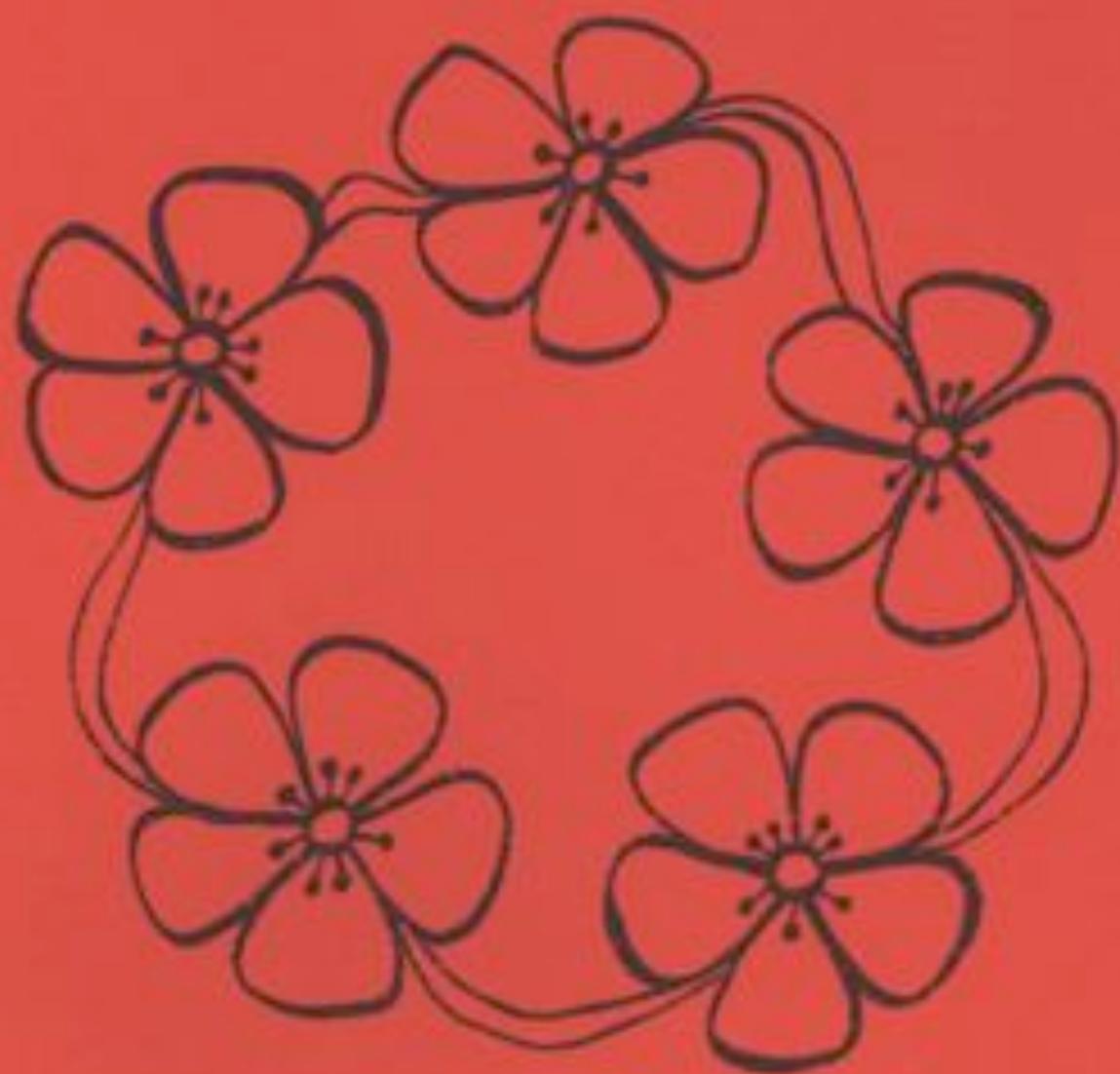


CYCLE OF SAMATHA



TARCHIN HEARN

Cycle of Samatha

A Gentle Encouragement to Appreciate the
Present Moment

by
Tarchin Hearn

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Introduction

I am sitting at my desk, writing this introduction. I smile and give myself a few minutes to breathe. Raising my eyes, I notice the sunlight streaming into the room. The smell of the beech trees is gently around and the sound of hammer tapping in the distance gives rhythm to the moment. Feeling all of this, appreciation flowers in many directions. How wonderful it is to be offering this to you.

