

Samatha Meditation

by

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Samatha meditation is about calming the mind down, calming the bodily activities, calming the speech and calming the activities of the mind. It's quite interesting to notice that when one faces a retreat situation one looks for activity: sitting in meditation one looks for things to do, for things to occupy the mind, rather than just being peaceful and quiet.

It's very easy to see that if my own mind thinks in a certain way, my body acts accordingly. That is a very useful reflection, because it means that there is more than one way to quieten the mind. Rather than just quietening it down in formal meditation, one can practise samatha meditation by restraining the speech and the actions in one's daily life. If one can restrain oneself in those situations - whether it is cleaning, washing up, walking, coming and going - then, when it comes down to sitting cross-legged on the meditation cushion, it is much easier to restrain the activities of the mind.

To develop samatha, first of all get hold of the breath - so you can see it. In order to do this you have to restrain other activities, the things that come up into the mind that tear you away from your object of meditation - whether it's thoughts or plans, or feelings of pain in the body, you have to restrain your mind from going out to those things, and stay with the breath. Once you can see the breath clearly, then you can actually calm it down and find what effort is required to make it smooth and light and the mind peaceful. This is the first practice in traditional anapanasati.

You may have noticed that whenever the mind is calm, the body doesn't give you so much of a problem. If you can get into a quiet state of mind quickly when you first sit down meditating - while the body is at ease, before the knees start to ache and the back becomes sore - then the body won't disturb you throughout the rest of the meditation. So quieten the body first of all, and then go to the breath and get hold of it wherever it is. It doesn't matter where the breath is - where the sensation is - wherever it is, see it there and catch hold of it and don't allow it to disappear. It is an effort - it's attaining or going towards something, doing something, rather than just letting go too quickly and doing nothing - rather than just watching the mind wander here there and everywhere; that's really not what the practice is all about. Quietening the mind down first of all is a prerequisite for any wisdom to arise.

There is a sutta which is the extension to the Paticcasamuppada. It extends what happens after dukkha; it doesn't stop there. According to that sutta, dukkha is the cause of the arising of faith, the arising of confidence in the teachings - the Noble Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. Once one

sees dukkha, then one realises that there is something to be done. I often find with teaching that people don't practise. They don't do anything, for the one reason that they don't see any dukkha - or rather, they don't recognise it in their lives. They don't see the suffering or the cause of the suffering - the place where the suffering is - and therefore they never do anything.

So it's obvious that dukkha is the very cause for people to arouse themselves and say, 'Right, I'm going to do something about this!' That's the confidence saying, 'No longer am I going to run around, going to other places, looking for other teachers, doing other things - here is the problem. I'm going to stick to this spot, and sort it out!' That's when that link happens, that's the start of doing something about the problem of human existence. That's really recognising dukkha, recognising where it comes from, and doing something about it.

Once one has that fundamental faith - that confidence - to stop, to stay in one place and face up to the problem, then the next step is joy. This joy comes from understanding that here is the problem, and here is the way out of it; there is something you can do. Joy gives rise to interest (piti), which is really wanting in one's heart to do something about it, and this fuels the energy for the practice.

Then comes happiness (sukha). When you really start to practise, you feel physical happiness, just by refraining from doing all those things that cause dukkha. That much gives happiness. This is where the transcendental dependent arising starts to get interesting, because the factor of sukha is the cause for the arising of samadhi. If one hasn't got happiness, then there is very little chance for samadhi to arise. If one is having a very hard time - an unhappy time - and the mind is very closed, there is no way that samadhi can arise. Samadhi can only come from the basis of happiness. This is where talks can be really useful - they can inspire you and give you that interest, and from there you can gain samadhi and see for yourself.

The next step from samadhi is seeing things as they are. Now this factor comes after samadhi, not before it; it's not the cause of samadhi, but the result of it. The only way you can see what is going on is when the mind is quiet, concentrated. The reason that one doesn't see things the way they are outside of a quiet clear mind is because the mind is under the influence of defilements - greed, hatred and delusion. These are the things that distort our perception. You all know that when we are angry it distorts our perception of a person or a place. If we are angry, this monastery is the last place we want to be. Then the next day, when we are happy and the sun is shining, it is a wonderful place! The same monastery, but the defilements distort our perception - desire distorts our perception. When one doesn't see clearly, how can one see things as they really are - how can one understand what is going on? Avijja [ignorance] distorts perception. So to see things as they really are, one has to clear the mind of these things that distort the perception - if only for a short while. In that short while, one can see the way things are.

I've always felt that the idea of insight meditation can be a misleading one. Often it has been the custom or the fashion to say that samatha meditation is 'dangerous', because you can get stuck in jhanas [meditative absorptions]. But how many people do you know who have got jhanas - let alone are attached to them? At least if you have a jhana, if you are very peaceful and getting blissed out,

you know one place where the defilements have temporarily subsided. At least you are getting somewhere, you are doing something. Also, it is the nature of jhanas - of the quiet mind - that after one comes out of these states, the mind is clear, and nine times out of ten wisdom will arise. There is a danger there that you can get attached to jhanas, but the danger is not that much.

