

# The Satipaṭṭhāna Method

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*Having spotted the lone rōnin standing on the dusty street, the miscreants arrayed themselves in a show of opposition, with weapons drawn. However, the ten of them together were about to prove no match for Sanjuro. His keen gaze assessed the situation impassively as he approached at a steady pace. When warned to come no closer, he immediately quickened his pace, but with sword still sheathed. When the pistoleer drew and aimed his weapon, Sanjuro suddenly darted to the side, shot a hidden dagger through the gunman's wrist, leaped into the fray, and within seconds had dispatched all but one of the men, a young coward whom Sanjuro out of compassion allowed to flee. The gunman, now dying in the dirt, asked Sanjuro to hand him his weapon, that he may take it with him to the next world, assuring Sanjuro that it was now empty of bullets. The pistoleer attempted to aim the gun at Sanjuro as the rōnin watched unmoved and the dying man, for want of strength, fired his pistol harmlessly into the ground.<sup>1</sup>*

This paper is about skill in practice, and what better way to begin than with the quintessence of skillfulness in popular culture, the martial arts film genre? Of what did Sanjuro's skillfulness consist? He had brought four qualities into the skirmish, each of which his ten opponents, even collectively, could not match: ardency, mastery, comprehension and composure. What is often overlooked is how fundamental these qualities are to the advanced Buddhist practitioner as well.<sup>2</sup>

Ardency has to do with motivation. The ten wrongdoers could scarcely apprehend the depth of compassion for the plight of the innocent among the villagers that impelled Sanjuro, even greater than the concern for his own life, which in the film he had already nearly sacrificed in this cause.

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1 This is a depiction of the climax of Akira Kurosawa's 1961 film *Yojimbo*.  
2 ... but perhaps the reason we have Shao Lin monks and their ilk.

Sanjuro's mastery lay in his knowledge and training, assuredly imparted by some samurai master and further "developed and cultivated" as he practiced his trade in situations like this. He understood weapons and human anatomy, how to respond in the most skillful way to specific situations. Most of his mastery would have become internalized through practice and repetition, ready at hand spontaneously without thought, neurally encoded simply to kick in according to circumstance.

Sanjuro's comprehension was evident in his thorough assessment of the evolving situation: the dangers and opportunities, the position of each man, the weapons and even psychological profiles of his adversaries, the lifting of the pistol. Most of this could proceed spontaneously drawing on trained mastery, but any unique circumstances would have required further thought and deliberation, in this case the presence of the pistol, a weapon with which he seemed to have limited familiarity. The keenness of his comprehension was dramatized in his realization that the dying gunman was deceiving him, along with the certitude that he would be too weak to fire the uplifted pistol.

Sanjuro's composure was clear in his demeanor: while his opponents were disrupted from their gambling, then exhibited fear and agitation at Sanjuro's appearance, Sanjuro had put all self-concern calmly aside to "unhinder" the mind, from anything else not immediately relevant to what had to be done, to "center" and "compose" the mind directly on that and nothing beyond. What a guy!

## **1. *Satipaṭṭhāna: method and practice***

These same four qualities are listed as providing essential prerequisites to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. In fact, we will see momentarily that they even give this foundational practice its name. Accordingly, I will call the employment of these qualities in the Buddhist context the "*satipaṭṭhāna* method." The "*satipaṭṭhāna* method is described in this passage:

Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating body in the body, ardent, comprehending, and masterful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating feelings among the feelings, ardent, comprehending, and masterful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating mind in the mind, ardent, comprehend-ing, and masterful, having put away

covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating *dhammas* among the *dhammas*, ardent, comprehending, and masterful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. (MN 10 i56)

This passage describes skill in practice. The contemplative practice itself is described in four aspects:

- (1) contemplating body in the body,
- (2) contemplating feelings among the feelings,
- (3) contemplating mind in the mind, and
- (4) contemplating *dhammas* among the *dhammas*.

The Pali word that I’m translating as ‘contemplating,’ used throughout the *satipaṭṭhāna*, is a variant of the gerund *anupassanā*, literally ‘seeing along’ or ‘watching.’ This primary practice is therefore a kind of seeing in a deep or penetrating sense, aimed at “seeing things as they really are,” for instance seeing without presuming a self, seeing the contingency of all things and seeing clearly the immediate sources of suffering. This practice demands enormous skill, is carefully cultivated over time, and in particular requires that we bring certain auxiliary qualities to bear in the practice, which are those enumerated in the passage:

- (1) ardency,
- (2) comprehension,
- (3) mastery,
- (4) putting away covetousness and grief for the world.

Let’s look at these in more detail:

**Ardency** (*ātappa*) is also translated as ‘zeal’ or ‘exertion.’<sup>3</sup> It is the active energy of Buddhist practice is closely aligned with right effort (*sammāvāyāma*),<sup>4</sup> and fortified by refuge.