The Cycle of Samatha is a simple teaching that invites us to dwell richly and appreciatively in the present moment. Actually it's so simple, that on hearing it for the first time, many people feel that they have already known it for years. It's just that somehow they had forgotten. In our busy lives, simplicity can often be quite elusive.

Some people have asked, what is the cycle of samatha and where does it come from? It's not a new translation of an ancient text, nor could I say with any honesty that it's something that I invented. This cycle which reminds us of the heart of healing and meditation, came spontaneously into mind, one day, while I was walking towards the teaching hall at Wangapeka to give a class to a group of people who were new to meditative work. Although the cycle appears to be quite simple, it is the fruition of more than twenty five years of study and contemplation in various schools of Buddhism, and more than eighteen years of teaching. During the following months, sharing this with many people around the world, it has proven to be a valuable tool, not only for beginners but also for people who have been engaged in meditative practices for many years. It is a teaching that feels natural and do-able for newcomers

while at the same time pointing to the deepest realisations of the contemplative life.

There are so many methods of contemplation already available today. I don't think we really need any more. The problem is not lack of guidance but that we forget our spiritual or meditative practices, often at the very moment we most need them. You could think of the Cycle of Samatha as a direct reminder of what we already know. Expressed in just five words, it's easy to remember and it can immediately enrich our lives and the lives of others around us.

As you read this booklet, please allow yourself to pause every sentence or two; to smile and breathe and enjoy the present moment. Don't rush through the text searching for a technique or some new facts to salt away in your information deposit box; more great ideas that somehow never grow beyond the initial burst of enthusiasm. Consider this writing as an invitation, from me to you, and in a mysterious way, from you to me; somehow gently calling to each other. Think of it as an invitation to leisurely stroll through a beautiful garden or to sip tea in a tranquil moment while sharing something very precious, heart speaking to heart.

Samatha (pronounced sah-mah-tah) is a Sanskrit word that is usually translated as calm or tranquillity. If we examine it in greater detail though, we can find a richer level of meaning. English is part of the Indo-European group of languages with roots tracing back into both Latin and Sanskrit. The word *Samma* actually means complete or total. Our English word *sum*, as in adding up a number of figures, comes from this root. The *tha* part, is really a shortened form of the Sanskrit root *stha*, which is associated with the idea of firmness or solidity. In English, *stha* gave rise to words such as *stand* and *stationary*. Putting *samma* and *tha* together we find the idea of standing completely firm: solid and unshakably present in the midst of whatever is arising.

Here we discover a wonderful thing and to some people it comes as quite a surprise. We're not talking about a calm that results from "pouring oil on troubled waters" or a tranquillity that arises through suppressing or controlling a particular activity; not stillness as opposed to something dynamic but calmness and clarity manifesting naturally, in the midst of activity.

In your imagination, come with me to the retreat centre at Wangapeka. Just across the road runs the cold and clear Wangapeka River. At certain times of the year, delicate white flower petals from the Kanuka trees, fall into the water and float down stream. Imagine you are sitting on the green mossy rocks, shaded by a grove of black beech trees. The sunlight is filtering through the leaves. Bell birds and tuis are calling to each other, their liquid notes highlighting the purity of the air. Wood pigeons coo back and forth across the stream. The water is swirling by, bubbling, whirlpooling, dancing through the rocks on the way to the Tasman Sea. It seems amazing that the delicate white flowers speeding past, are not crushed in the turbulent flow.

Imagine further that you are a Kanuka flower, floating in this same stream. You are relaxed. You cannot see the river bank rushing by. As far as you are concerned, you are easefully at rest in the water. A delicate cluster of petals cradled in the crystal clear surface tension of the stream. As bystanders, we see the flower racing down a dangerous course. The petal, however, is simply resting where it is. Can you see a connection between this and your life?

The cycle of samatha is a reminder of how to rest easefully in life's bubbling stream of constant change. It encourages us to let go of the deeply engrained habit of being a bystander and to enter the flowing of life; to release ourselves fully into the dynamic living presence of present moment. Whenever we hang on to the bank, we are using our energy to avoid being washed away. And yet we might ask ourselves if constantly hanging on is enough to make life feel meaningful and worth living or is it actually an unnecessary struggle?



