

CHAPTER NINETEEN

RIGHT SAMADHI

PART II

Samadhi is not only the culmination of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, it is also the crowning achievement of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. But samadhi has an even broader meaning beyond these two great spiritual systems, one that is rarely discussed. It is a universal "religious" experience that crosses all spiritual traditions. Permit me to recount a personal story as a way to suggest this broader view of samadhi.

Well over fifty years ago, I played the organ in a Methodist church in a small mountain town in East Tennessee, where I grew up. I had been playing for church since the age of fourteen, and now at the ripe old age of sixteen, I had been asked to play for our revival. It felt like the big leagues! As the name implies, revivals were yearly events where Protestant congregations brought in a visiting preacher to lead the church in a full week of evening services. It was a time of re-dedication and revival of the spirit. In those days, churches would often hold their revival in a large tent, which could accommodate many more people than the regular sanctuary. That is where our revival was held that summer, in a very big tent.

The preachers were usually well known, at least locally,

and in some cases their fame had spread across many states. They traveled from town to town bringing their message of conviction and renewal to the flock that gathered each night in the heat and passion of that old-time religion. Usually they were dynamic, exciting and charismatic. Still, they needed a little musical help to create the emotional wallop that led people to the altar at the end of each service. This is where the musicians came in. As the preacher stood on the makeshift stage and invited people to come down and get right with the Lord, the organist or pianist would “juice” the music, letting it rise and fall in sync with the preacher’s hypnotic cadence. “Come home, come home. Ye who are weary come home, come home,” the choir sang, while the preacher prayed, and the organ carried the message into each listener’s heart. It could be an extraordinarily powerful experience. One of my favorite songs was “Have Thine Own Way Lord,” which was what I was playing the night when a profound conviction of spirit literally led me down to the altar.

Have thine own way, Lord.
Have thine own way.
Thou are the potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me, after thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

These are the words of a longing and yielding heart. They have been sung in one form or other by humans longing to connect with the divine for as long as we have walked on this earth. These words could easily have been sung by the Indian saint Ramakrishna, in Dakshineswar, or spoken by a devout Muslim. In this case, they were sung by a Christian teenager in a small southern mountain town in the U.S.A. To this day, these words softly steal into my heart during a long Buddhist retreat.

According to the Christian belief, I was “saved” that summer night; I had a spiritual conversion. I was born again, made anew. How did it happen? Was it merely a psychological event, where a naïve, immature young man was hypnotized by the charisma of a wonderful preacher – made to feel he was sinful, needing forgiveness and redemption? Perhaps. I have often thought about all the disciples who were said to have experienced profound awakening as they listened to the Buddha’s sermons. Was that of a different order, somehow elevated because it was a Buddhist experience? Are Buddhist awakenings completely different from the emotional “religious” experiences of unsophisticated Christians, Hindus or Muslims?

Although the conversion that I experienced was filtered through the southern Christian culture of my childhood, it was a spiritual event that is cross cultural. Throughout the week of that revival my mind had been moved by a deep questioning. Perhaps it is too extreme to compare my questioning to the “great doubt” elicited by the old Ch’an masters - which we will discuss shortly - but certainly there was some crises of doubt that slowly developed deep within my heart. By that last night, doubt had reached a crescendo which led to a state Christians call “conviction.” As I knelt at the altar, my mind was in a state of utter confusion, and I remember that I cried profusely. Eventually something quite amazing happened: a bursting forth of a completely new mind state. Although most of that evening has long faded from memory, I still remember a state of complete clarity and peace that seemed to enveloped me. I was never quite the same again. It that is really true, what an extraordinary statement!

Without a doubt, that experience was some form of a samadhi state. Certainly it was a far cry from the four jhanas

we spoke of in the previous chapter, but there was a level of concentration and intensity that are the hallmarks of a samadhi state. The Theravada description of samadhi may be technically correct in a strict, classical Buddhist sense, but, in the final analysis, it is a limited definition. Indeed it does not even apply to other Buddhist traditions, as we will discover when we discuss the Ch'an *huatou*. It certainly does not include ecstatic experiences from other religions.

