

Paṭivedha

Exploring the Four *Satipaṭṭhānas* in Study and Practice

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Abstract

In what follows I explore the practice of the four satipaṭṭhānas from a first-person perspective, based on combining understandings gained through academic and traditional modes of learning.¹

Introduction

The four *satipaṭṭhānas* as a set constitute right mindfulness as the seventh factor in the eightfold path to liberation. Now the members of this eightfold path that come before and after right mindfulness are the four right efforts (6th factor) and the four absorptions (8th factor). The four right efforts are clearly practices undertaken in conjunction, building on and complementing each other. Right concentration in the form of the four absorptions similarly involves levels of meditative experience that build on each other. Hence it would be natural to expect that the same applies to the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. Therefore a basic challenge to my mind is to find a way of practice that covers all four *satipaṭṭhānas* in such a way that these build on and complement each other.

A bare listing of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* regularly occurs in several discourses of the Pāli Canon, as well as in their parallels, often without further explanations. More detailed explanations can be found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*,² in addition to which the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* also offers more information on the nature of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*.³

The instructions for mindfulness of breathing given in the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* confirm the premise that suggests it-

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self from the eightfold path, in that here the practice of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* unfolds seamlessly and becomes a unified form of practice. In the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* this takes place based on being mindful of the breath. The seamless continuity of the practice in the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* in a way trains the practitioner in precisely the type of continuity of awareness in the face of different experiences that is so crucial in everyday life situations.

In sum, judging from the context of right mindfulness in the noble eightfold path and from the exposition of mindfulness of the breath in the *Ānāpānasati-sutta*, it would be preferable if the four *satipaṭṭhānas* could be combined into a continuous form of practice, with the individual *sati-paṭṭhānas* building on each other.

When surveying the different exercises listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, however, it is not immediately evident how to develop a form of practice that mirrors the continuous way of meditation described for mindfulness of breathing in the *Ānāpānasati-sutta*. Therefore it is only natural that in modern times the ways in which *satipaṭṭhāna* is taught tend to be based on only selected aspects out of the scheme of four *satipaṭṭhānas* delineated in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.

Academic Research and the Practice of *Satipaṭṭhāna*

In this situation, academic research can help to develop a better understanding of the canonical instructions and their practical implications. Of course, academic research is not inevitably helpful for actual practice. Nevertheless, in my view it is possible to find a converging point between scholarly study and mindfulness practice in the attempt to understand and see things as they really are (*yathābhūta*).

Here particularly beneficial to my mind is the text-historical perspective that emerges from academic research. In relation to *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation this holds especially for the distinction between the discourse material on the one side and its commentarial exegesis on the other. The text-historical perspective shows that key aspects of some modern forms of practice are the result of the influence of the commentarial viewpoint. This makes it easier to understand how these aspects originated, especially when they are not self-evident in the description given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* itself. A distinction between the discourses and their commentaries need not result in a value judgment. In the context of an attempt to understand and see things as they really are, it is only meant to clarify the historical strata from which a particular type of information derives.

The basic distinction between discourse and commentary informed my Ph.D. research, where I tried to understand the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

first of all from the viewpoint of other Pāli discourses, thereby staying within the same textual strata.⁴ The commentaries have very helpful information to offer; in fact they are about one and a half millennia closer to the original than we are nowadays. However, in order to avoid looking at the discourses primarily through the lens of the commentary, I felt it was important to look at them first on their own, and only then turn to what the commentaries and modern teachers have to offer.

The search for a better historical understanding led me, after the completion of my Ph.D. research, to comparative studies of the discourses preserved in the Pāli Canon in the light of their Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan parallels. This type of comparative study allows a further refining of the historical layering within the textual corpus of the early discourses itself. In the case of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* this is particularly useful, as the parallel versions show considerable differences.⁵

Out of such comparative study I gradually began to realize that it is possible to develop a mode of practice that seamlessly combines all four *satipaṭṭhānas*, based on giving priority to those seven exercises that are found in all versions of the discourse. These are as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Contemplation of the body | - anatomical parts - elements - corpse in decay |
| Contemplation of feelings | - feelings |
| Contemplation of the mind | - states of mind |
| Contemplation of dharmas | - hindrances - awakening factors |

Without intending in any way to encourage a rejection of the other exercises, foregrounding those that are common among the parallel versions results in a sort of simplified version of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, compared to the exposition given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. Notably, this simplified version has a precedent in the Theravāda Abhidharma, where the *Vibhaṅga* presents an even shorter version. This shorter version has only the anatomical parts for contemplation of the body and it agrees with the above model in presenting only the hindrances and the awakening factors for contemplation of dharmas.⁶

In the simplified version of *satipaṭṭhāna* as a result of comparative research employed in an attempt to understand and see things as they really are, contemplation of the body covers, in addition to the anatomical parts, the four elements and a dead body in decay. In this way contemplation of the body, which previously seemed to me to be more a way of us-

ing the body to cultivate mindfulness, now instead clearly points to using mindfulness to cultivate insight into the nature of the body. In the case of contemplation of dharmas, focusing on overcoming the hindrances and cultivating the awakening factors invests this *satipaṭṭhāna* with a clear purpose, which is in fact the essence of the early Buddhist path of meditation: progress towards awakening.

Before presenting a possible approach to actual practice based on the seven contemplations listed above, I need to explain three simplifications I have introduced in order to make it easier to get started.

The first simplification concerns contemplation of the anatomical parts, where I suggest to begin by summarizing these under three headings: skin, flesh, and bones. The idea for such a simplified version came to me from a passage found in the *Sampasādanīya-sutta* and its parallels.⁷ Once familiarity with the basic practice has in this way been gained, the simplified version involving skin, flesh, and bones could then be expanded to cover all of the anatomical parts listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.

