

Samādhi (21) The Path of Well-being

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Hello and welcome to this 21st talk on *samādhi*.

Samādhi is the phenomenally useful ability to be happily absorbed in an activity. *Samādhi* is a state of being absorbed or connected. This is one of the gifts that can happen in meditation. As *samādhi* develops, it is a state that involves a lot of pleasure. Some of that pleasure can be experienced as gladness, comfort, joy, or sometimes as happiness. When it gets intense, some people will describe it as rapture and bliss.

There is a story that is told about the Buddha as he was searching for a path to awakening. He remembered being a child and being left in a safe place on the edge of a field under a rose apple tree. The adults were working on the spring plowing festival in the field. As he watched the events around him, he became very calm, settled, and peaceful. He noticed that he felt a lot of joy and happiness. Then he entered a state of *samādhi* that was very enjoyable.

As an adult, he remembered this childhood experience, and he said, “Wait a minute. Maybe this is the way forward. Maybe this is the way to freedom.” He had been practicing asceticism, where he was denying himself and intentionally experiencing a tremendous amount of pain. He realized that this wasn't going to lead to his awakening. In ancient India, to feel pleasure was considered taboo among some religious people. It was somehow indulgent, or a self-preoccupation of some sort.

The quality of this pleasure of absorption under the rose apple tree was actually quite healthy and useful. It seemed onward leading. It led to a deeper unification and a deeper arrival and connection here. There was a deeper clarity that allowed him to do the work of coming to the end of suffering.

In Buddhism, we have two concepts that may seem contradictory but are essential to understand because they are interrelated. One is a very direct acknowledgement of suffering. We acknowledge the suffering of the world and our suffering. We don't turn away, deny, or pretend it is not there. We don't override it even with meditation. There is a mature understanding, “Yes, there is suffering.”

At the same time, there is an appreciation that there is a healthy pleasure, a healthy sense of well-being, that we can cultivate and develop. This is a way of meeting and holding that suffering. It supports finding a way through that suffering.

Holding both at the same time is part of the art. Not fixating on the suffering is one way to do this. Do not be overly afraid, concerned, or try to fix or solve the suffering. We try to understand that at least in the context of meditation – maybe not in the rest of our lives – our challenges, problems, even some deep psychological suffering that we carry won't be solved but will be dissolved. It is better not to fixate on our challenges but to let the discomfort and suffering be on the edges. While not denying our discomfort, we start to develop and settle into meditation more and more. We begin to feel the pleasure of meditating.

Of course, this is not something someone can do when suffering is new and fresh or big or someone is new to meditation. But as meditation deepens and we have a sense of it, then we start opening up to the pleasure of

meditation. This is the 21st talk on *samādhi*, so there has been a lot of foundation leading up to this. Even if some of you are new to this, maybe by now you can start seeing a little hint, a glimmer of the pleasure that might be there. You are starting to experience the pleasantness, and the sense of well-being.

When the Buddha recognized this experience that he had it as a child as the way forward, he said, “I don’t have to be afraid of this kind of pleasure.” Again, in his time, people were afraid of sensual pleasure and all kinds of things because it kept them trapped in the world. They believed it created more bad karma. For him, it was revolutionary to discover that there is a kind of pleasure and well-being that is not a trap. It is not a problem. We don’t have to be afraid of it. We can embrace it. We can use that as an entry.

It is easier for the mind to want to be present if what we are being present for is enjoyable. It is easier to be present and show up if we are listening to really pleasant things like music. Maybe we are doing an activity that we enjoy a lot. Meditation can be like that, too.

Eventually, as we begin understanding ourselves, we learn the art of being present. It isn’t a direct kind of sensual pleasure because we’re getting a massage or something. A sense of rightness, relief, or delight starts to well up from some deep inner source. This sense of pleasure is not because of something good in the world, or our senses are being stimulated in a good way. It is more related to something beginning to work in harmony. It is the harmony of breath and mind.

The breathing is relaxed enough that it feels harmonious and easeful within us. It is an easy, relaxed breath. It is an awareness that enjoys being there. We start to become more and more sensitive to the very subtle sense of enjoyment or pleasure that seems to be part and parcel of the meditation itself. It might be a growing global feeling of a hum, a pleasant hum throughout the body. It might be like a little square centimeter inside that, as we breathe, we touch that centimeter of the breath or that little brief point, and it feels so poignantly delightful to feel that. It might just feel so pleasant to exhale. It may not in a square centimeter kind of point, but more like we can’t fixate the attention on that pleasure. It is more there in the periphery, on the edges of the breath, on the edge of the sensations of breathing.

It is better not to fixate or look for it. Just allow it to be there as a nice supporting pleasure that provides a kind of biofeedback mechanism. When that pleasure is there, connected to breathing, then we are on track. That encourages the mind to stay there. Keep doing what you are doing. Stay with the breathing. Ride the breath. Stay absorbed in the breath. Allow that pleasure to be there and even allow it to grow as you are there.

Sometimes that pleasure is a growing pleasure. It is the tingling of the air going out of the nostrils that can become more intense. It could be the soft rhythm and the smoothness of an exhale in the chest or the belly. It could be the sensation of breathing in – the speed and the smoothness of the breath. It is possible that it is not directly connected to breathing itself. Maybe it’s more on the edges or just beyond the edges of breathing. There is something that just feels comforting and nice, like a radiance, perhaps.

I don’t know how it will be for any of you. There are maybe an infinite number of ways in which we can feel pleasure that is related to meditation. It is not because the room temperature is just right. It is because of how we are becoming connected and present for the focus of meditation, the centering place, or the settling place. We are really involved in that process, and it feels good. It is like reading a good book or being involved in a wonderful activity that we enjoy. That kind of joy begins welling up.

I will talk more about this this week. We’ll focus on this aspect of pleasure. Throughout the day today, try spending more time noticing the pleasures you feel in the activities you do. Hopefully, you can find something. Maybe there is a way you can drive in a pleasant way. You have to adjust something, so driving is pleasant. It may be how fast you drive or how you sit. Try to find ways you can bring more pleasure to how you cook or clean or whatever you are doing. See if you can find and appreciate how you can feel pleasure in activities you do. It might be better than the alternative if you don’t do that.

So, thank you.