It may seem like quite a stretch to go from a Christian conversion experience in a tent revival to the awakening experience of a Ch'an meditator in ancient China, but I would suggest that the underlying commonality between the two scenes is samadhi. Although Ta Hui, one of the great Ch'an masters from the twelfth century, taught many styles of meditation, including Silent Illumination, his basic method was the *huatou* (pronounced wha – dough). A *huatou* is a koan, distilled down to its essence. For instance, there is a koan about a monk asking Zhaozhou (pronounced Jow Joe), "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" Zhaozhou replied, "nothing!" In Chinese, the word for "nothing" or "no" is "mu." Usually, the koan uses the Chinese word "mu." The student grapples with the seeming paradox of Zhaozhou's famous "no!" because, in fact, the Buddha taught that all sentient beings have Buddha nature.

A *huatou* only works with the "head" or essence of the koan. For instance, Ta Hui would ask his students to repeat the question, "what is mu?" relentlessly, while sitting, walking, eating. Or he would have a student simply repeat the word "mu" ("nothing") until it seeped into his very bones. This is a *huatou*. Here is how Sheng Yen describes Ta Hui's method:

The function of both *huatou* and *gong'an* (*koan*) is to generate what we call the "great doubt." This doubt

does not mean skepticism or suspicion, but an intense uneasiness and wonderment that we must know the meaning of the huatou. It is a state of all-consuming questioning that is relentless, not settling for an solution other than the complete resolution of the huatou. Such resolution means liberation from the great matter of birth and death. Naturally there are degrees of the doubt, from momentary feelings of a fleeting doubt sensation, to a persistent undercurrent of the doubt in all of your daily activities, to a great doubt sensation where you feel your whole world has collapsed into this sense of intense wonderment. When the doubt reaches a crescendo, it becomes vast and self-sustaining. Under certain circumstances this great doubt will explode; your sense of self will suddenly vanish and enlightenment will occur. The huatou is a great tool, and you must generate the doubt by investigating it.

A number of factors must coalesce for the doubt to reach a crescendo. First, there must be a container for the experience. Jung called this the *temenos*, a holy place with a protected center. Even a tent can become a *temenos* for a revival of spirit, and certainly so could a Ch'an monastery sitting on top of a mountain in China, as well as an ashram in India. In addition to the *temenos*, there must be a continuity of effort. This cannot be over emphasized. We have already mentioned U Pandita's saying that a mother hen has to sit on the egg with a steady constancy. This is the underlying *modus operandi* of all spiritual practice. Spiritual heat does not rise from on again - off again effort.

In a mindfulness retreat, we are asked to practice 24 – 7 sati: mindfulness to every activity and transition between activities throughout the day. The mind doesn't need to understand the dynamics of building psychic "heat" or

energy in the chitta any more than a mother hen has to understand the process of a chick's development within the egg. The meditator just needs to show up for the work.

The third factor in reaching a crescendo of doubt is the vital role of a teacher. Most of us simply cannot do this hard work without a teacher, one who can guide us through our dark days and urge us on when we falter. When these factors coalesce, samadhi arises; the mind becomes entirely one pointed, and completely engaged. As Sheng Yen says, it is "where you feel your whole world has collapsed into this sense of intense wonderment." It goes without saying that there is ample possibility for great harm if one is attracted to an unscrupulous, manipulative teacher or leader.

When the great doubt bursts apart, "Your sense of self will suddenly vanish and enlightenment will occur." If a sense of self suddenly vanishes, one has experienced anatta, even if for only a moment. This experience is called stream entry in Theravada Buddhism, but one does not have to be a Buddhist to experience it. Anatta can happen in a tent revival, and it can happen to someone listening in total connection to the Dalai Lama. It has happened to hundreds of thousands of people for thousands of years. If we can bear the tension of a psychological gridlock long enough, samadhi is the engine that leads us into a new way of being.

Carl Jung provides a contemporary Western explanation for psychic gridlock. He says it is a state that occurs when a complete parity between the opposites has developed in our psyche. This is, in fact, a great moment of potentiality according to Ta Hui, where the mind cannot find an escape from the dilemma of the huatou. According to Jung, the will is temporarily suspended; the wind is howling through the system, but the ship has lost its sails. The vital energy "dams up." If we can tolerate this

condition long enough, something entirely new and unexpected may spring forth. This burst of creativity, moves us out of a place of psychological paralysis. It is psyche's answer to what previously seemed unanswerable. Jung called it the transcendent function:

When there is full parity of the opposites, attested by the ego's absolute participation in both, this necessarily leads to a suspension of the will, for the will can no longer operate when every motive has an equally strong countermotive. Since life cannot tolerate a standstill, a damming up of vital energy results, and this would lead to an insupportable condition did not the tension of opposites produce a new, uniting function that transcends them. This function arises quite naturally from the regression of libido caused by the blockage

