

Samadhi (26) Approaching Samadhi

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Thank you for those of you chatting about the exercise. I'll read more of them after I finish now. Welcome to this next talk on *samādhi*. For this week, we're going to be looking at something that is commonly in English called the access concentration or access *samādhi*. The word access never really quite sits well with me. The word in Pāli, *upacāra*, my understanding is it means something more closely to approach, approaching.

Acāra means to wander and to wander towards something. And based on that meditation we just did, the idea that attention has a little bit quality of wandering, soft, roaming, but it's roaming towards a particular place. It's moving towards something. When I think of access concentration, I think of like there's a door I have to go through. But if I think of approach, then wandering towards, approaching, then it's more of a kind of a gentle movement like a river flowing or I'm in the groove of something and now I'm gliding along, I'm in the slide, sliding, I'm approaching.

And we're approaching a shift that will happen when the *samādhi* kind of clicks in, when the *samādhi* kind of envelops us or begins to have a life of its own, in a sense, when we don't have to make as much effort. It's not so much dependent on us practicing, but it's more that we're being practiced at some point. But we're approaching this point where the shift begins to happen. And there's a number of things that begin coming together in this stage, the stage called the approach. And one of them is that we get in the kind of, in the rhythm or with a sense of ease with these two factors of *samādhi*, which is connecting attention and sustaining attention.

And the awareness that places attention and the awareness that stays there. Some people emphasize that sometimes that involves a little bit of very rudimentary thought, that the

thought is, oh, come back to the breathing, and the thought that kind of begins to feel and sense what's going on, and know it more carefully, oh, that's a smooth inhale, that's a smooth out-hale, that's a step-by-step inhale. Just moves, inhale goes up, up, up in kind of steps. Or that's smooth, that's pleasant. So it's not so conscious, the thoughts, but exactly and consciously done.

But it can be a very simple kind of thinking that keeps us in the flow of it. And so the classic analogy that we'll talk about again later is akin to, in the modern world, mixing water into flour to make dough, where we start kneading the dough in order to really spread the water into the moisture, and all the flour particles become moist. And some of it is kind of a kneading and a folding, and maybe it is like folding, folding bread and kneading bread. And if you are very relaxed and enjoy making bread, enjoy kneading bread, it can be delightful to just be kneading it and folding and kneading and folding. Or I associate sometimes with when I have received a massage, and sometimes in certain massages, I like to breathe in the rhythm of the masseuse kneading my muscles.

And this breathing with the slow kneading of the different muscles just feels like such a nice way of flowing and being really present and connected to what's happening. And so it's not a fixing attention. It's not staring at something. And some people, when they think of concentration, they feel like they have to kind of have this laser focus that's unwavering. And that can create a lot of strain. But rather, it's a very soft, I like to think of it as just short of doing nothing, just enough.

And at different times of day, different times of situations, that just enough is different, how much effort we have to make. But we're trying to make a very light effort so that some of the natural way in which awareness kind of roams and explores and moves around an object happens. Just like with the eyes. Relaxed eyes will roam around an object to see it in different ways with very relaxed movements. Not staring at something. If we want something from the object that we're looking at then we stare and then there can be a strain, but if we just kind of want to know it in a relaxed way, so the same thing with feeling and sensing.

And some people it's much more physical, it's a sensing and feeling, sometimes it's more of an observing, sometimes it's more of a knowing that goes on. But it's really right there with the breathing. And what's nice about the rhythm of breathing, people for whom this works, is that the rhythm of the breathing is a little bit akin to the rhythm of connecting and sustaining attention. Connecting and sustaining attention. Stay right here. Stay right here.

And if that can be done, so it's almost like the concentration that builds, it doesn't build in

sustaining, but it builds in action, in the activity of connecting and sustaining, connecting, sustaining. And the art of this is to know how to do that so that it just feels like, for you, the natural rhythm or easeful or absorbing to do it. And as I said, sometimes you can almost use the inhale and exhale as the speed and rhythm of that massage. So to connect with the beginning of the inhale, sustain it to the end, connect to the beginning of exhale, sustain it to the end. And these two little activities, connecting, sustaining, give us just enough to do that it might be easier to stay focused there on the breathing in a relaxed, absorbing way.

And there might be thoughts, but they kind of go to the periphery. We don't have to be focused on them. And at this stage in the meditation, yes, there will be thoughts that begin taking you away. That's normal. That's completely at this stage, the approach stage. But they don't take you very far.

And now you can kind of watch and see the mind beginning to go and because you're in this rhythm of connecting and sustaining you see the thinking beginning to go away and then you kind of fold it back in, fold thinking back into the activity of staying with the breath, the rhythm with the breath. Some of you might find that it works better if you always maintain that very quiet counting, very still, soft count because it gives the thinking mind something to do that keeps you focused rather than have the thinking mind idle so it wanders off. For some people rather than counting there might be a single word like in, out or even the word yes works very well. And I found the word yes to work really well when I'm also at the same time starting to become aware of the good influence that the meditation has on the rest of me, the pleasure that we talked about last week. And the pleasure becomes like the supporting actors or the pleasure becomes the cheerleaders or the pleasure becomes the encouragement.

You're doing well. This is good. And then you're, you know, it's almost like the pleasure is teaching you, oh, this is a nice way of doing it. So, for example, kneading the bread. If you're in a hurry and you can't really have to finish it quickly and maybe there's people around you wanting your attention and they're upset with you because you're not paying enough attention to them, then you start kneading it really fast in a stressful way, and it doesn't feel good.

But if no one's there, and you love doing the bread, you like the quiet and peace of the kitchen, the lighting is coming in from the window just right, and everything is clean around you in the kitchen, and you don't have any pressing responsibilities at the moment, and it just feels such a wonderful delight to feel the texture and the moisture and the movements of kneading

the bread. And something inside of you kind of begins to relax and soften that says, oh, this is good. Almost like you don't want to stop doing it. Even though you're kneading it way beyond what's really necessary, it's just like such a nice thing to do. So, whether you could follow all that in your own practice, that is, you know, the idea is all this is supposed to, if nothing else, not be what you should do, but it could be maybe a reference point to understand what you do do, what works for you and what doesn't work for you.

So, maybe some of you will know clearly that, yeah, counting doesn't work. Other people will, yes, it works. Some people will say, oh, this thing about this connecting and sustaining, I don't quite understand it. I already have a good way of being with the breathing. So, I think I'll stay with it for now. So, you're kind of finding your own way.

But I'm offering you all these different elements, and hopefully some of them will work for you and support you in the process of becoming really absorbed in the meditation practice. Absorbed in such a way that the mind, thinking mind, becomes quieter and stiller and softer, and there's a feeling of well-being connected to meditation. So may your connecting and sustaining of attention, may that movement be one that can bring you joy through the day, that maybe throughout the day there's a gentle massage of things you have to connect to and then sustain. Even if it's as simple as connecting to a door handle and sustaining that connection until the door is open. And may it be a way of entering the present moment more fully. So, thank you.