The second simplification relates to contemplation of a dead body in various stages of decay. Initially, practice of this *satipaṭṭhāna* exercise could begin by briefly bringing to mind one of the images of a decaying body described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, perhaps that of a skeleton. Starting off with the whole set of images right away might be challenging for some practitioners. Introducing these gradually can help to ensure that this form of practice leads to the inner balance of detachment that is the goal of this and other *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises.⁸

The actual instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* require comparing one's own body to the condition of such a corpse with the understanding that one is not exempt from this fate. In order to execute this comparison, I suggest employing the recollection of death which is based on the breath. Such recollection of death is described elsewhere in the Pāli discourses and their parallels, which recommend that one should be aware of the fact that one might die even right after the next breath (or after the next mouthful when eating).⁹

In this way, based on one of the images of a corpse described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* as the starting point, one then becomes aware of the breath with the understanding that this could be one's last breath. The fact of death that earlier had been introduced as an *object* with the help of a mental image, now becomes the *subject* of contemplation by being experientially related to oneself. In this way, the general fact of death becomes palpably *my* death.

The third simplification I suggest concerns contemplation of the mind, where out of the various sets of mental state listed in the discourse I recommend to begin with these three pairs: with lust or without lust, with

anger or without anger, and with delusion or without delusion. Here, too, this is just meant as a way to get started, with progressive practice contemplation of the mind can be further developed by taking into account all of the mental states listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.

Another point to be mentioned is that, similar to making one's own mortality a matter of direct experience, in the case of contemplation of the anatomical parts and of the elements I recommend making these as much as possible something that is directly experienced. In order to do so, I suggest employing a systematic scanning of the body to become aware of the location where these bodily parts or qualities most prominently manifest.

Practice of the Four *Satipaṭṭhānas*

The form of practice that I nowadays practice myself and teach to others is based on awareness of the whole body in the sitting posture as a foundation for practice. This should ideally continue throughout all of one's *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. Based on such embodied form of awareness as one's grounding, one then proceeds by scanning the body, being aware of the skin. This is followed by another scan being aware of the flesh, including the organs. Then another scan takes place being aware of the bones. For purposes of continuity, the first scan could be from head to feet, the second from feet to head, and the third again from head to feet. In this way a continuous form of practice results.

During each scan one is aware of the location where these bodily parts are found and, whenever possible, one also attempts to have a direct sense or feel of these three bodily parts. While at least in a general manner this will become possible with some meditative expertise, a distinct feel of each part is not required. The purpose of the practice is not to cultivate bodily sensitivity up to the point that one is able to feel each and every part of the body. Being aware in a general manner of the location is sufficient for the exercise to fulfil its purpose. This purpose is combining a grounding of mindfulness in the body with an understanding that the body is made up of these parts. In this way the insight dawns that each of these parts is important for keeping the body alive, but the notion that the body is something sensually alluring and sexually attractive is a projection of the mind.¹⁰

The simile that accompanies this exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* illustrates the attitude to be cultivated in regard to these bodily parts, which should be comparable to looking at various grains in a container used for sowing. Such grains will be perceived as neither revolting nor as sensually attractive. The same neutral attitude is the aim of the exercise, where one learns to see the various parts of the body without allowing any overlay of mental projections influenced by lust, aversion, and delusion.

The simplified version of this exercise, based on just the three parts of the skin, flesh, and bones, could be developed further in line with the canonical instructions. This could be done by proceeding from the three scans to turning awareness to the individual anatomical parts listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, such as head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, bowels, mesentery, contents of the stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.

Each time one could be aware of the location on or in the body where these parts are found, while at the same time remaining aware of the whole body in the sitting posture to preserve one's grounding in mindfulness of the body as a whole. For getting started, however, the three scans described earlier suffice.

The next contemplation, concerned with the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, can be undertaken through a scanning similar to that employed for skin, flesh, and bones. One scan of the whole body can be undertaken to sense hardness as the manifestation of the earth element. This is particularly evident in the bones, although some degree of hardness is found throughout the body. The next scan would then be for wetness as a manifestation of the water element.¹¹ Wetness also pervades the whole body, but is most easily discerned in the various liquids found in the fleshy parts of the body. The fire element in the form of warmth is the object of the next scan, in the sense of the different degrees of temperature in various parts of the body. This is particularly easily discernible at the skin level, although it is of course also a feature of the whole body. The final scan then takes up the wind element, representative of movement, which covers any motion of or in the body. The most prominent manifestation of motion during sitting meditation will probably be the breath.

With each of these four elements the insight dawns that this body is just the same as nature outside, not different. In short, this body is not mine. The simile that accompanies this exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* describes a shift of perception from seeing a complete cow to seeing its various parts placed out for sale after it has been cut up by a butcher. In the same way, a meditator learns to shift from "my body" as a compact unit to seeing merely a combination of the four elements, which are similar to outside nature.

Having become aware of the breath during contemplation of the wind element naturally leads over to recollection of death. After briefly bringing to mind one of the images of a decaying corpse described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, whichever of these one finds most suitable, mindfulness returns to the breath, aware of the fact that this one right now might be my last breath. This effectively brings home the truth of the mortality of one's own body.

