

Mindfulness of Breathing (48) *Samādhī* Factor of Awakening

March 7, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

samādhī, Seven Factors of Awakening, concentration, stillness, tranquility, equanimity, serenity, Buddha, nourishment, one-pointed, centered, *passaddhī*, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu

Gil Fronsdal

The topic for today is the *samādhī* factor of awakening. Tomorrow's topic will be equanimity.

Samādhī is commonly translated as “concentration” in English. The prolific translator, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, an American who lives in San Diego, translates it as “serenity.” The word concentration has a very different feeling than the word serenity. When *samādhī* is translated as serenity, it raises the question: “How is it different from tranquility – the factor of awakening that occurs right before *samādhī*?”

Samādhī is characterized by stillness. I don't know whether the words serenity and tranquility are almost complete synonyms for each other. If you look at the

Pali words – the words of the ancient language – *passaddhi* is the word for tranquility. I think it has more of a connotation of brightness – a bright, soft quality, a very light feeling. The body can feel light and soft when there is tranquility. Whereas in *samādhī*, the primary characteristic is stillness. In *samādhī*, there is a sense of deep stillness. Things have gotten very still. The greater the *samādhī*, the more stillness there is.

Also with *samādhī*, the stillness can sometimes feel very strong. At times, there can be a certain strength in *samādhī*. The mind is not distractible. The mind will not wander away at all. Sometimes people describe a feeling in *samādhī* of being locked in. The stillness is so strong that – Boom! – we are locked in. The mind is not going to move anywhere or into anything. Whereas in tranquility, the mind is tranquil and peaceful, but it is not one hundred percent still, perhaps.

As I mentioned yesterday, I associate tranquility with a quiet, very peaceful lake in the morning – completely placid and still, with not a ripple of wind. The morning light is clear and bright. There is stillness in the air. The birds haven't come out yet. This body of water is also very flat. Tranquility is like a body of water, which I associate somehow much more with the body than the mind.

For me, there can be a very embodied feeling that comes with *samādhi*. But the stillness of the mind is not like a body of water. It is more like the stillness of space. Everything is still in space. Space, in and of itself, is stillness.

Looking up at the sky at night, you see that space has no boundaries. It goes on forever. You can say that space is soft, I guess, but it is not a quality that has softness or lightness as part of it. It is more porous. I associate *samādhi* more with the mind becoming still, porous, and open – with no boundaries.

The mind has definitely landed. It is here. It has landed here. Sometimes the sense of the landing place disappears. It is just here, with this openness. It is not exactly embodied. The body sometimes disappears in deep *samādhi*.

One of the primary functions of tranquility is to support *samādhi*. When the body is tranquil, it supports the mind becoming stiller. It is as if you're trying to land a drone on top of a fast-moving train. It's a little hard to do. But if the train stops, then you can land it on the roof of the train, perhaps. It is the same thing with trying to land in a body that is agitated. It is hard for the mind to land and be here. So tranquility creates a nice home – nourishment, support – for the mind to become settled, rather than focused, on our experience.

The idea of focus in *samādhī* – sometimes the idea of one-pointedness – may be a metaphor that works for some people: “Okay, I’m really going to be focused, one-pointed on this.” But I think of this so-called one-pointedness as a gathering together, so that *all* of us is centered on something. It is being centered on the breathing.

Rather than being one-pointed with the mind, it is coming to rest at the center point of the concentric circles of our life. We are just really right here. So we are with the breath – completely with the breath – for example, if the focus is on the breath. But there is more a feeling of being centered on it, rather than being focused on it. At least that’s how it is for me.

The Buddha said the nourishment for *samādhī* is serenity, which in Pali is *samatha*. It is not the same word as *samādhī*. *Samatha*, in my rudimentary understanding of Pali etymology, is even closer to a sense of stillness – landing, taking a stand where we are really still and quiet.

So *samatha* is a kind of serenity of stillness, and not a serenity of softness and lightness. The nourishment of *samādhī* is stillness. That means: “Nourish yourself with stillness. Notice the places where you are still – where there is stillness.” Perhaps that is within.

There's a local woman who is a mindfulness teacher. She composed a little CD for children called "The Still, Quiet Place Within." I love that title. Recognize and find a place of stillness, but not one where we're being held still or entrapped in being still. Find something that actually feels nourishing and wholesome. If you are able to touch into that inner place of nourishing stillness, allow yourself to be nourished by it.

This is one of the wonderful characteristics of the teachings of the Buddha around meditation. It is not just dreary and dry: "Focus on the breath; stay with the breath; zero in on the breath," like a technique of mental focus. It is settling into, allowing, and touching all the ways in which we feel nourished and wholesome. We feel the wholesomeness, nourishment, and goodness of something. We are allowed to feel joy. We are allowed to feel happiness.

One of the characteristics of the Buddhist community in the time of the Buddha – which was apparently a bit unusual in the religious circles of his time – was that his disciples smiled a lot. They were always a joyful group.

Meditation is not meant to be a grim practice. Don't take meditation too seriously. Meditation is much too important to take seriously. If you take it too seriously, I think you may squeeze some of the life out of it. And

that makes it harder to feel the nourishment, wholesomeness, joy, and pleasure of it all.

Don't indulge in those things, hold onto them, expect them, or "huff and puff" for them. But, even in the smallest ways – in the course of the day or in the course of meditation – you are allowed to tap into and discover the places that feel wholesome, where you feel there is inner goodness and nourishment.

Each of the seven factors has a nourishment. How does *samādhi* come about if this is the orientation? Not a one-pointed focus, but rather imbibing the nourishment that is here. Even if only one percent of yourself feels a good nourishing quality. This may be worth a lot more than the five percent of you that is neurotic. If you give one hundred percent of your attention to the five percent that is neurotic, then you are not going to be nourished. But if you give one hundred percent of your attention to the one percent that is wholesome, then you can be nourished by that. Then things begin to relax and open.

I don't know what percentage you have of all these things. If you are a regular human being, chances are you probably give more attention to what is not nourishing than to what is nourishing. So sit down and meditate in the nourishing stillness, the nourishing awareness, the nourishing tranquility, the nourishing joy, the nourishing mindfulness.

The *samādhi* factor of awakening. When it becomes well developed – meaning you are well-nourished by it and supported by feeling the goodness of it – this creates wonderful conditions for the mind to develop and to have equanimity. It is not enforced equanimity where you hold yourself still – but equanimity that comes because there is a feeling of being really settled and at ease in this nourishing place of stillness.

Until we do equanimity tomorrow, you might spend some extra time today seeing if you can become more familiar with whatever capacity and ability you have to discover a nourishing inner stillness – quiet, unwavering, unagitated within. See what it is like to let yourself enjoy it and be nourished.

May *samādhi* be a delight for you. Thank you.