

Samādhi (1 of 5) Concentration as Centering and Letting Go Into

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 4, 2020

Good morning. This is the morning of the fourth week, where each week I am talking about one of the five faculties. The first three were faith, effort, and mindfulness. This week is about *samādhi*, concentration. The translation of the word *samādhi* as concentration is fine, but I think it somewhat limits what *samādhi* means in the practice we do.

Samādhi has two basic meanings. One is as a faculty, a particular function or capacity of the mind that becomes stronger as it is utilized for the purpose of practice – or really for anything. The other meaning is that when this faculty is fully engaged and strongly present, then *samādhi* is a state. I think of it as a state of being. Some people might call it a state of mind. It's an overall state in which we are abiding or feeling. It exists in and through us. It's a state of wholeness, integration – a state of deep stability and steadiness, a kind of radiance of presence. To be centered in the state of *samādhi* is almost like finding a sacred temple in which we live.

To engage the faculty of *samādhi* is, in the simplest language, to be focused on what we are doing. There are many different choices about how we focus, so we have to be careful not to assume that if I use the word focus, I mean exactly what you would use the word for.

For now, I would like to play with the English word ‘concentration.’ I think of the word *samādhi* as the ability of the mind’s attention to center itself on something. Rather than focusing itself on something, it centers itself on something. The difference is that for some people, focusing is constricting, draining – whereas centering implies the idea of resting in something, abiding, standing in the middle of something. We are centered in it. It’s a whole body standing in the middle of some experience. We don’t have to strain at it, or look at it with the mind’s eye. Rather, we abide in it, and are present for it in a full way.

The idea of being centered has a lot to do with being wholeheartedly engaged in what we are doing at the moment. If what we are doing is using attention, then we use mindfulness to see what is happening. *Samādhi* brings to mindfulness a sense of wholeheartedness. Just this. Just let me be centered on this right now. If we are doing mindfulness of breathing, then as a partner, concentration is taking this and wholeheartedly centering ourselves in the experience.

A big part of centering ourselves in the experience is letting go. That was one of the first lessons I received when I went to study Buddhism in Thailand. For the first days when I was there, I stayed in a monastery and met a monk who talked about concentration. He said that the deep states of concentration are what is attained by just letting go. Just letting go. He wanted to differentiate that from mindfulness, a clear knowing of what the experience is.

But anytime you let go thoroughly, you end up in a state of concentration. That's because we are letting go of distractions, of fragmentation, of the mind going off in different directions. As we let go, there is a letting go *into* this moment. Just here with this. As we let go into the moment, more and more here, it's like centering ourselves more and more. Centering ourselves at the bottom of a bowl as the marbles get quieter and quieter, centering in the middle of the bowl.

Letting go is not the same thing as *samādhi*, but letting go is one of the means of becoming concentrated in a way that is relaxed, not straining. It is more like we are allowing the mind's capacity to be focused or to manifest because we are getting rid of the distractions that interfere with it.

So these are the two aspects of *samādhi*. One is the idea of being focused or centered on the experience.

The other is to let go of the things that interfere with that. If we don't let go, then there is the tendency to want to override the distracting forces by straining more or concentrating harder.

Certainly, the faculty of focus can become stronger over time, and its strength makes distractions less and less attractive. Until the mind is strong, to try and use strength to focus and get concentrated can often be counterproductive. It can create strain and tension. A variety of things can go wrong for people if they are trying too hard. The idea is relaxing and letting go into the breathing or whatever we are centering on. Sometimes this means the present moment, and letting go of what takes us away. Relaxing into this moment, settling into it.

One principle of *samādhi* is that the mind is a soft mind. The movement is toward a mind that is softer, more pliable, more malleable. A mind that is concentrated is bright, with a lot of clarity and calm. The very means by which we try to get concentrated, hopefully will have some of those qualities in it. We have softness, malleability, calm, and brightness.

These are a lot of ideas to incorporate together, but I hope they give you a sense of what is meant by *samādhi* and concentration. The beginning process of using this faculty and engaging it to become

concentrated is the capacity to be centered on our experience. This initiating step in concentration is to center oneself on something, or to focus, if you prefer that language.

Then, let go of what gets in the way. The mind goes off, and we center ourselves again – here. Centering is a little different from mindfulness in that mindfulness is to know and stay present in a knowing way. Concentration is to come back, and not necessarily to know the experience, but to rest in the experience, to be centered in the experience. We do that over and over again. We come back.

And every time we come back to being centered, we figure out how to do that whole process of letting go, centering, being focused. It's important to experiment with how to do the whole process so that you enjoy it. How can you be very forgiving, very allowing? One way to do that is to have low expectation that you are going to get concentrated. Don't try to be fast or cling. Give yourself lots of time. Be very relaxed.

When the state of concentration occurs for me, I think of it as a gift. I am not measuring myself, or trying to attain it in a tight way. I do my practice. I stay centered and present. I let go into the experience more and more, and with time, comes a state of being settled and concentrated. It feels like a wonderful gift.

I hope this has been a nice initial discussion about this faculty of *samādhi*. We will continue this theme over the next four days.

May you find many ways today to find yourself centered in your experience in yourself. And may you even enjoy that centering in yourself. Thank you so much.