In actual practice, I suggest to relate awareness of one's own mortality in particular to the inhalation. With every inhalation one is aware of the fact that this might be the last time oxygen is taken in. With each exhalation one then cultivates an attitude of letting go (thereby in fact training oneself in the attitude required when the actual time of dying comes). In case cultivating awareness of one's own mortality results in fear, putting more emphasis on the exhalations and on letting go will calm the mind and bring it back to balance. In the opposite case of having become a little sluggish, more emphasis placed on the inhalations and on the fact that this might be the last breath will energize the meditation and make one come fully alive to the present moment.

Once some familiarity has been acquired with this form of practice, the single image of a decaying corpse used at first could be expanded by adding more images, until one eventually comes to visualize, perhaps in quick succession, one's own body going through the stages of decay described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*: bloated body, body eaten by animals, skeleton with flesh, skeleton still smeared by dried-up blood, skeleton without flesh and blood, disconnected bones here and there, bleached bones, rotten bones heaped up, and bones turning to dust. However, a brief reminder of mortality by using just one of these pictures, such as the image of a skeleton, for example, is quite sufficient to get started in this form of practice.

Feeling is that which has been sensing the different bodily parts during the scans and which has been sensing the breath. Therefore the next step naturally is to turn to feelings, the second *satipaṭṭhāna*. Feelings need to be recognized as being pleasant, painful or neutral. Observation soon shows that these three types of feeling keep changing from one to the other. It becomes experientially clear that pleasure and pain do not last forever, an insight that gradually erodes the ability of feelings to trigger strong reactions.

The discourses illustrate insight into the nature of feelings with the example of various winds that blow from different directions.¹² In other words, to get excited about particular feelings is about as meaningful as contending with the vicissitudes of the weather. Both are best left to run their natural course in the knowledge that they will anyway change.

The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* further distinguishes between worldly and unworldly types of feeling. These categories become clearer when one turns to contemplation of the mind, the third *satipaṭṭhāna*, which naturally follows contemplation of feelings. Worldly feelings of the pleasant, painful, and neutral type arise when the mind is with lust, with anger, or with delusion. Unworldly feelings are the same three affective types of feeling when the mind is temporarily free from lust, anger, and delusion.

Being aware of these feelings naturally leads to recognizing such states of mind. Such recognition is the indispensable foundation for proper progress on the path. Notably, this means not only knowing when lust, anger, and delusion are present, but also when they are absent. Both presence and absence are equally part of the task of contemplation of the mind. Actual practice can then proceed by turning awareness to the condition of one's own mind with the help of these three pairs:

- with lust / without lust,
- with anger / without anger,
- with delusion / without delusion.

After having become familiar with such practice, the list can be extended until it comes to cover all pairs listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. These also include: contracted / distracted, great / not great, surpassable / unsurpassable, concentrated / not concentrated, and liberated / not liberated.

Within an approach to the four *satipaṭṭhānas* as a unified practice, however, the states of mind that definitely need to be recognized right from the outset would be the above three pairs, as these provide the basis for a mindful distinction of feelings into worldly and unworldly types and serve to connect the second to the third *satipaṭṭhāna* in actual practice.

A simile found in the context of an account of the gradual path of practice describes the ability to recognize the different mental states listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* with the example of looking into a mirror or a bowl with water to see the reflection of one's own face.¹³ Just as looking into a mirror enables one to identify how one's facial appearance can be improved, looking into the mirror of one's own mind enables one to identify how the condition of this mind can be improved, namely by overcoming the hindrances and cultivating the awakening factors.

When contemplation of mind turns into contemplation of the hindrances and of the awakening factors, thereby moving into the territory of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, a further refinement emerges. This refinement revolves around awareness of dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*). As highlighted in the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its parallel, one who sees dependent arising sees the Dharma and one who sees the Dharma sees dependent arising.¹⁴ Contemplation of dharmas applies this crucial doctrine of dependent arising to those qualities that stand at the very core of the path to liberation: the hindrances (as what needs to be overcome) and the awakening factors (as what needs to be cultivated).

In practical terms, one investigates one's own mind to see if any of the five hindrances are present. This is closely similar to contemplation of the mind; in fact a set of similes illustrates the five hindrances by taking up the

imagery of looking into a bowl of water to see one's face, thereby continuing with the same imagery used in the account of the gradual path of practice in relation to contemplation of the mind. In the version of this simile relevant to the present context, each of the five hindrances renders the water unfit for presenting a proper reflection of one's face.¹⁵ This happens when dye is added to the water (= sensual desire), when the water boils (= anger), when the water is overgrown by algae (= sloth-and-torpor), when the water is agitated by wind (= restlessness-and-worry), and when the water is placed into the dark (= doubt).

Together with recognizing the presence of a hindrance, one should also recognize the causes that have led to the arising of this hindrance and the causes that will lead to its removal. This is the distinctive mark of contemplation of dharmas.

Once the hindrances are temporarily overcome and the mind is free of them, this temporary condition of freedom should also be recognized. Such recognition can then become an occasion for the arousing of joy. The discourses present another set of similes that illustrates the joy one experiences when realizing that the mind is, for the time being, free from the five hindrances. This is comparable to having paid off a loan, having recovered from a disease, being released from imprisonment, being freed from slavery, and having safely completed a dangerous journey.¹⁶

This joy is based on having established *mindfulness*, on having *investigated* the mind when checking for the presence of a hindrance, and on having undertaken this investigation with sufficient mental *energy* to make sure that indeed no hindrance is present. The joy that has arisen in this way can become the awakening factor of joy, based as it is on mindfulness, investigation-of-dharmas, and energy. Such joy can naturally lead on to the remaining awakening factors tranquillity, concentration, and mental equipoise.

