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Himavanta Sutta

The Himalaya Discourse | A 6.24

Theme: Meditative attainment is able to shatter mountains

Translated by Piya Tan ©2013

Introduction

1 The Himavanta Sutta (A 6.24) is a short discourse on a particular benefit of meditation, that is, the attainment of mental or psychic power that can even “shatter the Himalayas.” This is an oblique reference to the attainment of the 4th dhyana, which is the basis for generating the various psychic powers.¹

2 ACCOMPLISHMENT IN SAMADHI

2.0 The 6 skills

A meditator must master these 6 skills (*kusala*) in order to be accomplished in samadhi, here referring to mental stillness or meditation connected with dhyana, namely:

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| (1) being skilled in attaining samadhi, | <i>samādhissa samāpatti,kusalo hoti</i> |
| (2) being skilled in remaining in samadhi, | <i>samādhissa t̥hiti,kusalo hoti</i> |
| (3) being skilled in emerging from samadhi, | <i>samādhissa vuṭṭhāna,kusalo hoti</i> |
| (4) being skilled in keeping fit for samadhi, | <i>samādhissa kallita,kusalo hoti</i> ² |
| (5) being skilled in the resort for samadhi, | <i>samādhissa gocara,kusalo hoti</i> |
| (6) being skilled in samadhi resolution. | <i>samādhissa abhinīhāra,kusalo hoti</i> |

The 6 skills regarding samadhi are an early teaching model found in the suttas. In the later texts, they are formulated as **the fivefold mastery** (*pañca vāsī*), that is,

- (1) We are able to let the mind attain dhyana.
- (2) We are able to attain dhyana fast enough and whenever we wish to do so.
- (3) We are able to stay in dhyana for as long as we have determined to.
- (4) We easily emerge from dhyana at the appointed time.
- (5) We are able to discern the dhyana-factors³ after emerging.

(Pm 1.459/1:99f; Vism 4.131/154, 23.27/704)⁴

2.1 Skill in attaining samadhi

As meditators, we should know how to gladden (*hāseti* or *hasati*)⁵ the mind to make it pliant so that it can attain dhyana (SA 2:352). While *hāseti*, “make laugh, gladden,” is causative, *hasati* or *hassati*, “laugh, gladden, be happy, to please” is indicative. Here, the causative verb is used to show the natural or spontaneous nature of joy that brings about mental stillness (*samādhi*), and which is, in turn, intensified by mental stillness.

¹ On psychic powers, see **Miracles**, SD 27.5a esp (4-8).

² Be *samādhissa kalyāṇa,kusalo*.

³ On dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*), see **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (6).

⁴ On the fivefold mastery, see SD 24.3 (2).

⁵ While *hāseti*, “make laugh, gladden,” is causative, *hasati* or *hassati*, “laugh, gladden, be happy, to please” is indicative. Here, the caus is used to show the natural or spontaneous nature of joy that brings about mental stillness (*samādhi*), and which in turn is intensified by mental stillness.

The Commentary says that this refers to being adept in knowing and resorting to suitable food and suitable climate, as a result of which is to attain samadhi (AA 1:161, 3:354). These are, however, physical and worldly conditions, which are doubtlessly conducive to meditation, but more vital is our mental joy that facilitates inner stillness so that we progress spiritually.

Furthermore, if we do not have a strong foundation in Dharma understanding or sutta learning, even when we attain high levels of meditative attainment, we may not be able to fully understand them, or we would find difficulty in instructing others effectively. However, after mastering some level of meditation, if we direct our mind to the early suttas, we will be able to easily understand the Buddha's teachings, even if we lack language or teaching skills. Anyway, if we are patient and wise pupils, we can still learn and benefit from meditation teachers who lack language or teaching skills.

