

RETHINKING THE SATIPAṬṬHĀNA

How satipaṭṭhāna teaches non-self

Bhikkhu Cintita, ©2023
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The seminal *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is today one of the most studied discourses of the entire Pali canon. It serves to verify, investigate, intuit and internalize *Dhamma* through through contemplation of direct experience, that we may attain knowledge and vision of the way things are, and it is the historical basis of modern insight or *vipassanā* meditation. I intend here to show here what is rarely recognized, that the primary *Dhamma* teaching of concern in the first three of the four themes of *satipaṭṭhāna* (body, feeling, mind and *dhammas*) is that pivotal and most challenging teaching: non-self.

Briefly, the first three *satipaṭṭhānas* correspond to three facets of the self as it is presumed to exist as a substantial, fixed thing. Each of the exercises within this scope challenges this presumption by demonstrating that bodily, percipient and mental evidence for the presumption is lacking, primarily through recognition the impermanence of the evidence in contrast with the presumption. It is the distinction between evidence and presumption that gives us the dichotomies referred to in “internal and external” and in “body in body.”

The three facets of the self

We will initially set aside the wide-ranging fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, each exercise of which takes up a recognized *dhamma* (*Dhamma* teaching) for experiential investigation and internalization. The exercises of the first three *satipaṭṭhānas* are quite different in that they make little or no reference to *Dhamma* in the exercises themselves, but rely on the common formulaic refrain that is, nonetheless rich in *Dhamma*. The refrain uniformly 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 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 is unsubstantiated. The teaching of non-self is that we presume the existence of a substantial, fixed self as an abstraction which is unsupported by the evidence, and which furthermore results in suffering. 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.
- (3) Recollection that “the body exists” is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and proficiency.¹
- (4) He abides independent. He doesn’t cling to anything in the world.

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

I submit that the logic of the two passages is substantially the same:

In paragraph (1), what we contemplate “internally” is the observable bodily “evidence,” based on the instructions of the preceding exercise itself. I will call this contemplation “internal analysis.” What we contemplate “externally” is the body as a facet of the self, which is a “presumption” of a substantial, fixed thing. When we contemplate both “internally and externally,” we are asking, Are these the same? We discover that we cannot reconcile the presumption with the evidence. I will call these final two contemplations “external analysis.”

Paragraph (2) brings the *dhamma* of impermanence into internal analysis, for the fragmentary, contingent and ephemeral nature of the internal evidence undermines uniquely well the presumption of the substantial, fixed self.

Paragraph (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.

1 I deliberately avoid translating *sati* as ‘mindfulness,’ because this term has lost the original intention of Rhys David’s once apt translation. See my associated paper, *How “mindfulness” got mislabeled*. ‘Proficiency’ is my attempt to restore that intention.

Paragraph (4) is the sole (albeit oblique) reference in the refrain to the characteristic (*lakḥaṇa*) of suffering, but taking an optimistic perspective, 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. “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.”² “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.³ 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.⁴

Some readers may be scratching their heads or raising their eyebrows, wondering why anyone would want presumptively to equate feeling with the self. This role in the case of the body and of the mind seem clear: famously “I

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

3 The “internally/externally/both” formula is attested in all parallel versions of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and found repeated in other correlates, but is more commonly part of the introduction (Sujāto 2012, 205).

4 In the related paper *The miracle of samādhi* I show how *samādhi* facilitates such internalization through disrupting conceptualization.

think, therefore I am,” and analogously “I physically occupy space, therefore I am!” Consciousness also fits well as a facet of self: recall the “pernicious view” of the *bhikkhu* Sāti, for instance, that it is consciousness that is reborn.⁵ 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 solid container, a space inside in which thoughts and emotions play out, and a window to the world outside.⁶

The kinship of feeling with 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 literally means ‘being conscious of.’ Although the examples of *vedanā* repeated in the Pali formulas seem to be limited to 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.

About this, the Buddha said,

In this fathom-long living body, along with its perceptions and thoughts, lies the world, the arising of the world, and the cessation of the world. (AN 4.45)

The Pali word for ‘world’ (*loka*) is equated with consciousness, since it is consistently used in the sense of world we are conscious of, not some

5 MN 38 i256-8.

6 This is also roughly what your car gives you, which might explain why many of us identify with our cars.

“objective” world largely beyond experience.⁷ This gives us the following facets, which correspond to the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*:

- (1) the self as the body,
- (2) the self as consciousness, and
- (3) the self as the mind.