These seven mental factors need to be recognized together with the causes for their arising as well as for their further growth. In actual practice, having established mindfulness a meditator then monitors a condition of mental balance in which all of these seven awakening factors are established. In case the mind becomes slightly sluggish, one gives more importance to investigation, energy, and joy. If the mind instead becomes slightly agitated, one gives more importance to tranquillity, concentration, and equipoise.

Elsewhere the discourses highlight the importance of these seven awakening factors by comparing them to the seven treasures possessed by a universal monarch.¹⁷ In the narrative of such a universal monarch, these treasures have miraculous powers. A magical wheel leads the king to a peaceful conquest of the whole world without any battle; a horse and

an elephant that can fly take him to wherever he wishes in his worldwide realm, etc. The seven awakening factors similarly have the almost miraculous power to lead to a complete transformation of a deluded worlding into a fully liberated one.

In order for this transformation to take place, the awakening factors need to be developed in dependence on seclusion (*viveka*), dispassion (*virāga*), and cessation (*nirodha*), leading to letting go (*vossagga*). This series corresponds fairly closely to the final four steps of mindfulness of breathing in the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* as a way of practicing contemplation of dharmas, which proceeds from impermanence (*anicca*) to dispassion, cessation, and giving up (*paṭinissagga*).¹⁸

Applied to the mode of practice sketched above, based on a mental condition that is *secluded* from the hindrances and aware of *impermanence*, one then allows the implications of impermanence to sink into the mind and transform its affective disposition. Is it not quite meaningless to crave passionately for what is anyway going to change? Cultivating this understanding, *dispassion* unfolds. In this way one allows the flow of impermanence to wash away one's passionate attachments.

The more one becomes dispassionate and detached, the easier it is to allow things to end, to accept the fact that what is impermanent is bound to *cease*. One learns to be at ease when things end, instead of trying to hold on to them. In actual practice one directs attention in particular to the disappearance aspect in the meditative experience of change. With progressive practice one eventually learns to appreciate that cessation, instead of being frightening, is peaceful.

The mind that no longer fears the fact that everything is bound to cease becomes able to *let go*, in the sense of *giving up* any clinging and attachments. Giving up all clinging and attachments as well as letting go of any sense of "I" or "mine", one becomes ever better at dwelling independently, without clinging to anything. The practice of letting go progressively deepens until one is able to let go to such an extent that the realization of *Nibbāna* can take place.

Traditional Mode of Learning and the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Refrain

Whereas the joining together of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in actual practice described above was the result of the input received from academic research, the central mode of practice to be used became clear to me by relying on the traditional way of learning. This requires memorizing the relevant text. When reciting the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* in Pāli from memory, I kept being struck by the fact that one particular part comes invariably again and again after each of the individual exercises. This is the part

which I have called "the refrain". Eventually it dawned on me that the refrain is more important than the individual exercises, even though on a mere reading this part of the discourse had not prominently caught my attention.

This refrain in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* presents four modes of practice. The first three are connected with the disjunctive particle *vā*, which means "or", showing that they are alternatives. The sequence of presentation suggests to my mind that these three alternatives involve some degree of progression in that they seem to build on each other. The last of the four comes with the conjunctive particle *ca*, which means "and", showing that this part is relevant for any form of practice. The four modes of practice are:

- internally, externally, both,
- arising, passing away, both,
- mindful just for the sake of continuous knowing and awareness,
- dwelling independently, without clinging to anything.

The first of the three alternative modes of practice speaks of contemplating internally, externally, and both. Other discourses give the impression that this reflects the need for cultivating mindfulness not only in relation to oneself, but also in relation to others.¹⁹ Contemplation done internally and in relation to oneself would be the chief task during formal practice, whereas external contemplation of others would be a task more prominently required when moving out into the world. With progressive practice, both eventually coalesce and mutually support each other.

Particularly helpful for bridging the transition from silent practice to engagement with the world can be mindfulness of the body, *kāyagatā sati*. Now remaining aware when engaging in conversation or attending to various tasks in everyday life can be quite challenging. For one who has trained in an embodied form of mindfulness, in a resting of awareness on the body as a whole, however, it becomes considerably easier to maintain mindfulness in such situations. For this reason the beginning point of the practice described above, by just setting up awareness of the body as a whole before getting into any scanning, etc., is something that serves as a foundation throughout the gradual progress through the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. It acts as a continuous backup for mindfulness and in this same function can then become the bridge between formal practice and daily activities.

The first part of the refrain describing internal and external practice involves a doubling. According to the instructions one should dwell "in regard to *the body* contemplating *the body*" in the case of the first *satipaṭṭhāna*, a formulation used similarly for the other *satipaṭṭhānas*.

Notably, the doubling of the term body (and in the same way the doubling of the terms feelings, mental states, dharmas) also introduces the individual exercises in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. In other words, the doubling is relevant to the individual exercises and to this first part of the refrain, which can be seen to complete the instructions concerned with such doubling.

I understand this doubling of the phrase "body" (etc.) to imply that, in regard to internal and external manifestation of the body, one contemplates individual aspects of the body. These could be some of its anatomical parts or its material elements, or any out of the stages of decay. Or else one contemplates a particular type of feeling or state of mind, or else a specific hindrance or awakening factor, whether this manifests internally or externally.

Having contemplated these individual aspects of the body (as well as feelings, mental states, and dharmas) internally and externally then leads on to awareness of the body (etc.) from the viewpoint of impermanence, which is taken up in the second aspect of the refrain. This second part no longer speaks of contemplating the body in regard to the body (etc.), but rather of contemplating the nature of impermanence in the body (and in feelings, mental states, and dharmas). In other words, the instruction in this second aspect of the refrain no longer involves a doubling of the terms body, feelings, mental states, and dharmas.