Smiling

Resting in this moment of now, I remember to smile. Eyes lifting, glancing right and then left in playful lightening dance. Air touching nostrils and lips. Front teeth cooling, opening to a sparkling grin. The body twinkles through and through. A rush of warmth and goodness shapes a path of deepening breath.

The Cycle of Samatha begins in the most simple way.

We smile!

After you've read these words, look up from the page and allow your face to soften into a smile. How does it feel?

To really appreciate something we often need to contrast it with something else, so after you have smiled, try frowning. Recall how it feels to be more sombre or serious. Check the overall quality of body and mind that's happening now. Is it different than when you were smiling? Go back and forth between these two states, smiling and sombre, until you clearly recognise the differences between them. Intellectually we all know that there probably is a difference but how does it actually feel in your body? Check it out – right now. How does smiling affect your perception? What does it do to your overall sense of aliveness? A simple smile can lighten up our whole way of being and immediately change our appreciation of the present moment.

If you are already involved with a practice of meditation, you might like to try a mini experiment. Take a few minutes to remind yourself how it feels to be intensely or seriously meditating. Recall the sensations of being deeply engaged in your practice. Perhaps you are already smiling but if you are not, allow a smile to lighten your face and continue with your meditation. Do you notice any difference?

When we smile to begin this cycle of samatha, we are not trying to look like a toothpaste advertisement. More important than the lips curling up is the feeling of smiling eyes. Smile again and become aware of the sensations in and around your eyes. How would you describe them? Many people discover a kind of lightness or sparkle, an increased degree of mobility that often feels quite playful. One person who was visiting us in New Zealand and called himself "a dour Scotsman" with a rolling "rrrr", said that he wasn't quite comfortable with all this smiling; however he admitted that his eyes softened and that the softening gradually suffused throughout his whole being. As our looking softens and twinkles, our vision becomes unfrozen and a wonderful mystery reveals itself. It seems that a lightness of looking brings a thawing of the heart.

Even when we remember to smile, it sometimes feels artificial, as if the smile were made of cardboard and pasted on the outside of our face. A smiling mouth without smiling eyes is often just a grimace, a facade we present to the world. A real smile is a moment of transforming magic. It can change our experience of everything.

When our smile is not present, especially when we are trying to concentrate, there is frequently a dulling of vision. It is as if through making a special effort to focus on one thing, we end up ignoring everything else. The tone of our experience can become flattened and somewhat grey, if not completely narrowed down. We can even fall into a kind of tunnel vision. In the midst of this effort to concentrate, it can sometimes seem that we've lost our smile altogether. Does your meditation ever feel like that?

How can we find our smile when it seems to have vanished away? We might end up looking for it in our pocket, in our wallet, in the telephone directory. Perhaps we misplaced it on the hard drive. The more we worry over its loss, the more our eyes freeze up or glaze over.

There is a simple way we can regain our smile that sometimes works even when we don't feel like smiling. I call it the Bali eye dance.

Are you familiar with the Indonesian dancing of Bali where the performers move their eyes in the most expressive ways, often accompanied with intricate hand gestures? When you have finished reading this paragraph, try raising your eyes a little, so that you are looking slightly above the horizontal. Then, without moving your head, glance to the right and then glance to the left. Do these movements gently back and forth a few times. Now roll your eyes in a large circle, clockwise, then counter clockwise. Become the mischievous child in a wonderful moment of showing off and let it be playful. Many people find that very quickly, they are smiling if not actually laughing.

In this first step of the cycle of samatha, we simply pause wherever we are and smile. If it helps, we can do the Bali eye dance. After a few playful eye movements, many people find a smiling warmth softens into their body and the breathing begins to spontaneously deepen. Please don't think of this as a meditation technique. It is something that anyone can do, at almost any time and almost any place. Smiling not only lightens our experience but it uplifts everyone we meet.



Breathing

Without thinking or intending, my body breathes on its own! Surprise! Everything participates in the miracle. Legs invite the air. Palms pulse with the gaseous tidal flow. Stomach and back, neck and head, face and chest, every part responds to every other.

Breathing in, all of life supports me. Breathing out, sharing deeply. I breathe heart to heart with the world. My breathing in, is the world breathing out. My breathing out, is the world breathing in. We are lovers! Cell to cell. Membrane to membrane. Intimately moving in rhythmic embrace. How simple. How natural. How richly now.

