A back-roads tour of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*

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The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) is a practice tutorial. It describes a practice of contemplating *Dhamma* in terms of direct experience through a long series of exercises, which are grouped under the four categories of body, concerns, mind and *dhammas*. Their purpose is to develop right view, whereby individual *Dhammic* teachings are verified in experience, familiarized and internalized, such that *Dhamma* becomes ultimately a matter of direct perception or responsiveness, leading to the attainment of knowledge and vision of things as they are, effectively seeing through the eyes of the Buddha. This practice depends on the application of all three of the developmental (*bhāvana*) factors of right effort, right mastery (*sati*)[1] and right *samādhi*, for that final push toward liberation.

The discussion here centers around the Pali version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) (or the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, DN 22*, which differs only in its much longer exposition on the Four Noble Truths). The body of the "Text" is a series of descriptions of twenty-one contemplative exercises, most of which are suitable for the cushion. We will compare the parallel versions of other schools and related discourses as we go.

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1   'Mastery' is not a customary translation of *sati*. I argue in my related paper "There is no Pali word for 'mindfulness'" that 'mindfulness' no longer reflects the early sense of *sati* as memory applied to purposeful activity in the present. This is a result of semantic change in the twentieth century which can be traced back to neglect of *Dhamma* in modern insight or *vipassanā* techniques, as well as to popular appropriation of the term. See my paper. It would be difficult to reading this twenty-first century paper on rethining *satipaṭṭhāna* with a twentieth-century interpretation in mind. My papers related to the one you are reading can be found at sitagu.org/cintita/satipatthana/.

1.   The satipaṭṭhāna framework

The text of the *sutta* begins:

> Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living in the Kuru country where there was a town of the Kurus named Kammāsadhamma. There he addressed the *bhikkhus*,
>
> "*Bhikkhus*." "Venerable sir," they replied.
>
> The Blessed One said this:
>
> This is the one way, *bhikkhus*, a path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of *nibbāna*, namely, the four *satipaṭṭhānas*.

'One way' *ekāyano*, (*eka* 'one' + '*ayana* 'way,' 'path') is sometimes translated as 'direct path' or 'only path.' Its uniqueness as a way to *nibbāna* here suggests its importance, but keep in mind that it is not adequate in itself to fulfill that goal, rather it is a near-final step on a very long path of practice, with many prerequisites. For instance, in the *Saṁyutta Nikāya* we have:

> Then, *bhikkhu*, when your virtue is well purified and your view straight, based upon virtue, established upon virtue, *then* you should develop the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in a threefold way.[2]
>   (SN 47.3)

By analogy, pushing the garage door button might be the one and only way to arrive at home, but still a relatively minor step if we have yet to drive across two states, to deal with restless children and to tank up multiple times, before we reach a point where the garage door will actually respond to pressure from our thumb.

> What are the four? Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides contem-plating body in the body, ardent, comprehending and masterful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating concern in concerns, ardent, comprehending, and masterful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating mind in the mind, ardent, comprehending, and masterful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating

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2   The three ways are internally, externally and both internally and externally, which we will describe below.

> *dhammas* in *dhammas*, ardent, comprehending, and masterful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

This overview exhibits two intersecting frameworks, which I call "the *satipaṭṭhāna* method" and "*satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation." The contemplation, also referred to in the literature as "the four *satipaṭṭhānas*" is the contemplation of …

(1) body in the body, …
(2) concern among the concerns, …
(3) mind in the mind, …
(4) *dhamma* among the *dhammas* …

The *satipaṭṭhāna* method is full engagement in a practice by one who is …

(1) ardent,
(2) comprehending,
(3) masterful,
(4) "having put away covetousness and grief for the world."

In practicing *satipaṭṭhāna* one investigates and comprehends the "observables" of a particular exercise in terms of *Dhammic* understanding, and comprehends the *Dhamma* in terms of the observables. Generally some "reconciliation" in involved, that is, adjustment of understanding of Dhamma or of sensitivity to observable features, in order that *Dhamma* and observables align. Utmost attentiveness is achieved through ardency and through "unhinderedness," a narrowing and stabilizing of the scope of attention through keeping the five hindrances at bay. These factors together are conducive to *samādhi*, which further narrows and stabilizes the scope of attention.

2. Exercises within the Text

The introduction, just cited, is followed by the description of a series of twenty-one exercises organized into four blocks corresponding to the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. The first section, of "body exercises," begins:

> And how, *bhikkhus*, does a *bhikkhu* abide contemplating body in the body?

