

Calmness (4 of 5) Serenity Without Boundaries

December 9, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

samatha, vipassana, *samādhī*, one-pointedness, unified, composed, centered, concentration, fixation, inclusive, prioritize, intimacy, openness, jar, sand, identification

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We'll continue with the theme of the week, which is calmness. One of the Pali words for calmness or tranquility is *samatha*. In English, it is often translated as "serenity." It is seen as the partner of vipassana, meaning "insight." Insight practice is partnered with a certain kind of serenity or calmness that gives power, strength, or clarity to the insight.

Samatha, or serenity, is associated with concentration, and concentration is considered to be a means of becoming calm. Concentration or *samādhī* is a process of becoming composed or unified in our experience. I like to think of it as learning how to be centered in our experience, but with awareness globally soft and expansive, rather than narrow and tight, so that

everything is included in a certain way. It is not that we're paying attention to everything and understanding everything that is going on, but there is a feeling of openness in the body and in the awareness. Awareness is not stuck or fixated in any one place.

Sometimes concentration practice is associated with one-pointedness, which can mean putting the attention on one place. But that can be translated into a stuckness and fixation on one place, which tends to be detrimental to the person who is getting concentrated. Instead, the idea is that awareness – the attention and the sense of presence that we bring – can be very soft and open, with an expansive feeling to it.

This is kind of like having a big jar full of sand with a cone at the bottom. At the bottom of the cone, there's a little valve. When you turn the valve, the sand will pour in through the middle. From the top, the middle falls in first, and everything else follows. When we focus on breathing, it is as if we are opening the faucet, and everything begins flowing down through the force of gravity.

Everything is included. Everything orients itself towards being here in this experience. This can't happen if we are prioritizing one part of our experience over other parts of the experience, for example, if we're prioritizing our emotions, our thinking, certain parts of our body,

ideas about the body, or prioritizing what *should* be happening.

I like to think of this as living in emotions or living through our thinking. Sometimes we live through certain component parts of who we are, rather than living through the totality of who we are. When we do that, we are limited. The idea in Buddhism is to free ourselves from the limitations of being partial.

Sometimes we use the language of identification. We identify with our emotions, or with our thoughts or ideas, meaning that we define ourselves by them. For instance, I emote, therefore I am; I think, therefore I am; I'm in pain, therefore I am; I suffer, therefore I am. So we live in those things. We take up a stance on those things. We prioritize them in some way.

This is not to dismiss the importance of any of that. Sometimes we need to give caring attention to all the different parts of ourselves. But we can give attention in such a way that we don't live in it – we don't give over-importance to it and limit ourselves.

The idea is to compose ourselves or unify ourselves with awareness, so that the sense of presence with the body, the sense of being here, is much more expansive and open to the fluidity of change – the movements, the aliveness, the animated fluidity of life from moment to

moment that includes everything. Because we're not compartmentalizing, or fixating, or in conflict, or pushing some things away, the mind becomes settled, and serenity begins to settle in. We have an easier time getting settled on something. We can settle on the breathing – like the sand all gets settled through this faucet. We open the valve and things just flow in. We are centered, and everything kind of comes along, and gathers around, and is part of it.

But the gathering in is not an intentional thing. It's more that we are open and relaxed. That's why relaxation is so important in meditation: when we relax, things have a chance to flow into the center. If the center is breathing, it flows there. When things have a chance to settle, a calmness, a tranquility, a serenity begins to occur.

I find it interesting that the greater the calmness, the more the calmness has no boundaries. The calmness almost feels like it extends out into the air and the space around me. Sitting with my eyes closed, I can't really feel the difference between the inside and the outside of my body in relation to the calmness.

The idea is that calmness spreads and opens and has space for it all. The calmness can hold our sorrow. It can hold our anger. It can hold our pain. It can hold our joys. It can hold the thinking mind. All these have a

place, but we don't prioritize them. We don't live in them. They can just be there in the fluidity, the movement, and the softness of life as it unfolds.

Sometimes *samatha* is cultivated through concentration. This might be by centering oneself on one's breathing, but in this centering, there is also an opening. When we center ourselves on the breathing, with the exhale, there is also an opening up into the experience of breathing. With the inhale, there is an opening into receiving the experience of breathing.

We are centered on the experience of breathing, but that open experience and open feeling is one where things open up so that everything – the sand of our lives – can pour in. It is not so much that everything pours in and fills the mind. Rather, it just pours through. Everything is fluid, moving, and flowing. Nothing is stuck. The deeper experiences of tranquility are ones where everything is flowing, everything is included, and everything is allowed. In nature, everything is dynamic, and everything is process, unless we fixate on it or think too much about it. Then we might imagine it's stuck.

Samatha is very much an embodied experience, so the ability to feel and sense calmness in the body is an important foundation for the deeper calmness that comes with a concentrated, unified mind. This is a mind

that knows how to be present in a steady, rooted way – *here* for our experience.

I think of this calmness as a little bit like the ballast of a boat. The boat might have a keel that is quite heavy, so no matter how strong the wind is, the boat might tip a little bit, but it comes back upright. Calmness is the balancer. It lets us move relaxedly with things, and then come back upright to presence. We don't get knocked over. Sometimes I also associate calmness with being porous. When things are calm, it is almost as if the body, the mind, and the heart are so open that everything just passes right through.

When there is no calmness, and we're fixated on something, when we over-prioritize or identify with some part of ourselves, it is almost as if we put up a wall, and life hits it – life reacts to it and bumps into it. Then we have to deal with the fixation. But when we're relaxed enough, and don't prioritize or fixate on any one thing, then the experiences of life can move right through. We are porous to experience. This does not mean we are aloof, distant, and disconnected from life. Calmness actually lets us feel a deeper connection, a deeper presence, and a deeper intimacy – both an intimacy with ourselves and an intimacy with the world.

These are some of the deeper benefits of cultivating calm and tranquility that come specifically from

concentration or unification practices. Maybe you can try it. Today, see how you can relax any way the mind is fixated, or prioritizes anything, or identifies with something as me, myself, and mine. See if you can open up the space of the body, the heart, and the mind to be more inclusive in a way that creates space within which things can relax.

A little key or tool for doing this is giving yourself time. Do things with lots of time. When you open up and make space for being open, let it be open in time as well. Give lots of time to your experience, so that *samatha*, or serenity, can hold you and can contain everything. Thank you very much.