

# 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, feelings, mind and *dhammas*. The purpose is properly 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 proficiency (*sati*) 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 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.

## *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 *Samyutta Nikāya*:

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.<sup>1</sup>  
(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. Back to the Text:

What are the four? Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating body in the body, ardent, comprehending and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating feeling in feelings, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating mind in the mind, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating *dhammas* in *dhammas*, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

This formula, also found in the many correspondents of the Text, provides the framework for practicing *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation on the themes of the “four *satipaṭṭhānas*,” while applying the “*satipaṭṭhāna* method.” The four *satipaṭṭhānas*, are practiced by one who abides contemplating ...

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

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

The *satipaṭṭhāna* method is employed by one who strives to be ...

- (1) ardent,
- (2) comprehending,
- (3) proficient,<sup>2</sup>
- (4) “having put away covetousness and grief for the world.”

In my related paper *The satipaṭṭhāna method*, I call the fourth factor “unhindered,” since it involves holding the five hindrances at bay. I explain that the *satipaṭṭhāna* method strives for utmost skillfulness or “proficiency-attentiveness” in the fourfold contemplative practice, and, for that matter, in every Buddhist practice. I argue there that this method (rather than the contemplative practice) is the basis of right proficiency (*sammāsati*), a path factor that “runs and circles around,” along with right effort and right view, each of the five wisdom and virtue path factors, in support of optimal performance,<sup>3</sup> and that right proficiency also implicates right *samādhi*, which “springs up” for “one of right proficiency.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Exercises within the Text***

The introduction, just cited, is followed by the description of a long series of exercises each of which implements one of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. The first section of exercises begins:

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

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2 Proficiency’ here translates *sati*. I deliberately avoid translating *sati* as ‘mindfulness.’ With ‘proficiency’ I hope to restore something close to Rhys David’s once apt choice of ‘mindfulness’ to refer to memory applied to purposeful activity in the present, primarily “know-how” rather than “know-what.” See my related paper *How “mindfulness” got mislabeled*.

3 As in MN 117 iii72.

4 SN 5.25-6.

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:

<b>Body</b>	<b>Feelings</b> <i>(only one exercise)</i>	<b>Dhammas</b>
breath		hindrances
postures		aggregates
activities	<b>Mind</b>	sense-spheres
body parts	<i>(only one exercise)</i>	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. Proficient he breathes in, proficient he breathes out. ...

The phrase ‘... having attended proficiently to what is in front’ translates *parimukham* (‘in-front’) *satim* (‘proficiency,’ ‘know-how’) *upaṭṭhapetvā* (‘having attended to’).<sup>5</sup> What is in front? Certainly, whatever needs to be attended to, the matter at hand, in order to accomplish the particular exercise. We attend to this range of factors while also bringing relevant *Dhamma* to mind, thereby fulfilling the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, and setting the conditions for contemplating experience in terms of *Dhamma*, in order to fulfill the practice of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*.

We don’t have the space here to cite each exercise,<sup>6</sup> 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,

5 I analyze *parimukham* as the object of the verb, and *satim* as an adverbial accusative.

6 But find the full text at [sitagu.org/cintita/satipatthana/](http://sitagu.org/cintita/satipatthana/).

he comprehends, “I am lying down.” Or he comprehends accordingly however his body is disposed.

This particular exercise probably takes place outside of the meditative context described earlier. Each exercise tracks some theme for analysis. Sometimes this theme is a present physical or mental event, sometimes it is a visualization, 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* practice is to examine *Dhamma* in terms of experience. However, the body, feeling and mind exercises rarely refer to any specific *Dhammic* teaching, 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 *Dhamma* teaching. 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 feeling, 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” (*upādānakkhandā*) are a *Dhamma* teaching (a “*dhamma*,” with small ‘d’) 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 proficiency.

Additionally, with respect to all exercises, there are *Dhamma* teachings laid out in the common refrain (with some slight variations) that 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 proficiency. 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 the mode of *Dhammic* analysis which performs most of the work of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. This analysis is based on the foundational teachings of the “three characteristics” (*tilakkhaṇa*) of non-self, impermanence and suffering. Through repeated contemplation we learn, and eventually internalize, these essential teachings. Only in the case of the *dhamma* exercises of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, the refrain is explicitly augmented with a 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.

### ***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. (MN 10 i62-3)

The humorous equivocation here might be partially explained in terms of 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* practice, as well as in the level of ardency and talent he brings to the *satipaṭṭhāna* method and to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.

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 realisation 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.