Three following sections begin with the same question but with reference to the other three *satipaṭṭhānas*. The exercises in the four *satipaṭṭhānas* are as follows:

Body	**Concerns**	*Dhammas*
breath	*(only one exercise)*	hindrances
postures		aggregates
activities	**Mind**	sense-spheres
body parts	*(only one exercise)*	awakening factors
elements		noble truths
9 exercises about corpse decay		

The very first exercise, on breath, is unique in that it begins with a passage that describes establishing a proper meditative context, conducive to the practice of most (but not all) of the other exercises as well:

> Here a bhikkhu, having gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, sets his body erect, having attended proficiently to what is in front. Masterful, he breathes in, masterful, he breathes out. …

The phrase '… having attended proficiently to what is in front' translates *parimukhaṁ* ('in-front') *satiṁ* ('mastery') *upaṭṭhapetvā* ('having attended to'), which summarizes the *satipaṭṭhāna* method.[3] 'In front' are the relevant observables which are comprehended in terms of the acquired mastery associated with the *Dhamma* teaching to be verified and internalized through the practice of the exercise. A high degree of attentiveness is achieved through comprehension, ardency, unhinderedness and (as we settle into the practice) *samādhi*.

We don't have the space here to cite each exercise,[4] but here, as an example, is the second exercise in full:

> Again, *bhikkhus*, when walking, a *bhikkhu* comprehends, "I am walking." When standing, he comprehends, "I am standing." When sitting, he comprehends, "I am sitting." When lying down, he

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3   I analyze *parimukhaṁ* as the object of the verb, and *satiṁ* as an adverbial accusative.

4   But find the full text at sitagu.org/cintita/satipatthana/.

> comprehends, "I am lying down." Or he comprehends accordingly
> however his body is disposed.

This particular exercise probably takes place outside of the "on the cushion" meditative context described earlier. Often the observables are produced through visualization rather than directly present as physical or mental events, as in the following:

> Again, *bhikkhus*, as though he were to see [*seyyathāpi passeyya*] a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter, a *bhikkhu* compares this same body with it thus: "This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate."

The purpose of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation is to examine specific *Dhamma* teachings (a "Dhamma teaching" is also referred to as a "*dhamma*," with small 'd'), in terms of observable experience. However, the body, concerns and mind exercises generally do not mention the specific *dhamma* to verify and internalize, but rather rely on the teachings laid out in the common refrain, which will be discussed presently. In contrast, each of the *dhamma exercises* of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* focuses explicitly on a well-established and clearly named *dhamma*. For instance,

> Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating *dhammas* in *dhammas* in terms of the five aggregates of appropriation. And how does a bhikkhu abide contemplating *dhammas* in *dhammas* in terms of five aggregates of appropriation? Here a *bhikkhu* understands: "Such is form, such its origin, such its disappearance, such is concern, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is perception, such its origin, such its disappearance, such are the fabrications, such their origin, such their disappearance, such is cognizance, such its origin, such its disappearance."

The "aggregates of appropriation" is a *dhamma* expounded in many places in the early texts, and the extent of the practitioner's familiarity with, or even internalization of, the teaching is brought into the current contemplation as the practitioner's mastery.

3.   The refrain

A common refrain (with some slight variations) follows each of the twenty-one exercises, according to which each of the exercises is subject to analysis:

> In this way he abides contemplating body in the body internally, or he abides contemplating body in the body externally, or he abides contemplating body in the body both internally and externally. He abides contemplating in body the nature of arising, or he abides contemplating in body the nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in body the nature of both arising and vanishing. The recollection [*sati*] that "there is body" is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mastery. He abides independent. He doesn't cling to anything in the world. That is how a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating body in the body.

The refrain describes a specific mode of *Dhammic* analysis directed toward verifying and internalizing the foundational teachings of the "three characteristics" (*tilakkhaṇa*) of non-self, impermanence and suffering. The most remarkable feature of this mode of analysis is that it is threefold, with reference to contemplating "internally," "externally" and "both internally and externally." This reflects the main organizing principle of this mode of analysis, which will be explained in a separate section below.

In the case of the *dhamma* exercises of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, the refrain is augmented with an explicit reference to the respective *Dhammic* teaching that provides the theme of the preceding exercise. For instance, the refrain following the five aggregates exercise cited above has this form:

> … In this way he abides contemplating *dhammas in dhammas* internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating *dhammas in dhammas* in terms of the five aggregates of appropriation.

4.   The concluding message of the Text

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* ends on a positive note:

> *Bhikkhus*, if anyone should develop these four *satipaṭṭhānas* in such a way for seven years, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now, or if there is a trace of clinging left, non-return. Let alone seven years, *bhikkhus*. If anyone should develop these

four *satipaṭṭhānas* in such a way for six years...for five years...for four years...for three years...for two years...for one year, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now, or if there is a trace of clinging left, non-return. Let alone one year, *bhikkhus*. If anyone should develop these four *satipaṭṭhānas* in such a way for seven months...for six months...for five months...for four months...for three months...for two months...for one month...for half a month, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now, or if there is a trace of clinging left, non-return. Let alone half a month, *bhikkhus*. If anyone should develop these four *satipaṭṭhānas* in such a way for seven days, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now, or if there is a trace of clinging left, non-return.

