

Samādhi (2 of 5): Connecting, and Sustaining Awareness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 7, 2020

Good morning. Today I will continue on the theme of *samādhi*, the fourth of the five faculties. I have a lot of reverence for *samādhi*. Somehow *samādhi* represents a wonderful state of being, of settledness, wellbeing that makes me feel whole in this world, or peaceful, beyond or wider than anything I could imagine. At its very best, *samādhi* is kind of like entering into sacred ground. Maybe it's a little dangerous to treat *samādhi* in such a lofty way, but I do have that kind of feeling for it.

Yesterday I talked about two aspects of *samādhi* – both as our preparation for developing concentration, and as part and parcel of concentration. Thinking of it as a preparation is to arrive, to initiate the process of concentration, to relax, to let go into being centered, and to find a center within yourself. The idea is to compose yourself on that center, to be settled. This is an alternative way of talking about being focused. Many times concentration is associated with focus, such as focusing the mind on the breathing. That is fine, but it lends itself to being in the control tower of the head, with

the mind's eye looking down with a laser beam.

In the Buddha's teaching, *samādhi* is a state, a fully embodied state. The whole body is suffused with the qualities of concentration. It isn't only a mental act. So to talk about composing ourselves is a physical language. We compose our whole body. We settle our body, align the body, and settle. In that aligning and settling, we begin the process of concentration. It works particularly well if we compose ourselves on the breathing. Or compose ourselves on some center of gravity within. It is like reorienting ourselves from how we usually think, or how we are in the world into something that may, for some people, feel counterintuitive or even foreign – the our idea of composing the body, and being here and now - rather than thinking, wanting, or avoiding. It's a kind of relaxing, letting go, centering on the breathing.

Then after that beginning, there are two movements of concentration practice that are the initiating and engaging parts of concentration practice. They can go hand in hand with mindfulness practice. In the ancient language they are called *vitakka* and *vicāra*. In the way my brain plays with words and sounds, *vitakka* to me sounds like a knock. It is a way of showing up and connecting. "Knock, knock, I'm here. Open the door." And with *vicāra*, I like to stretch the *ā*. It's more like lingering or staying.

There's continuity.

Vitakka sometimes is called, "the initial application of mind or attention." It's bringing the attention to the focus. So if we are focusing on the breathing, if that is the center of gravity for meditation, and the mind wanders off, then the very act of bringing the mind back and reconnecting to the breathing – knocking on the breath, "Here I am" – involves a little rudimentary thinking. The word *vitakka* in Pali can also mean thinking. If you notice that the mind has wandered off, there is a kind of cognition that says, "Let's come back; let's reconnect to the breathing."

How we have those thoughts, and how we do that coming back to the breathing is actually very important. It may be more important than returning to the breath. We want to make the return something that is welcomed, enjoyable, and calming in and of itself. Sometimes I have jerked my mind back, kind of violently, feeling bad about drifting off – and that is more agitating. I have also sometimes pounced back on the breath, "Now I'm really going to bore into it." That is more agitating than calming.

So, how can we come back in a calm way, and reconnect to the experience of breathing? In the ancient language of the Buddha's teachings, there is no equivalent idea to our English idea of coming back to

breathing, returning to one's breathing. It's a bit of a metaphor to bring the mind back. The mind doesn't go anywhere. The mind is always here. And the metaphor of bringing it back may lend itself to a certain kind of agitation or movement. Maybe *vitakka* is noticing that we are drifting off, then having the thought, "Where is the breathing?" Then allowing the breathing to knock on you: "Here I am. Knock, knock." So it's more relaxing and opening in making that initial connection. It's a conscious, somewhat intentional movement. "OK, I'm back. Here I am."

Some people are very good at coming back, and reconnecting to the breathing or to the focus of meditation. But once there, they don't apply themselves as much anymore. So, the mind wanders off again. The second aspect of concentration, *vicāra*, is sustaining the attention on the breathing, or on the object of attention – lingering, hanging out there. The analogy in one of the ancient texts is that *vitakka* is like placing a cloth on a bronze bowl, and *vicāra* is rubbing the bowl, polishing it. A more poetic image is that of a bee landing on a flower (*vitakka*), and *vicāra* is the bee walking around picking up the pollen. The word *vicāra* comes from the word to walk, to wander. So the idea is that we are staying with, wandering with our object of meditation. Some meditation teachers translate the word as 'evaluating.' It's a little like being there and discovering the experience, getting to know it better,

letting it register more fully.

Vitakka is connecting to the breath, or allowing the breathing to connect to you in your awareness. *Vicāra* is sustaining that attention over time, lingering there, resting in that, letting go into the whole experience of exhale. So you are really there “*vicāra-ing*” – cruising on, resting in, being polished by the exhale, staying aware in the whole length of the exhale. Then the same for the inhale. Connecting to the inhale, the whole inhale. These factors, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, are to some degree relevant at the beginning of each breath – each inhale and each exhale. There is a connection, and then there is the resting and sustaining. The sustaining will always come to an end. There will always be a time to do it again, and again. Sometimes sustaining can last a long time, but more often, especially in the beginning, the mind wanders off more quickly, and sustaining doesn’t have much momentum.

The analogy I like for *vitakka* and *vicāra* is that of a push scooter. One foot is on top of the scooter and the other foot is pushing you along. If you give yourself a good push, then the momentum will carry you and you don’t have to push for a while. Unless you are going down a steep hill, the momentum will fade away, and then you have to push again. Then you glide along. When I was a kid on a scooter, I never complained about having to push again to get the momentum going.

When we start developing concentration practice with the two movements – the tap of *vitakka* – and then allowing ourselves to glide along, or to be carried along with *vicāra*. We will need to do the connection, the little push, again. Here we go. Push again – and ride it, ride it, ride it. As the practice deepens, becomes intentional to connect or to allow the breath to connect to us. And it's intentional to linger and ride it – or let the whole experience wash over us. As we do that and settle into the practice more and more, at some point this need for *vitakka* and *vicāra* – connecting and sustaining – falls away. And then we're just really right there. We're cruising along, with no intentionality or thought needed to keep it going.

Finally, what I'd like to say is that these two things I have talked about today – the initial connection and the sustaining of the connection of awareness – can be experimented with. See if you can find a way to do it that is calm, relaxed, spacious – without expectation or demand that it be any certain way. See if you can make it fun, nice, or enjoyable, so that you might like doing it, and will want to do it. It doesn't feel like work. Just like for the kid, pushing the scooter is not work.

Thank you very much for being here. I'll continue the theme of *samādhi* tomorrow, and maybe take it to the next level. I've said it many times, but I feel very

appreciative and a lot of gratitude for being able to do this with all of you. Thank you.