

Christina Feldman

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

Week Four: “Samadhi as a Life Practice”

January 22, 2023



Welcome to Week 4, our final week in this month-long program of contemplating the development of *samadhi*, a collected, gathered, well-trained heart and mind. This week, I would like to reflect upon samadhi as a life practice. We often think of samadhi as something that is cultivated primarily on a retreat or on a meditation cushion. My own experience is that samadhi on the cushion and the cultivation of samadhi off the cushion are mutually dependent. If our lives are chaotic and wild and overstimulated and overfull and then we sit down to practice and think somehow we're going to develop samadhi, it might be a little bit unrealistic. But samadhi developed on the cushion also supports us in developing a life which is rooted in and pervaded with a sense of calm abiding.

I think this is truly an important reflection: Does our life support a well-collected, well-trained heart and mind? Does our practice support a collected, directed, intentional life? At times, the way that samadhi is spoken of is as directed attention and undirected attention. With directed attention, we hold a single focus in our attentional field, such as breath, listening, touch points in the body, or an image. This is directed attention. We sustain that focus as fully and as wholeheartedly as we can.

With undirected attention, we don't just have that single object. And in our lives, we very rarely have the luxury of having a single object as we move through a life, moving through a world where we're working, where we're caring for children, moving through a world of multiple sensory impressions. It's not even appropriate or helpful to even endeavor to hold mindfulness of breathing as our focus. Yet we learn that we can move through that world with calmness, wholeheartedly attending to what is most predominant in the moment that could be changing moment to moment. We learn to develop that responsiveness and yet have that core climate of unification, of integration of body, mind, and present moment—whatever we are being asked to attend to.

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This way of being in the world is a gift to ourselves, and very often it is a gift to others. We live in a world that too often is infused with agitation: agitation of hindrance patterns, agitation of views, agitation of opinions and moods. That agitation can be so contagious. We learn that we can add something different to the world of conditions—a world of conditions that we cannot always control and often *cannot* control—and yet what we *can* choose is how we are present and what we are contributing to that world of conditions. And we can offer the gift of calm abiding.

Thich Nhat Hanh was a much-loved teacher from Vietnam. He spoke about the ending of the war in Vietnam, where many Vietnamese people were fleeing the country in flimsy boats, exposed to pirates and to wild weather. He would say that if there was one person in that boat who could remain calm and steady, it could mean the difference between life and death for everyone else in the boat. On the cushion, we develop the skill of attending: of sustaining attention, sustaining intention, learning to be undiverted, and we bring these skills to our lives. In our lives and in the world, we develop the skill of wholeheartedness, the intentions of kindness, compassion, and non-clinging and we bring those skills onto our cushion.

In every moment in our lives, as we move through the world, we are flooded with a torrent of sensory impressions: sights, sounds, sensations, sense, taste, touch, and thoughts. Most of this we do not control and we're asked to meet. An image that is used in the Buddhist tradition is the image of a house with five windows open and an open door. Through the open windows and the door of that house flows the world of sensory impressions, and out from the open windows and the door flows our inner world of responses or reactions. What we learn to do is to place calm abiding, skillful intentions on the window sills and the door sill of that house. We learn we can practice some restraint at the sense doors. And if we truly wish to develop samadhi, or inner collectedness, this element of restraint is quite crucial. Not pursuing every sight, not hungering for more sights, more sounds, more sensations, more stories, we learn to put down that hunger and practice some restraint at the sense doors.

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The Buddha speaks so much about the wisdom of guarding the sense doors. This doesn't mean defensiveness. It's not about shutting out the world or trying to flee from the world but merely being aware of how we are present in the sense doors. Are we practicing craving or aversion? Are we practicing a mind that says more, more, more? Or do we appreciate what a crucial point this is, of the meeting of our senses doors with the sensory world around us?

We can learn to re-perceive with appreciation and sensitivity, to see fully, to listen fully, to touch fully, to be wholehearted in our interactions with appreciation and care. We can't always choose what flows in through the sense doors, but we have many, many choices about what flows out. Here is where the cultivation of a well-trained heart and mind and the cultivation of collectedness is so deeply important.

The world simply doesn't need more craving. It doesn't need more agitation. It doesn't need more ill will. And we realize that we are a conscious participant of how our world of the moment is being shaped. Samadhi is crucial here: to know what is happening within us; to know what to feed and what to fast; to know in all the moments of the flooding of the sense doors we have the capacity to collect and gather ourselves and to be clear in our intentions. The Buddha speaks of wise intention as not grasping at the sensory impressions or the associations with it. With intentional samadhi, we have the choice not to build a narrative about what is seen, about what is heard, about what is touched. We keep the front door open, receiving the world with calm abiding, with sensitivity, with wise intention; but we also keep the back door open, allowing this world of sensory impression to flow through rather than to be clung to or to be grasped at or to build a story upon.