**Comprehension** (*sampajañña*) is also translated as ‘clear comprehension,’ ‘watchfulness,’ ‘alertness’ or ‘deliberation,’ and entails an understanding or response, centered around the circumstances relevant to the current practice task and informed by mastery.

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3 According to the PTS dictionary.

4 Thanissaro (2012, 2, 13).

**Mastery** (*sati*) is most commonly translated as ‘mindfulness.’<sup>5</sup> It refers to active memory, bringing to mind and bearing in mind of previously learned knowledge and skills, thematically centered around what is relevant to performance of the current practice task.

**“Putting away covetedness and grief for the world”** (or, more concisely, “unhinderedness”) is equated with the removal of the hindrances<sup>6</sup> to make one “unhindered” by worldly self-concern. We will see that it commonly develops further into *samādhi*, a centering of the mind around just those circumstances and know-how that are relevant to accomplishing the primary task.

Bringing these four qualities to bear is what I call the “*satipaṭṭhāna* method,” which is an art of skillfulness, attentive to the present practice conditions, and tutored and trained in how to accomplish the current task or practice. In the case of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplative practice, it brings our acquired *Dhammic* principles and skills into our present experience of body, feelings, mind or *dhammas*. More broadly within Buddhist life, we find the *satipaṭṭhāna* method applied in ethical practices (following behavioral standards, developing the *brahmavihāras*, monitoring intentions, etc) and devotional practices (recalling qualities of the triple gem, etc.). More broadly outside of Buddhist life, it would be applicable in a wide variety of learned skills, including martial arts.

## 2. The etymology of ‘*satipaṭṭhāna*’

Teachers and scholars widely fail to appreciate that ‘*satipaṭṭhāna*’ refers literally to the method, not to the practice, of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The word is a compound of two words:

*sati* ‘mastery’ + *upaṭṭhāna* ‘attending.’

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5 I explicitly avoid translating *sati* as ‘mindfulness.’ This is because this term has been hijacked in much of modern Buddhism and popular culture, lending itself to interpretations that bear little trace of its early meaning as ‘recollection.’ In ‘mastery,’ I hope to restore something close to Rhys David’s original apt use of ‘mindfulness’ to refer to memory applied to purposeful activity in the present. See my related paper “There is no word for ‘mindfulness’ in Pali.”

6 Virtually everyone seems to consider that “covetous and grief for the world” refers to the first two of the five hindrances, and to stand for all five. This makes sense, since each has a potential for reducing skillfulness.

*Sati* ‘mastery’ is one of the four factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method introduced above. The Pali word is a derivation of a root meaning ‘memory’ or ‘recollection’ and corresponds to the verb *sarati* ‘remember’ or ‘recollect.’ The cognate word in Sanskrit *smṛti* has a similar meaning and was commonly used at the time of the Buddha specifically in reference to memory of sacred Brahmanic texts or even to the body of sacred texts itself, which for many centuries were preserved in rote memory before they were committed to palm leaf.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, *sati* is always (!) some form of memory in the early texts, and virtually always in support of the performance of some task or practice. Let me cite some key examples. First, *sati* is the first of the seven “awakening factors” (*bojjhaṅga*), where it is clearly allocated the function of bringing some aspect of *Dhamma* to mind so that it can be examined and investigated:

Whenever, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* dwelling thus withdrawn recollects that *dhamma* and thinks it over, on that occasion the awakening factor of *sati* is aroused by the *bhikkhu*. The *bhikkhu* develops the awakening factor of *sati* at that time. The *bhikkhu* completes the awakening factor of *sati* at that time. (SN 46.3)

In short, a *Dhamma* teaching is chosen as the first awakening factor, and all that is previously known, relevant or internalized through practice about this teaching is brought to mind. This fulfills mastery. The second awakening factor, “investigation of *dhammas*,” then begins to examine how this teaching manifests in present experience. This fulfills comprehension. The third factor fulfills ardency and the rest of the series fulfills composure. Mastery based on the *Dhamma* is what we must continually bring to mind and hold in mind in order to practice *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation,<sup>8</sup> or in order to engage in virtually any other Buddhist practice.

Elsewhere the Buddha offers us the following example of mastery:

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- 7 We should not forget that this same practice of rote memorization of scriptures was successfully emulated in the early Buddhist *Saṅgha* as well, apparently uniquely among non-Brahmanical schools. If this were not the case, there would be no early Buddhist texts. It therefore makes sense that *sati* would have an analogous connotation in the early texts.
- 8 In fact, the three beginning awakening factors correspond to the task of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of *dhammas*.

