

Sunday dharma talk

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Sitting down here, assuming my meditation posture, it's so familiar. It's kind of a homecoming. It's a place I've been many times before, a way of being. I've been many times. It feels very meaningful to be in this posture for me.

And perhaps because the topic is *samādhi*, I also sat here and closed my eyes and remembered, more than remembered, relived, redid, that when I was doing my long retreat in Burma, where I sat for months and months, many, many times a day, all day, at some point I found myself assuming this posture, taking a deep breath or two to get kind of settled, and I would repeat to myself a line from a song from the '60s: "And I've got a whole lot of love." And then I'd go, "Mm-hmm." And then I was ready to meditate.

There are many translations for the word *samādhi* into English. I wish I could translate it as love. It certainly has taught me a lot about love. To be settled, gathered, unified, immersed in such a deep way that kind of like everything is the subject. No difference between self and the world. No difference between meditation and the meditator. Clarity.

The word *samādhi* is a very popular word in religious circles in India and elsewhere. And in some schools of religion in India, some traditions, the word *samādhi* is reserved for the highest attainments, the awakening, full awakening. Generally, it's not, and in our tradition, it's not reserved for such a high attainment, but still a wonderful, wonderful, rich religious word. I don't think of it as a technical word, because then it loses some of its emotional association, depth, fullness.

In *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, they have lots of *samādhis*. I mean, tens, I don't know, thousands and thousands of *samādhis*. And in our tradition, *Theravāda*, we usually don't talk about too many of them. But one way of understanding *samādhi*, one way to understand what it is, and

maybe appreciate how the *Mahāyāna* have so many, is to see one thing all the way through to the end. To give yourself fully over to what's happening, see it through to the end.

The *samādhi* of an inhale. To see that inhale all the way through to the end. And exhale. To be there, be present all the way to the end.

When you're eating a meal at a retreat, to see the meal all the way to the end means that's all you do. You know, you give yourself over to the meal. And so you'll see that many times you don't just eat. You think about what's going to be for lunch the next day. Try to predict what's going to happen. Or start thinking about it. It'd be nice to get the menu, the recipe.

Or some people are eating way too noisily for a meditation retreat. I wonder if I'm eating too noisily. Maybe I'm a distraction for people. Certainly if I'm eating, I'm eating the wrong way. I must be guilty of inappropriate swallowing. That's not seeing one thing through to the end. That's getting distracted and caught in thoughts that really have nothing to do with the real task at the moment.

Just this, just the fork going into the lettuce. The magic, the wonder, the awe of what's on the plate and this fork going in and picking it up and just going to the mouth and putting it in, chewing, swallowing. There was a time on retreats where I would put food in my mouth with some utensil, and I'd put the utensil down and then just chew and swallow, and then just pick up the utensil to do the next one, to just really give yourself over to just one thing.

I find it, you know, remarkable to be pretty present, maybe concentrated in this hall. And then I go to walk down the steps, and I forget about the *samādhi* of step-walking. Just one thing, stepping to the end. It's not that far. By the time I get to the third step, I wonder if I can manage to go one more step without the motion sensor going on, the light going on, and it becomes a little game.

And then it turns on, and I forget about that, but then I wonder about, you know, should I get tea? I wonder what the weather will be like tomorrow. Or do I remember where I left my shoes? I should have, like, a regular place for my shoes. Maybe I should have a place with a name tag. Like, you know, like the teachers in school have a parking space as teacher. Maybe we can get a teacher plaque for the IRC, so that would be great.

And all that happens, you know, on these few steps going down. It's amazing the journeys the mind can take that are not part of the *samādhi* of stepping, stair-stepping. It can seem pretty ridiculous to say these things, but not here. Not here, if you start getting settled, quiet, and you start discovering that the *samādhi* of walking down the steps is better than the other options that you have. You lose something when you start planning the plaque, designing the

plaque you're going to have that is your parking space for your shoes. As delightful as that idea is, there's a loss. Yes.

So to begin to feel and sense the wonder, the beauty, the love of just being right here, intimate, connected to this thing right here. The word *samādhi* etymologically means to gather together. And so some people translate it as unify. And there are other words that are kind of synonyms for *samādhi* in Buddhism, *samājita* and *ekodi*. That also means to unify, unity.