The humorous equivocation here might be partially explained in terms of the variation in how much progress the individual *bhikkhu* has made in the prerequisite factors of the path (the virtue and wisdom factors) prior to beginning *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, as well as in the level of ardency and talent he brings in applying the *satipaṭṭhāna* method in *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation.

So it was with reference to this that it was said: "*Bhikkhus*, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of *Nibbāna*, namely, the four *satipaṭṭhānas*."

This echos the beginning of the *sutta*. We conclude:

That is what the Blessed One said. The *bhikkhus* were satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words.

… as they virtually always are.

5. The correlates of the Text

The Text I have been citing is the Pali version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10). The Pali tradition also includes many shorter, related "*satipaṭṭhāna* discourses" primarily in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-saṁyutta* (SN 47) and in the *Anuruddha-saṁyutta* (SN 52). The middle-length *Ānāpānasati* (MN 118) and

the *Kāyagatāsati* (MN 119) *Suttas* also share thematic content with the Text. Parallel texts were likewise transmitted in other early historical sects and then collected after translation into the Chinese canon, giving us parallels of the Pali *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the Chinese *Madhyama Āgama* (MĀ, which derives from the early Sarvāstivāda sect) and in the Chinese Ekottarika Āgama (EĀ), which possibly derives from the early Mahāsaṅghika sect).[5]

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and its parallels are widely considered a later addition to the early Buddhist literature, probably compiled from earlier sources by disciples in the first two centuries after the Buddha. As evidence, the four *satipaṭṭhānas* are notably missing from the "Book of Fours" of AN and comparative evidence suggests complex historical development,[6] since its parallels from other traditions differ significantly in structure and content. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* along with its parallel versions has been called a "poorly organized" late compilation.[7] Nonetheless, I maintain that the sutta, in spite of all this, has an almost entirely coherent logic, and is highly consistent with the body of early teachings, perhaps with a little fraying around the edges. I note that all the various correlates share in common:[8]

- the four *satipaṭṭhānas* of body, concerns, mind and *dhammas*,
- the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, and
- the threefold mode of analysis in terms of "internal," "external" and "both internal and external."

However, these may be found in structurally different places in the diverse variants. For instance, the three-fold mode of analysis found in the refrain of MN 10 is found in a passage similar to the MN 10's introductory formula in most discourses, both of Theravāda and of other sects. For instance, in the *Saṁyutta Nikāya* we have:

> Here, bhikkhu, dwell contemplating body in the body internally, ardent, comprehending, masterful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world, Dwell contemplating body in the body externally … Dwell contemplating body in the body internally and

5   Some translations from the Chinese Canon are found in Kuan (2008).
6   Kuan (2008, 112, 133 and chapter 5).
7   Sujāto (2012, 133).
8   Sujāto (2012, 190, 193, 204).

externally … Dwell contemplating concern among the concerns … . (SN 47.3)

I furthermore note also that the consensus among *satipaṭṭhāna* texts in all traditions is that:

- the integration of *samādhi* as an essential factor in *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Although the Theravāda *Satipaṭṭāna Sutta* itself does not highlight this role of samādhi (except within the awakening factors exercise), within the other Theravāda correlates, reference is routinely made to *samādhi* as a factor of *satipaṭṭhāna*. In the *Saṁyutta Nikāya* we have:

Come, friends, dwell contemplating body in the body, ardent, comprehending, unified, with limpid mind, in *samādhi*, with one-centered mind, in order to know body as it really is. Dwell contemplating concern among the concerns . . . Dwell contemplating mind in the mind . . . Dwell contemplating *dhammas* in *dhammas* . . . in order to know *dhammas* as they really are. (SN 47.4)

'In samādhi' translates the participle form (*samāhitā*) of *samādhi*. 'Unified' (*ekodibhūtā*) and 'one-centered' (*ekagga*) are *jhāna* factors. The most significant source of variation among the parallels of this Pali *sutta* are the wildly divergent lists of exercises in the "contemplation of body" and "contemplation of *dhammas*" sections.[9] Of the three parallel versions of the sutta, the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the *Ekottarika Āgama* and the *Madhyama Āgama* versions, only the anatomical parts, elements and corpse exercises are common to all three body sections, and only the awakening factors and hindrances are common to all three *dhammas* sections.

This variation has been explained[10] in terms of derivation from a single proto-discourse with a very small set of exercises (the ones common to all variants) from which the three parallel versions evolved, it is assumed, only through adding exercises. However, the assumption that the evolution of sectarian variants in general traces back to singular proto-discourses has been questioned,[11] and I would suggest additionally that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is of

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9   Anālayo (2014, 3-8) compares point by point the lists of exercises for the Pali text with its two early parallels.