Just as the gatekeeper in the king's frontier fortress is wise, masterful, and intelligent, one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances, for protecting its inhabitants and for warding off outsiders, so too a noble disciple is masterful, possessing supreme mastery and discrimination, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. With mastery as his gate-keeper, the noble disciple abandons the unwholesome and develops the wholesome, abandons what is blameworthy and develops what is blame-less, and maintains himself in purity. (AN 7.67 iv110-1)

The gatekeeper performs his occupation by bringing previous know-how to bear in assessing each person who seeks entry. Aside from any acquired intuition about what constitutes looking suspicious, he will draw on this memory of particular incidents involving particular people that he might now recognized from the (ofttimes distant) past. This is his mastery. The noble disciple is then asked to develop an analogous mastery in *Dhammic* practice in assessing his own thoughts and intentions as they seek entry one by one.<sup>9</sup>

I choose to translate *sati* as ‘mastery,’ because the vaguer ‘memory’ or ‘recollection’ fails to put us in mind of the particular kind of memory that skilled Buddhist practice demands. “Know-how” is far more important for our purposes than “know-what.” This will include not only taught principles that can be put into practice to perform tasks, but also the internalized manifestations, whose application has become automatic and effortless through years of practice, much as years of learning scales and chords manifest in spontaneous movements of the virtuoso’s finger tips. In Buddhism, I daresay, our development and cultivation of mastery in practice also marks our progress on the path. Therein lie the fruits of our practice.

With regard to the second word of the compound *satipaṭṭhāna*, two alternative etymologies have been proposed:

*sati* ‘mastery’ + *paṭṭhāna* ‘foundation,’ ‘establishment,’ or  
*sati* ‘mastery’ + *upaṭṭhāna* ‘attending to.’

In the first etymology, favored in the Pali commentaries, the word *paṭṭhāna* is literally

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9 In SN 48.9 the noble disciple’s mastery is described in exactly the same way, including recalling and bearing in mind even things that were done and said long ago.

*pa-* ‘forth’ + *ṭhāna* ‘standing,’

hence ‘foundation’ or ‘establishment.’ In the alternative etymology, the word *upaṭṭhāna*, in which the ‘u’ is elided to produce the ambiguous compound, is literally

*upa-* ‘close’ + *ṭhāna* ‘standing,’

hence something like ‘caring for,’ ‘attending to.’<sup>10</sup> Most modern scholars<sup>11</sup> seem now to agree that this second analysis is correct,<sup>12</sup> for several reasons:

- (1) The equivalent of *satipaṭṭhāna* in Sanskrit Buddhist texts is *smṛtyupasthāna*, which is unambiguously built on the cognate of *upaṭṭhāna*, not that of *paṭṭhāna*.
- (2) The gerund form *paṭṭhāna* does not occur by itself in the early texts.
- (3) The other inflections of the verb *upaṭṭhahati* routinely occur in association with *sati*, for instance *upaṭṭhitā sati* ‘attentive mastery.’

In fact, in the description of the first exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* we have,

... *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* ...

‘... having attended masterfully to what is in front ...’<sup>13</sup>

I will translate *upaṭṭhāna* as ‘attentiveness,’ which connotes more active engagement than ‘attending.’ The compound *satipaṭṭhāna* can be translated as ‘mastery-attentiveness,’ but I will generally leave it untranslated.

Picture a nurse standing close to her patient in order to attend to his needs caringly. She is alert, sensitive and composed. This is *upaṭṭhāna*. In her attentiveness, she brings all of her training and knowledge to bear to the assessment of his needs in order to respond appropriately. This is *sati*.

Likewise, a Buddhist practitioner sits close to experiential factors in the present practice situation – raw sense impressions, the arising of feelings, of ill-will, and so on – with the same attentiveness. That is *upaṭṭhāna*. In attending to her experiential world, the practitioner brings her *Dhammic* mastery to bear in

10 The PTS dictionary lists “attendance, waiting on, looking after, service, care, ministering.”

11 See Anālayo (2007, 29-30).

12 ... yet, oddly, most continue to gloss it as ‘foundations’ or ‘establishment.’

13 MN 10 i56. Here, *parimukhaṃ* (‘what is up front,’ that is, what is relevant to the practice task at hand) is the object of the verb, and *satim* is an adverbial accusative.

order to interpret her experiences and and to recognize the conditions by which they arise. This is *sati*.

Notice that the etymology of the compound ‘*satipaṭṭhāna*’ reflects quite closely the *satipaṭṭhāna* method itself. Nothing in the term suggests the practice of contemplation (*anupassanā*) as opposed to any other skillful practice.

Nonetheless, the term *satipaṭṭhāna* is almost always used with reference to contemplative practice. To avoid confusion, I will clearly distinguish, where appropriate in what follows, “the *satipaṭṭhāna* method” from “the *satipaṭṭhāna* (contemplative) practice.”

