

Christina Feldman

*Meditation Month 2023: Samadhi: Cultivating Inner Calm and Collectedness*

Week One: “What Is Samadhi?”

January 1, 2023



Welcome to this Meditation Month offered by Tricycle, where we will reflect on the meditative development of *samadhi*, a word that I will unpack as we go along in this first session. I would wholeheartedly encourage you to explore this practice as deeply as you can over this month, both on the cushion and in the whole of your life. Its benefits are profound, developing what the Buddha described as a well-trained heart/mind.

I'd like to begin by offering you a quote from the *Samyutta Nikaya*, where the Buddha says, "Just as a river Ganges flows towards the ocean, slopes towards the ocean, inclines towards the ocean, so too a practitioner who cultivates and develop samadhi flows, slopes and inclines towards nirvana, inclines towards awakening and liberation."

In this first session, what I would like to reflect upon is: What do we mean by samadhi? There are two words that you will come across as you travel the meditative path. One is samadhi, and the other is *samatha*. These are both Pali words. My understanding is that samatha refers to any training in calming the mind, calming anything that is agitated in the mind and the body.

Samadhi is often seen as being the fruit of this calming—the mind that can sustain both intention and attention. Both words are frequently preceded by the word *samma*, which means right or wise attentiveness that has its roots in ethics and has the aspiration of freeing the mind and heart from agitation and traveling a path of awakening, of liberation. More accurately, the word samadhi, and samatha, too, translates as to gather. To gather together or to collect together.

The image that is sometimes used in the texts is one of gathering harvested corn or wheat and bringing it together into a kind of oneness, a unified whole. I think of this as the integration or the unification of body, mind, and present moment. And I think as we reflect on our own experience, we see that this unification is often absent—our body is in one place, our mind is occupying some other place, and the present moment is frequently just forgotten.

The image that I often refer to or use is the image of a very skilled sheepdog. In Wales, they have these sheepdogs that are sent out in the autumn to gather together the sheep that are spread over

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the hillsides. The sheepdogs gather the sheep from the pastures that have dried out and are no longer nourishing, where the sheep are not thriving. A wise sheepdog never intimidates or harms the sheep in this process, but it gathers them together and guides the sheep from these worn-out pastures to pastures where they will flourish and thrive.

In the practice of developing samadhi, we are doing much the same within the landscape of our own minds and hearts. We're gathering and collecting our attention from places, from pastures where we don't thrive: the fields of rumination, distractedness, obsession, and proliferating thought and narratives. The fields where we too often simply become exhausted. We're learning to gather our attention from those fields, and guide our attention into this mind, into this body, in a collected, unifying way. This is the pasture, this is the field, where we do begin to thrive. We're guiding our attentional capacity into the fields of calmness, mindfulness, and stillness; the landscape of heart and mind where we flourish, where there is creativity, where there is appropriate responsiveness, and where there is a way of inhabiting the moment that we find ourselves in.

This is much more than just concentration. I think concentration for many people has the associations or the real experience of something that is forced, something that is driven. We may remember times in our childhood when we've been commanded to pay attention and concentrate. Samadhi is something much more than this.

There's a certain attitude that is needed in developing samadhi. It's fascinating to me that in the texts, the Buddha says, “In a mind of happiness, attention finds a true foundation.” This is often heard as something rather odd or unusual, or something that doesn't make any sense because we often see happiness as the outcome of samadhi. Whereas actually, the Buddha speaks about laying the foundations where the mind is willing to gather, it's willing to calm, it's willing to collect. It's finding delight and joy in that collectedness.

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It doesn't mean that we come to our meditation cushion elated and blissful. It doesn't mean that everything is wonderful in our lives. But it is about developing this commitment and dedication to rest within a sense of easefulness, a willingness to meet what life is bringing to us. It may mean, in developing that mind of happiness, that we look carefully at our lives. And we may look carefully at where we're practicing unhappiness, in the sense of being enchanted by our narratives, stories, or obsessions. We may look carefully at where we're practicing destructiveness and fragmentation that leads the mind to be agitated and unsettled.

When I think of the word happiness, I don't think of a state. I don't think of a particularly emotional experience that has only one flavor. I think of it much more as a sense of easefulness, simplicity, and spaciousness. And sometimes this means making changes in our lives—something that we will reflect on as this month develops.

This development of samadhi is not something that is unique to the Buddha's path. If you look at any contemplative tradition, in any religion, you will see the same encouragement to learn how to sustain a wholeheartedness, to learn how to sustain intention and attention. You will see the encouragement to gather, to calm, and to be able to listen inwardly. We can accurately assume that the practice of samadhi was the primary practice in India at the time that the Buddha ventured on his own path of awakening.

