

The Meaning of Right Samadhi

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Ajahn Nyanamoli: Could you give me a mundane example of *samadhi* (composure)?

Q: The inability to be disturbed by disturbing events.

Nm: Like when someone is in a good mood throughout the day, they are not affected by bad or disturbing events.

The reason why I'm asking this is because it's not just the composure of an idea (it is partially). But that idea implies emotional composure as a background of it. So, a *mood* would be an example. Equally, someone's mind can be composed in a bad mood. This means that even good things would annoy and irritate them.

Q: Anything that happens comes within that bad mood. Everything has a disagreeable baseline. Or an agreeable baseline if they're in a good mood.

Nm: Yes. Do people have a say in their moods?

Q: No. You can't change it. It presents itself on its own.

Nm: That's true on that level. Can you think of another level in which a person does have a say in their mood?

Q: Putting oneself in a good mood is possible. As an example, reminding oneself of how fortunate one is compared to others. Doing certain things, and reflecting in certain ways, keeps my mood from getting bad.

Nm: Yes. The moods are indeed phenomena on their own. However, are you allowing your wild mind to go where it wants? When that happens, moods get depressed and agitated. Or are you trying to restrain it? As a result, you will feel happier and lighter. Therefore, you do not control the *phenomenon* of mood being present, but you do control the indirect cultivation of that mood.

As the Buddha said, even if one lives a non-celibate life, i.e. a householder's life, but frequently recollects the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, and their own virtue, then he will gain a pleasant abiding, a good mood - a kind of *samadhi* right now. When the mind is directed toward reflecting upon certain values, it becomes composed in that direction. So, day after day, you want to make a practice of reflecting upon the right things, even when you don't feel like it.

If you want a higher pleasant abiding, that will require more restraint, but it boils down to frequent remembrance and reflection. That is what will incline the mind. Whatever one frequently thinks about, that's where the mind is inclined to go. Is it sensuality or non-sensuality? Is it irritation, fault finding, ill will, or non-irritation, non-fault finding, non-ill will? One direction inclines to suffering and the other does not.

On one occasion...The Blessed One said this: Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still seeking enlightenment, it occurred to me:

Suppose that I divide my thinking into two classes. Then I set on one side thinking pertaining to sensuality, aversion, and cruelty, and I set on the other side thinking pertaining to non-sensuality, non-ill will, and non-cruelty.

As I lived thus (in solitude), diligent, persistent, and vigilant, sensual, (aversive or cruel) thinking arose in me. I understood thus: 'This class of thinking leads to my affliction, to others' affliction, and the affliction of both; it obstructs wisdom, sides with difficulties, and leads away from Nibbāna.'

When I considered this, that type of thinking subsided in me;

Whenever sensual, (aversive or cruel) thinking arose in me, I abandoned it, tamed it, and brought it to an end...

...Bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks(vitakka) and ponders upon(vicara), will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon sensuality, he has abandoned the thought of non-sensuality to cultivate the thought of sensuality, and then his mind inclines to sensual thinking. If he frequently thinks and ponders with aversion, he has abandoned thinking with non-aversion...or if he frequently thinks and ponders with cruelty, he has abandoned thinking with non-cruelty,...and as such his mind inclines to those unwholesome directions. - Mn19

Recollection versus Concentration

How is *recollection* different from *concentration*? What is concentration in mundane terms?

Q: It's all about honing in on something specific at the expense of everything else. For example, playing the piano or being completely immersed in something that absorbs all your attention. The piano is something you have to focus on, and if you lose focus for a moment, you'll make a mistake.

Nm: Basically, it's all about paying attention to what's in front of you. Does that differ from recollection and composure?

Q: Yes, because concentration depends on the object that you are focused on.

Nm: How? Where is the dependence? Because you could not care what you are concentrating on, but practice concentration on, for example, anything that comes into your field of attention.

Q: It depends on that object staying the same and not going away. Because if you are concentrating on anything that comes into your field of attention then you wouldn't call that concentration, because it would be diverse. It would be any type of object.

Nm: But that's my point. Does it matter what object it is in order to define concentration? Concentration is what you do. So, you could concentrate on any object that comes your way, and still practice concentration. Even if there are different objects. Can you concentrate on 'themes' or the nature of things?

Q: No.

Nm: So, what's the difference then?

Q: *Concentrating* is paying sole attention to a thing. Whereas *recollection* is more about discerning the background or context of one's attention.

Nm: You could say, in mundane terms, that when you concentrate, you are doing it, you are intentionally attending to a specific thing. But when you are recollecting, you are remembering the context in which a thing has presently arisen. You are not doing that context, you are remembering it, as opposed to concentration which is an act that you choose to do, which is at the expense of the bigger picture - the context. Concentration is concerned with content, whereas recollection is the discernment of context.