Mastery is the dominating influence in all this. This is why we call in an expert to do a difficult task. And so it is with Buddhist practice:

And how is mastery its [the spiritual life’s] authority?

Mastery is internally well-attentive: ‘In just such a way I will fulfill the training pertaining to good conduct that I have not yet fulfilled, or assist with wisdom in various respects the training pertaining to good conduct that I have fulfilled.’

...

Mastery is internally well-attentive: ‘In just such a way I will scrutinize with wisdom the teachings that I have not yet scrutinized, or assist with wisdom in various respects the *Dhamma* that I have scrutinized. (AN 4.245)

The phrase “mastery is ... well-attentive” is *sati su-upaṭṭhitā hoti*, which (putting aside *su-* ‘well’) is cognate with *satipaṭṭhāna*. Notice that two tasks are cited here (there are two more tasks in the complete passage) to which mastery is attentive: training in good conduct and scrutinizing the *Dhamma*. The first pertains to developing and cultivating ethics, and the second to the contemplative practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* itself. Therefore *sati sūpaṭṭhitā hoti* with respect to both tasks refers to the more general *satipaṭṭhāna* method, not to the more specific contemplative practice that goes by that name.

### 3. *Mastery-comprehension*

We should note that *sati-upaṭṭhāna* ‘mastery-attentiveness’ exists alongside another similar and common compound, *sati-sampajañña* ‘mastery-comprehension.’ This second compound refers to the two central factors of the



*satipaṭṭhāna* method, but omits ardency and unhinderedness. This compound occurs widely, for instance, in association with contemplation:

This is Nanda's mastery-comprehension: Nanda knows feelings as they originate, as they remain present, as they disappear; he knows perceptions as they originate, as they remain present, as they disappear; he knows thoughts as they originate, as they remain present, as they disappear. That is Nanda's mastery-comprehension. (AN 8.9 iv168)

Mastery-comprehension is particularly common in association with ethical practices.<sup>14</sup> Here it is with shame and conscience:

*Bhikkhus*, when there is no mastery-comprehension, for one deficient in mastery-comprehension, shame and conscience lack their proximate cause. (AN 8.81 iv336)

Here it is with sense restraint:

Restraint of the sense faculties, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for restraint of the sense faculties? It should be said: mastery-comprehension. (AN 10.16 v115)

'Mastery-comprehension' describes a ubiquitous faculty of general human cognition, one that you are employing right now, as you read these words: your mastery is actively engaged through your English-language know-how, your knowledge of Buddhism, your mastery of turning pages or scrolling, and much more, without which you would be unable to comprehend what I am writing. Your comprehension includes the meanings you are assigning to the sentences you read, whatever degree of thought and deliberation this inspires, whatever integration of new knowledge with old you manage, and (bottom line) that which you take away from this paper.

Mastery and comprehension are inseparably linked, like two sides of one coin. There is no comprehension without bringing one's mastery to mind, and mastery is pointless if it does not lead to comprehension. Moreover, even as mastery informs comprehension, comprehension grows future mastery. Mastery-comprehension is fundamental to human cognition, and fortified with ardency, unhinderedness and *samādhi* in Buddhist practice, to become the *satipaṭṭhāna* method.

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14 ... and *satipaṭṭhāna* is noticeably absent in ethical contexts.

Several scholars have alluded to the function of mastery-comprehension in similar terms: Rhys-Davids, who adopted the translation ‘mindfulness’ fourteen decades ago, noted “the constantly repeated phrase ‘mindful and thoughtful’ (*sato sampajāno*), ... that activity of mind and constant presence of mind which is one of the duties most frequently inculcated on the good Buddhist.”<sup>15</sup> Shulman describes *sati* in terms of the fusion of memory and attention and Thanissaro in terms of active memory that provides an immediate “framework” for understanding experience and what has to be done in this regard.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere<sup>17</sup> *sati* is seen as a faculty of memory that bears in mind the *Dhamma* in a manner relevant to the practitioners spiritual quest. Dreyfus<sup>18</sup> discusses *sati* from the perspective of cognitive science in terms of “working memory” as a natural cognitive function.

#### 4. Learning and attention

Mastery is know-how both applied in comprehension and grown through comprehension: we learn by doing. Growth of mastery is described repeatedly as ‘development and cultivation’ *bhāvanā bahulīkammaṃ*. Through “development” new experiences and insights are remembered. Through “cultivation, that is, repeated practice (*bahulīkammaṃ* literally means ‘doing a lot’), mastery is habituated and restructured in a process of “internalization.”