The way one presumes the self seem likely to include all three facets, but there are there are doubtlessly variations. In fact, the *Mahānidāna Sutta* also considers two alternatives to equating feeling with the self.

In what ways, Ānanda, do people regard the self? They equate the self with feeling:

- (1) “Feeling is my self,” or
- (2) “Feeling is not my self, my self is impercipient,” or
- (3) “Feeling is not my self, but my self is not impercipient, it is of a nature to feel.” (DN 15 ii66)

The first option is that self is simply equivalent to feeling. The second is that the self is equivalent to body, the facet which cannot perceive. The third is that the self is equivalent to mind, the facet that can perceive and emote, and from which feeling and consciousness arise. This gives us the first three *satipaṭṭhānas* as alternatives: body, feelings and mind, as reflecting these three facets of self.

Presumption and its evidence

In the Buddha’s teaching, “the self” is a presumption (*maññita*), a cognitive fabrication (*saṅkhāra*) that we conceive and then take as real. The Buddha had a low regard for presumption:

Presumption is a disease, presumption is a tumor, presumption is a dart. By overcoming all presumptions, *bhikkhu*, one is called a sage at peace. And the sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die; he is not shaken and does not yearn. For there is nothing present in him by which he might be born.

(MN 140 iii246)

⁷ Hamilton (2000) is largely concerned with the implications of this point. She states (p. 140) that forgetting that the focus of *Dhamma* is the world of experience, leads to a lot of misunderstandings. See also Cintita (2021, 5-9).

We will see how the analysis of the refrain serves to quell the presumption of the self, so that we may abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world. Let's consider two perspectives we can take toward the self, or toward any potential presumption. The more common is "external," which means running with with the presumption, believing it, to making it into an ontological commitment of truth. The other is "internal," which refers to questioning it, getting to the bottom of it, making it into a topic of epistemological investigation. Presumption separates the perspectives: Internal is pre-presumption, asking "how would I know?" External is post-presumption, launching into a narrative about what it is convinced it knows.

Suppose we see a UFO. Sure enough, we see lights moving in the sky in a bizarre pattern, just like UFO's in the movies. Then we reflect on what we've seen, "The UFO must be of extra-terrestrial origin, because the technology to produce what I have observed is unknown on earth. But from what planet did it come? How did it get here? What are the intentions of these extra-terrestrials? I saw it, but did it see me? Do I need to hide so that I don't get [gulp] 'probed'? Is there a way I can cash in on my discovery?" This is the more credulous and presumptive approach of accepting that there really is a UFO, and then speculating and telling tales about it. This is external analysis. This level of analysis would be called "epistemic" in philosophy.

Alternatively, I might reflect as follows, "Am I hallucinating? Did I have too much to drink? Did I not get enough sleep? Or maybe I'm dreaming. Is a twiddle bug larva creeping across my glasses? Can weather or optical effects explain what I am seeing?" This is the more cautious and skeptical approach of reevaluating the evidence on which the potential presumption of the existence of the UFO would be based, and taking seriously the possibility that whatever potential evidence I directly observed is *not* a manifestation of a real UFO. This is internal analysis. This level of analysis would be called "ontological" in philosophy.

Internal analysis

Internal analysis is referred to in the refrain as follows, again with regard to body:

"In this way he abides contemplating body in the body internally
..."

The expression ‘body in the body’ is noteworthy here and elsewhere, since it evidently reflects the internal and external perspectives. In other words, the first reference to “body” is to a range of internal evidence that potentially validates the substantial existence of “the body,” and the second is to the external body, the body as a whole, whose existence can only be, and generally is, presumed, but not directly experienced as a whole.⁸ In sum:

‘ body in the body’	internal body	evidence
‘body in the body ’	the external body	the presumption

Each of the body, feeling and mind exercises describes the respective process of internal analysis. It does this in considering a particular range of internal evidence which might provide the basis for presuming the substantial existence of the external self. Each exercise is a kind of thought experiment, but each fails to validate the external self.

In the practice of analyzing the body/self internally, we center ourselves in, and develop a direct form of intimacy with, every detail of the evidence described in the respective exercise: the components, movements, postures, stages of decay, etc. Generally this is performed within the stillness of *samādhi*.⁹ For instance, the first exercise instructs us,

Breathing in long, he comprehends: “I breathe in long”; or
 breathing out long, he comprehends: “I breathe out long.”
 Breathing in short, he comprehends: “I breathe in short”; or
 breathing out short, he comprehends: “I breathe out short.”