In this way, whereas the first of the three modes of practice (internally/externally) is concerned with individual aspects of the body (etc.), with the second of these three (arising/passing away) the general nature of the body (etc.) comes to the forefront. The same applies equally to feelings, mental states, and dharmas.

With this second mode of practice one moves from the individual case to the general character of all bodily and mental phenomena as processes, which are clearly discerned by contemplating arising, passing away, and both arising and passing away. Such contemplation aims at cultivating an experiential insight into impermanence. Such insight into impermanence in turn forms the basis for progress to liberation through *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation.

In the case of the three body contemplations described earlier, awareness of the impermanent nature of the body naturally comes with contemplation of death. In the case of feelings and mental states (including the hindrances and the awakening factors), however, such awareness needs to be consciously encouraged. This can be done by shifting from awareness of a particular feeling or state of mind to the general characteristic of all feelings and mental events as a process, as constantly changing phenomena. Impermanence is at the outset probably more easily discerned

with feelings, but with further practice it becomes progressively easier to be aware of the continuously changing nature of the whole of the mind.

The third of the three alternative modes of practice in the refrain speaks of just being mindful for the sake of knowing and awareness. This points to being just aware of the body, feelings, mental states, or dharmas. The third part of the refrain clearly shows that there is a place for some form of bare awareness within the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*'s scheme, even though individual exercises like the contemplation of the anatomical parts involve an element of evaluation. Notably, this third mode of practice is the only part in the refrain where mindfulness, *sati*, is explicitly mentioned.

Mindfulness is also not mentioned as an active task in the individual exercises discussed above. In the case of the anatomical parts and the elements one "examines", *paccavekkhati*. In the case of the stages of decay of a dead body one "compares", *upasamharati*. For the other exercises one "knows" or "understands", *pajānāti*. These are the mental activities that serve to establish mindfulness.

Once mindfulness has been established, it can function as an awakening factor. The listing of the seven awakening factors is in fact the only instance among the individual exercises where mindfulness features at all. Even here the actual meditative task is that one "knows" or "understands", *pajānāti*, and mindfulness only occurs in the list of those qualities whose presence one should recognize, together with understanding the conditions that lead to such presence.

In sum, mindfulness is not mentioned as an active task in the individual exercises, and in the refrain mindfulness comes up only in the instruction to be just aware, merely for the sake of knowing and awareness. This makes it clear that, in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, mindfulness is not something one *does*, but rather something one *is*. The activities described in the individual exercises become *satipaṭṭhāna* in as much as (and perhaps even only as long as) with their help the mental condition of mindfulness, *sati*, becomes established, *upaṭṭhita*.

In actual practice, this part of the refrain requires proceeding from the more structured mode of practice by engaging with the different exercises described earlier to a less structured form of meditation. Based on being anchored in whole body awareness one simply allows the present moment to unfold naturally, just being receptively aware of the flow of experience in whatever way it manifests itself, without choosing or rejecting, just remaining balanced and aware.

According to the fourth mode of practice described in the refrain, which is relevant to any *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, one should proceed dwelling independently, without clinging to anything. This is perhaps the most important instruction in the entire discourse. The attitude it depicts is rel-

evant throughout, being something to be maintained and cultivated with all forms of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.

Within the somewhat gradual build-up that can be discerned from a closer study of the four modes of practice described in the refrain, the ability to dwell independently and without clinging comes as a natural result of the somewhat bare form of awareness described in the preceding section of the refrain. This is *satipaṭṭhāna* at its best, when mindfulness is well established just for the sake of remaining aware and comes together with an inner attitude of independence from clinging to anything.

The Definition and the Refrain in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

The four aspects of the refrain nicely match four basic qualities described at the start of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* in a part I have called the "definition". This definition mentions the following four qualities:

- diligent,
- clearly knowing,
- mindful,
- free from desires and discontent with regard to the world.

All four qualities are of course required throughout, but they can nevertheless be seen to relate to the four aspects of the refrain. Being diligent, *ātāpī*, literally "ardent", means to really keep at it, being so interested and keen on the practice that one becomes able to continue *satipaṭṭhāna* internally and externally, in formal sittings and during everyday activities.

Clearly knowing or clear comprehension, *sampajāna*, points to the insight dimension in the cultivation of *satipaṭṭhāna* and the growth of wisdom. This is precisely what contemplating of arising and passing away is about: clearly knowing and comprehending impermanence.

Mindfulness, obviously required throughout, fully comes into its own with awareness practiced just for the sake of remaining aware.

Remaining free from desires and discontent with regard to the world matches dwelling independently, without clinging to anything.

The resulting correlations could be seen as depicting the essence of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation in four complementary facets, which would be:

- diligently contemplate internally and externally,
- clearly know arising and passing away,
- be mindful just for the sake of continuous knowing and awareness,
- remain free from desires and discontent so as to dwell independently, without clinging to anything.

This offers a succinct formulation of the gist of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation relevant to formal practice just as much as to everyday life. To summarize even further, a single phrase could be used, such as, for example: "keep calmly knowing change".²⁰ Here "keep" represents diligently contemplating internally and externally; "calmly" stands for remaining free from desires and discontent so as to dwell independently, without clinging to anything; and "knowing change" points to clearly knowing arising and passing away as a basis for being mindful just for the sake of continuous knowing and awareness.