As a simple example of the growth of mastery, consider how difficult driving a vehicle was in the early weeks, when your mastery was very low. It demanded your full attention to the driving conditions, and even that was not enough, because you weren’t able to fully comprehend your experience of the swirl of cars, curbs, street signs, bikes, kites, angry drivers honking behind, and pedestrians scattering in front, into reasonable plans of action with so little guidance from that early stage of mastery. As a consequence, you had to think about each action and even that produced poor comprehension. However, with practice you gained insights ([*screech ... wham*] “I’m never going to do *that* again”) and through habituation and internalization you learned to drive effortlessly and largely intuitively.

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15 Rhys Davids (1881, 145).

16 Shulman (2014, 112-4), Thanissaro (2012, 1, 15).

17 Levman (2017).

18 Dreyfus (2011).

Internalization is the gradual migration of mastery from “explicit” to “implicit” cognition. We humans are endowed with (at least) these two distinguished systems, variously named.<sup>19</sup> The explicit (evolutionarily newer) system involves deliberate and effortful reasoning, problem solving, conceptual abstractions, sustained narratives, and active discursive thinking. The (older and much larger) implicit system, on the other hand, is silent, for the most part unconscious, effortless, non-conceptual and intuitive. They are two ends of the famous “learning curve.”

Growth in mastery has an interesting relationship to attention. Cognitive science tells us that attention is a limited resource, so it seems logical that in performing a primary task, the optimal scope of attention would consist of exactly those aspects of mastery and comprehension that are relevant to accomplishing that task. The scope of attention is maintained dynamically, or “kept in mind” as the contents of “working memory.” For instance, in driving a car we keep in mind know-how ranging from traffic laws to internalized automatic responsiveness. We also attend to present situational factors like the color of the looming traffic light, our distance to the car in front of us, and the current plan to maneuvering around a slow car on the freeway. Optimally our attention would not stray beyond this scope to being persuaded by billboards or planning our vacation.

A perhaps surprising correlation in common human cognition is that higher mastery generally means *greater* multitasking or scattering of attention. The skilled driver is more likely to snack or listen to the news. Consider how you *now* talk on the phone, eat lunch, listen to the radio, text, honk at inept drivers and lean out the window to flirt with pedestrians, all while you are driving. Your attention has become dispersed. With increased mastery, driving has lost its challenge and has become somewhat boring, so you turn most of your attention elsewhere to occupy the mind. Your surplus of available cognitive energy has become reallocated, to the detriment of immediate skillfulness and of further growth of mastery.

In fact, the natural tendency in human cognition seems to lean toward reallocating surplus attention in a way that turns each of us into “a jack of all trades, master of none,” which must have carried a fitness advantage in in our ancestral environment. However, Buddhist practice seeks to reverse this

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19 See, for instance, Bruya (2010), Kahneman (2011), *Thinking Fast and Slow*, or the more popular Gladwell (2005), *Blink: the power of thinking without thinking*,

tendency, for the *Buddhadhamma* shares a characteristic found in the many “arts,” including martial arts, *haute cuisine*, sculpture, music or sports: we are intent on virtuosity, so that our performance is optimized and our mastery develops continuously and single-mindedly beyond common capability. In this way we progress on the path, with time and training to become a wizard of wisdom and a virtuoso of virtue.

As in these other arts, we develop and cultivate simple mastery-comprehension into something more refined, primarily by controlling attentiveness, which is what makes the *satipaṭṭhāna* method so critical as the art of skillfulness. As an alternative to multitasking and dispersion of attention, the scope of our attention is sharpened through progressive stages as the mind becomes “unhindered,” then “composed,” then “silent,” then “equanimous.” Each of these has its proper time, for how far we are able to progress in this sequence as we pursue a particular practice, depends on our level of mastery as well as on extrinsic circumstances. This progression begins with the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, but then is carried forth in *samādhi*, making the two integral.<sup>20</sup> See my related paper *The miracle of samādhi* for more on this.

## 5. Training in mastery-attentiveness

The *satipaṭṭhāna* method is applied throughout to provide attentiveness and to perfect mastery in every aspect of Buddhist practice. As the general art of skillfulness, we also train in the *satipaṭṭhāna* method for its own sake. A simile in the Saṃyutta Nikāya graphically illustrates this in a non-*Dhammic* context:

The Blessed One said this: “*Bhikkhus*, suppose that on hearing, ‘The most beautiful girl of the land! The most beautiful girl of the land!’ a great crowd of people would assemble. Now that most beautiful girl of the land would dance exquisitely and sing exquisitely. On hearing, ‘The most beautiful girl of the land is dancing! The most beautiful girl of the land is singing!’ an even larger crowd of people would assemble. Then a man would come along, wishing to live, not wishing to die, wishing for happiness, averse to suffering. Someone would say to him: ‘Good man, you must carry around this bowl of oil filled to the brim between the crowd and the most beautiful girl of the land. A man with a drawn sword will be following right behind you, and wherever you spill even a

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20 See my related paper “The miracle of *samādhi*” for more on this.

little of it, right there he will fell your head.’ What do you think, *bhikkhus*, would that man stop attending to that bowl of oil and out of negligence turn his attention outwards?”