In the midst of a life that is filled with responsibilities, expectations, and doing, the cultivation of calm abiding and inner collectedness offers a way of living that is graceful, steady, and

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uncluttered. To cultivate samadhi in our lives is challenging, but it's also deeply rewarding. We may need to experiment with changing some of the habits and familiar ways of living that we have. Do our lives need more simplicity? Are they too cluttered? Can we consider what is essential to our well-being and what is inessential? Can we learn to cultivate what is essential, the collectedness, the kindness, the calmness of compassion? And can we let go and unbind from so much that is inessential outwardly and inwardly? Can we learn to calm down some of the rhythms of our days to create space for stillness, to create space for unclutteredness? Can we learn to calm down and bring more stillness into our narrative building, into the agitations that we might encounter? Can we learn to meet our inner world and our outer world with responsiveness and stillness? Can we sit on the bus or in our car without having the radio on? Without the plan of arriving? Do we find ourselves too busy?

I took upon myself an intention for a year to stop hurrying. It didn't mean that I couldn't move quickly. But I discovered how much hurrying is a state of mind. Do we find ourselves in that place where we're leaning forward into the next moment, the next thing, the next thing we need to do? Can we move slowly or quickly as needed without being hostage to that state of mind? Can we begin to notice the beginnings and endings in our day rather than accumulating too much unfinished business? Things do have endings. It doesn't mean that they're completed or finished. But we end a telephone call. We end an activity. We end a conversation. We end something that we're doing, and our attention is turned towards something else that requires our attention. Can we pause in those moments to really know those endings, rather than carrying one activity, one engagement, one interaction into the next moment, where it is really not needed? Do we allow ourselves moments in the day to really connect with spaciousness: to step outside, to see the space around the trees, to look at the sky at night, to calm the body, to feel our feet touch the ground? Can we attend wholeheartedly to the meal that needs to be cooked? To the activity of walking?

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We are always practicing something in our days. If we're not practicing calm abiding, it is highly possible that we will be practicing one of the veiling factors: that we will be practicing agitation or restlessness or craving or ill will. And it is clear in the development of this path we need to know what we are practicing in any moment, because whatever we practice, we get better at, whether it's the skillful or the unskillful. Can we be comfortable with non-doing? We can find, at times, a refuge or a sense of meaning and identity and purpose in always being engaged in doing.

There may be choices in our day when we're resting that we're resting in nondoing, that we're connected to the mind body of this moment, to be still, to be present, without any agenda or any plan. Can we appreciate the taste of collectedness, of samadhi, in our bodies, in our minds—the taste of calmness, the taste of stillness? Can we make peace with the unarguables: that change is part of all of our lives? It's not emotionally neutral—at times we welcome it, at times we fear it. Can we make peace with the reality that we will never arrange the conditions of our lives where there is none of the difficult or the unpleasant that this is woven into our being as a human, that we will have losses and gains, that we will age, that we will sicken, that we will die, that we will lose things? Can we make peace with this? Can we make peace with stepping out of the agenda of becoming a perfect self?

When we can make peace with the unarguables, much of the agitation in our lives does begin to calm. Samadhi may be a choice. Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor wrote, he said, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our power to choose. And in our power to choose lies our growth and our freedom." The well-collected heart knows how to make that space and knows how to make wise choices about what we practice and what we cultivate in any moment. It's also about what we don't practice and what we don't cultivate. The Buddha described this journey as swimming against the tide, swimming against the tide of the norms in our culture that lead to unskillfulness, that lead to over-busyness, that lead to delusion. And it's very often swimming against the tide of many of our own habit patterns of agitation. But when

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we find the coolness and the stillness of the waters, we discover a mind and heart that delights in calm abiding, that delights in stillness, that delights in collectedness. We meet and develop a mind that is a friend.

As always, the practice begins with establishing an intentional posture: intentionally being present in the body mind of this moment, however it is, gathering and collecting our attention, directing our attention to this body, mind, present moment with everything that is here with us: the thoughts, the sounds, the moods, the sensations. In the midst of this, grounding, not clinging, cultivating kindness and compassion. Calming the agitation, the busyness, to inhabit this moment fully, wholeheartedly, being aware of what we are bringing to our practice just now: what mood, what mind state. Being aware of how much busyness, agitation, demand we might be bringing to our practice just now and allowing all of this to calm. Giving authority to our intentions to be present rather than to whatever mood or mind state is here. Discovering that with practice, with dedication, we can return to calm abiding. We can sense our feet touch the ground. We can sense this body wholeheartedly.

As much as you're able, sustain that intention to be wakeful, to be curious, to gather, to unify body, mind, and present moment, knowing that this is the ground in which we flourish, in which we thrive, a gift we offer to ourselves of calm abiding. When our attention gets drawn away, we renew our intentions. We return.

Gathering, directing, sustaining, appreciating the landscape of calm abiding, the landscape of wholeheartedness, sensing the field and climate of spaciousness, of gatheredness, of unification. Inhabiting this moment fully and wholeheartedly begins with inhabiting the body fully and wholeheartedly, reflecting on what it is that we would like to bring forward into our lives. What would be a gift to others, to our world, in intention, in wholeheartedness, in calm abiding? Sensing how this path of collectedness, stilling, is a gift to ourselves and a gift to the world

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around us; emerging from this practice period with some curiosity, some investigation about cultivating samadhi in our lives. Are there changes we need to make—helpful changes? What is it that we may need to unbind from? What habit patterns of busyness? What is it that we can cultivate in the midst of a world of conditions we cannot control? How can we cultivate and rest in samadhi, a mind of collectedness?