So this gathering together, this unifying, I like to think of it as becoming whole. We're often fragmented. We're often sometimes divided. Sometimes divided with a war between parts of ourselves. And to heal the divides, to heal the fragmentations, is a very important part of this practice.

First, by seeing how that works, seeing how thoughts keep us away from ourselves, unless we think we are our thoughts. But we're not our thoughts. The thoughts are just part of the whole. So *samādhi*. And I think of the overarching thing that I kept thinking about today, and the topic of *samādhi*, is that it's a form of love.

I associate it so strongly with a tenderness, a gentleness, a warmth, an appreciation, a beauty. The tradition, the *Theravāda* tradition, sometimes associates *samādhi* with harmony. Things come into harmony, not just gathering together in unification, but feel as if things are in harmony. They're forming a harmony of all things. A beauty, profound beauty.

And I am emphasizing all this because of how often *samādhi* is interpreted to be concentration, and thereby bearing down, tightening up, focusing really tight, you know, got to do this, got to hang on for dear life. And then it sometimes creates a lot of tension. It sometimes contributes to greater fragmentation and greater divide. And if we associate *samādhi* with love, I don't know how easy that is, it is most explicit around the *Brahma-vihāras*. They're the four forms of love, and those can take you to wonderful, expansive states of *samādhi*. But associated with love, then I think maybe we'll have a different orientation.

If you love a child, you don't bear down on them with great force to show them you love them. And, you know, there's a gentleness, a kindness, softness, with which we're with the child. To love ourselves enough that we want to heal all the divides here. Welcome all the parts of ourselves in to be part of the whole.

So the five levels of *samādhi*: settling, gathering, unification, immersion, and clarity. So the settling in, to understand the value of being relaxed and relaxing, to understand the value of arriving here, appreciating the possibility of being at home or at rest in this very spot where you sit or where you stand, to appreciate the value of that, the gift of that, the benefit of that,

because it's here, being settled here, that allows for the deeper healing, the deeper gathering, the deeper love or connection.

And some of this settling is helped if we're not addicted to our thoughts. If we go from one thought to the next as a stream of consciousness, and we're not giving ourselves the time and the space for something to settle. And so part of the function of mindfulness, a moment of clear knowing, seeing, being with what is, is also meant to just give some space for things, give breathing room for your experience. So in that breathing room, something may be convenient to settle. And sometimes what settles is in the body, sometimes in the heart, sometimes in the mind.

The settling, relaxing part of *samādhi* is a natural phenomenon, that if you leave yourself alone, things will settle. Things will settle down. Some of you know I like the analogy of the discovery museums, exploratory museums they have for kids. Sometimes they've had these really big bowls, I mean, six-foot-wide bowl-like things. And you could drop something like a marble from the edge of it.

And the marble was back and forth. And there was a hole in the middle, a small hole, the very bottom of the bowl. But if the marbles had so much momentum, they would go right over that hole. But you watched them, and they slowly lose their momentum. And they slow down, slow down this way and that way, until they're slow enough that when they go over the hole, they fall through the hole. And then they go to rest.

But if you, the kids would lean over the edge of the big bowl, and then the marble came by, and they gave a little pat, pat. They gave it more momentum, and it would still go so fast that it would never fall into the hole. Well, we have this coincidence in English, referring to people who have loose marbles in their bowl. And these are marbles in our heads that haven't come to rest. And in fact, maybe it's the kid in us or something, yeah, is leaning over and we keep pushing them, we keep adding momentum to them. So they keep going and going and going. We don't give them a chance for that to come to rest or to fall through that wonderful hole, the gap.

So we give ourselves a gift if we allow ourselves to settle, to relax, to soften. And what we end up doing is not clinging so much to thoughts. The analogy given from ancient times of people's relationship to thoughts is that of a monkey swinging in the trees. And as soon as the monkey lets go of one branch, it's already grabbing the next branch as it swings. As soon as one thought stops, we're grabbing the next one. Monkey mind goes on and on and on.

So the clinging to thoughts is so powerful. So this settling begins to release a certain kind

of clinging, the clinging we have to thoughts. And then there's the gathering. And gathering has a lot to do with recognizing. Just recognizing all the parts of the way we are.

