

What's in a Word? Samādhi

- Andrew Olendzki

Its meaning and practice.

The Pali/Sanskrit word samādhi, usually translated as “concentration,” is made up of three parts, a verbal root and two prefixes (sam+ā+dhi). The last part, dhi, is a noun form derived from the verbal root dhā, meaning “to put or place.” The prefix ā gives direction and suggests “placing upon,” and the prefix sam means “gathering or bringing together.” When combined and used in a Buddhist context, these elements add up to the sense of “unifying the mind and placing its awareness upon a particular object.”

Traditional sources also emphasize that the mind focuses on a single (eka) point (agga), and “one-pointedness” (Pali, ekaggatā; Skt. ekāgratā) is another common way of defining samādhi. The mind is actually always focused on a single object in any given moment, but it habitually moves rapidly—and sometimes restlessly and apparently randomly—from one object to another. You may have noticed this!

The practice of developing concentration as a meditative skill begins with intentionally directing the mind to a chosen object, such as the breath, and holding it there steadily over multiple successive mind moments. This is not easy to do at first, as reflex draws our attention to novel and distracting sights, sounds, sensations, or thoughts. Keeping the mind grounded on one thing can seem boring, futile, or frustrating.

With practice, however, the mind wanders off its object of meditation less often, staying away for

less time before its meandering is noticed and attention is called back to the breath. The body becomes progressively more relaxed, breathing naturally slows down and gets more subtle, and the mind begins to feel increasingly peaceful, stable, lucid, and capable. With such enhanced focus one can now look more closely at the flowing stream of consciousness, or one can proceed to deeper levels of samādhi.

A tipping point can be reached when the experience of the concentrated mind itself becomes more compelling than the allure of external objects, and a state of absorption known as jhāna gradually develops. The mind becomes tranquil but alert, with neither too much nor too little energy, and finds an equanimous stance that neither favors nor opposes anything but rather rests with quiet confidence on its object. A growing sense of well-being ensues and slowly matures into a state of profound equanimity. The mind in this state is said to be luminous, malleable, cleansed of its impurities, and thus able to see things clearly. Now the process of developing wisdom can begin.

How Samadhi Can Lead to Inner Happiness

- Christina Feldman

A well-connected mind doesn't just lead to insight but an inwardly generated delight that we should pursue and enjoy

One of the great benefits of samadhi, [concentration that results from calming the mind], is happiness and inwardly generated happiness. And the Buddha says

this kind of pleasure that is found within the well-collected mind should be pursued and developed. It should be cultivated. There is nothing to fear in this inwardly generated delight and happiness.

What the Buddha is speaking about is an internally born happiness rooted in interconnectedness, and there is very profound insight in cultivating this inwardly generated happiness. It alters our relationship to the world of conditions in deeply ethical ways.

Our relationship to this world of conditions that we all live in is rooted in the externalization both of happiness and unhappiness, and in enchantment with the pleasant conditions and aversion to the unpleasant conditions. We find ourselves endlessly rearranging or trying to rearrange the conditions in our world of the moment, where we have a maximum amount of pleasure and a minimal amount of unpleasantness. We look outward to the world, often with pleading eyes, saying, “Make me happy.” This makes us a consumer of the world. Samadhi is not only a guardian of the mind, it is said to be also a guardian of the world.

In discovering this inwardly generated happiness, the whole surge of craving and aversion begins to calm. We are less entranced with pursuit and avoidance. We are actually protecting the world from the surges and impulses of craving. It’s a deeply ethical cultivation.

Once this inwardly generated happiness is truly glimpsed and cultivated, we no longer pursue craving, aversion, and clinging, knowing that the world of conditions can indeed bring us so much that is pleasant, so much that is delightful, but does not have the innate capacity to deliver the lasting happiness that we seek and long for.

There are numerous discourses that recommend the development of samadhi as an essential factor in beginning to know things actually as they are, relieving perceptions of our associations rooted in the past, or how we have known something before. They

allow us to see anew, and to find a sense of wonder in meeting life as it is. We begin to see very experientially the changing nature of all things, to see the lovely and the unlovely, without generating narrative craving and aversion, to know the breath as a breath, the body as the body as sound, as a sound the thought as a thought.

The Buddha speaks of samadhi, at times, as being a journey of purification, which is a word that can be charged with reactivity and an association with impurity and purity. This is not what the Buddha means by this process of purification. Instead, what samadhi does, as the mind begins to calm, settle, and deepen, is bring into the light a consciousness of so much that has been unconscious and buried, yet that is still powerful in generating reactivity. We begin to see the arising and passing of patterns, and we begin to know the unbinding from those patterns that can be so powerful in leading to distress. We begin to be less repetitive in our reactions.

In this process of purification—of everything coming into the light of consciousness—we find ourselves less inclined to define ourselves by the contents of our minds. On the ground of samadhi, we begin to cultivate clarity and the power of wise discernment, and to know what is skillful and what is unskillful, what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what leads to affliction and what leads to the end of affliction, and what liberates and what binds.

The clarity that is formed of samadhi—this capacity to see clearly, to discern clearly—is the beginning of the ending of distress.

Samadhi Blindfolds Mara

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

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.