### ***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-samyutta* (SN 47) and in the *Anuruddha-samyutta* (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 to 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).<sup>7</sup>

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,<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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:<sup>10</sup>

- the four categories of body, feelings, mind and *dhammas*,
- the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, and
- the threefold mode of analysis in terms of “internal,” “external” and “both internal and external,”

... even though these may be found in structurally different places in the various 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:

Here, bhikkhu, dwell contemplating body in the body internally, ardent, comprehending, proficient, 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 externally ... Dwell contemplating feelings in feelings ... . (SN 47.3)

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7 Some translations from the Chinese Canon are found in Kuan (2012).

8 Kuan (2012, 112, 133 and chapter 5).

9 Sujāto (2012, 133).

10 Sujāto (2012, 190, 193, 204).



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* practice,

... although the Theravāda *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself does not mention this. Within the other Theravāda correlates, reference is routinely made to *samādhi* as a factor of *satipaṭṭhāna*:

Come, friends, dwell contemplating body in the body, ardent, comprehending, unified [*ekodibhūtā*], with limpid mind, composed [*samāhitā* ‘in *samādhi*’], with one-centered mind [*ekaggacittā*], in order to know body as it really is. Dwell contemplating feelings in feelings . . . Dwell contemplating mind in the mind . . . Dwell contemplating *dhammas* in *dhammas* . . . in order to know *dhammas* as they really are. (SN 47.4)

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.<sup>11</sup> 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<sup>12</sup> 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 only by adding exercises. However, the presumption of evolution of sectarian variants from singular proto-discourses has been questioned,<sup>13</sup> and I would suggest additionally that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is of a specific nature that makes it 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

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

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

13 For instance, in Shulman’s (2021) “play of formulas” model of the genesis of the early texts.

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.

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.

## **Satipaṭṭhāna practice 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 experience. It makes critical use of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method and the *jhānas* in order to fulfill that function.

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.<sup>14</sup> Two teachings place *satipaṭṭhāna* practice into this broader process of developing right view: the “five stages of liberation” and the “seven awakening factors.”

**The stages of liberation.** Developing right view is laid out systematically by the Buddha in five steps in the *Stages of Liberation (Vimuttāyatana) Sutta*.<sup>15</sup>

14 Shulman (2014, 105-8, 152). See also my related papers *The miracle of samādhi* and *Samādhi and cognition*.

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

(1) Here, bhikkhus, the Teacher or a fellow bhikkhu in the position of a teacher teaches 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)

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. “Teaches the *Dhamma*” (*dhammaṃ deseti*) here can alternatively be translated as “teaches a *dhamma*.” A particular occasion of teaching *Dhamma* will manifest as teaching one or more *dhammas* in any case.

Each of the five stages of liberation is followed by a 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 becomes composed [attains *samādhi*]. This is the first 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)

This is common to each of the five stages of liberation, varying only in ‘first,’ ‘second,’ and so on. Notice the reference in the refrain to some of the factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, which should be present in the right proficiency (*sammāsati*) that runs and circles also around the rest of practice on the path, even though we have not yet reached the contemplative stage.

What will 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 proficiency is the primary conditioning factor of *samādhi*, and document the corresponding pervasiveness of *samādhi* in the early texts, often described as arising through a series of antecedent states that includes rapture and tranquility. The development of right view, as well as most ethical practices are infused with *samādhi* in the early texts. The last sentence describes liberation, the goal of the five stages as a whole, which is equivalent to the goal of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Rote recitation is a primary form of meditation for many Burmese monastics today.

(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. We can now equate what he is doing with *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, 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*.<sup>16</sup>

It is declared that there are three kinds of wisdom: based on hearing (*sutamayā paññā*), on reflection (*cintāmayā paññā*) and on development (*bhāvanāmayā*

16 See my related paper *The miracle of samādhi*.

*paññā*).<sup>17</sup> 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 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* has clearly taken us into *samādhi*, but (given that there is no longer a reference to *vitakka-vicāra*) presumably into the higher (second to fourth) *jhānas*, where a much more subtle and (almost) silent form of cognition prevails. 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)

“Knowledge” here is in the sense of gnosis, a developed, intuitive form of know-how or proficiency. This is repeated as for ‘body,’ with regard to ‘feelings,’ ‘mind’ and ‘*dhammas*.’ Right view has been developed through the five stages of liberation, from memorized scripture by rote, to something

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17 DN 33 iii219.