In some schools of *Vipassanā*, they do this body scan, which is a wonderful way of bringing our whole body together into a whole. In our form of *Vipassanā*, it's more random. We just kind of become aware of whatever calls our attention. And over time, we're gathering the whole body. We're waking up the body and becoming embodied. Gathering the whole body. Gathering our inner life, our emotional life.

So the emotional life is not at cross-purposes with the healing, cross-purposes with the settling, cross-purposes with the coming into harmony with all things. And so recognizing what's there, clear recognition that this is here, this too, everything is included. And I think it's one of the great gifts of this meditation practice, the idea that everything's included in mindfulness. And the mantra is "this too," though sometimes it's not said like that. It's more like a surprise: "This too? Really?" Yeah. This too, it's included, yes.

And then as these fragmentations and divisions we have within us settle more and more, we're able to kind of give ourselves. Just seeing one thing all the way through to the end means that more of us can start flowing with that, gathering around that, being with that, participating in it, which is where the harmony of unification is. Everything is kind of in the river, pointing in the same direction, flowing in the same direction, involved with the same thing.

Our thoughts are thinking about the practice, if we're thinking at all. Our intention, both conscious and subconscious, intention is really to be present here for this practice. The body is participating in the practice with an intentional posture, being awake in the body. Emotionally, and mood and the emotional atmospheres, is gathered and involved, being part of it. When I would sit there, "got a whole lot of love," I was gathering the love, the warmth, to be part of this process of being present.

So this gathering and this coming together in harmony, so that things become unified, working together, all of ourselves can be included as part of *samādhi*. And as we do that, the gathering together tends to kind of dissipate some of the desires and aversions we have, what we like and what we want and what we don't want, that keeps things separate. And as we get unified, those start falling away more and more. Clinging to preferences, clinging to aversions, clinging to desires, quiet. Because those things keep us divided if we're pulled into their orbit.

And we start seeing that strong desires, cravings, hostility, and aversion, having enemies to

our experience, takes us in the opposite direction from harmony and unification. Then we go further, and there's immersion. I love it. So, you know, I love the idea of immersion as dipping under the water in the sea, and just being underwater, looking at the surface, that I used to do so many times when I was a kid, over and over again. It was so quiet and peaceful.

When I was about, I don't know, my late 50s, I went back to that place, and I went in the water. Then I went under the water and looked up, and it was still peaceful there. Peace hadn't disappeared. When I surfaced out of the water, it was a lot more noisy now, 40 or 50 years later, to become a popular beach place.

So this immersion, this dipping in, this kind of everything saturated with *samādhi*. This idea of saturated, it's remarkable the way that the Buddha talks about the feelings, the joy, the happiness, the goodness that can arise with us giving ourselves over fully to one thing, and how that can be suffusive and pervade the body. The main instruction the Buddha gives for deep *samādhi* is to take the good feelings and suffuse them through the body, pervade them through the body. And this is another way, another step, in this wonderful process of unification, coming together for all of who we are into one place.

See one thing all the way to the end. Be the one thing that follows through to the end. All of ourselves. And when we're really settled, immersed in this loving field of *samādhi*, then it tends to do a lot to relax the grip of self, the attachment to self, the clinging to self. There's a softening of subject and object, softening of me, myself, and mine, and softening of this "I'm having the experience, I'm the victim of the experience, I'm the receiver of the experience." It just kind of, the whole self thing becomes less and less relevant.

Some people feel like self disappears there, or it becomes one with the experience. The meditator becomes the meditation. So I said earlier that *Theravāda Buddhism* and our form of Buddhism, they don't have so many *samādhis*, but they have one *samādhi* that you might not have known about. It's called a *samādhi*. It's called the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*.

There's a long history of creating a divide between the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness* and *samādhi*, saying they're two different things. But in the Buddha's teachings, he talks about the *samādhi* of the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. Even with mindfulness, there's giving ourselves over to the experience fully. It's a very... seeing one thing through to the end, becoming the one thing that is the end, full immersion and awareness, fully here, unified.

