

Christina Feldman

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

Week Two: “The Benefits of Samadhi”

January 8, 2023



Welcome back to this second week of this month-long program on the development and cultivation of *samadhi*, the well-trained, well-developed heart and mind. This week, I would like to reflect on some of the benefits of developing this pathway and this capacity that we all have for inner collectedness. If you have begun to cultivate this practice and this pathway, I hope you've begun to sense or even to glimpse some of the benefits of the practice and why it is so highly valued in the teaching of the Buddha and its place on the path of awakening.

I'd like to start with a quote from the Buddha, where he says, “I know of no one thing that can do so much harm as an untrained mind. But once understood, I can think of no one thing that is a greater friend than a well-trained heart and mind.” A key benefit of developing *samadhi*, this inner collectedness, is to begin to calm the ongoing habit of proliferation and the underlying mental states that generate proliferation. The word in Pali for this proliferation is *papanca*. It is the generation of thinking that is rooted in underlying beliefs, views, and moods that distorts our capacity to see things as they actually are.

Experientially, we know the difficulty and the distress found within our mind that just never seems to stop, that builds so many narratives, so many stories about pretty much everything: ourselves, other people, the world. We can give so much authority to those narratives, describing what we think the world is or other people are or who we are. There's a saying that many people think of their mind as something akin to a mirror, more or less accurately reflecting the world as it is, not appreciating that the mind is the principal architect of that world. We can find ourselves living with familiar states of agitation, anxiety and aversion that generate seemingly endless thinking. It's exhausting to find ourselves so often just lost in thought, disconnected from the moment with all of its joys and sorrows.

When you read the introduction to the *Satipatthana Sutta*, one of the very pivotal discourses on the teaching of establishing mindfulness, the Buddha refers to this agitation. As I introduced into

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the sitting in the last program, the instruction is to breathe in, calming anything that is agitated, and then to breathe out, calming anything that is agitated. It's a very intentional way of focusing. It's not just about watching the breath or your chosen meditation object. It's not just about coming back or concentrating. It is very intentional in its guidance that there is a calming of all the waves of agitation in the body and in the mind.

As we begin to calm the body and mind, the habit of proliferation also begins to calm. We begin to taste the sweetness of stillness, the sweetness of calm abiding. This is a great meditative art and a great life skill. Calming the proliferation, we also begin to calm the process of self-building, the “I am.” The clinging is reduced, and we begin to emerge from the contracted world of “I” and “you” that is rooted in story, rooted in narrative and reinforced by agitation, aversion, and confusion.

Samadhi is a very direct way of practicing non-clinging. There's a discourse when the Buddha describes what it is to be a master of the courses of thought. He says, “A master of the courses of thought thinks the thoughts they want to think when they want to think them and doesn't think the thoughts they don't wish to think.” That is quite a skill, perhaps somewhat unknown in our experience, where so many of our thoughts appear quite uninvited, that appear to linger in ways that are distress-causing or that cause agitation. It's a very high bar, and it's not one to imagine that you will immediately experience, but it does develop: to think the thoughts we want to think, when we want to think them. It is about knowing how this mind that can seem to be a source of such confusion and distress can also be such an ally: in the creative process, in the imaginative process, in the investigating and reflecting process. It is treating the mind as a friend and as an ally.

The next of the great benefits of samadhi is happiness, an inwardly generated happiness. The Buddha says that this kind of pleasure and happiness that is found within the well-collected mind

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should be pursued, developed, and cultivated, and 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 inner collectedness. There is a 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 easily rooted in the externalization of both happiness and unhappiness, the enchantment with the pleasant conditions and the aversion to the unpleasant conditions, finding ourselves often in agitated ways, 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 the unpleasant.

Looking outward to the world, often with pleading eyes, saying, “Make me happy!” makes us a consumer of the world. Samadhi is not only a guardian of the mind; it is also said to be a guardian of the world. In discovering this inwardly generated happiness, those surges of craving and aversion begin 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 for 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, how we have known something before, allowing us to see anew; to find a sense of wonder in meeting life as it is. We begin to see very experientially the changing nature

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of all things; to see the lovely and the unlovely, without generating narrative craving and aversion; to know the breath as the breath, the body as the body, a sound as a sound, and a thought as a thought.