Mindfulness of the Body

Central to a practical implementation of the above or any other mode of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation is of course the quality of mindfulness itself. Helpful indications for understanding the early Buddhist notion of mindfulness can be found in a passage in the *Dvedhāvītakka-sutta* and its parallel.²¹ This passage describes a cowherd who during the time when the crop is ripe has to watch the cows closely to prevent them from straying into the fields. But once the crop is harvested, he no longer needs to act in this way. According to the *Dvedhāvītakka-sutta* and its parallel, all he needs to do is to be mindful of the cows. This image suggests a mental attitude of being receptively aware without interfering.

The presentation in the *Dvedhāvītakka-sutta* and its parallel confirms the indication from the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, where mindfulness is not an activity in itself. Instead, activities like examining, comparing, and knowing or understanding are the tasks during *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. It is with the help of these activities that *sati* becomes established.

Another helpful passage relates a broad form of awareness to mindfulness of the body. This is found in the *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya-sutta* and its parallel, which describe a narrow state of mind when one is without mindfulness of the body. This stands in contrast to a state of mind that is broad, which comes precisely when one has mindfulness of the body.²² In my understanding, such a broad and openly receptive form of awareness that is based on being mindful of the body as a whole is a key for successful practice.²³

The anchoring function of mindfulness of the body, *kāyagatā sati*, finds illustration in a simile. This simile describes six different animals, each of which is bound by a leash and these leashes are bound together in the middle by a knot.²⁴ Each of the animals tries to escape in a different direction. The strongest one drags the others along until getting tired and another takes over, dragging the others along in a different direction.

The situation changes once a firm post is placed in the middle and the leashes of the six animals are tied to this post. However much any of the

animals pulls, the post remains firm. Eventually the six animals will stop pulling in this or that direction and simply stay or lie down beside the post.

The six animals represent the six senses, the post stands for mindfulness of the body. This simile illustrates how *kāyagatā satī* can serve as a strong post for countering distraction by way of any of the six senses. The strength with which any of these six "animals" can pull the mind off in various ways can at times be remarkable. But with *kāyagatā sati* it becomes possible to remain stable amidst whatever commotion takes place around one.

The help mindfulness of the body can offer in this respect became clear to me from my own experience, which I would like to relate briefly by way of illustration. When I was still living in Sri Lanka and was running a little meditation centre on the outskirts of Kandy, I used to go begging food every morning. This is a traditional practice of monastics, described in the early texts and still maintained in most Theravāda countries nowadays. In the early morning one goes out barefooted and with eyes downcast, silently walking until someone offers some food. One stops and receives it, perhaps gives a little blessing, and then resumes the silent walk.

Going out begging is a meditative activity, but at the same time it is different from sitting all alone in one's hut or under a tree to meditate. To be out on the roads begging food exemplifies the challenges we all face when moving from formal practice to everyday situations. In order to continue with awareness when going out to beg, I tried to employ mindfulness of breathing. I decided to make a determined effort to keep very closely aware of each breath during my alms round. One day I did this with very firm determination. I was indeed quite successful in catching every single breath for a considerable duration of time. However, soon enough I realized that I was walking the wrong road. This was the first (and last) time in about eight years of staying in that place that I took the wrong road.

I thought I had been so mindful. How come being so very mindful of the breath I had taken the wrong road? Actually the problem was that I had been concentrating too much. The focus of the mind had been too narrow; therefore what was outside of that area of focus was no longer clearly registered. I had been somewhat like a horse with blinkers. Still able to walk and hold on to my bowl, but no longer with that breadth of mind that oversees the whole situation and recognizes which way to proceed.

Reconsidering the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* in the light of this experience I realized that it does not present mindfulness of breathing as something to be done during everyday activities. Instead, the discourse recommends a forest, the root of a tree or an empty place for those engaging in the practice of mindfulness of breathing. The same holds for the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which also introduces mindfulness of breathing as something done in a secluded setting.²⁵

So I let be the breath and tried instead to just be aware in a general manner while going begging. I no longer missed the road and got my food alright, but I easily got distracted. My situation was similar to those six animals that are bound to each other, being dragged here and there. Although for a little while I thought I was aware of what happened, it soon became clear that in actual truth I was not really being mindful. I was, to be honest, merely pretending to myself to be mindful.

In the first case my mind had been too narrowly focused and thereby lost track of what I was actually doing, in the second case my mind lacked a reference point for preventing it from succumbing to distraction. Expressed in Buddhist doctrinal terminology, in the first case I had given too much emphasis to concentration (*samādhi*) instead of just being openly and receptively mindful. In the second case I of course had attention (*manasikāra*) while going begging — in fact attention is something that is present in any state of mind and without some degree of attention I would not have been able to walk the right road — but I was not really established in being mindful (*sati*).

The solution I eventually found is precisely what the simile of the six animals suggests, namely mindfulness of the body as a strong post. This does provide an anchoring in the present moment strong enough to enable remaining centred with anything that happens. The whole body is so broad an object that it does not encourage a narrow focus and thus naturally fosters a broad form of awareness, as described in the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta* and its parallel. At the same time, the whole body does provide a support for establishing mindfulness, instead of leaving one to try to remain aware (or in my case, to pretend to remain aware) without any kind of support or reference point.

Simply remaining with receptive awareness is in my reading of the *satipaṭṭhāna* refrain a developed form of practice that has its place as the third of the three alternative modes described in this part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. The first of the three alternative modes is internal and external contemplation. For cultivating the external dimension of *satipaṭṭhāna*, bare awareness on its own may not suffice.