At this stage we consider the evidence on its own merits, as body in the body without regard to the “whole body,” which is perhaps substantial and manifests itself as this evidence, or which is perhaps only a cognitive fabrication that arises conditioned by such evidence. Attending to the evidence is largely a process of direct perception or noting, requiring little, or (with growing familiarity) no, deliberation.

8 What is translated as ‘in’ is in fact a simple locative in Pali grammar, bringing two bodies effectively into spacial proximity, or figuratively into thematic proximity.

9 SN 47.8 compares the attainment or non-attainment of *samādhi* in this context to the difference between a competent or incompetent cook. There are abundant *sutta* references to the presence of *samādhi* in the fulfillment of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, for instance, in the teachings of the seven awakening factors, or in the statement, “The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are the theme of *samādhi*.” (MN 44 i301) See also my related paper *A back-roads tour of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.

Impermanence

Impermanence is a primary aspect of internal, but not external, analysis, for it is only here that contingency and flux can be directly observed, and impermanence offers the most critical kind of internal evidence:

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

Breaths, for instance, come and go. Bodily actions, postures, stages of decomposition are likewise impermanent: they arise and vanish. Some visualized factors in internal analysis, such as some body parts, might be less obviously impermanent, but it is easy to visualize or even remember (consider dental work, for instance, or cutting and clipping hair and nails) their removal or replacement, or simply visualize them in turn as consisting of ever-changing parts. Or consider that cells are continually replaced, and every cell is receiving nourishment and expelling waste. The whole body, on the other hand, the subject of external analysis, is largely immune from analysis in terms of impermanence, since it comes already with an unobservable presumption of (at least relatively) substantial and fixed existence.¹⁰

External analysis.

It is in the incongruous gap between internal and external that insight into non-self is sparked. From internal analysis, we then turn our contemplation outward:

... or he abides contemplating body in the body externally, or he abides contemplating body in the body both internally and externally.

10 There are modes of external analysis that reveal impermanence, but they do not seem to fall under the purview of the refrain. We can note, for instance, that our external presumptions of permanence turn out repeatedly to be contradictory: they lead to failed expectations and thereby to suffering. For instance, we tend to be foolishly convinced that our spouse and we will live happily ever after, forever young and indestructible, only to discover that we both acquire wrinkles, gray hairs and flab, as well as shedding teeth and mental faculties over the years.

“The external body” is one’s body “presumed” to exist as a substantial, fixed thing, and as a facet of the self.¹¹ The external body is also called ‘the whole body’ (*sabbakāya*) and ‘the bodily fabrication’ (*kāyasaṅkhāra*) in the *satipaṭṭhāna* breath exercise of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and ‘the body beyond’ (*parakāya*) elsewhere.¹² “Contemplating both internally and externally” is to search for the external body (or the self) in the evidence, and convinces us intuitively that it is not there.

The practice of internal analysis along with its concern with impermanence will have received most of the effort of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. The urge to engage the body externally will have been resisted as a fatal distraction. The Buddha instructs us:

Come *bhikkhu*, abide observing body in the body but do not think thoughts connected with the body; abide observing feeling in the feelings but do not think thoughts connected with the feelings; abide observing mind in the mind but do not think thoughts connected with the mind; abide observing *dharmas* in the *dharmas* but do not think thoughts connected with the *dharmas*. (MN 125 iii136)

The first step in external analysis is to bring the presumed body/self to awareness, but only very briefly, so that the mind does not proliferate thoughts and leave us unable to return to internal analysis. A simple way to do this might be simply to recall a narrative feature of the body, such as “What a marvelous physical specimen am I,” or “I’ve gotten many decades of use out of this old body.”

The second step is to hold evidence and presumption in mind at the same time. This effectively raises the question: “Where is the self?” or: “Where is the body (as a whole) in the internal evidence?” In any case, we will never find the external body lurking in the evidence we have been contemplating. In fact, we

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

12 DN 18 ii216.

will be challenged to hold both evidence and presumption in mind at the same time, for the one is immediate and ever changing and the other abstract and fixed. The external body is quelled and we return to internal analysis. The insight into non-self has arisen, and through repetition non-self becomes habituated in our thinking.