10   Sujāto (2012, 140) and Anālayo (2014, 176).

11   For instance, in Shulman's (2021) "play of formulas" model of the genesis of the early texts.

a specific nature that makes it highly unlikely to have emerged in this way: It is a practice tutorial. It is of the very nature of a tutorial that it would be spoken many times in short order from the get-go, in many variations presented to different audiences of varying backgrounds, attainments and practice needs, probably by many voices. As with a math tutorial, the range of exercises would likely have been open-ended. It is hard to imagine it not diversifying into many variants in just this way right from the beginning, as teachers devise new exercises based on the underlying principles. I would suggest that early variants of this tutorial opened up to a radically *inclusive* (in fact open-ended) range of exercises, rather than a narrowly exclusive range, as these vernerable scholars suggest.

Moreover, since the *satipaṭṭhāna* is concerned with verifying and internalizing *Dhamma* teachings, and there are innumerable *Dhamma* teachings, it would be surprising if the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, in particular, were not in principle flooded with distinct applicable exercises. Essentially any *Dhamma* teaching that might be verified in observable experience might be a potential candidate for contemplation.

6.   *Satipaṭṭhāna* as development of right view

In the remaining sections of this paper, I will look at the logic of *satipaṭṭhāna*: what its function is and how it fulfills that function. In brief, its function is to develop right view through investigating and internalizing *Dhamma* through verification in observable experience. It makes critical use of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method and the *jhānas* in order to fulfill that function.

The development of "right view" (*sammādiṭṭhi*) begins with a conceptual exposure to the *Dhamma*, acquired and remembered through hearing (or in later centuries) reading the *Dhamma*. This is followed by stages of reflection and contemplation, necessary to make sense of the *Dhamma,* and to verify it in practice. Right view is ultimately internalized and woven into the fabric of experience, so that in the end *Dhamma* becomes how we perceive and act spontaneously in our experiential world. When developed to perfection, right view becomes "knowledge and vision" (*ñāṇadassanā*), the precursor to awakening. Through the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* that we learn to see through the eyes of the Buddha.[12] Two teachings place *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation into

12   Shulman (2014, 105-8, 152). See also my related papers "The miracle of *samādhi*" and "*Satipaṭṭhāna* in the stillness of *samādhi*."

this broader process of developing right view: the "five stages of liberation" and the "seven awakening factors."

The five stages of liberation. Developing mastery right view is laid out systematically by the Buddha in five steps in the *Stages of Liberation* (*Vimuttāyatana*) *Sutta.[13]* Let's look at this text:

> (1) Here, bhikkhus, the Teacher or a fellow bhikkhu in the position of a teacher teaches [a/the] *Dhamma* to a *bhikkhu*. In whatever way the Teacher or that fellow *bhikkhu* in the position of a teacher teaches the *Dhamma* to the *bhikkhu, …* (AN 5.26)

Then begins the refrain mid-sentence. Keep in mind that at the time of the early texts, teaching would have consisted primarily of rote recitation, perhaps with a bit of explication.

Each of the five stages of liberation is followed by this refrain:

> … in just that way he experiences inspiration in the meaning and inspiration in the *Dhamma*. As he does so, delight arises in him. When he is delighted, rapture arises. For one with a rapturous mind, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body feels pleasure. For one feeling pleasure, the mind attains *samādhi*. This is the first [second/third/ etc.] stage of liberation, by means of which, if a *bhikkhu* dwells heedful, ardent, and resolute, his unliberated mind is liberated, his undestroyed taints are utterly destroyed, and he reaches the as-yet-unreached unsurpassed security from bondage. (AN 5.26)

Notice the reference in the refrain to some of the factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, even though we have not yet reached the contemplative stage. What may surprise some readers is the arising of *samādhi* in the refrain simply through recitation with others. In my related paper "The miracle of *samādhi*" I point out that right mastery is the primary conditioning factor of *samādhi*, and document the corresponding ubiquitousness of *samādhi* in the early texts, often described as arising through a series of antecedent states that includes rapture and tranquility. The last sentence describes liberation, which is the goal of the five stages as a whole, and which is equivalent to the goal of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation. Rote recitation is a primary form of meditation for many Burmese monastics today.

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13   AN 5.26, DN 33 iii241-2 is similar.

(2) Again, neither the Teacher nor a fellow *bhikkhu* in the position of a teacher teaches the *Dhamma* to a *bhikkhu*, but he himself teaches the *Dhamma* to others in detail as he has heard it and learned it. In whatever way the *bhikkhu* teaches the *Dhamma* to others in detail as he has heard it and learned it, …

… in just that way ... and he reaches the as-yet-unreached unsurpassed security from bondage. (AN 5.26)

The *bhikkhu* has yet to ponder or examine the teaching he has learned, so we can assume that he has memorized some texts and is merely reciting them for others at this stage, with or without some explication.