“No, venerable sir.” (SN 47.20)

The task to be performed here is that of carrying the bowl without spilling a drop of oil. However, we can see each of the factors of the *satipatṭhāna* method fully at work: the sword represents ardency and the girl represents external distractions writ large. Comprehension and mastery are represented by the task of keeping the oil in the bowl. Mastery in this simile is not *Dhammic*, but consists largely of fine motor skills of the type practiced since the man was a toddler, and now long internalized.

Normally this fellow could afford to be as distracted as he liked, bumbling and stumbling along. In this circumstance, given his induced ardency, he will nonetheless fully engage his faculty of comprehension. He must track without lapse the position of the bowl, perhaps, the movements of the various people present, the potential for being bumped, the reliability of walking surfaces, the careful placement of each step, down to the potential effects of a gust of wind. Although the scope of the man’s attention must be very broad, it must at the same time be sharply circumscribed: by all means it must strictly *exclude* the girl dancing and singing, for she could easily become a fatal distraction. Perhaps even more challenging, the basis for ardency is “wishing to live, not wishing to die,” yet hindrance of fear must be put aside, alongside the hindrance of lust.

The discourse concludes:

“I have made up this simile, *bhikkhus*, in order to convey a meaning. This here is the meaning: ‘The bowl of oil filled to the brim’: this is a designation for mastery directed to the body. Therefore, *bhikkhus*, you should train yourselves thus: ‘We will develop and cultivate mastery directed at the body, make it our vehicle, make it our basis, stabilize it, exercise ourselves in it, and fully perfect it.’ Thus, *bhikkhus*, should you train yourselves.” (SN 47.20)

This conclusion is striking. It recommends training in mastery-attentiveness itself, through choosing practice tasks connected with the body or with masterful engagement in physical tasks. Developing and cultivating ‘mastery

directed to the body' (*kāyagatā sati*), making it our vehicle, making it our basis, stabilizing it, exercising ourselves in it, and fully perfecting it, is often the most direct way of training our skill in the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, which we can thereby begin to apply spontaneously to whatever task we undertake, not only to tasks defined by *Dhamma* or tasks having to do with the body. This is echoed in another *sutta*:

... one thing, when developed and cultivated, leads to mastery-comprehension ... What is that one thing? Mastery directed to the body.  
(AN 1.276)

In other texts we learn that applying wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) to the contemplation of the arising and falling of feelings, perceptions and thoughts develops skill in *sati-sampajaññā*, and that the contemplation of insubstantiality and suffering with regard to the aggregates,<sup>21</sup> or the development and cultivation of *samādhi* leads to mastery-comprehension.<sup>22</sup>

This training in the method itself is taken to heart in the following passage from the *Samaññaphala Sutta* describing one stage of the gradual training, a practice stage prior to the stage at which *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation is practiced:

“And how, great king, is the *bhikkhu* endowed with mastery-comprehension? Herein, great king, in going forward and returning, the *bhikkhu* acts with comprehension. In looking ahead and looking aside, he acts with comprehension. In bending and stretching the limbs, he acts with comprehension. In wearing his robes and cloak and using his alms-bowl, he acts with comprehension. In eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting, he acts with comprehension. In defecating and urinating, he acts with comprehension. In going, standing, sitting, lying down, waking up, speaking, and remaining silent, he acts with comprehension. In this way, great king, the *bhikkhu* is endowed with mastery and comprehension.  
(DN 2 i70-1)<sup>23</sup>

The challenge of this practice is that the *bhikkhu* is already so masterful in these routine actions that they require little effort. Under these conditions, the

21 AN 6.29, SN 22.122 iii168-9, DN 33 iii223. See my related paper *Samādhi springs up* for more on this.

22 DN 33 iii223.

23 This passage also shows up almost word for word as an exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself, at MN 10 i57.

attention of the untutored worldling would normally be scattered. Yet, even without the urgency of the previous example, the *bhikkhu* is asked to retain clear comprehension and remain attentive anyway. That is where the challenge lies, in maintaining attentiveness anyway, where mastery is already high.<sup>24</sup> This requires narrowing attention and stilling the mind.

## 6. Right mastery

Right mastery (*sammāsati*) is the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path. In this paper we've managed to look at mastery (*sati*) itself, as well as its progressive enhancements as mastery-comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*), as the *satipaṭṭhāna* method (mastery-attentiveness) and finally as the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplative practice. We would hope right mastery would correspond in the Buddhist context to one of these degrees of elaboration if not to the root concept of *sati* itself.