This is not to say that a gifted meditator could not be able to remain effortlessly aware without any support, or else be capable of continuing various activities while remaining mindful of the breath. My point is only that this is not easily accomplished and for those who, like myself, find this difficult, an easy alternative described in the early discourses is mindfulness of the body, *kāyagatā sati*. This is why in the above practice model I recommend that *kāyagatā sati* as an embodied form of mindfulness remains as a basis for moving through the different *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises. This is the "strong post" that is capable of taming the six different animals

in the simile mentioned earlier. In this way the practice of the four *sati-paṭṭhānas* delineated in this article continues to strengthen this strong post of *kāyagatā sati* that serves as an ever-ready anchoring in daily life situations.

Conclusion

With the above-described form of practice I feel I have been able to find a solution for what I perceived as a basic challenge, mentioned at the outset of this article, namely to find a way of practice that brings together all four *sati-paṭṭhānas* in a way that is comparable to the sixth and eighth factors of the noble eightfold path, right effort and right concentration.

Similar to the way the four right efforts and the four absorptions that make up right concentration complement and build on each other, each of the four *sati-paṭṭhānas* can in this way complement and build on the others. Contemplation of the body builds up an embodied form of awareness that serves as a foundation and continuous reference point for practice of the other three *sati-paṭṭhānas*. The detachment cultivated with contemplation of the anatomical parts continues with contemplation of feelings as the very place where detachment needs to be strengthened in order to prevent the arising of craving. The basic insight into the not-self nature of the body developed through contemplation of the elements deepens with contemplation of mental states, making it clear that body and mind are equally devoid of a self. Facing one's own mortality through the third body contemplation makes one come fully alive to the present moment, thereby fostering in particular mindfulness that is well-established in the here and now as a basis for cultivating the other awakening factors.

Having trained in physically sensing the body with the three exercises in the first *sati-paṭṭhāna* finds its natural complement in turning awareness to feeling itself, which in turn leads via the distinction between worldly and unworldly types of feelings to contemplation of mental states, inculcating the ability to sense the arising of unwholesomeness even before it has fully manifested in the mind. Contemplation of the mind finds a further refinement in recognition of the hindrances as a basis for emerging from them and then being able to cultivate the awakening factors.

The activities involved in the above-delineated form of *sati-paṭṭhāna* meditation gradually gain in depth and refinement. With the body contemplations one "examines", *paccavekkhati*, and "compares", *upasamharati*. These are activities that are somewhat more active and which do involve some degree of evaluation. With the next two *sati-paṭṭhānas* practice becomes more refined and less active, in that now one just "knows" or "understands", *pajānāti*. Such less evaluative and more receptive know-

ing then acquires additional depth of comprehension with the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, where clear recognition of the hindrances or the awakening factors comes in combination with a clear vision of their conditionality.

Undertaken in this way, *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation brings to maturity insight into the three characteristics, weaving together impermanence, *dukkha*, and not self in a way that eventually also comprises direct insight into dependent arising with the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*. In addition, a relationship to the cardinal teaching of the four noble truths can also be discerned.

Here the three contemplations of the body in particular drive home the truth of *dukkha*, the fact that the body is not able to provide true and lasting satisfaction. The second *satipaṭṭhāna* then puts the spotlight on the very place where *dukkha* arises, namely feeling as what can, but does not have to, lead to craving. One aspect of contemplation of mind is to recognize when defilements are at least temporarily absent. Being aware of such a state of mind gives a foretaste of the final goal of permanent freedom from defilements, which is the theme of the third truth in terms of the cessation of *dukkha*. Finally overcoming the hindrances to cultivate the awakening factors stands at the very core of the path to the cessation of *dukkha*, which corresponds to the fourth truth.

In this way, the above-described mode of practice as the result of combining academic research, traditional ways of learning, and personal experience, brings together the four *satipaṭṭhānas* into a continuous and harmonious form of meditation practice that directly cultivates key aspects of liberating insight in early Buddhist thought.

Needless to say, the above is not meant to stipulate the only possible way of understanding mindfulness, nor is the mode of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation I have depicted the only one that is able to do justice to the instructions in the discourse. Instead, what I have presented here is merely one possible way of going about such practice. Simply put, this approach emphasizes continuity of whole body awareness as a basis for proceeding through the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in such a way that one dwells independently, without clinging to anything.

Those who always undertake
Mindfulness of the body well
Do not engage in what should not be done,
Persevering in doing what should be done,
Being mindful and clearly knowing,
Their influxes come to an end.²⁶

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|---------------------------------|
| AN | <i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i> |
| D | Derge edition |
| DĀ | <i>Dirgha-āgama</i> (T 1) |
| Dhp | <i>Dhammapada</i> |
| DN | <i>Dīgha-nikāya</i> |
| EĀ | <i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125) |
| MĀ | <i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26) |
| MN | <i>Majjhima-nikāya</i> |
| Q | Peking edition |
| SĀ | <i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99) |
| SN | <i>Samyutta-nikāya</i> |
| T | Taishō edition |
| Th | <i>Theragāthā</i> |
| Vibh | <i>Vibhaṅga</i> |