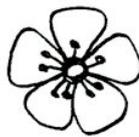
People who practise this cycle often note that as their smile deepens, so too does their breathing. The process is very natural. Breathing in and breathing out..... smiling. Perhaps you have already practised breathing meditation where you trained yourself to watch the breath coming and going. You may have even learned to control the breathing in various ways. With the cycle of samatha, we don't so much "watch" the breath, nor do we try to control it in any way. We simply feel the movements of the body breathing. Just smiling and breathing. That's it! Don't think of this as a meditation practice. This is life. With rare exceptions, breathing happens twenty-four hours a day, from the moment we are born to the moment we die. If we are breathing, we are alive.

Most people are aware of only certain parts of their body at any one time. A tightness in the chest, a pain in the elbow and so forth. Unfortunately there are many other parts that completely escape our attention. Although we may know it intellectually, few people experience their body as one completely integrated organism.

I sometimes find it useful to think of my body as having only one very complex muscle that simultaneously flexes in a multitude of different directions in order to support the various movements. This may sound a bit strange but just consider your own body this way. Have you ever had a sore back? At times like this, even picking up a relatively light weight object, can make us acutely aware of how bending in a certain way requires that we anchor ourselves in another part of our body. In fact, if we attend very closely to our physical movements, we will find that every little movement is accompanied by compensating movements in other parts of the body.

I remember holding a new born baby and marvelling that as she breathed, a ripple of movement ran from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head and then back again. Breathing is a rhythmic muscular movement. As adults, could we become so still and so sensitive that we intimately feel the subtle movements of breathing rippling throughout our entire organism?

Smiling and breathing. Right now I am sitting back from my computer to do this. Please join me for a moment. We can smile and breathe together.



As you breathe, become aware of the palms of your hands. Can you sense the rhythm of your breathing right here in your palms? Attend to your feet and legs. Can you feel the breathing in your thighs and feet? Notice your back breathing. Your scalp and face.

Feel your arms, your chest and abdomen. As you smile, open your awareness to feel your entire body breathing.

Of course, we breathe with much more than just our lungs. Air moving in and out of the chest won't do us much good if it isn't transported via the blood to the cells which absorb oxygen and give off various waste products. Some people feel a little foolish doing all this smiling. Our Scottish friend admitted as much. If that is the case for you, since you've gone this far anyway, why not go the whole hog and do something completely ridiculous! Imagine each cell of your body is a nose! An entire human body made of trillions of tiny noses, each one savouring the delicate scent of oxygen. Ah! Here's a molecule from the rainforests of Borneo. Mmm, here's some from the grasslands of Patagonia! Becoming very still, see if you can feel all of these noses inhaling and exhaling; inner connoisseurs of the rare and wondrous art of breathing. If you feel reluctance to do this, at least you could try sharing it with your children! Teach them how to be really "nosy"!

Breathing in. Breathing out. One's entire body breathing and savouring this essence of life.

Sometimes the wonderful simplicity of smiling and breathing slips away without our even noticing. This can especially happen to "meditators". Our smile fades as we intently focus. Our critical faculties may subtly turn to judgement. Instead of enjoying our breathing, enjoying the immediacy of being alive, we step out from our bodies and once again become distant observers, uninvolved bystanders, spectators at some kind of meditation sporting event. Once we are no longer directly involved, our minds begin to wander all over the lot. Old stories surface. Reviewing the past and planning the future. The easeful pleasure of presence disappears and we are left with wild hive of buzzing thoughts. Does this ever happen to you?

Like an early morning mist rolling up the valley, this subtle dulling can obscure the arising moment. We are settling nicely into our meditation, when, without really noting it, we find ourselves drifting in a vague aimless way. Any sense of active exploration has disappeared in the mist. Some people associate this drifty state with a sense of turning "inward" but it can also mask a subtle turning off from, or a turning away from what people often think of as the

"outer world". This is not awakening. A better name might be asleepening!

Imperceptibly, a gradual tightening and freezing of our faculties takes place until we are deep in an experience that is neither here nor there, neither awake nor asleep. Compared to the business of our lives, it may feel restful and calming but it is not very functional for driving a car in busy traffic or interacting with others in a compassionate and enlivening way.