The Buddha speaks of samadhi at times as being a journey of purification, which is a word that can be very charged with reactivity and associations of impurity and purity. This is not what the Buddha means by this process of purification. What samadhi does is as the mind begins to calm, to settle, to deepen, there is a bringing into the light of consciousness so much of what has been unconscious and buried and yet 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 and so driven and lead into 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: to know what is skillful and what is unskillful; to know what is wholesome and what is unwholesome; to know what leads to affliction and what leads to the end of affliction; to know what liberates and what binds.

The clarity that is born of samadhi, this capacity to see clearly, to discern clearly, is the beginning of the ending of distress. Samadhi begins to liberate the mind from the grip of the hindrances—craving, aversion, dullness, agitation, and doubt—patterns so powerful that we meet not only on our meditation cushion but also in our lives.

In the next session, I will begin to reflect upon and investigate those patterns of reactivity more fully. The calming of the hindrance factors does not leave a vacuum. We discover a world of sensitivity, a capacity for wholehearted listening, a mind that truly can think creatively, that can

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contemplate and reflect, a heart that can be responsive in all moments of meeting the world around us.

Once more, we will continue with the exploration of developing samadhi and collectedness. Again, I would invite you to pay attention to your posture, remembering that the body is always sending signals to the mind, and the mind is sending signals to the body. As much alertness, wakefulness, groundedness as we can cultivate in the body, this invites the mind to also ground, still, calm, and be wakeful.

I encourage you to find a posture for your body where you feel supported, an embodied intentionality of wakefulness, alertness, balance, softness. Take a moment to listen inwardly to the body of this moment, to places where there might be holding, tightness, contractedness: in your shoulders, in your face, in your belly, in your hands. Allow those places to soften, quite intentionally softening.

Appreciate just settling. Appreciate the settling and befriending of the body, the attitude of caring, being aware of how mindfulness of the body invites the mind into that environment, that climate of care and kindness, of spaciousness, of softening.

Take a moment to listen to the mind and the heart of this moment, whatever mood or mental state is present, whether the mind feels contracted or spacious, dull or wakeful, busy or agitated or calm. In the midst of this body mind of the moment, set the intention to gather, to collect, to know where our attention is being directed.

Be mindful of the body breathing, wholeheartedly as you can be, mindful of whatever object you have chosen to ground yourself within. Breathing in with sensitivity, breathing out with sensitivity. Breathing in with kindness, breathing out with kindness. Breathing in with curiosity,

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and then out with curiosity. Just sensing the changing nature of all things, of body as process, of mind as process.

As much as you're able to, just sustain that intention to be present, to develop a calm abiding amidst all the changes, amidst all the sensations, all the thoughts. Breathing in, calming. Breathing out, calming. Breathing in, appreciating. Breathing out, appreciating this taste of collectedness, of gatheredness. Breathing in, being undiverted by the moods, the stories, the narratives. Breathing out, not clinging to anything, not taking hold of anything in mind or in body.

In the midst of the changing landscape of mind and body, remember this groundedness, this cultivation of wholeheartedness. Taste the happiness and easefulness of a well-trained heart, a well-trained mind. Taste the happiness and easefulness of this unification and gathering of mind, body, and present moment. Appreciate the taste of calm abiding, sensing the possibility of deepening in that calm abiding, in the stillness of being free from agitation, free from busyness, free from confusion.

There may be many moments when your attention may be drawn to something that becomes more predominant: a sound, a thought, a body sensation. Just pause as you're aware of those moments and reset the intention to be settled and collected within the mind body of this moment, returning intentionally with care, with gentleness, yet also with a commitment to deepening and cultivating this calm abiding in the midst of all things, tasting happiness found within this unification of body, mind, and present moment in the midst of the joys and sorrows of our lives.

Feel free to continue with the practice, or if you're ready to emerge, then just emerge gently, clearly, sensing the space around you, not leaving the calm abiding behind.