(3) Again, … he recites the *Dhamma* in detail as he has heard it and learned it. In whatever way the *bhikkhu* recites the *Dhamma* in detail as he has heard it and learned it, …

… in just that way ... and he reaches the as-yet-unreached unsurpassed security from bondage. (AN 5.26)

Now he recites the *dhamma* to himself, to complete the process of memorization.

(4) Again, … he thinks about, deliberates, and mentally inspects the *Dhamma* as he has heard it and learned it. In whatever way the *bhikkhu* ponders, examines, and mentally inspects the *Dhamma* as he has heard it and learned it, …

… in just that way ... and he reaches the as-yet-unreached unsurpassed security from bondage. (AN 5.26)

Now he is doing some serious pondering, he 'thinks about, deliberates, and mentally inspects' (*anuvitakketi anuvicāreti manasānupekkhati*) the *dhamma* under consideration. At this point what he is doing begins to align with *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, in particular with contemplation of *dhammas*. The wording here is significant, since thinking and deliberation (*vitakka-vicāra*) characterize the first *jhāna*, but not higher *jhānas*. This is discursive thinking, and the *samādhi* attained in the refrain must therefore be limited to the first *jhāna*.[14]

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14   See my related paper "The miracle of *samādhi*."

It is declared that there are three kinds of wisdom: based on hearing (*sutamayā paññā*), on reflection (*cintāmayā paññā*) and on development (*bhāvanāmayā paññā*).[15] The first two have been nurtured so far, the third comes in the final stage:

> (5) Again, he has grasped well a certain theme of *samādhi*, attended to it well, sustained it well, and penetrated it well with wisdom. In whatever way the *bhikkhu* has grasped well a certain theme [*nimitta*] of *samādhi*, attended to it well, sustained it well, and penetrated it well with wisdom, …

> … in just that way ... and he reaches the as-yet-unreached unsurpassed security from bondage. (AN 5.26)

At this final stage, the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* is evident and it has clearly taken us into *samādhi*. However, given that there is no longer a reference to *vitakka-vicāra*, it has presumably taken us into the higher (second to fourth) *jhānas*, where a much more subtle and (almost) silent form of cognition prevails.[16] Notice that the *dhamma* that is the theme of study and of contemplation has become a *theme* of *samādhi* (*samādhi-nimitta*), in accord with the statement:

> The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are the theme of *samādhi*. (MN 44 i301)

Continued contemplation and insight are critically dependent on the higher *jhānas* in order to penetrate the *Dhamma* and to achieve knowledge and vision, for we are told:

> When right *samādhi* does not exist, for one failing right *samādhi*, the proximate cause is destroyed for knowledge and vision of things as they really are. (AN 10.3)

Elsewhere these results are explicitly attributed to *satipaṭṭhāna*, as in the following practice, also cited above:

> Come, friends, dwell contemplating the body in the body, ardent, comprehending, unified, with limpid mind, composed [in *samādhi*], with one-centered mind, in order to know the body as it really is. (SN 47.4)

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15 DN 33 iii219.

16 "Implicit" (described as effortless and intuitive) as opposed to "explicit" (deliberate and reasoned), studied in the cognitive sciences, are described in "The *satipaṭṭhāna* method."

"Knowledge" here is in the sense of gnosis, a developed, intuitive form of mastery. This is repeated as for 'body in the body,' with regard to 'concern among the concerns,' 'mind in the mind' and '*dhamma* among the *dhammas*.' Mastery of right view has now been developed through the five stages of liberation, from memorized scripture by rote, to something penetrated with wisdom. I would argue that this leads to a point in which the *dhamma* has been integrated into a wide fabric of experience, and internalized to the point that we implicitly perceive effectively through the eyes of the Buddha. Practice of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* seems to operate in, and to be functionally equivalent to, the final two stages of liberation, starting with an arbitrary *Dhamma* teaching. In principle, any *dhamma* that can manifest in direct observable experience should be a candidate for practice of the stages of liberation.

The awakening factors. Closely related to the five factors of liberation are the better-known "seven awakening factors," which zoom in for a closer look at these final stages of liberation. The seven awakening factors form a causal chain that can be summarized as:

> mastery→ *dhamma*-investigation → energy → rapture →
> tranquility → *samādhi* → equanimity.

For instance, the *Virtue Sutta* begins with hearing the *Dhamma* from monks of virtue and wisdom, then continues as follows:

> … when one has heard the *Dhamma* from such *bhikkhus* one dwells withdrawn by way of two kinds of withdrawal: withdrawal of body and withdrawal of mind.

