

The Faculty of Samādhi

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 05-19-13. [This talk was preceded by a guided meditation of *ānāpānasati*, or mindfulness of breathing, following instructions in Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's *With Each and Every Breath*, available at http://www.dhammatalks.org/ebook_index.html.]

In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Connected Discourses, the Buddha said: **"... there are these five faculties. What five? The faculty of faith, the faculty of energy, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of wisdom. These are the five faculties.**

"... one who activates them fully succeeds fully; one who activates them partly succeeds partly. The five faculties, bhikkhus, are not barren, so I say."

— SN

48.17, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Over the past few weeks we've been exploring these Five Faculties. Today I want to look at the faculty of samādhi, which is usually translated as "concentration."

If we look at the Pāli suttas, this quality of samādhi is quite important. It shows up again and again in the various lists or frameworks for working with the mind and heart. Besides being listed as a faculty, we find it in the:

- Fourth Noble Truth, in other words in the Eightfold Path, where it is *Sammā Samādhi*, usually translated as Right Concentration. Samādhi is also used in the three part description of the Eightfold Path: *Sīla* - Virtue or Skillful Behavior, *Samādhi* or Concentration, and *Pañña* or Wisdom.

- We find samādhi listed as one of the Five Strengths, which is a stronger version of the Five Faculties.

- Samādhi is regarded as one of the Four Powers (which are concentration, determination, intention and wisdom.)

- And it is one of the Seven Factors of Awakening [mindfulness, investigation of phenomena, energy/effort, rapture, tranquility, concentration, equanimity].

If we've been practicing for a while, we may feel that we have a good idea of what concentration or Samādhi refers to, both in the theory of the practice and in our actual experience. But I find it is useful to periodically take another look at these terms. According to Richard Shankman, the word *samādhi* "is derived from the Pāli prefix *sam*,

meaning 'together,' and the root *dhā*, meaning 'to put' or 'place.' It is related to the Pāli verb *samādhati*, meaning 'to put together, to bring together, to concentrate.'"

— Richard Shankman, *The Experience of Samādhi*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2008, pp. 3-4.

And when we look at the way it is used and translated we find two slightly different understandings of *samādhi*, which actually has led to different approaches to practice.

On the one hand it is taken to mean that the attention is focused, settled or absorbed into one point. So perhaps focused solely at the tip of the nose to the exclusion of all other things while following the breath.

On the other hand, *samādhi* is taken to mean a collectedness or unification of the mind. So in this approach the mind is stable and undistracted while the object of mind may be a single object (such as a mental image of the space at the tip of the nose) or the object may vary from moment to moment (such as when one is watching/knowing the impermanence of each moment of experience).

In actual practice, some people will totally rely on one form, others will totally rely on the other, but I think the truth is that many of us rely on both forms, depending on what seems most useful at any particular time.

But the two forms do have different consequences and over the years I've come to increasingly lean more toward the collected/unified mind camp because it seems like an easier way to settle the mind and it seems to lead to a more relaxed, open relationship with one's experience while still allowing insights to arise.

In the suttas when the Buddha talks about *samādhi* it is pretty much always defined as concentration at the level of absorption, or the Pāli word is *jhāna*. Hundreds of years after the Buddha's death, in what are known as the Commentaries, especially the *Visuddhimagga*, or Path of Purification, a more elaborate definition of *samādhi* was offered. In this view, there is:

- Momentary Concentration - so in some moments concentration might be quite strong, with the Five Hindrances (*nivarāna*) momentarily suppressed, and the next moment it might be weak. The idea would be to get where the mind was sufficiently undistracted to string together many moments of concentration, which then would get stronger. *Samādhi* at the level of momentary concentration could be focused either on a single object or on varying objects. This is the level of concentration that people usually claim is used in Insight Meditation.

- Momentary concentration can lead to what is called Access Concentration. The term "access" is related to the idea that at this level of concentration one is very close to having access to the first *jhāna*, the first level of absorption concentration. There are three major marks of access concentration: the Five Hindrances are suppressed; but this is pretty fragile and it is easy to fall back into a distracted state of mind; and the third mark is that while thoughts still arise, they are subtle, very wispy and not so distracting.

- When the Five Hindrances are suppressed and there is more stability and consistency to it, then one may settle into the third form of *samādhi*: *jhāna*. As with *samādhi*, there is a lot of uncertainty about what exactly the Buddha meant by the term *jhāna*. It generally means that there is a real quality of stable undistractedness to the mind. But the depth or strength of this seems to vary from teacher to teacher. And this is affected by whether one is doing "one-pointed" concentration practice or the broader, collected-mind form of practice.

What is crucial is that to achieve any sort of stability in attention, whether for a moment or longer, the qualities of mind and heart known as the Five Hindrances have to be either suppressed or one has to be no longer subject to that form of mental/emotional state of mind and heart, which is what happens as one moves through the different stages of Awakening.

Talking about working with the Five Hindrances is too extensive for today's time, but let me just identify the hindrances as:

- greed for sensory experience,
- aversion towards sensory experience,
- sluggishness and/or sleepiness (mental and/or physical low energy),
- restlessness, agitation and/or worry (mental and/or physical excessive energy), and
- doubt, whether doubt about the Buddha, the teachings, the teachers or the Sangha, or the practice one is doing. Or doubt about oneself and one's own capacity to live a life of equanimity and compassion.

A concentrated mind is important, because it is only with a stable, concentrated mind/heart that we are able to look deeply, calmly and wholeheartedly at our experience and see what is true about our own minds and hearts, and those of others. In other words

to realize Wisdom, which is the fifth of the faculties and the quality that will be explored next week.