

# The Satipaṭṭhāna Method

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DRAFT (10/23/23)

*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 an unseen 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, proficiency, 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 proficiency lay in his knowledge and training, assuredly imparted by some samurai master and further developed 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 know-how would have become internalized through practice and repetition, ready at hand spontaneously without thought, neurally encoded 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 moment the pistol was raised. Most of this could proceed spontaneously drawing on trained proficiency, 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, then anything else not immediately relevant to what had to be done, to center without emotion or distraction, to "compose" the mind directly on that and nothing beyond. What a guy!

### ***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, in the Buddhist context I will call the employment of these qualities the "*satipaṭṭhāna* method." The "*satipaṭṭhāna* method is described in this passage:

Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating the body in the body, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating feelings in feelings, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides

contemplating mind in mind, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetous-ness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating *dharmas* in *dharmas*, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. (MN 10 i56)

This text describes skill in practice. The “primary” practice itself is described in four aspects:

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

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 impermanence in 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) Proficiency,
- (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

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3 According to the PTS dictionary.

4 Thanissaro (2012, 2, 13).

understanding or response, centered around the circumstances relevant to the current practice task and informed by proficiency.

**Proficiency** (*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 “know-how,” thematically centered around what is relevant to performance of the current practice task.

**“Putting away covetedness and grief for the world”** 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 “composure,” 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,” the 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* practice, it brings our acquired *Dhammic* principles and skills into our present experience of body, feelings, mind or *dharmas*. We note that the same method appears to apply not only to Buddhist contemplative practice, but to martial arts as well and, moreover, pervades all aspects of Buddhist practice and is applicable, practically speaking, far beyond.

### **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* ‘proficiency’ + *upaṭṭhāna* ‘attending.’

*Sati* ‘proficiency’ is one of the four factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method introduced above. The Pali word is a derivation of a root meaning ‘memory’ or

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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 ‘proficiency,’ 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 *How “mindfulness” got mislabeled*.

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.

‘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 intuited concerning this teaching is brought to mind. This fulfills proficiency. 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. Proficiency 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 proficiency:

Just as the gatekeeper in the king's frontier fortress is wise, proficient, and intelligent, one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances, for protecting its inhabitants and for

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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*.

warding off outsiders, so too a noble disciple is proficient, possessing supreme proficiency and discrimination, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. With proficiency 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 of who looks 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 proficiency. The noble disciple is then asked to develop an analogous proficiency in *Dhammic* practice in assessing his own intentions as they seek entry one by one.<sup>9</sup>

I choose to translate *sati* as ‘proficiency,’ 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 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 of proficiency in practice also marks our progress on the path.

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

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

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

*pa-* ‘forth’ + *ṭhāna* ‘standing,’

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

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 proficiency.’

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

... *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* ...

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

I will translate *upaṭṭhāna* as ‘attentiveness,’ which connotes more active engagement than ‘attending,’ and the whole compound *satipaṭṭhāna* as ‘proficiency-attentiveness.’

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

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.

Notice that the etymology of the compound ‘*satipaṭṭhāna*’ reflects quite closely the *satipaṭṭhāna* method itself, but the practice of contemplation (*anupassanā*) only incidentally through its incorporation of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, even though the term *satipaṭṭhāna* is almost always used with reference to the practice. To avoid confusion, I will clearly distinguish, in what follows, “the *satipaṭṭhāna* method” from “the *satipaṭṭhāna* (contemplat-ive) practice.”

Proficiency 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 proficiency its [the spiritual life’s] authority?

Proficiency 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.’

...

Proficiency 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 “proficiency 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 proficiency is attentive: training in good conduct and scrutinizing the *Dhamma*. The first pertains to developing and cultivating ethics, and the second to wisdom, the second seemingly the specific 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.

### ***Proficiency-comprehension***

We should note that *sati-upaṭṭhāna* ‘proficiency-attentiveness’ exists alongside another similar and common compound, *sati-sampajañña* ‘proficiency-comprehension.’ Notice that this second compound refers to the two central factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method but omits ardency and unhinderedness,



though it certainly suggests the entire method. This compound occurs widely, for instance, in association with contemplation:

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

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

Bhikkhus, when there is no proficiency-comprehension, for one deficient in proficiency-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: proficiency-comprehension. (AN 10.16 v115)

Literally, 'proficiency-comprehension' describes a ubiquitous faculty of general human cognition, one that you are employing right now, as you read these words: your proficiency is actively engaged through your English-language know-how, your knowledge of Buddhism, your mastery of turning pages, and much more, without which you would be unable to comprehend what I am writing about. 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 – whatever you take away from this paper.