> Dwelling thus withdrawn, one recollects that *dhamma* and thinks it over. Whenever, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* dwelling thus withdrawn recollects that *dhamma* and thinks it over, on that occasion the awakening factor of mastery is aroused by the *bhikkhu*; on that occasion the *bhikkhu* develops the awakening factor of *mastery*; on that occasion the awakening factor of *mastery* comes to fulfillment by development in the *bhikkhu*. (SN 46.3)

"Mastery" (*sati*) is in reference to a level of know-how around a particular *dhamma*. This is the same *dhamma* that was carried through the stages of liberation. As the first awakening factor, *sati* brings that *dhamma* (*taṁ dhammaṁ*) to mind at whatever level of mastery has been developed in regard to that *dhamma*. The *Virtue Sutta* continues:

> Dwelling thus, he examines that *dhamma* with wisdom, investigates it, makes an exploration of it. Whenever …, on that occasion the awakening factor of *dhamma*-investigation is aroused by the *bhikkhu*; on that occasion the *bhikkhu* develops the awakening factor of *dhamma*-investigation; on that occasion the awakening factor of *dhamma*-investigation comes to fulfillment by development in the *bhikkhu*. (SN 46.3)

This step of *dhamma*-investigation (*dhamma-vicaya*) applied to that *dhamma* corresponds to the fourth stage of liberation, and aligns with the fourth *satipaṭṭāna*, the contemplation of *dhammas*. Although it does not explicitly state it, we can assume that we are acutely attentive to experiential observables by which we might verify that *dhamma*. For instance, if the teaching has to do with craving and suffering, we should be ardently intent on evaluating it in terms of our own craving and suffering.

> While he discriminates that *dhamma* with wisdom, examines it, makes an investigation of it, his energy is aroused without slackening. Whenever, on that occasion the awakening factor of energy is aroused by the *bhikkhu*; on that occasion the *bhikkhu* develops the awakening factor of energy; on that occasion the awakening factor of energy comes to fulfillment by development in the *bhikkhu*. (SN 46.3)

With energy and non-distraction we have fulfilled the requirements of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method. The awakening factors continue by itemizing the antecedent factors leading to *samādhi* that we've already encountered in the Stages of Liberation:

> → rapture → tranquility → *samādhi*

In both the stages of liberation and the awakening factors, examination is carried into *samādhi*, the insight factory in which that *dhamma* is turned to wisdom.[17] I note that each of the four *satipaṭṭānas* in turn is similarly demonstrated to fulfill the seven awakening factors in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*.[18]

Contemplation of *dhammas* as the general case. The language of the five stages of liberation and of the seven awakening factors is immediately suggestive of the fourth *satipaṭṭāna*, in which a particular *dhamma* has been

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17 See my related paper "The miracle of *samādhi*."
18 MN 118 iii85-7.

selected, learned, then pondered, then examined in detail in its own terms, then brought into *samādhi* for detailed, quiet investigation, and finally internalized to become integrated into our immediate perceptual apparatus, cultivating mastery at each step. It has been observed that *Abhidhamma*-based schools of *vipassanā* in Asia, which are naturally inclined to exploring a broad swath of *Dhamma* beyond "impermanence," tend accordingly to regard the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* as the primary practice.[19]

Surely, the five stages of liberation and the seven awakening factors offer an open invitation to subject any *dhamma* to this process. In fact, verification in terms of observable experience is a general quality of the Dhamma:

> The *Dhamma* is well expounded by the Blessed One, directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise. (SN 11.3, AN 3.70, AN 11.12, AN 11.13)

The claim that the fourth *satipaṭṭāna* is restricted to a limited set of *dhammas*, is unwarrented. There is no reason to doubt that the five *dhamma* exercises of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta are but representative members of an open-ended set,[20] as are the alternative sets described in the Chinese *Āgama* parallels.

I conclude that at least the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* is a development of right view. What is the purpose of the other three *satipaṭṭhānas*?

7. Body in the body internally and externally

Each exercise of the fourth *satipaṭṭāna* takes up a *dhamma* (*Dhamma* teaching) for experiential investigation and internalization. However, the exercises of the first three *satipaṭṭhānas* make little or no reference to *Dhamma* in the exercise itself. Nonetheless, their formulaic refrain provides additional instructions and is rich in *Dhamma*, for it brings to bear the teachings of the "three characteristics" (*tilakkhaṇa*) of non-self, impermanence and suffering. Whereas the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* ranges over many Dhamma teachings, the first three *satipaṭṭhānas* focus consistently on verifying and internalizing the hugely critical three characteristics.

The refrain does not mention "self" or "non-self" directly, and so it is easy to miss the degree to which the *satipaṭṭhāna* is about non-self. In fact, the refrain

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19   Cousins (1994, 52).
20   Contrary to Sujāto (2012, 140) and Anālayo (2014, 176).

introduces a peculiar strategy for approaching this teaching, in which the terms 'internally' and 'externally,' as well at the construct 'body in the body,' etc., make sense. The need for this strategy comes from a peculiar challenge to verifying non-self in terms of observables: Just as we cannot in principle verify that there are no flying penguins, we cannot in principle verify that there is no self. The best we can do is repeatedly to fail to verify in direct experience that there is a self.