I will suggest here that right mastery is, in fact, the *satipaṭṭhāna* method (mastery-attentiveness) to as applied to the other path practices. But to reach that conclusion, we must first look at two seemingly inconsistent ways in which right mastery is specified in the early texts. The first is as something that runs and circles around the other factors of the path. The second is as the “four *satipaṭṭhānas*” themselves.

**Right mastery runs and circles around everything else.** Let's begin by looking at how the Buddha incorporated the combination of right view, right effort and right mastery as factors at work in virtually all of Buddhist practice.

Right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong action as wrong action, and right action as right action. ... One tries to abandon wrong action and to enter into right action: This is one's right effort. One remembers to abandon wrong action and to enter and remain in right action: This is one's right mastery. Thus these three qualities – right view, right effort, and right mastery – run and circle around right action. (MN 117 iii72)

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24 Notice that this practice of mastery directed to the body looses a lot like “everyday mindfulness,” for instance, as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, but in terms of a constellation of factors. See my related paper “There is no word for ‘mindfulness’ in Pali” for a perspective on this.

This passage is stated verbatim for each of the first five factors of the noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action and right livelihood. The path practices in which we gain mastery fall under the categories of wisdom (right view and right attitude<sup>25</sup>) and ethics (right speech, right action and right livelihood). The development (*bhāvanā*) factors (right effort, right mastery and right *samādhi*) thereby serve as “auxiliary” practices in boosting the efficacy of these “primary” practices.<sup>26</sup> These three factors are claimed to run and circle around the wisdom and ethics practices. Understanding right mastery in terms of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method makes perfect sense in this passage.

“Right view” is the development of a correct and accessible understanding of the Dhamma, which serves as a guide for the other path factors. Right view begins with study, and satipaṭṭhāna contemplation itself is an advanced practice within right view.

“Right effort” is the energy that drives actual engagement in practice, in speech, body and mind, under the guidance of right mastery.

Right effort is responsible, for instance, for controlling the impulse to wack a pest or fabricate a whopper, when right mastery makes the proper *Dhammic* behavior clear.

“Right mastery” is the intermediate factor between right view and right effort, between the guiding light of *Dhamma* and momentary practice behavior. It determines appropriate *Dhammic* thought or behavior in the practice situation and awaits right effort’s implementation.

For instance, a constant and well developed attentive mastery is necessary in making proper ethical choices as we find ourselves repeatedly in morally charged situations, weighing a constellation of factors such as our own motivations, our vows and commitments, the imperative to harmonize with others and do no harm, and our rough calculations of anticipated benefits. With even a momentary lapse in attentiveness, we may fail to act appropriately at the right time.

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25 *Mettā* meditation is an example of practice in right attitude (*sammā saṅkappa*).

26 Notice I am claiming that *samādhi* also plays a critical auxiliary role here. In my related paper “The miracle of *samādhi*” I argue that this role is tightly aligned with right mastery, fine-tunes unhinderedness and composure and promotes insight and internalization.



As a quick simile, if right cuisine were a path practice, right view would be our cookbook and right effort the mixing, stirring, baking, and so on that actually happens. Right mastery would be the executive function between book and spoon that knows precisely what to do when, and also gains in adeptness as it fulfills its function. With mastery-attentiveness the art of cuisine is gradually mastered.

**Right mastery is the four *satipaṭṭhānas*.** Right mastery is alternatively defined in an oft repeated formula as follows:

And what, bhikkhus, is right mastery?

Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating body in body, ardent, comprehending, masterful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. ...

This is right mastery. (SN 45.8)

The middle paragraph is repeated as for body, also for feelings, mind and dhammas. Though it cites the method, this passage appears to equate right mastery specifically with the contemplative practice, rather than with the more general *satipaṭṭhāna* method of the previous definition. For instance, if right mastery runs and circles around right speech, then its role would not seem to be *contemplation* of right speech, but rather skillful *performance* of right speech. The two definitions seem incongruous, especially given that among the many practice exercises found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and other *satipaṭṭhāna* texts, none touches on right speech nor shows interest in any other ethical practice.<sup>27</sup> Nor does the term *satipaṭṭhāna* seem ever to occur anywhere in the early texts in association with ethical practices, like guarding the senses, whereas *satisampajañña* occurs routinely in such contexts.

However, these two definitions can be reconciled if we interpret the reference to the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in an well-attested alternative way. Definitions in the early texts are often definitions “by example.” For instance, the following defines “perception”:

And why do you call it perception? It perceives; that’s why it’s called ‘perception.’ And what does it perceive? It perceives blue, yellow, red, and white. It perceives; that’s why it’s called ‘perception.’ (SN 22.79)

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<sup>27</sup> In fact, if Sujāto (2012, 140, 192, 305) and Anālayo (2014, 176) are right, the earliest *satipaṭṭhāna* practice was limited to a greatly pared down set of exercises.