If you recognise this dullness creeping in, check your smile and if it seems to have disappeared, Bali eye dance until you recontact a playful quality that refreshes. When we find ourselves smiling and breathing with deepening calm, then it's time to brighten the state even more by anchoring ourselves in the sensory richness of present moment



Present

All the senses are waking up. Seeing Hearing Touching Smelling Tasting. Smiling and breathing in this particular place. Not any other. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Smiling and breathing, a kaliedescoping of colour, sound, touch, smell, taste and thought weaving a mystery – this tapestry of present moment.

While you are smiling and breathing, if you haven't already done so, try opening your eyes. Notice where you are. Softly smiling, sensitively breathing and at the same time, seeing. We can do these all together. Many meditators practise with closed eyes. It's as if they need to shut out the distraction and disturbance of the environment around. Yet if we were to see the essence of meditation as dwelling in a state of easeful, present, awakesness, couldn't this be done with open eyes? If you have developed a habit of meditating with your eyes closed, check and see if there isn't some degree of rejecting or shutting out of the world.

Although our eyes are open, we are not trying to gather in visual objects. Nor are we trying to keep anything out. We are simply smiling, breathing and seeing whatever presents itself. If the eyes want to move, let them. Don't try to fix on anything in particular. Looking is a very natural activity. Sometimes our eyes rest with something. Sometimes they move. As you become more acclimatised to this, you will find it easy to be smiling with the breathing while gently acknowledging the various things around you. Try it right now and I'll join you.

Once you have a sense of ease with seeing, then open your ears. Smiling, breathing and listening. Allow the sounds that are around to bathe you. No effort to keep anything out, not even sounds that are disturbing or irritating. You may have a sense of being suspended in an ocean of sound. The waves lapping against you with different strengths and rhythms. Sculptings of sound arising and passing in space.

Become very sensitive to touch and tactile sensations. Feel your clothing on your skin, the breeze on your face. The physical sensations of breathing are tactile so your awareness of breathing is already opening to touch.

Bring your attention to smell and then to taste. These are constantly shaping our sense of place; the smell of fresh paint or jasmine or rose garden. The taste of a newly picked apple. Smells and tastes are subtly colouring our experience even though many people are not aware of it. Pause for a moment right now. What do you smell? Even if you are not eating, what do you taste in your mouth?

As we are smiling and breathing we can use our five senses to appreciate where we are, in a vivid and intimate way. Smiling. Breathing. Present. All the sense doors are open. Not blocking. Not judging.

Something very special happens when smiling, breathing and present sensing come together. Try it and find out for yourself. Many people discover a deepening aliveness often accompanied with a growing confidence that this is a truly a valuable path, even though it is essentially quite simple.

Smiling, breathing, present. Try it again and again at different moments throughout the day. Try it when you're happy and when you're sad. Try it when you're feeling good and when you are ill. Try it in all sorts of different circumstances; not just when you meditate but also at the office and in the kitchen. As we deepen into this rich loam of reality, we will inevitably enter the fourth step of the cycle.

Flowering out from the very heart of experience comes a knowing of profound appreciation.



Appreciating

Smiling. Breathing. Present. And in this richness of present moment profound appreciation flowers in all directions. Appreciating in a deeper knowing way, some of the myriad factors that support this birthing of now. Oceans, a planet of water, matrix of becoming for uncountable beings. Atmosphere, evanescent cyclings of wind and rain, fire and flood. Mother and father, you too are in this moment. Your hands reflect in mine. Your hopes pulse in my blood. Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating an entire universe dancing a mystery of now in uninhibited wonderment. And still there's more.

Smiling. Breathing. Present. Becoming more familiar with these three, we may find a place, or a way of being that feels profoundly still and yet vibrantly awake. Poised and centred, our senses are alert. Like a resting cat, our interior is calm and clear and yet we are responsive to everything that is going on around. Our whole being purs.

At this point, be warned that you have ventured on the edge of a very subtle and seductive trap, one that has caught innumerable seekers of truth in the past! In this blissful and clear mode of being, it is easy to cherish the thought that this is "it", that you have somehow "arrived", that this is what you have always been searching for. Although very beautiful, by regarding these states as "attainments" we unwittingly turn them into limitations.