Recollection then is not about trying to focus on something particular. But rather about remembering certain contexts so that the mind becomes composed in them.

Q: Developing such composure is done *indirectly*.

Nm: Exactly. By recollecting certain contexts the mind will be encouraged in a specific direction. For example, seeing the danger and lack of satisfaction of attending in the wrong direction. If you sustain these themes, then the mind will turn away from the wrong direction. And why can't you do that with concentration? Why can't you just concentrate on your mind and make it go that way?

Q: Because it's not an object that you can attend to.

Nm: Exactly. Some people think that they can concentrate on their mind. However, you don't see your mind when you're concentrating *with* it. It's not a sense object.

Q: It's always *before*.

Nm: Exactly. In the same sense, if I were to be looking at visual things, I couldn't see my eyes there. That is impossible. Or feeling tactile sensations, to see my body there. That is impossible. The body is the background. The body is the organ because of which you sense sensations.

Do you think concentration can be helpful in practice?

Q: Initially it is needed for reading the Suttas and getting information.

Nm: Sure, attending to the right things is important. However, I'm referring to concentration as a practice. Is that beneficial?

Q: Yes. If the mind is inclining toward unwholesome things, it could be helpful to intentionally direct it toward more wholesome things.

Nm: When one is concentrated, is it possible to discern what is wholesome or not?

Q: Some things are obviously unwholesome.

Nm: But while being concentrated, do you have the possibility of discerning whether you are attending to something wholesome or not?

Q: Not by virtue of concentration. If you could, it would be at the expense of concentration.

Nm: What is the point at which attention becomes a concentration practice?.....when recollection is lost.

You have no choice but to attend to things. Nevertheless, you can learn not to over-attend and overlook the context, meaning, and background of whatever you are currently attending. The background is where your intentions are. And that context is what tells you what is wholesome (I can allow it to be attended further) or unwholesome (I should not welcome it, not delight in it, and make sure I don't attend particular signs and features that will increase these states). Attending only to the content means ignoring the context. So, ironically the concentration practice is directly opposite to the *samadhi* practice. *The composition* of the context is *samadhi*. Recollecting things rightly, that then sustains and inclines your mind in a certain way. Concentration means overshooting the mark and abandoning the context - even if it's concentrating on good things. That's why the whole practice is to learn how not to overshoot (concentrate) or undershoot (ignore, deny). Attend to something, but don't let it become a focusing concentration practice, because you cannot possibly do that and at the same time discern the background context of your intentionality, the meaning, and the mood behind all of that.

Right Recollections, Right Composure

Can you give some examples of the right composure and right recollection?

Q: Seeing the body as the present background context, whatever one is doing.

Nm: How would you see that?

Q: Don't be too involved in what you are doing.

Nm: What constitutes 'too involved'?

Q: *Concentration* in the way we just described.

Nm: So, abstaining from concentration. Would that then reveal the background?

Q: Not necessarily.

Nm: So, back to my original question. How do I reveal the context or background?

Q: As the Suttas say, be aware of what you are doing. Not in the sense of the actual object of activity that you are doing, but what your body is doing in general. In the sense that 'I'm sitting', 'I'm walking', 'I'm lying down', 'I'm standing' – as a way to indirectly notice the fact that, no matter what you're engaged with, your body is always there as the background image.

Nm: How would I prevent that from becoming my concentration object?

Q: To understand that the body we are talking about now cannot be seen as a sense object.

Nm: Yes, so how do you understand that?

Q: Frequently reflect and ponder on it.

Nm: And to frequently reflect and ponder on it, what do I need?

Q: To not forget the theme.

Nm: Where do I get the theme from?

Q: From studying the Discourses.

Nm: Yes. You learn about the themes that counter your whole experience. The normal tendency is to attend to what's right in front of you. That's the definition of sensuality in general. Your *being* existing on the level of sense objects. That's the measure of what's real. So then whatever you come across, you make it an object by overly attending it - *Ayoniso manasikara*.

In this case, you'll learn the right things, but you'll still make them objects of your attention. By studying, hearing, recollecting, discerning, and reclarifying, however, you will be learning how not to. Consequently, you need to abandon all of your wrong views (that require certain degrees of attention, concentration, assumptions of sense objects, etc.) to maintain the right composure, and the right establishment of the mind. The right view is therefore essential. So, we're back to what we always say. Without the right view, you cannot get the right *samadhi* because it isn't a technique. You cannot become accomplished in it by following a set of mechanical instructions. It's the discernment of and anchoring in the right context, the right mood. The mood of a neutral feeling that's not perturbed by pleasant or unpleasant, by agreeable or disagreeable.

When you study the Suttas, you will be able to get a better sense of context and themes. It won't take that much study to see that that's what the Buddha was often talking about.