The examination of impermanence in the context of internal analysis plays a critical role in this result. We cannot reasonably infer permanence from evidence based on that which is impermanent. As we observe body internally – its components, its movements, its decay, etc. – we are keenly aware of its impermanent nature. Then an attempt to hold the substantial, “fixed” body in mind side by side with the internal evidence is bound to appear incongruous. Likewise, *samādhī* is likely to contribute to the result: In conducting internal analysis, we are likely to have entered *samādhī* before we attempt external analysis. Beyond the first *jhāna*, *samādhī* is adverse to narrative content,¹³ accentuating the stretch from evidence to presumption.

We find this same method built into the breath exercise of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the equivalent passage in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*:

- (1) Breathing in long, he comprehends [*pajānāti*] “I breathe in long,” or breathing out long, he comprehends “I breathe out long.”
- (2) Breathing in short, he comprehends “I breathe in short,” or breathing out short, he comprehends “I breathe out short.”
- (3) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body.” He trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.”
- (4) He trains thus: “I shall breathe with a tranquilized body fabrication.” He trains thus: “I shall breathe out tranquilizing the body fabrication.”
(MN 10 i56, MN 118 iii82)

In steps (1) and (2) the monk performs internal analysis of something inherently impermanent: breath. In step (3) he experiences (*paṭisaṃvedī*) the presumed or fabricated body “externally,” what is called here the ‘whole body’ (*sabbakāya*), seeking the presumed body in the evidence. In step (4) when the

13 This is because discursive thinking (*vitakka-vicāra*) is present in the first *jhāna*, and still supportive of a degree of narrative content. See my related paper *The miracle of samādhī* on this.

search fails, and the body fabrication (*kāyasaṅkhāram*, the external body) is put to rest (*passambhayam*), or quelled, since it cannot be sustained.

“There is a body”

Through the analysis of the refrain we have disabled the presumption of a self, but we have not proved that there is no substantial self, nor disabled the usefulness of the concept of a self:

Or else proficiency that ‘there is a body’ is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and proficiency.

Our concepts are not the problem as long as we recognize their emptiness. It is not that there is nothing there at all, only that body is not what we think it is. The concept of the body serves as a useful marker that can be useful in sorting out the world, for instance, to get across the street without getting run over. In fact, without reference to “body,” how would the Buddha have provided practice instructions at all for *satipaṭṭhāna*? We are capable of maintaining our internal stance even in the presence of a conceptualization, as long as we don’t get caught in presumption and consequent proliferation of external narratives.

“Not clinging”

The analysis of the refrain is based on the teaching of the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*). We have reviewed the approach to non-self and impermanence found there. The final instruction of the refrain relates to suffering, but from the perspective of successful practice:

And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating the body in the body.

It is sobering but critical in Buddhist practice to realize that everything and everyone we cling to will be lost to us one by one ... until the ones that remain lose us. The world is slipping by like sand through our fingers. As a result, our experiential world is littered with the shards of broken promises. We have been duped, because we have presumed that an enduring substantial self exists, along with its interest in enduring substantial objects. And we suffer, because everything is in fact in constant flux. Our narrative presumptions simply do not keep pace with the unfolding of what plays out over time. The analysis of the

refrain trains us not to presume. Not presuming, we have nothing to cling to in the world that we might appropriate as ‘me’ or ‘mine.’ This is the end of suffering.

Once again, it is important to understand that the analysis of the refrain is not an intellectual argument that there is no self. We humans are perfectly capable of intellectual conviction of one thing while consistently presuming its opposite. Rather, the analysis of the refrain serves through repeated practice to internalize non-self so that we no longer spontaneously perceive the involvement of a self at every opportunity.

An alternative interpretation of internal/external

The most commonly described interpretation in the literature of the trichotomy of ‘internal,’ ‘external’ and ‘both internal and external’ is that we first contemplate “internally” our own body, feeling and mind, and then we contemplate “externally” those of other people and then we contemplate both together.¹⁴ This “empathetic interpretation” has some serious defects.

First, such a practice of empathy is not attested elsewhere in the early texts to my knowledge, in spite of the prominence allegedly apportioned to the trichotomy in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, where it frames the contents of the rest of the refrain, and in most correlates (including the Chinese parallels), where it frames the contents the rest of the entire text. For instance, in the *Samyutta Nikāya* we find the trichotomy right in the introduction of the text.

