Tranquility

How tranquility supports meditation practice and ultimately leads to a deeper sense of contentment and peace
- Gil Fronsdal

My body was tranquil and undisturbed, my mind concentrated and unified.
—The Buddha MN 4.22 (i 21)

Tranquility is both a gift of meditation practice and a support for deepening the practice. As a gift, it can be healing and confidence-producing. As a support, it provides a sense of well-being that nourishes concentration and mental harmony. Meditative tranquility is a compelling state that can involve feelings of peace, calm, serenity, contentment, and deep rest. In the body, tranquility is like a deep, clear lake with a wide, still surface. In the mind, it's like the soft, quiet, fresh air over the lake at dawn.

Tranquility supports mindfulness, and in turn mindfulness is a support for tranquility. As agitation decreases with greater tranquility, mindfulness can become more stable and insightful. And as mindfulness recognizes agitation with a clear, non-conflictive awareness, tranquility grows.

While tranquility can be conducive to sleepiness, well-developed tranquility is an invigorated state similar to waking up refreshed from a good nap. Sometimes partial tranquility slides into complacency, but full tranquility comes with an alert presence. And while the idea of tranquility can seem boring to those unfamiliar with it, in reality it is quite engaging for those who experience it.

In the Buddha's teachings, tranquility is a supportive condition for happiness that can be characterized as "peaceful happiness." In meditation, the state of tranquility provides contentment and peace that are the basis for a deep and sublime sense of well-being. This is a happiness that's not possible when the mind is restless or preoccupied. Tranquility removes the excitement from joy so joy can transform itself into a more satisfying state of happiness.

Tranquility is born when agitation calms down, when conflict is put to rest, and when desires are reduced. Relaxing the body is a primary practice for cultivating tranquility. We can soften the face, release the shoulders, and loosen any tension in the belly. We can also let go of thoughts and relax the "thinking muscle," letting go of any physical tension, pressure, or agitation associated with thinking. As the body relaxes, anxiety abates. As thinking quiets down, agitation decreases.

The Buddha said that tranquility is the nourishment for tranquility. This can be translated into the idea that tranquility is fostered by paying attention to tranquility, that peace grows by noticing what is peaceful, and that relaxation expands by appreciating relaxation. Being aware of even the smallest amount of tranquility, peace, or relaxation can foster more of these same states. Observing them in others can evoke them in ourselves. Perceiving the tranquility and peace of particular places can suffuse the body with these qualities. Visiting locations with strong atmospheres of tranquility can be medicine for releasing tensions and preoccupations.

In addition to meditation, other supports for tranquility are spending time alone or in nature. Being around calm people also helps. Avoiding multitasking by doing just one thing at a time reduces agitation; doing one thing at a time in an unhurried and undistracted manner can be deeply calming. For some people, talking less or talking more slowly promotes relaxation.

An axiom about tranquility is, “If you need wisdom, try tranquility first.” The more we value being wise in our life, the more valuable it is to be tranquil. With the support of tranquility, what is wise will often be obvious and simple. This is especially true in meditation; everyone has the ability to be wise in meditation provided we are not too agitated to recognize it.

While tranquility is not the ultimate purpose of Buddhist meditation, it is an important part of the path to liberation, which is the ultimate purpose. Tranquility sets the stage for the final stages on the path to liberation. It is considered a factor of awakening that prepares the ground for deep concentration and equanimity. It also prepares the mind for liberation by doing some of the initial work of letting go of what keeps the mind agitated. Becoming tranquil by relaxing tension, quieting agitation, and letting go of discursive thinking is exercising the mind’s capacity to release its attachments. When that capacity is mature, the mind can let go fully. This ultimate letting go comes with a profound sense of peace and happiness that is the greatest fruit of tranquility.

Samadhi

Definition: Samadhi may refer to a broad range of states. A common understanding regards samadhi as meditative absorption. It is a state of meditative consciousness. In Buddhism, it is the last of the eight elements of the Noble Eightfold Path (Right Concentration). In the oldest Buddhist sutras, on which several contemporary western Theravada teachers rely, it refers to the development of an investigative and luminous mind which is equanimous and mindful.

Blindfolding Mara

Samadhi creates a space to investigate and understand the origin of Mara, the personification of the habit patterns that lead to distress.

-Christina Feldman

We can have so many wise and skillful intentions in our lives—to be generous, to be patient, to be kind, and to live compassionately. Yet we can feel so frustrated when our intentions are forgotten or sabotaged. The greatest saboteurs of intention and attention are the veiling factors of craving, ill will, agitation, worry, dullness, and doubt. In the teachings, this collection of patterns is often referred to as Mara, the personification of the habit patterns that lead to creating and recreating the world of distress.

Each of these patterns has an extended family. Craving carries with it deep beliefs in insufficiency—in not being enough, not having enough, and not being good enough. Ill will has an extended family of impatience, frustration, jealousy, anxiety, and the need to be in control. Numbness is not just about falling asleep on a meditation cushion. Dullness, numbness, and dissociation arise when we don’t want to feel, or when we don’t feel resilient enough to be connected with the world, both inwardly and outwardly. Doubt carries images of a self that is incapable and powerless and needs certainty in an uncertain world. The Buddha speaks of these patterns as being at the root of our psychological and emotional storms. They are the root of generating the stories that too easily become our nightmares.

A meditative journey to the development of a well-trained heart and mind is a journey through these patterns. They are our classroom, our curriculum. This is where we learn to sustain attention and intention. We learn to be undiverted in our intentions to gather, to calm, to still, and to cultivate calm abiding in the midst of these patterns arising.

In a climate of collectedness, calmness, and stilling, the habit patterns of Mara cannot find a foothold in the mind.

This journey begins by developing an emotional literacy that knows craving as craving, aversion as aversion, restlessness and worry as restlessness and worry, dullness as dullness, and that truly knows doubt as doubt. We learn not to feed these patterns with thought. They don’t have an independent self-

existence. When they are not fed, they begin to lose their power. The Buddha used the image that if you want a fire to keep on burning, just throw logs on it. If you want the fire to begin to cool, stop feeding it.

We see the ways in which story and narrative set up, reinforce, and deepen these patterns of reactivity. But when they are not fed, we see them arise and pass instead. We develop an emotional literacy, and we're able to ask the question: What does this pattern need? What would be helpful? Is it a greater cultivation of contentment or kindness? Is it a greater sense of energy? Or is more investigation needed?

Calming and stilling are the willingness to commit to just being wholeheartedly present in one moment at a time, to commit to one breath, to commit to the sense of our feet touching the ground. To know this, we begin to train the mind. We begin to train the heart. We give greater authority to our intentions than to Mara. We give greater authority to our intentions than the mood of the moment or the mental state of the moment.

Samadhi does not uproot Mara. The Buddha was very clear on this. But samadhi blindfolds Mara. Samadhi blindfolds Mara in the sense that in a climate of collectedness, calmness, and stilling, the habit patterns of Mara cannot find a foothold in the mind. Samadhi creates a space to investigate and understand those habit patterns.