

# RETHINKING THE SATIPAṬṬHĀNA

## Preface to *Rethinking Satipaṭṭhāna*

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*Satipaṭṭhāna* is a foundational practice of early Buddhism, represented in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the related *Ānāpānasati Sutta* and many shorter discourses in the Pali canon, and their parallels in the Chinese canon. It is acknowledged as the early source of modern *vipassanā* or insight meditation and of modern “mindfulness” practice, and it is possibly the most widely studied and discussed discourse in the Pali canon in modern times.

### 1. The obscurity of *satipaṭṭhāna*

Nonetheless, there is much we do not understand about the message of these early texts, or, rather, there is astonishingly little in these early texts that we interpret consistently or convincingly. *Satipaṭṭhāna* has confused me for a long time. My recent investigation was launched as a result of my puzzlement at the interpretation of contemplating “body in the body” (etc.) “internally” and “externally,” a topic taken up twenty-one times in the primary text, as having to do with contemplating one’s own body then contemplating someone else’s body. I was not convinced. It also alarmed me that no one seemed able to explain the significance of body, feelings, mind and *dharmas* as the four categories of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Moreover, many teachers of *satipaṭṭhāna* and *vipassanā* insist that these analytical practices are incompatible with the silence of *jhāna* or the higher stages of *samādhi*, yet the early *satipaṭṭhāna* discourses (albeit not the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself) consistently and clearly describe the close integration of the *jhānas* with *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. At least one early text even describes *satipaṭṭhāna* itself as “a *samādhi*,” and the integrated practice is claimed to develop knowledge and vision of how things are. This contradiction concerned me. I also found no satisfying account of what “the bodily formation” and “the whole body [of breath]” meant.

It seemed to me that part of the confusion about what the *satipaṭṭhāna* texts say comes from a history of re-interpretation of key concepts. It has now been

abundantly documented and is becoming widely acknowledged, for instance, that the meaning and role of *samādhi* and *jhāna* found in the commentaries, particularly in the seminal *Visuddhimagga*, contrast markedly with what is found in the early texts. Much of the confusion around *satipaṭṭhāna* seems to have resulted from attempting to reconcile multiple contrasting historical frameworks that don't in principle cohere.

## 2. The methodology of this study

Recent progress in dating Buddhist texts has encouraged prioritizing the scholarly study of “Early Buddhist Texts” (EBT), the earliest stratum of Buddhist scriptures. This approach allows us in principle to avoid becoming entangled in the inconsistencies that have developed historically, by focusing on the *Dhamma* as the Buddha taught it, as far as we can determine. What generally count as EBT are roughly the bulk of discourses of the Buddha and early disciples found in the first four *Nikāyas*, parts of the fifth, and parts of the *Vinaya*, as found in the Pali canon, as well as in parallel traditions preserved in other languages, primarily in Chinese.<sup>1</sup> The EBT paradigm chooses to let these texts speak for themselves, and this guides what I present here.

Since the Buddha and his disciples did not have the advantage of the *Visuddhimagga* or other later resources at their disposal, the authority of these later texts in interpreting the early texts is contestable. However, the early texts seem clearly to have been articulated in the context of the early *Upaniṣads* or other related but no longer existent pre-Buddhist teachings, and in a certain cultural, intellectual and physical milieu. These form a rich source of relevant clues, particularly in the etymology of early Buddhist terminology, for accurately interpreting early Buddhist texts. Any remaining inconsistencies between the early and later Buddhist texts are then explained in terms of either innovation or mis-transmission, which has often spun off separate traditions, whose relative merits can be left to scholars of later schools to assess.

In addition to assuming the EBT perspective, I also employ criteria of “functionality,” “coherence,” “field testing” and “cognitive consistency” in rethinking *satipaṭṭhāna*. Underlying functionality is my own conviction that the *Dhamma* serves solely as a support for practice, and that practice provides benefits in terms of soteriological and practical goals. Even the most

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1 Probably the best account of the scope and provenance of the Early Buddhist Texts is Sujato and Brahmali (2014).

philosophically sophisticated and astute points of *Dhamma* are no more than parts of the scaffold that upholds practice. Accordingly, we can ask of any *Dhammic* teaching, “How do we put this into practice?” or “Why would the Buddha teach this? Where is the benefit?” Functionality offers a strong constraint on what can be considered a viable interpretation of the early texts.

I also view the early texts as remarkably coherent, systematic and well-spoken. This point is easily obscured, first, because the early *Dhamma* was spoken in many very short self-contained discourses, and, second, because the early Buddhist discourses themselves are often shown to be unreliable victims of demonstrable ancient editing. Our task, in recognizing the underlying coherence, is therefore like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle in which some pieces are missing, and in which other pieces have been mixed in from other jigsaw puzzles. At some point we nevertheless recognize, “By George, it’s the Golden Gate Bridge!” A particular interpretation of the whole has shone forth that we cannot easily disregard, and once this has happened it becomes the basis of interpreting the remaining unplaced pieces, and of rejecting some of these altogether as intruders from other people’s jigsaw puzzles. Although the conclusion cannot be proven decisively, and still admits of debate, the convergence of evidence from many sources becomes so overwhelming to those who see what shines through, that doubt disappears. And what shines forth is repeatedly a coherent, functional system of teachings. Since the Buddha was a very systematic and practical thinker, coherence offers another strong constraint on interpretation.

Field testing occurs through the actual practice of particular interpretations of *Dhamma*. The Buddha made abundantly clear that the *Dhamma* is to be “verified by the wise” and instructs us to “come and see,” and so we do. In fact, the purpose of *satipaṭṭhāna*, in particular, is to support such experiential verification of *Dhamma*. It follows that the Buddhist adept, accomplished in practice, will be in an especially good position to evaluate viable interpretations in terms of practice experience; in fact, in a far better position to witness this shining through than the mere scholar. The adept is like the jigsaw enthusiast who has actually been *on* the Golden Gate Bridge, who is already familiar with its features and the contours of the land- and sea-scape around it. Field testing is an essential, ultimate constraint on interpretations, that can otherwise easily result solely from scholastic cleverness.