It is safe to say that our conscious ego has very little interest in psychic gridlock, and does everything it can to avoid such a terrifying event. How incredibly important that we acknowledge, in humility, just how profound our resistance to radical change is. We may claim that we want to awaken from the roof tops, but the small self always wants to walk on safe ground. It desperately needs to know what lies around every dark corner; moment by moment it tries to keep us safe from the unknown. All the while, if we are practicing 24-7 mindfulness or a Zen koan on a retreat, we are being led toward the unknown. Obviously, psychic gridlock becomes a possibility. It is quite ironic. Here we are trying our best to cling to the known and at the same time trying to move toward the unknown. For some of us, months, if not years, of intense practice would be necessary in order to reach that psychic edge where the transcendental function is engaged. Others are inexplicably primed to reach that state in the most sudden, unpredictable and frightening

of circumstances.

I find Jung's theory of a transcendental function most reassuring. Certainly in religious terms, we are told that grace must be present for an awakening experience. Paul did not fall to the ground because of something he had done on his own. Christianity says that his awakening came from God. Ramakrishna gave all credit to God. But Jung's transcendental function is not based in mystery or grace. Given the proper circumstances – "where there is full parity of the opposites" – something radically new is bound to spring forth. I suggest that Jung's transcendent function is precisely the brain's capacity to radically change through a process known in the East as samadhi.

The human nervous system must undergo significant rewiring in order for the brain to safely process the powerful energies that are released in deeper levels of meditation. For instance, my system could only receive what it was capable of processing that summer night in Tennessee, which was quite limited indeed. To my knowledge, Patanjali's classical yoga is the only extant discipline that focuses primarily on rewiring the human nervous system, thus preparing it for spiritual evolution. This rewiring also happens through Buddhist meditation, but, other than sila (morality) training, working with the charkas through asanas and pranayama never seemed to be a primary concern in the Buddhist tradition.

Far too many meditation students have had the experience of going beyond the processing capacity of their nervous systems, particularly in long intensive retreats, with unpleasant and sometimes disastrous results. This is not to mention psychological issues. Here we are living in supposedly modern times, with absolutely no scientific proof whatsoever that what I have just written is true. In

short, samadhi has not engaged our Western scientific minds at all, and surprisingly, that includes psychology.

Now let us return to a more narrow view of samadhi. We said that, in yoga, there is a turning inward, particularly at the fifth stage, called pratyahara. Chip Hartranft, in *The Yoga-sutra of Patanjali*, calls it a process of "interiorization." This reminds one of "turning the light within," or the "backward step" of Zen. As we sit in meditation, the mind begins to settle over a period of months or years. It can be a very slow process for some, but, almost beyond noticing, one eventually realizes that a change has occurred. Thoughts still come and go, but the body has stopped fidgeting; the mind is quieter. When our senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, etc.) begin to withdraw from their external objects, the meditator has reached pratyahara. In fact, it signals an actual shift of consciousness. We are no longer pulled out of our connection to the interior by our senses rushing out to contact a sense object.

Dharana

The sixth limb of yoga occurs when we are finally able to truly concentrate on an object. In Zen, a traditional method of developing concentration is to count the breaths starting from one and going to ten. Initially, the meditator may count one on the inhalation and two on the exhalation. As she gains greater concentration, she may breathe in and out on the same count of one. Eventually, when the meditator finds that she can stay with the count from one to ten without forgetting any number, she is ready to drop the count and simply stay with awareness of the breath. Easy? For some of us it seems impossible to get past five! We are doing great up to five and then discover that we are on a cruise to Alaska and have no idea which number is next. It's quite sobering and humbling. We bring ourselves back to the breath and start all over, breathing in on a count of one,

breathing out on a count of two, etc. Some of us have to do this many months, or, dare I say, years. When the meditator has gained the ability to concentrate he has reached dharana. The process of interiorization continues.

Dhyana

Patanjali says another shift in consciousness arises at the seventh limb. Now, the meditator no longer needs to force the mind to concentrate on the same object moment by moment; this occurs naturally. The mind automatically stays on the object. Sounds occur, thoughts still rise, body sensations are still there, but the mind is not disturbed by them. It rests on, and becomes one with, the object; it becomes deeply calm and still. This is what Patanjali calls meditation. The word he used is dhyana, which translates into Pali as jhana.

Translated into Buddhist terminology, dhyana seems to be synonymous with access concentration, that state where the mind rests in the neighborhood of the first jhana, and the hindrances are pushed to the periphery of consciousness. This is what Patanjali calls meditation. Yoga's final step of spiritual transformation is samadhi, the culminating eighth step.