The ancient meditation texts called clinging to marvellous states, an *Upakkilesa*, a higher defilement. It's possible to become so attached to this way of being that it shapes our entire attitude to further meditative exploration. After this, a powerful yearning to re-experience these states takes control of our practice and anything else doesn't seem worth bothering with. In a way we have developed an addiction to bliss states in meditation and like any addict we get anxious and compulsive when we can't get our fix. Have you experienced this? We get upset when the pleasure simply isn't present. We get upset when anything threatens to take it away. We also plot and plan and try to recapture it after it has vanished. Ironically, this obsession closes down our awareness of new arisings and prevents the very bliss we crave. It often stunts the process of further investigation and growth. Be alert for this clinging to meditative highs.

As the experience of presence blossoms around us and if we haven't become trapped in the good feelings, it is very natural to find ourselves looking deeply into some of the factors that are contributing to this unique moment. Actually, it may be even more profound than mere "looking". As we begin to understand in a direct feeling way, how uncountable threads of becoming are supporting this present arising, a deep sense of appreciation begins to empower and transform our experience.

At this stage in the cycle we are working with a very subtle balance of intellectual speculation and deep non-verbal absorption. Smiling, breathing, present, we add the tiniest amount of thinking to observe how the sights sounds smells tastes and touches of the environment actually support our sense of where and what we are. For example, the very objects that we see around us help to give us a sense of location. I am sitting between this floor and that ceiling. The bird song is in front and the river roar is behind. This is how I know I am here and not somewhere else.

Many people seem to think that this is not very "spiritual" as if the world of the five senses is thoroughly understood and that there is no real mystery to be discovered here. But please look again. Our mind state is being influenced by the present outer environment. Imagine how the experience of reading this book would be different if you were doing it outside in an exposed place with wind and cold rain. While smiling, breathing and present, look around with all

your understanding and appreciate how the five sense experiences are shaping this present moment. Appreciation does not necessarily mean you like something, but it does imply a deeper understanding.

In Buddhism it is considered that there are actually six senses; the five that we all know, which are thought of as doors letting in the world, and the sixth which is called the "mind door". It is through the mind door that thoughts, feelings, memories, dreams and so forth arise. Examining the activity at this door is vital for understanding our on-going experience but at this point I would suggest that you focus more on the five senses as this will encourage immediate and very real healing. Supported by a solid foundation of awareness in these five, you will be much more able to investigate the play of mental activities.

To deepen appreciation of your sensory experience, you could try the following thought experiment. If you've never done it before, you might find it a bit shocking but the exercise can be very informative. First of all contact the smiling, breathing and presence. Take some time to do this well.

Now imagine that you lose your sense of sight. You are blind. How does this affect your experience; your sense of position, your sense of self? Now you lose your hearing. What is happening now? Smell disappears and then taste. Imagine that the sense of touch disappears. What is left?

With the absence of the five senses we are left with memories and feelings, yesterday's experience. In a way this happens every time we lose touch with present sensing; whether we've actually gone to sleep or just drifted into a day dream fantasy. We are left with last week or last year.

Now, continuing with our experiment, imagine that you lose the mind door. Where are you now?

Finish the experiment by restoring the six senses beginning with mind. Take some time to appreciate how the actual experiences of the six sense doors are constantly weaving together the dynamic fabric of being and your moment by moment subjective sense of self.

Everything depends on something else. The floor is supporting you and if it is made of wood, a forest with all its ecological intricacies is, in an indirect way, participating in this moment. Your body is shaped by the D.N.A. from your parents so they are also part of this present moment. The food that you have eaten was once earth, water, air and sunlight, transformed into plants and now into the very flesh of your body. My parents and life experience and my writing this on a lap top computer is contributing to your present experience. The number of supporting factors is endless.

Smiling. Breathing. Present. Appreciating.

Knower depends on known. Known depends on knower. Sensing depends on memory and prior experience. The present moment is an interbeing of uncountable factors, a dynamic weaving of space and time crafting the extraordinary appearance called now. Micro shapes macro while macro is simultaneously shaping micro. Nothing in the universe exists independent of everything else.

This fourth stage of appreciating isn't just a big think about the interconnectedness of everything. Here we use the intellect to stimulate a larger field of appreciation and then we let go of the speculation and simply rest in the spacious clarity of the moment. If the resting becomes fuzzy or drifty, then we can sharpen the moment with some speculative analysis of what is arising and then return again to the non-verbal present.