Finally, cognitive viability asks of our interpretation that it make sense in terms of what is independently known of how the human mind works. When we practice *samādhī*, gain insight into non-self and impermanence, gain independence from crippling attachments or attain awakening, it is within the capabilities of human cognition. As an erstwhile cognitive scientist, I bring a useful degree of erudition to the table in this regard, alongside great admiration for possibly the world's first cognitive scientist: the Buddha. Understanding the role of cognition fills in the details of the criterion of functionality in interpreting the *Dhamma*.

My experience has been that the “constraint” of consistency with human cognition actually expands, rather than limits, the scope of possible interpretations. The reason is that we tend to underestimate the capabilities of human cognition. The cognitive perspective has turned out to be particularly productive for improving my understanding of what is going on in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. For instance, *Dhamma* practice is about acquiring and applying skill: effectively it teaches us to become “a virtuoso of virtue and a wizard of wisdom,” and to become “a maestro of mastery” by means of acquiring the art of skillfulness itself. Modern research tells us that skill acquisition and training are largely a matter of “internalization” of previously explicit conceptual mastery, so that it becomes spontaneous, effortless, intuitive, quick and quiet. A virtuoso pianist does not think, but lets the music simply arise through her, as if in a trance. This helps us understand the how the silence of *samādhī* helps, rather than hinders, acquiring the wisdom of the Buddha.

### 3. Overview of the papers

Under the umbrella of the “Rethinking *satipaṭṭhāna*” project, I have drafted a series of papers, each exploring *satipaṭṭhāna* from one perspective or another, and will soon compile these into book form. Although the content of the papers has turned out to be highly integrated, I have provided enough background in each to make it self-standing, so that the reader can begin with any one of the papers depending on interest. Someone interested in “right mastery” (*sammāsati*, which most authors translate as ‘right mindfulness’) will want to begin with “The *satipaṭṭhāna* method”; someone interested in *samādhī* and *jhāna* can look at “The miracle of *samādhī*,” and so on. There is, in addition, abundant cross referencing among the papers.

**“There is no word for ‘mindfulness’ in Pali.”** The word ‘mindfulness’ has come to designate something in modern usage that it was not intended when the early scholar Rhys Davids aptly adopted it in 1881 to translate the Pali *sati* in the context of *sampajañña*. This has come adversely to effect the way students, and even scholars I daresay, interpret the early texts. I recommend that it is time we abandon the label ‘mindfulness’ in translating *sati* in the early texts, as I do in these papers.

**“The *satipaṭṭhāna* method.”** I analyze the phrase “ardent, clearly comprehending, and knowing how, having put away covetousness and grief for the world,” which occurs at the beginning of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as describing the art of skillfulness, which is potentially of general applicability. I call this “the *satipaṭṭhāna* method,” also designated by the common compound *satisampajañña* (*sati* ‘knowing how’ + *sampajañña* ‘comprehending’). I show that the *satipaṭṭhāna* method is the basis for “right mastery” (*sammāsati*), the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path that “runs and circles” around each of the virtue and wisdom factors of the path.

**“The miracle of *samādhi*.”** *Samādhi* is a natural phenomenon through which the cognitive and affective functions of the mind are progressively narrowed to rely almost exclusively on internalized, effortless implicit or intuitive application of skills in the performance of a task. It is further developed and cultivated in Buddhist practice to arise quite spontaneously where right mastery is present. It produces, through the proficient guidance of *Dhamma*, the fruits of clarity, insight, knowledge and vision of things as they are, that lead ultimately to liberation. This is the *samādhi* of the early texts.

**“A back-roads tour of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.”** This discourse is a tutorial for the contemplative practice of investigating and confirming *Dhamma* experientially, a process that aids in internalizing *Dhamma* as a matter of direct perception, as an advanced stage in the acquisition of right view. The refrain describes a distinct method for investigation of the critical teaching of non-self, particularly highlighted in the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*. The fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* opens virtually all the *Dhamma* verifiable in experience to investigation and internalization.

**“How *satipaṭṭhāna* teaches non-self.”** This is a detailed investigation of the refrain which occurs twenty-one times in the course of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, to describe a method for investigating the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*). The treatment of non-self is particularly elegant: The self is a

presumption or mental fabrication with three facets, each “externally” presumed to represent whole, fixed and substantial self, but each at best observable “internally” through the fragmentary and contingent evidence of bodily or mental factors, or, as a special category, of “awareness.”

**“Samādhi and skill acquisition.”** *A draft of this paper is not yet available at the time of this writing.* This paper examines *samādhi* as a natural phenomenon involved in skilled performance, especially at the level of virtuosity, that is especially developed and cultivated in the Buddhist context to be more readily at hand in the practice of *Dhamma*.

**“Satipaṭṭhāna rethought.”** The papers of the “Rethinking *satipaṭṭhāna*” are of an academic tone, analyzing the early texts in terms of etymology, functionality, coherence and cognitive consistency, in order to address the issues of interpretation. “*Satipaṭṭhāna* rethought” is the parallel effort to put the tentative or established results of rethinking *satipaṭṭhāna* into practice. This has taken the form of a hands-on manual for contemplation of *Dhamma*, which will be printed separately from the more academic papers.

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This paper is part of a series on *Rethinking Satipaṭṭhāna*. Please go to <http://sitagu.org/cintita/satipatthana/> for references and for access to other papers in the series.