

A Field of Barley

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Noirin Sheahan On a sunny afternoon last weekend, I walked by a field of barley, mesmerised by its beauty. The stems were unusually tall, almost shoulder height, and a light breeze rippled the leaves into exquisite shades of green and gold. It was as though I had entered a van Gogh painting! Something hungry inside wanted to devour the scene, master it, keep it for a rainy day. And that something felt frustrated and angry at the impossibility of this. The final section of the eightfold path - training the mind using the factors of Right Effort, Mindfulness and Samadhi[1]- turned up as guides. Mindfulness registered delight at the scene, desire to swallow it up, anger at my inability to do this. It registered the physicality of this emotional cocktail: desire opening the chest, pushing the head upwards, anger tightening the face and throat, furrowing the brow and eyes. The clash of opposing forces felt painful. Craving for beauty morphed into disgust. Desire switched course in an instant, told me to forget this nonsense, look away, think of other things. Again there was a strong physical component: desire was now trying to turn the neck, head and eyes away from the barley field, find a new draw for the imagination. This felt like the easy option, and the force of mind commanding “Move on” was almost irresistible. At this point Right Effort stepped up to prevent me taking the habitual easy option. I reminded myself of Mudita, appreciative joy, which the Buddha described as a ‘divine abode’ for the mind. Despite its transience, we are to take in the beauty of life, let it halt the river of thought that persuades us to do something more useful than stare at a field of waving barley. Armed with the motivation to practice mudita, I found the willingness not to turn the head and eyes away from the scene. Mindfulness registered aversion and disgust but also moments of ease when the mind rested in silent wonder at the sight of green-gold barley. Gradually those moments grew longer, and drew thoughts to a close. This is Samadhi, the mind's natural preference to rest, let go of its protests and useless babble. After a while I could relax enough to let attention sink into the unpleasant tightness in the chest, neck and face. The close-up physical perspective let me glimpse shades of grief which I hadn't previously registered. The field of barley was showing me the heartbreaking truth of transience: what we love is forever slipping through our fingers. Once I could feel and acknowledge grief, the experience became easier. Physical tensions relaxed and I could appreciate the beauty without grasping it painfully. Appreciative joy mingled with sombre thoughts of death and dying. I was surprised at how calm the mind remained as it acknowledged that my personal story along with my experience of life would come to an end. Despite twinges of grief, the thought seemed more acceptable than usual, even somehow beautiful, as if it too were dancing in waves of green-gold barley. Thank goodness for Mindfulness and how it can be shored up by Right Effort at times of need; how it enables the stillness of Samadhi, where we can ponder unwelcome truths without adding to our fear of death, our hunger for life. I trust the trio to work hard at my death-bed, persuading me not to turn away in disgust, perhaps

reminding me of death's dance in a field of waving barley.[1]Usually translated as Concentration which unfortunately suggests straining, while Samadhi denotes an unforced gathering of mind or peaceful abiding.

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