

Samādhi (4 of 5) Well-Being and Joy

April 9, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

samādhi, concentration, absorbed, *jhāna*, rumination, settled, hindrances, afflictive, lake, underwater, fountain, stroking, cat, purring, ‘purringful,’ gladness, well-being, joy, goodness, happiness, getting out of the way

Gil Fronsdal

This is the fourth talk in the series on the faculty of concentration, *samādhi*. As I said the first day, *samādhi* has two very general meanings. As a faculty, our topic today, it's a particular functionality of the mind. The ancient Buddhists thought it was a particular place in the brain that is able to be settled, focused, gathered together.

Maybe it's not a particular place, but rather a combined functioning of different mental faculties, which work in harmony to get us settled into the second meaning of *samādhi*, which is a generalized state of being – a state of mind.

Samādhi is a state in which we are fully present, fully engaged in what's happening. There's a long tradition of calling that “being absorbed,” but the idea of “being absorbed” can mean losing ourselves in the experience – an excessive merging in the experience where there isn't clarity of attention or awareness of what's happening.

However, the way I understand it for myself, and from the ancient teachings of the Buddha, as concentration deepens in meditation, there is a greater and greater clarity of attention – the mindfulness becomes brighter. In fact, the deepest states of what is usually called ‘absorption,’ *jhāna*, include a very clear form of awareness or mindfulness.

The state of being fully and continually present – fully aware, with the mind not distracted, not fragmented – this undistracted presence has a lot to do with what *samādhi* is.

As we really get present, organized, and unified for something, there are a number of things that are not happening, and a number of things that begin to happen. What's *not* happening is that the busy, active, thinking mind is not perpetuating itself.

The thinking mind is often thought of as a self-perpetuating machine – the faster we think, especially if we have negative thoughts – the more stressful it is for the mind. The mind is stressed both by the strength of the thinking and by what is being said. Our thoughts can be like little daggers we stick ourselves with. A leading source of all kinds of psychological problems is rumination – the regular, continuous things we're saying to ourselves. That is a particular function of the mind – to think and have imagery a lot, to spin stories and ideas – it keeps going and going.

What *begins* to happen in *samādhi* is that the mind gets settled, quiet, and unified. There is a quieting of the thinking mind. When we are spared from some of the stories, beliefs, criticisms, and undermining thoughts, there is more space in the mind for other things. Once the irritating or stressful kinds of thoughts are quiet – then, with the feeling of being unified and present – grows a good feeling, to use a non-technical word.

One of the things that falls away or quiets down are thoughts and feelings of discontent, irritation, or boredom. All these are activities of the mind. Nothing is inherently boring except for the activities of the mind that evaluate it that way. Nothing is irritating except for the activities – thoughts and ideas of the mind – that interpret it that way.

All these mental activities that make us feel dissatisfied, uncomfortable, irritated, bored, wanting, greedy, wanting something else, expectations – all these activities have a stressful effect on our mind and body. But as we allow the mind to settle and get quieter, these things begin to quiet as well.

The more concentrated, fully engaged and settled we can become – allowing the particular experience we're focusing on to fill awareness, to be the subject we are doing – then the mind gets quieter and clearer. All these afflictive thoughts and ideas fall away. If there is no boredom, no irritation, no dissatisfaction, then we're just *here*

in a deeper, settled way. We can feel deeply contented, deeply satisfied, deeply at peace, deeply happy.

It's not because we are making ourselves happy or contented. It's just the goodness, the peace and relief of not having these afflictive thoughts and ideas. In his teachings the Buddha particularly singles out the Five Hindrances. When they quiet down, there's a sense of goodness what he calls a gladness, or joy and happiness, that can be there, just because it's so good to not to be afflicted anymore – a sense of relief in the fullness of it.

I also believe that as this afflictive overlay finally gets quiet – not an easy thing to do – as we get more concentrated, settled, and unified – there is a deeper sense of goodness and well-being that has a chance to bubble up. The image the Buddha uses for this deeper well-being is that of an underwater fountain in the bottom of the lake, which flows up and spreads new, refreshing water out into the lake.

The idea that deep inside us is a fountain, a spring of well-being that can well up and *fill* us – it's not something we are doing, making, or forcing – but more like we're getting out of the way. When the hindrances and these afflictive thoughts have finally quieted down, and we learn how to open, be fully present and make space for something to come in, make space to be influenced by the depths of what's good inside of us – then we can sometimes feel this wellspring of joy or well-being or happiness. That is one way of experiencing it. Everyone has a slightly different way.

Part of *samādhi* practice is the practice of letting go. But I think that, more profoundly, it's a practice of getting out of the way – allowing ourselves to trust something really deep inside, and get quiet enough that we begin allowing this to flow. Certainly, as we begin this movement of trusting something deep inside, some of what happens is the purification process.

Some of what has been buried deep inside – grief, anger, and sorrow for example – needs to come out and have its time in the sun of awareness in order to empty out. We have to learn that process, be patient with it – hopefully know not to add afflictive thoughts on top of it – but just feel inspired that it's so good to have this stuff finally come out, so that it can dissipate, resolve itself, heal itself.

With this deeper movement of healing, at some point, the goodness wells up – the well-being, the gladness wells up. It flows and tingles. It feels warm, soft, quiet, and connected. We feel like we're home, cozy.

There's an image I love for getting really settled, feeling part of the joy that can happen in meditation. I spend a lot of time focusing on the breath, so the breath is like a rhythm. Sometimes I feel it's like petting the cat. I don't just tap the cat. I don't take a fist and press down hard on it. I gently stroke the cat, and it starts purring. If I stop stroking the cat, it stops purring. If I start stroking it again, the cat purrs. In the same way, we stay with the breath.

Breathing is like stroking the cat. Or the awareness is like the stroking of the cat, just staying with the breathing. At some point – it's not automatic and it's not something you can force – as we get more and more settled, there can be a sense of the whole system of who we are. Everyone experiences it differently. The system – our body and mind – (in a non-technical idea) begins to purr. It begins to feel good, nice and light.

This recognition of goodness, pleasure, what feels beautiful, or feels 'purringful' is part of what supports *samādhi* practice. Without expectation, without demand, without striving, but being open to start feeling the goodness, the well-being that comes when we settle, and allow that well-being to influence us, meaning get out of the way and let it move through us. The Buddha talked about letting it suffuse us, the whole body.

This is part of *samādhi*, this sense of joy and happiness that can come from the practice. So thank you. I hope that you have a wonderful day, wonderful next twenty-four hours. I hope that your inner life provides you with nourishment and well-being.