2.2 Skill in remaining in samadhi

As a meditator, we should know how to clear our mind of the 5 hindrances,⁶ and grasp the meditation sign (*nimitta*).⁷ We learn to let go of sensual desires by stilling all our physical senses, and cultivate lovingkindness, so that ill will, too, is abandoned. Building up our lovingkindness, we feel joyful interest or zest, so that we overcome restlessness and worry and also sloth and torpor.⁸ As our interest or joy intensifies, so does our mental stillness, so that our mind is clear of any doubt about ourself or some teaching or practice, especially our meditation. Hence, we are able to sustain our inner stillness, and even go on to attain dhyana, and build it up.

However, when we notice that, despite our efforts, we are not enjoying our meditation, then we should simply sit back, doing nothing, as it were, but simply observing whatever is going on in our mind. Alternatively, we could do some walking meditation. When we feel ready, we direct our mind again to the meditation object. Remember no positive effort in meditation is lost. It is a cumulative experience, so that we benefit even from “bad” meditation—like a toddler learning to walk (we were toddlers once).

On a deeper level, the Commentary says that the skilled meditator knows how to spend time in dhyana, keeping the dhyana stable, or deepening it; and keeping up the duration of the dhyana (AA 2:161, 3:255).

2.3 Skill in emerging from samadhi

We should be able to emerge from dhyana at a pre-determined time (by the body clock) (AA 3:355); or be wise in knowing the time-limit in regards to emerging, thinking, “I will exert myself as long as the sun is gone” (*ettakam gate suriye uṭṭhahissāmīti vuṭṭhāna, kāla, paricchadakā paññā*) (DA 3:979; PmA 1:232).

A meditation beginner should make an effort in “timing” himself in meditation, beginning with short sittings of a few minutes, and gradually extend the sitting in a comfortable way. As we synchronize with our body clock, we would notice how easily emerge at the determined time.

⁶ On the 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*), see **(Satipaṭṭhāna) Nīvaraṇa S** (A 9.64), SD 41.13; also **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1.

⁷ On *nimitta* as “meditation sign,” see **Nimitta**, SD 19.7.

⁸ On overcoming the hindrances, see **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1 & **Saṅgārava S** (S 46.55 @ SD 3.12).

2.4 Skill in keeping fit for samadhi

The Commentaries says that the skilled meditator is capable of keeping the mind fit for dhyana, keeping it adaptable, happy, bright (AA 3:355). He also knows the suitability of the different kinds of kasinas⁹ (PmA 1:232). The kasina meditations can be used as alternative meditations to enrich and enhance our meditation, but even in themselves, properly done, can bring us into dhyana.¹⁰

In other words, we should know how to be versatile in our meditation, such as varying how we focus on the meditation object (such as watching different aspects of the breath), or switching to another meditation, or even harmoniously combining meditations, such as doing the four-element (earth, water, fire, wind) meditation, and then going on the breath meditation.

A blessing of proper meditation is that we become more closely, even minutely, aware of our body, especially of its physical changes and needs. We should then properly respond to such signs, which can be something as mundane as going to the toilet, or taking less food, or avoiding certain kinds of food (that might make us more sleepy or restless, etc). Simply stretching or walking exercises, mindfully done, also help.

2.5 Skill in samadhi resort

Having avoided what is not conducive to stillness or concentration, we should take up what is helpful for it, know what “sign” (*nimitta*) or “characteristic” (*lakkaṇa*) is best as a concentration object (*ārammaṇa*) (AA 3:355; PmA 1:232). Not only should we be skilled in the meditation-work (*kamma-t,thāna*) itself, but also in resorting to proper places for alms (if we are renunciants) (AA 2:352).

If we are attending a meditation retreat, we need not be concerned with our meals and lodging, as they will be provided for. If we are doing our own personal retreat, then we should properly prepare ourselves and what we need for it. It would be wise to consult some seasoned meditators who have gone of retreats.

Whether we are on retreat or not (but especially, if we are on retreat), a beautiful natural quiet place is always conducive meditation. On arriving at such a place, we should first check out the place, looking for the most beautiful places and sights, and noting them, and also watching out for less safe ones, like rough ground, steep inclines, falling branches, and so on. We should be prepared for weather extremes by bringing the right kinds of clothes and so on.