Most of us presume there is a self as a substantial and fixed thing or essence, a "me" that's been there as long as we can remember. We organize our worldview around this presumption, then famously suffer as a result. The practice of non-self is to quell (weaken or eliminate) this presumption. In order to do this, we consider every form of evidence we can think of that has the potential for verifying the presumption. There seem to be three widely recognized facets of the presumed self, that suggest three sources of evidence: the body/self, the concerned/self and the mind/self. These correspond to the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*. We can think, "I have a body, therefore I am!" or "I experience the 'world out there,' therefore there is someone who is concerned: me!" or "I think (and emote), therefore I am!" Each individual exercise in the first three *satipaṭṭhānas* is a kind of thought experiment that provides an alternative range of observable potential evidence for the self. According to depending coarising, taking cognizance of, begins with concern, the point at which something matters, then quickly grows into perception, thinking and planning.[21] .

The strategy for the practice of non-self is outlined in the first sentence of the refrain:

> In this way he abides contemplating body in the body internally, or he abides contemplating body in the body externally, or he abides contemplating body in the body both internally and externally.

"Internal contemplation" focuses on observables that constitute potential evidence for the self, in this case the body/self. This contemplation is directed by the exercise itself, for instance, as the breath or bodily activities. We have here the opportunity to become very intimate with these observables in themselves as we settle into *samādhi*. The second sentence of the refrain directs us to integrate impermanence into internal contemplation:

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21   This is explained in my related paper "Contemplations of non-self."

> He abides contemplating in body the nature of arising, or he abides
> contemplating in body the nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating
> in body the nature of both arising and vanishing.

Impermanence of evidence is the primary source of incongruity between
evidence and presumption. "External contemplation" brings the presumed
body/self to mind, and "both internal and external contemplation" ask the
question, "Does the evidence constitute the self." What results in ongoing
practice is typically an immediate intuitive sense that the two are incongruous,
or that the presumed self is an abstract intrusion into what is really there. One
might not be able to bring the presumed self to mind in the midst of evidence at
all, which makes the same point even more emphatically.[22]

By way of example, let's look at the concerns exercise of the second
satipaṭṭhāna:

> Here, when experiencing a pleasant concern, a *bhikkhu* comprehends: "I
> experience a pleasant concern"; when experiencing a painful concern, he
> comprehends: "I experience a painful concern"; when experiencing a
> neither-painful-nor-pleasant concern, he comprehends: "I experience a
> neither-painful-nor-pleasant concern." When experiencing a worldly
> pleasant concern, he comprehends: "I experience a worldly pleasant
> concern"; when experiencing an unworldly pleasant concern, he
> comprehends: "I experience an unworldly pleasant concern"; when
> experiencing a worldly painful concern, he comprehends: "I experience a
> worldly painful concern"; when experiencing an unworldly painful
> concern, he comprehends: "I experience an unworldly painful concern";
> when experiencing a worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant concern, he
> comprehends: "I experience a worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant
> concern"; when experiencing an unworldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant
> concern, he comprehends: "I experience an unworldly neither-painful-
> nor-pleasant concern."

The refrain is as before, but with regard to "concern." The *Mahānidāna Suta*
offers an independent description of the non-self and impermanence
contemplations of the refrain with different terminology, and thereby confirms
and illustrates the present understanding of the refrain:

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22 In the related paper "The miracle of *samādhi*" I argue that *samādhi* facilitates such
     internalization through disrupting conceptualization.

Now, Ānanda, one who says: "concern is my self" should be told: "There are three kinds of concerns, friend: pleasant, painful, and neither pleasant not painful. Which of the three do you consider to be your self?" When a pleasant concern is felt, no painful or neither pleasant not painful concerns is felt, but only pleasant concerns. When a painful concerns is felt, no pleasant or neither pleasant not painful concern is felt, but only a painful concern. And when a neither pleasant not painful concern is felt, no pleasant or painful concern.

A pleasant concern is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, bound to decay, to vanish, to fade away, to cease – and so too is a painful concern and a neither pleasant not painful concern. So anyone who, on experiencing a pleasant concern, thinks, "This is my self," must, at the cessation of that pleasant concern think: "My self has gone!" and the same with a painful and a neither pleasant not painful concern. Thus whoever thinks: "concern is my self" is contemplating something in this present life that is impermanent, a mixture of happiness and unhappiness, subject to arising and passing away. Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "concern is my self."
    (DN 15 ii66-7).