How do you incline your mind towards wholesome and take it away from unwholesome? Not by watching your belly movements, nostrils, or the soles of your feet. But through your active thinking and reflection, you sustain these values by pondering on potential dangers, potential perils, lack of satisfaction, and benefits. That's what the first *jhana* is - a comprehension born of active thinking and pondering that is fully withdrawn, separated, and gone beyond sensuality.

Q: It takes effort to understand what the Suttas are genuinely saying. You have to be willing to question your assumptions about these things because you start from a position of ignorance and wrong view. Everything is misunderstood. One has to consider that there is another way to pay attention to things, a peripheral attention.

Nm: Yes. It is learning how to attend correctly because you start by over-attending everything. Or not attending what you need to attend. Either ignoring or over-attending. The Middle ground of it is awareness of attention and its context, its origin, its womb (*yoniso*). That needs to be discerned and learned first; sustained; endured; and then recognized for what it is. And then, yes, you can cultivate it. But even then, it won't become an object of your cultivation, in that concentration sense. Even though, in the broadest theoretical sense, yes – it's a phenomenon, a theme, an object that you can think about.

Q: It's an *indirect* way. Not directly wanting to change what is in front of you but changing the context.

Nm: Yes, you guide or encourage your mind to follow certain paths. Just like you can create pathways for the water to flow in a specific direction.

Right Context

What are some examples of the right context?

Q: The danger of craving or sensuality. The benefit of restraint and virtue.

Nm: Yes, it is important to repeatedly consider the dangers of non-virtue, sensuality, and ill-will, even if you are virtuous and sense-restrained. That's how you'll cultivate those right themes. As far as external actions are concerned, there is nothing more you need to do. You don't need to be adding new rules and random observances. By actively thinking about certain themes, one cultivates the right *samadhi* based on unbroken virtue. Setting the mind on the right path.

Q: Recollecting your virtue and experiencing the joy of that, the body becomes calm, and the mind becomes happy. That is the composure that leads to knowledge and vision.

Nm: Exactly. Your body will become calm and agreeable as your mind is calmed and made agreeable by having directed it to certain moods and themes. *Samadhi* then is a result of the right recollection, right thinking, and right evaluation - right *vitakka* and *vicara*. And anyone can sit for periods of each day, and make their mind think about these themes and values. If you spend a few days building that up, the right mood will begin to persist and gather momentum.

Losing Composure

Q: Let's say somebody says something to you and you get angry. In frustration, you lose your *samadhi*. How should you proceed?

Nm: The first recognition is that if you got actively angry, you didn't have *samadhi* in the first place. If you were cultivating these themes and actively reflecting upon them, you wouldn't give in when anger arises. And you would

see that difference now. If you have gone on a long-distance mental journey in a good direction (of non-anger) and somebody from a bad direction comes and tries to entice you. Yes, it might make you turn around and start walking a bit in that direction. But it's still quite a walk to go back into the bad domain - actively getting angry. And you will see that.

You will gain confidence because of that, thinking, "I don't need to panic and start fighting with the mind. Yes, it got a bit distracted. However, let me endure this thing that's trying to take my attention through sensuality or anger and, instead, keep cultivating the same indirect themes, cultivations, and contexts." The further the mind goes in that direction of abandonment and seclusion from the unwholesome, the harder it will be to get disturbed by things that are at a vast distance away. So, if you have spent a few days thinking about these contexts and you still end up angry over something, it means you need to spend more time cultivating the right context. Each time you develop the right reflection and recollection – constantly thinking about those values – the mind is travelling a little further in a good direction, and it will continue to do so for as long as your virtue and sense restraint remain unbroken.

You have to resist the urge to deal with your anger head-on. Because that will require abandoning the context and entangling yourself in the content to try to get rid of it. That's why I keep saying that most contemporary meditation practices are rooted in aversion and sensuality. Trying to get rid of things that bother you and replacing it with a sense pleasure - 'antidoting' this with that. Which requires you to abandon the context or not have it to begin with.

This is how you protect your *samadhi*. Recognizing where the importance lies. Reflecting on what you value. Thinking about the dangers of losing those values and having the mind return to states that are unbeneficial. Remembering all the joy, lightness, and clarity you got as a result of establishing the right mood. Recollecting the fact that the things that used to make you furious or lustful haven't moved you now, and if you forget about that, your mind will slowly drift back into those unwholesome domains. Unless, of course, those impurities have been fully uprooted.

There is no need to fight things directly. All you need is virtue, sense restraint, solitude, and an active practice of thinking about and reevaluating these wholesome themes. And when that practice becomes dry and the mind starts getting distracted, it's not about finding something new to do. It's about finding ways to rekindle the same things – until the mind has travelled far enough away from unwholesome pastures and burnt all bridges whereby it's impossible to return.