In the story that we inherit of the Buddha's journey, he sought out the most proficient and well-known practitioners of his time, practiced with them, and developed deep states of samadhi and absorption. But he also found he was disappointed. He found that these deep states of absorption, of gatheredness, were states that had beginnings and endings. And he remained somewhat dissatisfied with these states, as delightful, blissful, and collected as they were, he remained somewhat disappointed in discovering that they actually didn't deliver the lasting happiness, peace, and freedom that he sought.

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This was the beginning of the Buddha introducing something quite new and unique into this pathway. He spoke about using samadhi, the power of stillness and collectiveness, and turning this towards the development of understanding and liberating insight. He spoke about turning the collected mind towards experientially seeing deeply the arising and passing of all things, the changing nature of all things. He used samadhi to investigate, *What is dissatisfaction? What is unsatisfactoriness? How does it arise? What triggers this background noise of discontent, of there being something missing?* He used the power of samadhi to investigate the whole domain of, *Who am I? What do I mean by self? How is self formed? Is it real? Is it true? Or is it something that is a process and is constantly changing?* And through developing samadhi and turning it in this way to investigate and understand, the Buddha forged new pathways that developed a level of insight that truly liberated the heart from greed, confusion, and ill will and directed towards an unshakable liberation of the heart.

As we move on in reading the early texts, it's clear that the Buddha never left this pathway or cultivation of samadhi behind. In the discourses, we get the short version of the path of awakening, that a practitioner goes and takes their seat at the roots of a tree or in an empty hut. They close their eyes, develop deep states of absorption, and get up and proclaim that they've done what needs to be done. This is the short version. It doesn't resemble most people's pathways. For most of us, our pathway is one of valleys and peaks, with times when we feel we're getting somewhere, times when we feel we've entirely lost the plot, times when we feel we understand something deeply, and other times when we feel we're just beginning.

What we do glean from the Buddha's teaching is that samadhi can be powerfully used in the service of understanding the insight that truly liberates. Samadhi provides the inner stillness—the inner calmness, collectedness, and stability—that can be turned towards awakening and freedom. As I said, this is a short version we read in the texts.

When we practice, we are often faced with a wayward and uncooperative mind. We have intentions to be present and attend wholeheartedly, only to find that time and time again, those

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intentions and our attention are hijacked and sabotaged by passing thoughts, plans, ruminations, and memories. We meet the habit of fragmentation both in our lives and in our practice, where our bodies are in one place and our minds are quite separately inhabiting a different space. From the Buddha's perspective, this fragmentation, this disunification, is truly a recipe for distress, confusion, struggle, and heedlessness. And this disunification is often a recipe for unhappiness.

I'd like to offer you a quote from the *Dhammapada*, one of the early, most beloved collections of the Buddha's teaching, where the Buddha recognizes and acknowledges the waywardness of the mind. He says, "This mind, hard to control, flighty, alighting where it wishes, one does well to train. The well-trained mind brings happiness and deepens happiness."

Many practitioners will recognize that samadhi—this quality of inner collectedness, calm, and stillness—is the Achilles' heel of their practice. We can have many insights, but too often, they remain at a conceptual level. We know about *dukkha*. We know about unsatisfactoriness and what triggers it. We know about impermanence and we have glimpses of nonself and nonclinging. Yet somehow that knowing too often doesn't seem to sink into our bones in a way that transforms the landscape of our heart and mind.

That gap, that sense of dissonance, can be so frustrating to us when we find that time and time again, our intentions and attention are sabotaged, essentially, by psychological emotional habits of reactivity. So often our intentions and attention are sabotaged by agitation. Samadhi is a process. Its development is a process. It's a cultivation that takes truly some commitment, time, and dedication. But it is the cultivation of a mind that feels to be a true friend, that heals dissonance, and that allows for creativity and responsiveness. It is the foundation of liberating insight.

It's important to recognize that samadhi is a pathway, a training, a cultivation. It is worth developing a dedicated piece of time to this cultivation. It's important to not be discouraged or to yield to frustration. This process of calming is often new territory for us. We can have such a

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long history of agitation, reactivity, and narrative building. It takes care to begin to calm all of this. We can appreciate the challenges that we face in developing this pathway, but perhaps also sense the profound benefits of this well-trained mind.

I would recommend a specificity of intention in your practice this month. We often have rather generalized intentions, such as, “*I’ll be mindful today, I’ll be aware today.*” And we find that those intentions are easily forgotten. It’s almost as if they’re too generalized. Specificity of intention means sustaining a focus over a period of time so that it can truly begin to sink into our bones. Then we begin to taste the landscape of a well-trained heart.