Proficiency and comprehension are always inseparably linked, like two sides of one coin. There is no comprehension without the activation of proficiency, and proficiency is pointless if it does not lead to comprehension. Moreover, even as proficiency informs comprehension, comprehension extends and refines future proficiency. Although proficiency-comprehension is fundamental to human

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

cognition, it is further developed and refined in Buddhism to produce proficiency-attentiveness, fortified with ardency and unhinderedness.

Scholars have repeatedly pointed in the direction of this faculty in their accounts of *sati*: 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.

### ***Learning and attention***

Proficiency is know-how both applied in comprehension and grown through comprehension: we learn by doing. Proficiency is grown, on the one hand, through new insights and, on the other, through a restructuring enabled by habituation called “internalization.” In Buddhism our progress is tied to growth in proficiency in all of the primary practices, described repeatedly as ‘development and cultivation’ *bhāvanā bahulīkammaṃ*, which seem to describe these two aspects of the growth of proficiency, (*bahulīkammaṃ* literally means ‘doing a lot’).

As a simple example of the growth of proficiency, consider how difficult driving a vehicle was in the early weeks, when your proficiency was very low. It demanded your full attention to the driving conditions, and even that was not enough, because you weren’t able to sort out 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 top-down contribution from early proficiency. As a consequence, you had to think about each action and even that produced poor results. However, with practice

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15 Rhys Davids (1881, 145).

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

17 Levman (2017).

18 Dreyfus (2011).

you gained insights ([SCREECH, WHAM] “I’m never going to do *that* again”). and through habituation you learned to drive effortlessly on autopilot (your know-how has been internalized).

Growth in proficiency 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 proficiency and comprehension that are relevant to accomplishing that task. The scope of attention would be 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 responses that allow us to merge with adjacent traffic as our lane disappears, 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 venture beyond this scope to bring our birdwatching skills to birdwatch, or text with our best friend.

A perhaps surprising correlation in common human cognition is that higher proficiency generally means greater multitasking or scattering of attention. The skilled driver is more likely to birdwatch. 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 proficiency, driving has lost its challenge and has become somewhat boring, so you look 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 proficiency.

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 our ancestral environment. However, Buddhist practice seeks to reverse this 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 proficiency develops continuously and single-mindedly beyond mere adeptness. 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 proficiency-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 depends on our level of proficiency and on practical circumstances. The bloke whose house is being washed away in a flood with his family in it is unlikely to be unhindered, it would be inappropriate for the neophyte to be composed. This progression begins in the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, but then is carried forth in *samādhi*, making the two integral. See my related paper *The miracle of samādhi* for more on this.

### ***Training in proficiency-attentiveness***

The *satipaṭṭhāna* method is applied throughout to provide attentiveness and to perfect proficiency 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 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 *satipaṭṭhāna* method fully at work: the sword represents ardency and the girl represents the challenge to unhinderedness. Comprehension and proficiency are represented by the task of keeping the oil in the bowl.

Notably, the proficiency required to accomplish this task is likely to be extremely high. It largely consists of fine motor skills practiced since toddlerhood and now long internalized, though the art of balancing a burden on one's head might have been acquired later. Normally this fellow could afford to be as distracted as he liked, and that would have been his intention, only occasionally bumping or stumbling.

But this is the point of this passage: he will nonetheless fully engage his faculty of comprehension due to the level of ardency. He must track 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. His comprehension must be finely detailed and not lapse for even a second.

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 also be excluded, 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 proficiency directed to the body. Therefore, *bhikkhus*, you should train yourselves thus: 'We will develop and cultivate proficiency 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 proficiency-attentiveness itself, through choosing practice tasks connected with the body or with proficient engagement in physical tasks. Developing and cultivating

‘proficiency 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 having to do with the body. This is echoed in another *sutta*:

... one thing, when developed and cultivated, leads to proficiency-comprehension ... What is that one thing?  
Proficiency 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>19</sup> or the development and cultivation of *samādhi* leads to proficiency-comprehension.<sup>20</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 proficiency-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 proficiency and comprehension. (DN 2 i70-1)<sup>21</sup>

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

20 DN 33 iii223.

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

The challenge of this practice is that the *bhikkhu* is already so proficient in these routine actions that they require little cognitive effort. Under these conditions, attentiveness 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 proficiency is already high.<sup>22</sup>

### **Right proficiency**

Right proficiency (*sammāsati*) is the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path. In this paper we've managed to look at proficiency (*sati*) itself, as well as its progressive Buddhist enhancements as proficiency-comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*), as the *satipaṭṭhāna* method (proficiency-attentiveness) and as the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplative practice. We would hope right proficiency 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 proficiency is the application of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method (proficiency-attentiveness) to the other path practices. But to reach that conclusion, we must first look at the two primary ways in which right proficiency 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*.”