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 even beyond the conceptual to the point that we effectively perceive 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 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:

proficiency → *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 proficiency is aroused by the *bhikkhu*; on that occasion the *bhikkhu* develops the awakening factor of *proficiency*; on that occasion the awakening factor of *proficiency* comes to fulfillment by development in the *bhikkhu*. (SN 46.3)

This is the same *dhamma* that was carried through the stages of liberation. As the first awakening factor, *sati* brings that *dhamma* (*taṃ dhammaṃ*) to mind at whatever level of proficiency 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 *satipaṭṭhāna*, *dharmānupassana* (the contemplation of *dhammas*). Although it does not explicitly state it, we can assume that we are acutely attentive to experiential factors present in the contexts of the practice 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.<sup>18</sup> I note that each of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in turn is similarly demonstrated to fulfill the seven awakening factors in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*.<sup>19</sup>

**Contemplation of *dhammas* as the general case.** The language of the five stages of liberation and of the seven awakening factors are immediately suggestive of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, in which a particular *dhamma* has been selected, learned, then pondered, then examined in detail in its own terms, then brought into *samādhi* for detailed, quiet investigation, and finally internalized

18 See my related paper *The miracle of samādhi*.

19 MN 118 iii85-7.

to become integrated into our immediate perceptual apparatus. 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.<sup>20</sup>

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 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)

While it has been claimed that the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* is restricted to a limited set of *dhammas*, this conclusion is unwarranted. The five *dhamma* exercises actually described are representative members of a potentially open-ended set, as are the alternative sets described in the Chinese *Āgamas* parallels.

How about the other three *satipaṭṭhānas*?

### ***Body in the body internally and externally***

Each exercise of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* takes up a *dhamma* (*Dhamma* teaching) for experiential investigation and internalization, so it is of quite general applicability. However, the exercises of the first three *satipaṭṭhānas* are quite different in that they make little or no reference to *Dhamma* in the exercise itself, only in its formulaic refrain. Nonetheless, the refrain is rich in Dhamma, for it conveys the critical teaching of the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) of non-self, impermanence and suffering. To get a sense of the logic of the refrain, consider this passage from the *Mahānidāna Suta*:

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

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20 Cousins (1994, 52).



pleasant not painful feeling is felt, but only a painful feeling. And when a neither pleasant not painful feeling is felt, no pleasant or painful feeling.

A pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, bound to decay, to vanish, to fade away, to cease – and so too is a painful feeling and a neither pleasant not painful feeling. So anyone who, on experiencing a pleasant feeling, thinks, “This is my self,” must, at the cessation of that pleasant feeling think: “My self has gone!” and the same with a painful and a neither pleasant not painful feeling. Thus whoever thinks: “feeling 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: “feeling is my self.” (DN 15 ii66-7).

We notice that this *Mahānidāna* passage considers the prospect that feeling is 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, feeling and the mind are three facets of this self that we presume to our detriment.

The *Mahānidāna* passage then considers the evidence for feeling being this presumed self and finds it wanting, primarily because whatever it is we experience as feeling is always fragmentary, situation-specific, and ever changing, that is, impermanent and lacking the substantial fixedness we presume the self to have. We could argue the same way about the body and the mind.

Now, let’s compare the *Mahānidāna* passage with the *Satipaṭṭhāna* refrain:

(1) 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.

(2) 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.

... That is how a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating body in the body.

I submit that the logic of the two passages is the same: what we contemplate internally is the observable bodily evidence, and we do this (a) as instructed in the preceding exercise itself, and (b) as instructed in paragraph (2) of the refrain. What we contemplate externally is the body as a facet of the presumed self, which is therefore a substantial, fixed thing. When we contemplate both together, we are asking, Are these the same? We cannot reconcile the two.

The elided part of the refrain reads like this:

(3) Recollection that “the body exists” is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and proficiency.

(4) He abides independent. He doesn’t cling to anything in the world.

(3) recognizes the practical usefulness of the external body, feeling and mind, that is, of the self, for instance, to cross the street without getting run over by an ox cart. But we dare not take them as more than conveniences, we take care to acknowledge their emptiness. This is a subtle point, and I’m glad to see it here. (4) is the sole reference in the refrain to the characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*) of suffering, but optimistically, as something abandoned along with clinging by means of this practice.

This dichotomy of evidence and presumption makes sense of the expression ‘contemplating body in the body,’ and of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ in the refrain, in terms of the following correlations.