Eventually, a sense of immense spaciousness may flavour our experience without causing us to lose any of the details. The world is rich and wondrous, manifesting in ways we may never have really appreciated before. Smiling. Breathing. Present. Appreciating. All of these together give birth to the fifth step of this cycle, Offering.



Offering

Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating, all burst forth as spontaneous offering. Offering my heart, the nature of mind, the mystery of being, everything is streaming out, beauties creation. God offering to God, the moment pouring itself out for everyone. Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating, offering; five reminders of everything precious. Each one invoking the other. All together deepening the smiling and so the mystery cycles onward. Water molecules, cradled in the river, flowing to the sea of becoming, embedded forever in the mystery of now.

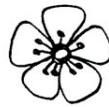
Within this very special moment, like a child who, having discovered something new and amazing, runs to find someone to share the experience with, we may find ourselves in a state of spontaneous offering. Offering up this beautiful moment to others.

There are many ways you can work with this. You could bring to mind a specific person or group and imagine you are offering your experience to them. You could offer the joy or insight that is immediately present. Perhaps you are feeling embedded in life so that there is no sense of yourself as separate from everything else. Then you might know the world magically offering jewels to itself. Wonderment offering wonderment to wonderment. God offering God to God.

Essentially in this fifth step, there is a spontaneous sharing of our being with others. This is a very natural out flowing of appreciation and it softens any over concern with self. We let go. We un-cling.

We give the moment away in a joyful burst of generosity. Moment by moment by moment.

Settling into this state, the offering itself, will deepen our smile. The smile opens the breathing to new degrees of sensitivity. Richer breathing strengthens the sense of presence which deepens into appreciation and so the cycle roots us unshakeably in the arising moment; utterly firm in the midst of whatever experience is present. This is true *samatha* and it is inseparable from deep seeing. Tranquillity and insight are merged into one seamless moment.



Sometimes when you are practicing you might lose touch with the sense of offering. Though it may have been very clear at an earlier time, now it has lost its feeling of meaningfulness. If this happens, don't bother trying to fabricate an artificial sense of offering. Just step back one place in the cycle and deepen your appreciation. The offering will spontaneously spring from this when it is ready. If your appreciation begins to feel a little contrived then shift back to presence and attend to the vibrant aliveness of the five senses. If present sensing becomes blurred or unclear then rest in your breathing. If it doesn't seem possible to be with your breathing then at least you can smile! If at the moment you can't even find a smile, even with your Bali eye dancing, then go for a walk in nature, breathe deeply and feel your feet upon the earth and come back to the cycle later.

This Cycle of Samatha is a wonderful reminder. Just by pausing and reviewing these five words; – Smiling - Breathing - Present - Appreciating - Offering – is often enough to bring us back to a much richer way of being. This can easily become part of our everyday experience. In Buddhist teaching it is sometimes said that the path is good at the beginning, good in the middle, and good at the end. Simple as they may seem, these five can lead us into a profoundly fresh and wonderful way of being.

About the Author

Tarchin Hearn is a skilled teacher of meditation and the practice of awakening. He has more than 25 years experience in various schools of Buddhism and was ordained as a monk for 12 years. Since 1977 he has taught in many countries and helped establish a number of centres for study and practice. Author of six books, he presently makes his home at the Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre in New Zealand.

Also by Tarchin Hearn
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Natural Awakening: The Way of the Heart

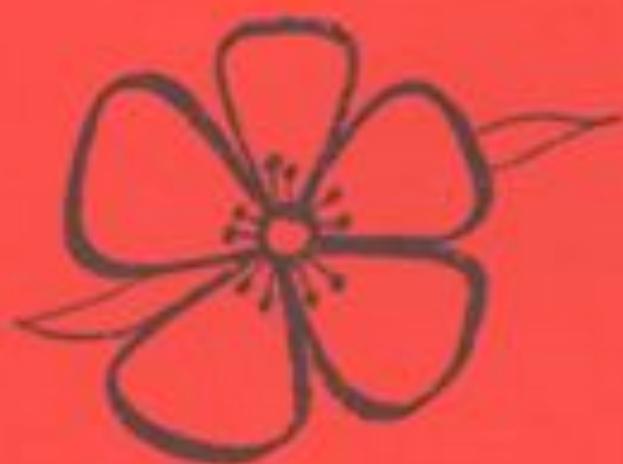
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