And then there's the fifth one, which is clarity. So the function of *samādhi* is to really help the process of liberation, the process of freeing us from our clinging and attachments. But as some of you might have noticed, clings and attachments are sometimes hard to let

go, hard to release. There might be some things which are easy, but some things are really so tight and compacted and so powerful, and it's been there so long that it seems like it's stuck. It's like they're there encased in cement. You know, they're not going anywhere. It's so solid. It's impossible to imagine without it. And sometimes it's impossible because we're so identified with it. Like, who would I be if I don't have my clinging?

Part of the function of *samādhi* is to create an inner environment that's soft, malleable, flexible, they say workable, that has clarity to it, bright, unblemished, untroubled, that is without hindrances. So the mind has become pliable enough that it's able to let go, it's able to release. The cement has dissolved. And so part of preparing the mind for deep letting go is to appreciate the quality, characteristics of the mind that shift and change in this beautiful experience of unification, immersion.

And one of those is clarity. Clarity of mind, clarity of awareness. It's hard at this stage to see any difference between mind and awareness. Just there's this wonderful feeling of clarity. The mind's eye just sees everything so clearly. And what the mind knows is less important than how it knows.

By now, we could have a reference point to really see the difference between knowing forcefully or tightly or with clinging, with desperation, knowing with aversion, knowing with preferences, knowing with confusion, knowing with attachment. We can really feel what that's like, and we can learn how to know without it. To know with clarity, to know with simplicity, to know with a full kind of giving ourselves to the *samādhi* of what's happening in the moment. Just this, just now.

In these deeper states of *samādhi*, it's possible to have the sense that present-moment experiences occur without a past or a future. We don't associate them with stories, with narratives. It's just a moment of this is happening, this is arising, this is passing. But the remarkable thing is that past and future start feeling like they're not relevant, or they're just kind of like figments of the imagination or constructs or phantoms, ghost-like in quality. It's not really where the vitality of lived life is found. And this kind of really begins: just this. This is where the lived life is, in this direct experience of this moment now.

So *samādhi*, this gathering, just really being here for something, helps this process of simplification. So just this moment, just this now here. So if you're with your breathing, that's a kind of a primary area of mindfulness and concentration, the quality and characteristics of breathing will change through each of these five phases.

The settling, the breathing might still be some holding or some patterns of tension or some

being easily distracted. But it's kind of gathering. It's settling. Breathing is relaxing. And then the gathering, we start cruising a little bit or surfing on the breath. It seems like, oh yeah, I can do it. As we're following the inhale, the whole inhale, the whole exhale, the unification around breathing.

Now it feels like there's just, everything is kind of gathered around to love the breath or beautify the breath or feel the beauty of it all or the harmony of it all. The immersion into the breath. Now there's breathing. We're so fully in the breath, but the influence of the breath is spreading out into the body, suffusing the body with goodness. It's no longer just the breath, but the wonderful kind of aura the breath has out into the body of well-being.

And then clarity. Clarity begins seeing the breath and highlighting breathing. All the sensations of breathing. Then who would have guessed that there are actually four different sensations just on the in-breath? Six sensations, like a kaleidoscope almost, through. That the sensations of breathing with the beginning of the in-breath is a different sensation than the end of the in-breath. And in the middle, it's a different sensation again.

And so when everything gets quiet and still and harmonious, the *samādhi* of mindfulness, seeing one thing through to the end, just being there cruising with the inhale as if there's no past or future. All there is is this one inhale. All there is are these sensations that are coming and going during this inhale, during this exhale, and it's seen with clarity.

So as I said yesterday, when we come into the *samādhi* factor now, we're halfway through, we're in the second half of the 12 *Upanisā* steps. It can get quite special. It can get quite special. Because now we're beginning to get a taste or a foretaste of some of the clarity, the beauty, the unification, the happiness of awakening itself. Because with *samādhi*, there's a clear beginning of releasing or stopping or absence of clinging.

And to feel and appreciate, oh, look at this. As I get more settled, as I get more unified, more immersed in the experience, yes, it's true. There's less clinging now, less attachment compared to what it was before. And then at some point, in this process of deepening *samādhi*, you'll come to trust it deeply. There's a deep trust and confidence that this is good, this is healthy, this is the way. This is the onward-leading way, leading to freedom. Thank you.