Samadhi

In Sanskrit, samadhi can also refer to a structure, similar to a mausoleum, meant to commemorate the dead. Usually samadhis are built to honor a saint or guru and when an Indian Master dies, it is often said that she or he has entered Mahasamadhi, the great union. Interestingly, the Buddha also chose to enter a state of samadhi at the time of his passing, as have many Zen Masters throughout the history of Ch'an and Zen Buddhism, but the Pali scriptures

prefer to say that he entered one of the *jhanic* states.

Samadhi is a state of religious ecstasy and union. It is known by different names in all religions, but for certain it involves a radically altered state of consciousness. In a linear progression, samadhi flows naturally out of dhyana or access concentration, but it can also happen spontaneously. For instance, there is a story of the Buddha, as a young boy watching his father at a spring plowing festival. He entered into a blissful state of silence. Surely, his mind spontaneously went into a samadhi state. The recollection of this moment was crucial in his later quest for enlightenment. Samadhi can occur when you are taking a walk in the park and when a charismatic preacher, guru, or teacher lifts you off the planet through the power of their words.

Throughout history men and women have been struck dumb by samadhi's awesome power, from Paul on the road to Damascus, to Hildegard of Bingen. When he was sixteen years old, the great Advaita Vedanta master, Ramana Maharshi, fell to the floor as if dead. From that moment on, he remained in an altered state of consciousness for the remainder of his life. Like a salt doll entering the ocean, the basic structure of Ramana Maharshi's ego dissolved, never to completely re form again.

In dhyana, the mind becomes completely "fixed" on the object. As it remains deeply concentrated on the object, *and in the presence of sufficient power or energy*, a unification occurs in which the subject and object become one. Body and mind drop away. What is left is essence, or "suchness." One cannot overestimate the importance of a healthy nervous system strong enough to process the burst of energy that flows through the system. Ta Hui, stresses the importance of a "burst of power." He once wrote an elderly student, praising him for his impeccable discipline and attention to

the Dharma. All the old man lacked was a final burst of power to break through the iron wall of delusion that kept him separated from Truth. Samadhi is the engine that produces that burst of power.

According to Patanjali, there are two levels of samadhi: savikalpa samadhi and nirvikalpa samadhi. In Savikalpa samadhi the meditator, escapes the gravitational pull of the hindrances and enters into a profound state of silence. At its highest levels, body and mind seem to have vanished, but in fact, there is still a “seed” remaining. Even if the ego seems to have disappeared, it is still there. As we said in the previous chapter, in the Theravada terminology, this is called the form realm. In other words, savikalpa samadhi is comparable to the four lower jhanas. Even in the fourth jhana, “beyond pleasure and pain” the seed of ego, name and form, remain.

Savikalpa samadhi mirrors the origins of consciousness before the Twelve Nidanas were able to form the iron chain that binds us to the eternal wheel of samsara. The seed of ego that lies dormant in savikalpa samadhi is none other than avijja, or ignorance. When the meditator comes down from samadhi, that seed will sprout again and the Twelve Nidanas again begin to function.

The highest samadhi is nirvikalpa samadhi. This is a state beyond ego, and is called “seedless.” It is comparable to the four higher “formless” jhanas of Theravada Buddhism. In the formless realm, one has transcended attachment to views and perception. There is no longer an attachment to form, body or materiality. In Theravada, it is also called the Immaterial Realm. The terminology is different, but there seems to be no difference between Patanjali’s nirvikalpa samadhi and the four formless jhana’s of Theravada Buddhism, the highest of which is called “The

Sphere of Neither Perception nor Non-perception.”

Ramakrishna taught that in nirvikalpa samadhi, the seed of avijja is burned out through contact with the divine fire of the Absolute. His favorite description of nirvikalpa samadhi was to compare it to a salt doll stepping into the ocean. It vanished in the salt water. Referring to this ultimate experience of samadhi, he said:

True knowledge is impossible without samadhi. In samadhi man becomes one with God. Then he can have no egoism.

Do you know what it is like? Just at noon the sun is directly overhead. If you look around then, you do not see your shadow. Likewise, you will not find the ‘shadow’ of ego after attaining Knowledge, samadhi.