But where there is a danger in this Western world is in vipassana, because you can get notions about vipassana from a book. You can read an idea and straight away you think, 'Now I understand.' This is where one really attaches. You think, 'This is the way it is. I've seen the way things are' - when the mind hasn't been clear enough to get beyond the defilements. Delusion is ruling the day, the defilements have caught you again. Vipassana which comes outside of a quiet clear mind is not to be relied upon. That is the danger of vipassana. So, often it is more dangerous to be stuck with a view, than to be stuck enjoying a jhana. If one is practising samatha, at least one knows if it is being successful or not. One can tell very clearly, very easily if the mind is quiet or not. With vipassana it may be difficult to know if the insight that has arisen in your mind is true or not - whether you really are seeing things the way they are, or whether you are deceiving yourself. That is the big danger with delusion - delusion is delusive! It tricks you.

So one does the practice: one cultivates happiness, cultivates samadhi, cultivates seeing the way things are - this basic insight. You will know if it is insight, if it gives rise to dispassion. You can ask yourself if you still get angry, if you still get irritated; if you still have desire and greed, and really want things - whether it's personal attainments, or fame in the monastery for being the great meditator, the best cook . . . if these are the things you really want, then you still have not really seen the way things are. If it really is insight, it creates dispassion (nibbida) in the mind.

Nibbida gives rise to a more intense form of dispassion, called viraga. Raga means lust, that which attaches you to the things of the world, or things of the mind: viraga is the giving up of that desire or delight in the things of the mind, or things of the world. The next step up from that is freedom, vimutti - liberation. That's not the last step, actually. Interestingly, the last step after vimutti is the knowledge that one has been released - not the sort of dithering about if one is enlightened or not, but knowing clearly the state of your mind. Like in the suttas, the monks didn't say, 'Well... um. . . yes.. .I think I'm enlightened!' The monks who were enlightened just said so. The Buddha just said so: 'There's no more birth, nothing more to be done.'

So when it comes down to reality, one does need to do something. One does need to put forth effort into practising - to quietening the mind down: in daily life, and also when one is sitting. If you try, and it doesn't become calm straight away, it's because one is pushing in the wrong places. People say sometimes that they have been trying to calm the mind down to make it peaceful, and it doesn't work - but there is a way to calm the mind down. Just because a person does it wrongly - doesn't know the way to quieten the mind - doesn't mean it doesn't work. One can calm the mind down, but to be able to do that you have to know when to push and when to pull; if you do all pushing and no pulling it doesn't work. You have to know the state of your mind, and also what you are doing. You have to know how much to hold on to the breath - to know when you are holding on too tightly to the point

where you become tired and tense. If you find that you can't calm down, investigate the reason why. One of the reasons may be because you haven't invested the time or the effort. How many hours are there in the day, and how many of those hours do we spend sitting watching the breath?

One may be sitting, but how often does one watch the breath? It's quite easy to see the reasons, although it might not be a particularly nice thing to admit or own up to - but there it is. So one tries to be quiet in the day, and in the mind - to quieten down the external activity as well as internal activity, to be peaceful.

To actually practice samatha - to have success in meditation - not only do you need effort but you also need right view, a bit of wisdom or panna. It's panna which teaches quietness, and quietness that teaches panna. The two go together, like friends walking along a path hand in hand. Indeed, you cannot just practise samatha through an effort of will; you have to know where that will is to be directed. If you just direct it haphazardly, it is not strong enough - it's never sustained long enough to have any effect. The will needs to be directed through panna, knowing the right place to push - how much, for how long, and where.

So to say that the practice is just mindfulness is to miss the point: it's the whole Eightfold Path. Sometimes these days samadhi is the poor relation in the Eightfold Path. That's why I'm emphasising it here. The other ones can be overestimated. So it's really good to be honest with oneself, and ask just what is going on: is one's mind quiet, or is it noisy? When you are listening to a talk can you shut up inside, can you be peaceful? Can you listen to words without arguing about them? These are just ways of seeing where one is - then one can do something about it. It's not that hard to quieten the mind down, and it's really worth doing!

Paticcasamuppada is the Buddha's teaching of 'dependent arising'. This teaching occurs in several places in the Sutta Pitaka and describes how suffering is engendered dependent on supportive conditions. The process is initiated by ignorance and wrong views in the mind. In the Upanisa Sutta, the analysis goes further: the Buddha points out that for those who wish to awaken, suffering itself is a supportive condition for the arising of commitment to a spiritual path, and eventually to liberation itself.

The normal formulation is of twelve linking factors; from the twelfth, suffering, the Upanisa Sutta proceeds thus:

"Suffering is the supporting condition for faith, Faith is the supporting condition for joy, Joy is the supporting condition for rapture, Rapture is the supporting condition for tranquillity, Tranquillity is the supporting condition for happiness, Happiness is the supporting condition for concentration, Concentration is the supporting condition for the knowledge and vision of things as they really are, The knowledge and vision of things as they really are is the supporting condition for disenchantment, Disenchantment is the supporting condition for dispassion, Dispassion is the supporting condition for emancipation, Emancipation is the supporting condition for the knowledge of the destruction of the asavas (the most deeply-rooted obstructive habits)." Samyutta Nikaya II, 29

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