‘ <b>body</b> in the body’	internal body	evidence
‘body in <b>the body</b> ’	the external body	the presumption

“Internal body” (which I translate grammatically into English as an indefinite collective) is bodily “evidence,” fragmentary, situation-specific, observable and ever changing. “The external body” (a singular definite) is one’s body “presumed” to exist as a substantial, fixed thing, since it is a facet of “the self.”<sup>21</sup> The external body is also called ‘the whole body’ (*sabbakāya*) and ‘the

21 ‘Contemplating body in the body’ translates *kāye kāyānupassī*. Translating the locative *kāye* requires choice of a specific English preposition and either a definite or indefinite article; I choose ‘in the body’ for consistency with the present account of the external (or “whole”) body. *kāyānupassī* is a compound *kāya+anupassī*, literally ‘body-contemplating.’ I choose to translate *kāya* here as a noun, but

bodily fabrication’ (*kāyasaṅkhāra*) in the *satipaṭṭhāna* breath exercise of the Text, and ‘the body beyond’ (*parakāya*) elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> “Contemplating both internally and externally” is to search for the external body/self on the basis of the evidence, failing, thereby “quelling” (subduing or pacifying) the presumption that it is there.

Since the refrain does not mention “self” or “no-self” directly, it is easy to miss the degree to which the *satipaṭṭhāna* is about non-self. The critically important teaching of non-self is somewhat unique among the *dharmas* and requires a distinct method of analysis, for we cannot directly verify a negative in experience. Each individual exercise in the first three *satipaṭṭhānas* is a kind of thought experiment that represents yet another way to deconstruct the presumption of the self, largely in terms of impermanence. This is virtually the sole function of the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*, not as an intellectual exercise, but through repeatedly encountering the incompatibility between the external body, feeling or mind and its internal evidence, to produce an intuitive, internalized understanding of non-self.<sup>23</sup>

Some readers may be scratching their heads or raising their eyebrows, wondering why anyone would presumptively equate feeling with the self. This role in the case of the body and of the mind seem clear: famously “I think, therefore I am,” and similarly “I physically occupy space, therefore I am.” Consciousness fits well in that role: recall the “pernicious view” of the *bhikkhu* Sāti, for instance, that it is consciousness that is reborn.<sup>24</sup> I surmise that, due to a close association between feeling and consciousness, feeling serves as a stand-in for consciousness. Together the body, consciousness and the mind give us a neatly construed self whose facets are a container, a space inside in which thoughts and emotions play out, and a window to the world outside (roughly what your car gives you).

The closeness of feeling to consciousness can be appreciated if we first note that *vedanā* (‘feeling’) is in fact a gerund of the verb *vedeti* ‘sense, know, experience,’ and hence effectively means ‘being conscious of.’ Although the examples of *vedanā* repeated in the Pali formulas seem to be limited to

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without an article, to convey the collective sense of internal body as an unspecified range of bodily evidence.

22 DN 18 ii216.

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

24 MN 38 i256-8.

immediate simple valuations of suffering, pleasure, or simply “mattering,” this factor is, in fact, the basis from which the entire world we are conscious of unfolds. For the Buddha:

All things ... come together in feeling. (AN 9.14)

The causal influence of *vedanā* is described as follows:

With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset a man ... (MN 18, i112-3)

Through feeling, leading to perception and proliferation of thought, we imagine the world that we are conscious of. A more detailed discussion of the analysis performed in the refrain is undertaken in my related paper *Body in the body internally and externally*.

## 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 experience. The scope of the *sutta* is largely specialized on the foundational teaching of the three characteristics of non-self, impermanence and suffering, which is represented in the *sutta*'s recurring refrain, but also extends to the contemplation of *Dhamma* across the board, insofar as *Dhamma* is reflected in observable experience. As such, role of *satipaṭṭhāna* is to develop right view beyond conceptual understanding, to produce the internalization of *Dhammic* know-how.

Preparation for successful *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is significant. The practice is already an extension of the development of right view through study and deliberation. It certainly also depends on progress in the ethical practices in order to loosen the grip of the presumed, external self if one wants to gain the critical insight into non-self. The *bhāvana* path factors of right effort, right proficiency (*sammāsati*) and right *samādhi* are essential supports, applicable in all Buddhist wisdom and ethical practices, but *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is perhaps unique in making such critical use of right proficiency (to bring *Dhamma* into

full engagement in contemplative practice), and right *samādhī* (for wrapping attention around the primary theme and fine-tuning analysis into silent and pre-conceptual modes of cognition).<sup>25</sup>

The brilliance of *satipaṭṭhāna* is that, once the prerequisite training is in place, the exercises themselves become simple, grounded, intuitive and effortless. They are a matter of sitting quietly with a particular aspect of experience to discover repeatedly the shoddiness of the presumptive conceptual overlay we tend to impose on that experience. I haven't taken the space here to demonstrate that we also sit with the various, seemingly intricate and philosophical *dhammas* of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* in this way as well.<sup>26</sup>

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

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25 See the related papers *The satipaṭṭhāna method* and *The miracle of samādhī* for more on this.

26 See Shulman (2014) for an explanation of how it is possible to bring Buddhist “philosophy” into the stillness of *samādhī*.