Clearly, the four colors are merely representative examples, and are implicitly understood to generalize to orange, green, birds, faces, tastes, harmonious sounds, the moon and so on.

Similarly, the following defines “fabrication” (*saṅkhāra*) in its three facets by example:

Friend Visāka, in-breathing and out-breathing are the bodily fabrication, thought and deliberation are the verbal fabrication, and perception and feeling are the mental fabrication.

(MN 44 i301)

I propose that the definition of right mastery in terms of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* is similarly a definition by example, one that is implicitly generalized to the application of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method to other Buddhist practices as well. The choice of the fourfold contemplative practice to exemplify mastery-attentiveness is natural: it is emblematic of the method, since it is utterly dependent on the method (such that the method is built into the practice instructions), it provides optimal conditions for the full arising of arduity, comprehension, mastery and unhinderedness, and, as a contemplative and introspective practice, it opens the method to immediate inspection (in contemplation of the seven awakening factors). Even though the method is broadly applied throughout Buddhist practice, never is it as successfully applied and so vividly apparent as when one is sitting, secluded, under a tree in meditation posture, engaged in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.

These same conditions that make this contemplative practice emblematic for right mastery, also explain why the meaning of term *satipaṭṭhāna* migrated from the *satipaṭṭhāna method* to the *satipaṭṭhāna practice*. This migration is so complete that it is rare for the term *satipaṭṭhāna* ever to refer directly to its method, even though that is where the literal meaning of the term is actually found. A contributing factor for the loss of the method’s rightful name is probably the availability of the similar, largely equivalent term *satisampajañña* ‘mastery-comprehension’ to refer to the method.<sup>28</sup> This migration is so complete that there seems to be only one instance in the Pali *suttas* in which the word *satipaṭṭhāna* ever refers to a practice other than the fourfold

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28 Note that the term *paticca-samupāda* (‘dependent coarising’) seems similarly, but not so completely, to have migrated from a broadly applicable method of analysis based on conditional relations, specifically to the *twelve links* of dependent co-arising.

contemplation. In the *Majjhima Nikāya* the Buddha describes himself as practicing “the three *satipaṭṭhānas*,” but in this case his task is to

“... teach the *Dhamma* to his disciples out of compassion,”

under three alternative conditions:

- (1) “his disciples will not give ear and exert their minds to understand,”
- (2) “some of his disciples will give ear and exert their minds to understand,” and
- (3) “[all] his disciples will give ear and exert their minds to understand.”  
(MN 137 iii 121)

Here the practice is teaching rather than contemplating *Dhamma*, but certainly the application of the common *satipaṭṭhāna* method is what connects the two identically named practices.<sup>29</sup>

I conclude that right mastery is the application (running and circling around) to right everything else, of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method (mastery-attentiveness).

## 7. Conclusions

We began this exploration by catching the thread of a foundational teaching in the introduction to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which we recognized as a kind of art of skillfulness and named the “*satipaṭṭhāna* method.” We discovered the general applicability of this method. We found the method reflected in the etymology of compounds *satipaṭṭhāna* and *satisampajañña*. We found that the *satipaṭṭhāna* method finds natural support in what we know about human cognition, and it provides a coherent, explanatory and functional account of what the early texts tell us about *sati*. Finally, we found that the method is the essence of right mastery *sammāsati*, the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path.

This paper has been about skill in practice and development of mastery. Buddhism is a practice tradition, concerned with learning, internalizing, mastering and eventually becoming a virtuoso in, what we might call the skill of life, or in the skills of wisdom, virtue and mental composure. The thought world of Buddhism is accordingly organized around skill in practice: around action (*kamma*), both skillful (*kusala*) and unskillful (*akusala*); around

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29 Kuan (2008, 31) assesses that *satipaṭṭhāna* is the same concept in both cases, but points out that Bhikkhu Bodhi disagrees.

competence (*pariyatti*) and performance (*patipatti*); around development (*bhāvana*) and cultivation (*bahulīkata*) of mastery. Those firmly on the path are “in training” (*sekkha*) and those who have mastered it “beyond training.” (*asekkha*). The similes of Buddhism draw repeatedly from music, crafts and professional life.

Right mastery is right at the center of skill in practice. It is where *Dhamma* meets practice. It optimizes, then masters skillfulness through the development and cultivation of attentiveness. It is present in the range of wisdom and ethics practices, its own development is a practice in itself, and it is reflected also in non-Buddhist arts and crafts (by Sanjuro and others). The goal of Buddhist practice is virtuosity, cultivated through learning the scores and chords of *Dhamma* until we perform brilliantly with the Buddha’s hands, responsively and spontaneously in each moment, as an embodiment of wisdom and virtue.

**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.**