We notice that this *Mahānidāna* passage does explicitly what the refrain does implicitly: it considers the prospect that concerns are equivalent to the self, and argues that this cannot be. The teaching of non-self is that we presume a self as an abstraction which is unsupported by the evidence and which gets us into trouble. It is just as reasonable to consider that either body or mind is equivalent to the self. This explains the particular themes the first three satipaṭṭhānas: the body, the concerns and the mind are three facets of this self that we presume to our detriment. Whatever it is we experience as concern is always fragmentary, situation-specific, and ever changing, that is, lacking the substantial fixedness that accompanies the presumption of the self. We could argue the same way about the body and the mind.

A more detailed discussion of the analysis performed in the refrain is undertaken in my related paper "Non-self in *satipaṭṭhāna*."

8.   The versatility of satipaṭṭhāna

Satipaṭṭhāna contemplation involves a sophisticated integration of a number of cognitive systems to serve a specific function: the verification and internalization of *Dhamma* as an advanced development and cultivation of right view, encountering many insights on the way. One of its remarkable features is that through some relaxing of restrictions it easily extends to a variety of alternative functions, and most or perhaps all "meditative" practices can be defined in terms of the various *satipaṭṭhāna* substructures.

If we remove *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation from its foundation in the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, the method in itself has wide-ranging applications. Recall that the method integrates ardency, mastery, comprehension and control of attention (unhinderedness, turning into *samādhi*) as a basis of "right mastery" implementing the skill of skillfulness seeming for any given practice. The method applies full engagement in the range of wisdom and virtue practices. *Mettā* meditation, for instance, serves to develop right attitude rather on this basis, than right view. The method might further be generalized beyond *Dhamma*, to everyday activities, or to other specialized skills, such as to chess, to playing the accordion or to Shaolin kung fu. Many of the practices to which the *satipaṭṭhāna* method can be applies are not contemplative by nature.

Let's re-engage *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, but then, if we remove *Dhammic* investigation as we continue investigation of observables, our practice will be like idling an engine without putting it in gear. This seems to be what many often understood as "mindfulness." Effectively this puts analysis (aka *vipassanā*, literally 'seeing apart') aside, so that we can attend to developing and cultivating the factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, particularly deeper levels of *samādhi* (aka *samatha* 'settling'), in order to develop it more directly into an natural inclination of the mind. *Samatha* without *vipassanā* can also be used strategically to provide periods of calm abiding for its own sake, or for disrupting an over-active mind before settling into investigation.

Now let's re-engage Dhammic mastery (and thereby restore *vipassanā*). There will be periods when *samādhi* must elude us, for instance, when beginning a particular exercise, in which too much effort is required for reconciling yet-to-be-internalized *dhammas* and observables. In this case, *vipassanā* is present without *samatha*. But in the default case, *vipassanā* and *samatha* will both appear "yoked" together, producing optimal progress in internalizing *Dhamma*.

As a final example of the versatility of *satipaṭṭhāna*, there will be times when mastery and the engine of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation are fully engaged, but some non-*Dhammic* task has intruded where a *Dhammic* practice would otherwise be. This seems often to happen inadvertently, in a moment of distraction, when some quite wholesome creative preoccupation pops up on the cushion. For me, for instance, the task involved might concern how to formulate the paragraph you are now reading most effectively, so that it is most easily comprehended by readers like you. Meditators often report insights into such non-*Dhammic* matters while on the cushion, sometimes solutions to problems, or things they've neglected. Usually they report this with some embarrassment, "… while I *should have been* meditating." My suggestion, at least if you sit for substantially long periods, is that you dedicate a few minutes at the beginning of each period reviewing your ongoing creative projects in order to encourage such non-*Dhammic* "aha" moments. For me, this tends to be time well-spent and tends to clear the mind of such extraneous thought prior to settling into proper *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Experiment.

9.   Conclusions

This back-roads tour of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) recognizes the Text as a practice tutorial for developing and internalizing our understanding of *Dhamma* through contemplation of specific teachings in terms of direct observables. The scope of the *sutta* is largely specialized on the foundational teaching of the three characteristics of non-self, impermanence and suffering, which are represented in the *sutta*'s recurring refrain. However, it also extends to the contemplation of *Dhamma* across the board, insofar as *Dhamma* is reflected in observed experience. As such, the purpose of *satipaṭṭāna* is to develop and cultivate mastery of right view beyond conceptual understanding of *Dhamma* to the point of knowledge and vision of things as they are, effectively to see through the eyes of the Buddha.

The brilliance of *satipaṭṭhāna* is that, once the prerequisite trainings are in place, including a strong foundation in virtue, solid familiarity with Dhamma, and an understanding of the *satipaṭṭhāna* framework itself, the daily practice of the exercises become simple, grounded, intuitive and effortless, it becomes a simple matter of dwelling quietly in *samādhi*, watching the *Dhamma* verify itself in observed experience, transparent through the many dying layers of presumption that constitute the commonplace but illusory world.

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