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NOTES

- ¹ The idea for the present article was suggested to me by Suwanda Sugunasiri, the editor of the *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*.
- ² MN 10 at MN I 55,²⁷ (translated Ñāṇamoli 1995/2005: 145ff) and its parallels MĀ 98 at T I 582b7 and EĀ 12.1 at T II 568a1.
- ³ MN 118 at MN III 78,²⁰ (translated Ñāṇamoli 1995/2005: 941ff) and its parallel SĀ 815 at T II 209b¹⁵ (whose abbreviated parts need to be supplemented from SĀ 803 and, in order to cover the whole treatment given in MN 118, also from SĀ 810).
- ⁴ Anālayo 2003.
- ⁵ Cf. in more detail Anālayo 2013.
- ⁶ Vibh 193,16.
- ⁷ DN 28 at DN III 105,¹² (translated Walshe 1987: 420) and its parallels DĀ 18 at T I 77b¹⁷ and T 18 at T I 256a¹²; cf. also Anālayo 2013: 72f. The passage in DN 28 describes a progression of practice from examining (*paccavekkhati*) the bodily parts that also feature in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* to examining (*paccavekkhati*) just the bones, leaving aside skin and flesh, as well as blood. This seems to envisage a form of examining that is concerned only with the bones (the translation in Walshe does not do full justice to the Pāli original). Although not stated explicitly, it seems fair to assume that a similar approach could also be developed with skin and flesh. The parallel versions do not mention blood. Thus the common core of this passage in DN 28 and its parallels revolves around these three: skin, flesh, and bones. In actual practice these three parts could indeed be felt, once some degree of bodily sensitivity has been cultivated.
- ⁸ The canonical texts report the similarly challenging contemplation of the anatomical parts at one time went overboard, to the extent that several monks were so disgusted with their bodies that they committed suicide. The Buddha is on record for recommending the more peaceful practice of mindfulness of breathing instead; cf. SN 54.9 at SN V 321,²¹ (translated Bodhi 2000: 1773f) and its parallel SĀ 809 at T II 208a³, and for a more detailed study that also covers the different *Vinaya* versions Anālayo 2014.
- ⁹ AN 6.19 at AN III 306,⁷ and AN 8.73 at AN IV 319,²⁴ (translated Bodhi 2012: 878 and 1221) as well as their parallel EĀ 40.8 at T II 742a²⁵; cf. in more detail Anālayo 2013: 104–116 and Anālayo 2015.
- ¹⁰ Klima 2002: 218 explains that "it is not that desire is 'evil' in the Dhamma ... it is possible to misunderstand this through associations with Victorian moralism ... it might be better to understand the practical meaning of disengagement with desire in a less anxious and more matter-of-fact way: desire is a conditioned phenomenon, a part of convention, and clarity of discernment will not have the necessary power while one is in a state of reaction to it. So, if the ideal of clear discernment is our goal, then glorifying and pursuing desirous passions would not be beneficial."

- ¹¹ According to later Theravāda exegesis, the water element cannot be physically sensed but can only be known inferentially; cf., e.g., Karunadasa 1967/1989: 29f and Bodhi 1993: 238. This position is not attested to in the early discourses and to my mind does not find corroboration in actual experience, since one is able to sense when one's clothes have become wet and this wetness penetrates to the skin level or else when one's mouth has become dry.
- ¹² SN 36.12 at SN IV 218,5 (translated Bodhi 2000: 1272) and its parallel SĀ 471 at T II 120b16.
- ¹³ DN 2 at DN I 80,15 (translated Walshe 1987: 106), with counterparts in two of its parallels, DĀ 27 at T I 109b8 (to be supplemented from DĀ 20 at T I 86a28) and a discourse quotation in the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli 1978: 248,26; the point of this simile is in particular to illustrate the ability of recognizing the state of mind of another.
- ¹⁴ MN 28 at MN I 190,37 (translated Ñāṇamoli 1995/2005: 283) and MĀ 30 at T I 467a9.
- ¹⁵ SN 46.55 at SN V 121,25 (translated Bodhi 2000: 1611ff) and a Sanskrit fragment parallel in Tripāthī 1995: 127 (5.11); cf. in more detail Anālayo 2013: 189–191.
- ¹⁶ DN 2 at DN I 71,31 (translated Walshe 1987: 101f), with counterparts in two of its parallels, DĀ 27 at T I 109b8 (to be supplemented from DĀ 20 at T I 85a25) and a discourse quotation in the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli 1978: 241,19; cf. in more detail Anālayo 2013: 191–193.
- ¹⁷ SN 46.42 at SN V 99,1 (translated Bodhi 2000: 1594f) and its parallel SĀ 721 at T II 194a6; cf. in more detail Anālayo 2013: 217–219.
- ¹⁸ In the context of the present model of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, the two terms *vossagga* and *paṭinissagga* can be understood to have the same implications and it is only in order to reflect the fact that different Pāli terms are used that I translate the one as "letting go" and the other as "giving up"; for a more detailed study of the compass of each term in the Pāli discourses cf. Anālayo 2009.
- ¹⁹ Cf. in more detail Anālayo 2003: 94–102 and 2013: 17–19.
- ²⁰ Anālayo 2003: 267.
- ²¹ MN 19 at MN I 117,1 (translated Ñāṇamoli 1995/2005: 209) and MĀ 102 at T I 589b28.
- ²² MN 38 at MN I 270,10 (translated Ñāṇamoli 1995/2005: 360) and MĀ 201 at T I 769c16.
- ²³ For a more detailed discussion of the nature of mindfulness in early Buddhism cf. Anālayo 2003: 44–66 and 2013: 21–38.
- ²⁴ SN 35.206 at SN IV 198,25 (translated Bodhi 2000: 1255f) and its parallels SĀ 1171 at T II 313a15 and D 4094 *nyu* 80a2 or Q 5595 *thu* 125b6.
- ²⁵ Anālayo 2003: 126f.
- ²⁶ Dhṃ 293 (cf. also Th 636): *yesañ ca susamāraddhā, niccaṃ kāyagatā sati, akiccaṃ te na sevanti, kicce sātaccakārino, satānaṃ sampajānānaṃ, atthaṃ gacchanti āsavā.*