**Right proficiency 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 proficiency 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

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22 Everyday attentive proficiency may often feel a lot like modern “mindfulness” practice. That's great; keep doing what you are doing. The current paper seeks to demonstrate that what seems to be a single unexplained faculty is a constellation of factors (and presented that way in early Buddhism) that are necessary to understand the role of *Dhamma* and *samādhi*, for instance, in Buddhist practice, or how all of this facilitates liberation. See my related paper *How “mindfulness got mislabeled for a critique of the modern understanding of “mindfulness.”*

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 proficiency. Thus these three qualities – right view, right effort, and right proficiency – run and circle around right action. (MN 117 iii72)

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, that is, for each of the wisdom and virtue practices.

Understanding right proficiency in terms of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method makes perfect sense in this passage. Each path factor represents a set of *Dhammic* skills that manifest in practice situations. Right proficiency is the intermediate factor between right view and right effort, between know-how and practice, between competence and performance for each of these *Dhammic* skills. Right proficiency brings to mind those aspects of right view that are relevant to the practice situation, comprehends an appropriate response to that situation and authorizes right effort to consummate the response comprehended by right proficiency. Moreover, right proficiency thereby develops and ultimately perfects its own function. If right cuisine were a path practice, our right view would be our cookbook and right effort the mixing, stirring, baking, and so on. Right proficiency 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 attentiveness the art of cuisine is gradually mastered.

Likewise, in the practice of right action, right proficiency brings the five precepts to mind (proficiency) when the impulse arises to wack a pest or fabricate a whopper (comprehension). Right effort follows up to avoid enacting that impulse. Without right proficiency, ethics might fail us at the crucial moment of action due to inattention to our values.<sup>23</sup> A constant and well developed attentive proficiency 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.

Ethical practice can be a matter of problem solving, but becomes internalized with repeated practice as immediate “moral perception.”<sup>24</sup> Long training of

23 Garfield (2022, 86).

24 Garfield (2022, 5, 179).



proficiency in ethics develops a virtue that arises spontaneously without thought, having fully internalized a desire to be good or to be a good Buddhist, into pure kindness with no more regard for the principles than a virtuoso pianist needs to keep musical theory in mind while performing a concerto.<sup>25</sup>

The path practices in which we gain proficiency fall under the categories of wisdom (right view and right attitude<sup>26</sup>) and ethics (right speech, right action and right livelihood). The development (*bhāvanā*) factors (right effort right proficiency and right *samādhi*) thereby serve as “auxiliary” practices in boosting the efficacy of these “primary” practices.<sup>27</sup>

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

And what, bhikkhus, is right proficiency?

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

This is right proficiency. (SN 45.8)

The middle paragraph is repeated as for body, also for feelings, mind and dhammas. Though it cites the method, this appears to equate right proficiency specifically with the contemplative practice, rather than with the more general *satipaṭṭhāna* method of the previous definition. For instance, if right proficiency runs and circles around right speech, then its role would not seem to be *contemplation* of right speech, but rather skillful *performance* 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>28</sup> Nor does the term *satipaṭṭhāna* seem ever to occur anywhere

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25 Garfield (2012, 12-3, 18-22).

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

27 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 proficiency, fine-tunes unhinderedness and composure and promotes insight and internalization.

28 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.

in the early texts in association with ethical practices, like guarding the senses, whereas *satisampajañña* does routinely.

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)

Clearly, the four colors are merely representative, 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)

Moreover, given the tendency for many passages in the discourses to meld into fixed formulas, alternatives to the standard examples are seldom found.

I propose that the definition of right proficiency 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 proficiency-attentiveness is natural: it is emblematic of the method, since it is utterly dependent on the method (the method is built into the practice instructions), it provides optimal conditions for the full arising of ardency, comprehension, proficiency 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 proficiency, also explain why the referent 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* 'proficiency-comprehension' to refer to the method.<sup>29</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 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>30</sup>

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

## 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

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29 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.

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

of skillfulness, which we named the “*satipaṭṭhāna* method, and which we discovered to be of general applicability. We found that this fit the etymology of compounds made from the root *sati* and the structure of early Buddhist thought. In this way we recognized this teaching in *satipaṭṭhāna* itself, in *satisampajañña* and ultimately in *sammāsati*, the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path. We found that this teaching 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*.

This paper has been about skill in practice and development of proficiency. Buddhism is a practice tradition, concerned with learning, internalizing, mastering and eventually becoming a virtuoso in, what we might call the skill of life. The thought world of Buddhism is accordingly organized around skill in practice: around action (*kamma*), both skillful (*kusala*) and unskillful (*akusala*); around competence (*pariyatti*) and performance (*patipatti*); around development (*bhāvana*) and cultivation (*bahulīkata*) of proficiency. 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 proficiency 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, and its own development is a practice in itself, 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.**