Even more importantly, we should ensure that we have not brought our “old” world with us. No reading (even of Dharma books) is advisable during a retreat, except perhaps a puja book or some reflective sutta passages that we have found helpful. If we have a handphone, it should be switched off as soon as we arrive at the retreat place. In other words, we are preparing ourselves to renounce our world for the duration of the retreat or sitting.

2.6 Skill in samadhi resolution

When we are more skilled and familiar with our meditation, we should then learn to direct our mind to the 1st dhyana and on to higher ones (AA 3:355).¹¹ Having mastered the different dhyanas and attainments, we then cultivate insight in terms of them (PmA 1:233).¹²

⁹ Two easy kasina meditations are the perception of light (*āloka,saññā*, A 6.29,3) and of space (*ākāsa,saññā*). Col-our kasinas incl blue, yellow, red, or white (D 16,3.29-32), SD 15.1 (9.2.1). On *kasina*, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (9.2).

¹⁰ For the 10 kinds of kasina meditations—the 4 primary elements, the 4 colours, light and space—in the context of other meditations, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (Fig 8.1).

¹¹ On how to cultivate dhyana, see SD 15.1 (8.7).

Whenever we talk about meditation, especially dhyana, we must remember that most people (today anyway) do not easily attain dhyana. The question here is: **Do we need dhyana to awaken?** The simple answer is yes, if we are practising for arhathood or non-return; and no, dhyana is unnecessary if we are working for once-return or streamwinning. Those who renounce the world as monastics, properly speaking, would take up meditation for attaining dhyana, while the laity who still “enjoy sensual pleasures” should take the latter path.¹³

3 RELATED SUTTAS

There are at least two other suttas that are closely related to the Himavanta Sutta, and they should be studied together with it. These suttas are as follows:

(Samādhi) Bala Sutta	A 6.72/3:427,25-428,4	SD 41.15
Vasa Sutta	A 7.38/4:34,5-9	SD 41.16

These two suttas each has a list of meditation skills some of which are identical.¹⁴

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Himavanta Sutta

The Himalaya Discourse

A 6.24

1 Bhikshus, a monk accomplished in six things might shatter the Himalayas, the king of mountains; so what is there to speak of vile ignorance.¹⁵

What are the six?

2 Here, bhikshus, a monk

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| (1) is skilled in | attaining samadhi, | <i>samādhissa samāpatti, kusalo hoti</i> |
| (2) he is skilled in | remaining in samadhi, | <i>samādhissa ṭhiti, kusalo hoti</i> |
| (3) he is skilled in | emerging from samadhi | <i>samādhissa vuṭṭhāna, kusalo hoti</i> |
| (4) he is skilled in | keeping himself fit for samadhi | <i>samādhissa kallita, kusalo hoti</i> ¹⁶ |
| (5) he is skilled in | the resort for samadhi | <i>samādhissa gocara, kusalo hoti</i> |
| (6) he is skilled in | samadhi resolution | <i>samādhissa abhinīhāra, kusalo hoti</i> [312] |

3 Bhikshus, a monk accomplished in these six things might shatter the Himalayas, the king of mountains; so what is there to speak of vile ignorance.

— evaṃ —

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¹² For details, see SD 33.1b (6.4.2).

¹³ See SD 8.5 (2)): Is dhyana necessary for streamwinning? Also SD 15.1 (13).

¹⁴ For other details, see **Samādhi Samāpatti S** (S 34.1) @ SD 41.12 (1.4.1). See also **Samadhi**, SD 33.1a & **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (8.6).

¹⁵ *Chahi bhikkhave dhammehi samannāgato bhikkhu himavantaṃ pabbata, rājaṃ padāleyya, ko pana vādo chavāya avijjāya.*

¹⁶ Be *samādhissa kalyāṇa, kusalo.*