Ramakrishna taught his disciples that samadhi is the goal of yoga – the uniting of the individual soul with cosmic consciousness. In a sense, samadhi was so commonplace to Ramakrishna that it was not a big deal at all. He slipped into altered states of consciousness at the sound of a sacred hymn or chant. To him, samadhi is the key that unlocks the portal to the divine. He believed that “true knowledge is impossible without samadhi” and sang this song to his followers:

Dive deep O mind, Dive deep in the ocean of God’s
Beauty;
If you descend to the uttermost depth,
There you will find the gem of Love.

When all duality ceases, and there is no longer even the shadow of an ego, one is in nirvikalpa samadhi.

This is the point where Buddhism diverges from the classical yoga teaching. The Buddha saw that the salt doll only seems to disappear while emerged in the ocean of samadhi. When it returns to “earth” it reconstitutes itself. This point of divergence is not only between Buddhism and Patanjali’s system of yoga, it distinguishes Buddhism from most other spiritual systems as well. Essentially, the Buddha declared that the seed of avijja, ignorance, is embedded so deeply within our human psyche structure that even a profound state of samadhi will not be sufficient to burn it out. In other words, samadhi may be a necessary element in the eradication of avijja, but not the sufficient element. A caveat might be offered here that some humans have experienced lower stages of enlightenment in previous incarnations. In other words, it is possible that profound states of samadhi might be sufficient to burn out the seed of avijja if it has already been fatally weakened by previous enlightenment experiences. This is far beyond my knowing, but it seems like a reasonable theory.

In any event, the Buddha declared that wisdom, prajna, is what leads us to freedom, not samadhi. “Ye shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.” Samadhi is the rocket, but wisdom is the aim. Samadhi is the burst of power, but wisdom is what soars on that power and what ultimately sees Truth. Thus the Buddha made a crucial correction to the spiritual blueprint; he added sati as the seventh step of the Path. This leads to a certain cognitive dissonance, at least for this writer, which is why we have asserted that samadhi does not rest easily on top of the Eightfold Path.

Earlier I described the seventh step of Right Sati as a set of brakes on samadhi. In this light, we can at least speculate that in the context of the Eightfold Path, Right Samadhi must always remain tethered to sati. This is an entirely different

animal from experiences such as Paul's on the road to Damascus, or Ramana Maharshi's, where the mind is completely blown away by the power of samadhi. In the same vein, isn't the absence of wisdom the missing element in most ecstatic religious experiences? Clearly, in the absence of prajna, one can still dance with the divine, but the absence of wisdom can also lead humans into mass hypnosis and incredibly dangerous cults. Perhaps the Buddha's original teaching implied that samadhi must always be guided by prajna. This is what makes it Right Samadhi.

However logical such speculation may be, there is no doubt that the early Buddhist scholars simply clothed classical yoga's samadhi in Buddhist robes, renamed it the eight jhanas and placed it as the eighth step of the Eightfold Path. It creates a cognitive dissonance for one simple reason: there is no way the mind can remain tethered to sati in the formless realm of the four higher jhanas, better known as nirvikalpa samadhi. This is not to say that the early commentators did not do their best to smooth over any cognitive dissonance. There are descriptions such as "momentary concentration" and "vipassana jhanas" which attempt to justify an integration of samadhi into mindfulness practice, but, for some of us, this does not quite resolve the question. We leave further discussion of such arcane matters for another day.

If sati is, in fact, analogous to a beam of light shining in a light house and samadhi is analogous to a set of mirrors that magnify the light, one might add a further analogy. In some circumstances, a set of mirrors reflecting light can become a laser. It is fascinating to ponder. A laser – Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation - is produced when an ordinary beam of light is "contained" within a "lasing medium." The lasing medium has two mirrors at either end and the light is stimulated by a current

of energy. As more and more photons of the same wavelength are reflected off of the mirrors, a cascade effect occurs and eventually a powerful laser beam escapes through one of the mirrors.

Lasers were invented by mind, and mind is able to reinvent itself by the same process. We spoke earlier of the temenos, the sacred holding space. Ultimately, the mind itself is the sacred holding space. At some point, the light of sati, through the power of samadhi, can become a laser. It can then penetrate to the very root of avijja. In that light, ignorance is forever obliterated. "Done is what had to be done" were the words of the Buddha.

One final image comes to mind. We picture a lighthouse shining its light into the dark harbor, but the Eightfold Path imagines something quite different. At some point, the light must turn inward, toward some interior impossible to conceptualize. We are told to trace back the radiance. Where is this center? Where do we shine the light? In the merger of sati and samadhi - light plus magnification - the interior begins to shine. The lighthouse still radiates outward, in all directions, but only because it has become illuminated from within.