize. Thank you.