I would encourage you to give the whole of this month over to the development and cultivation of samadhi. You don’t need to be concerned about missing out on insight or missing out on kindness. You will find that all of this comes to you. Yet there is something helpful about being specific in our intentions and giving ourselves wholeheartedly to this one intention of developing a well-trained heart and mind. To developing calm abiding, to developing our capacity for stillness, collectedness, and gatheredness.

There’s no right amount of time to sit. In my own experience in developing samadhi, you need to listen inwardly. There are times when it is completely appropriate to get up from your cushion or your seat. If the body is complaining, or if you find there’s been an energy slump, or if you’re beginning to struggle and turn the whole practice into some kind of battleground, then it is better to get up and do some walking or move. Sometimes it’s helpful to go past that first moment when your body or mind is shouting at you to stop the practice. To go past that first moment, to again regather, recollect, and then perhaps to respond to what your body and mind are telling you after a few minutes.

If the practice is going well—and there are goalposts for this; you’re not struggling and there’s a sense of contentment—then don’t go for set periods of time to sit. Go for minimums, but not

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maximums. If you're well, if the mind and body are being cooperative and are engaged, don't set a maximum. Listen inwardly to when is the right time to come out of your meditation posture.

There's no such thing as too much collectedness in our lives. But be aware that intention needs an ongoing renewal. It's not enough, for most people, to set an intention at the beginning of their days to be kind, collected, and gathered. We need to be sensitive to all the moments when agitation, disunification, or fragmentation is happening. We need to hear the sounds of this in our minds and bodies and renew our intentions in those moments: *“Ah yes, I can return to the touch of my feet on the ground. I can return to just this breath, to gather and to collect again.”* It is so important to be doing this in our lives and to not anticipate that a period of time on a cushion will have a magical effect in terms of developing samadhi and collectedness. It is important to sense what it is like to sustain this intention through our days, both on the cushion and off the cushion. The benefits *will* come. The benefits *will* be felt.

Let's end this first session by beginning to practice what we've been exploring. You will find in the texts that the Buddha was quite light on prescribing how to practice. But you do discover that there are many moments of encouraging the use of the breathing process as a place of collectedness. In other parts of the Pali Canon, you will find other objects suggested and offered: sounds, sights, or images. For some people, because of histories of breathing issues or even histories of trauma, mindfulness of breathing is not a restful place to be. If that is the case for you, then it's important that you choose a different object where there's a greater sense of easefulness, wellness, and access. It is important that the development of samadhi is not a battleground. It's not an endeavor to force your attention. Rather, it's a welcoming space in which to settle.

I encourage you to find a posture for yourself where you feel supported, where you feel as easeful as you can be, and where there's a marriage of both alertness and softness. We begin by developing an embodied intentionality in our posture. Begin to find that posture, arrive in the body, inhabit the body however it is in this moment. As much as you're able to, develop an

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uprightness in your back and neck. Establish, as much as you're able to, a sense of balance, of groundedness. Feel your legs and your feet touching the mat, the chair. Be mindful of the sensations that are present in those places of contact. Your hands touching each other. Be aware of the touch of your clothing and the air on your skin.

Maintain an intentional posture of alertness and wakefulness. A body of calmness. Allow the thoughts, the images, and the memories to sit in the background of your attention. Foreground this mindfulness of the body sitting right now. The body sensing. The body listening. The body breathing.

In the midst of all of this, cultivate a calm abiding, a wholeheartedness of attending. Sense what is well in your body right now, even what is pleasant in your body right now. Appreciate the quality of gatheredness and collectedness. Appreciate the sensations in your body that are pleasant, that are well.

Explore what it is to breathe into the entire body, being aware of the body expanding with the in-breath and the body relaxing with the out-breath. The breath breathing itself without any need to control or regulate. Sense when there's a short breath. Sense when there's a long breath. Be mindful of the small pause between the ending of the out-breath and the beginning of the next breath.

Breathing in, calming anything that is agitated in the body. Allow the body to soften. Sense the easefulness of that softening, of inhabiting the body wholeheartedly. Breathing in, breathing out, calming anything that is agitated in the mind and in the heart—the thoughts, obsessions, ruminations, or images. Do not hold onto anything that arises in the mind. Be aware of the arising but also of the passing. Allow the mind and the heart to settle into the body, to inhabit the body fully. Breathing in: brightening the mind, brightening the heart. Breathing out: calming the mind, calming the heart. Gather your attention, directing your attention to the body-mind of this

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moment. Sustain your attention as much as you're able to and appreciate the collectedness, the gatheredness, the unification of body, mind, and present moment.

If you wish, continue with the practice, the cultivation. Or if you're ready to emerge, then emerge. Open your eyes, sensing the space around you.