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, ardent, comprehending, proficient, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. Dwell contemplating body in the body internally and externally, ardent, comprehending, proficient, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. (SN 47.3)

Second, in offsetting non-self, the empathetic interpretation provides a weak *Dhammic* basis for contemplation in the exercises of the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*, a particularly conspicuous deficit in view of the attention given

¹⁴ For instance, in Anālayo (2007, 95-102).

to the other two characteristics of impermanence and of (at least a nod to) suffering.

Third, the empathetic interpretation provides no explanation of the otherwise obscure phrases “body in the body” and “tranquilizing the body fabrication.”

Fourth, the empathetic interpretations leads to various inconsistencies when brought into particular passages. For instance,

There a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body in the body internally, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. As he abides contemplating body in the body in this way, he becomes rightly composed [in *samādhi*], he becomes rightly serene. Thus rightly composed and rightly serene, he gives rise to knowledge and vision externally with regard to the body beyond. (DN 18 ii216)

This passage is repeated for feeling, mind and *dhammas*. Under the empathetic interpretation, he gains no insight about his own body, but, oddly, only about the body of others.¹⁵ In the current account, the body beyond is the presumed body, the one equated with the self, and insight arises when we bring that body to mind.

Body exercises

To illustrate the foregoing, let’s now intersect the the analysis of the refrain of the refrain with the specific exercises of the four *satipaṭṭānas*. In the Pali discourse, the following are the areas of investigation represented in the body exercises:

breathing	bodily actions	elements
postures	body parts	corpses (9 exercises)

Each exercise presents an alternative assemblage of internal evidence, either directly perceived or visualized, for the presumption of the body, as a kind of thought experiment that reveals the tenuousness of the presumption of the substantial self in its facet as the body. Let’s take the posture exercise as an example:

15 ‘With regard to the body beyond’ translates *parakāye* (*para-* ‘beyond’ + *kāya* ‘body’ + LOCATIVE). It is commonly over-translated as ‘... other people’s bodies,’ which presupposes the empathetic interpretation.

Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* is one who acts with comprehension when going forward and returning, who acts with comprehension when looking ahead and looking away, who acts with comprehension when flexing and extending his limbs, who acts with comprehension when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl, who acts with comprehension when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; who acts with comprehension when defecating and urinating; who acts with comprehension when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

Repeated internal contemplation reveals that the observed evidence is actually fragmentary, situation-specific, and ever changing. It is discovered that the external presumption of a substantial body adds no information to what is directly observed, and, in fact, appears as an unwarranted abstraction. The evidence fails to support the presumption.

In approaching practice, we like to start with an intellectual understanding, and even that is often beyond the yogi's grasp. So, let me offer a very close analogy to non-self that is easier to appreciate: "non-nation." For a nation, as for a self, it is easy to presume substantial existence, which is then reaffirmed and sustained by the many narratives that turn around the nation: it occupies a territorial landscape with defined borders, it prints currency, enacts laws, punishes offenders, it has a economy, a GDP, an army, nameless bureaucrats, it has a population within its borders, it is the object of pride, and even the sacred object of salutation and song. Caught in narrative we appropriate our nation patriotically as "me" or "mine," and may be willing to die for our nation. The *presumption* of substantial existence conditions not only many narratives but also actions in accord with these narratives. For instance, the construction of new border walls, restrictions on immigration and mandatory teaching of a single language make nations look more and more like they really do substantially exist, with clear demarcations between nations. The self is similar.

But what is the evidence that there is such a thing outside of the stories we tell about it? One can easily devise exercises to contemplate evidence for the substantial existence of the nation in analogy with the *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises for the self. Watch a farmer milking his cow as a manifestation of the economy facet, or hike to the frontier to discover a falling-down border marker as a manifestation of the territorial facet. We will find no convincing evidence that

the nation is anything more than a shoddy product of imagination and convention, taken seriously for better or for worse.

The key difference between non-nation and non-self is that we *know* from the outset that the nation was made up conceptually, at first, in the minds of a committee of founders, and subsequently through the declarations of various statespeople, “We hereby declare ... from the western shore to the eastern mountain tops ...” The self is made up, but below the radar, with no evidence that it is anything more than a shoddy product of imagination and convention, then reaffirmed and sustained by many narratives, often to our detriment.

The feeling exercise

Feeling (*vedanā*) is generally regarded as “hedonic tone,” encompassing the three factors of pain, pleasure or neither pain nor pleasure, sometimes extended to differentiate either physical and mental pain and pleasure, or worldly and spiritual pain and pleasure. The feeling exercise of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, reads as follows:

And how, *bhikkhus*, does a *bhikkhu* abide contemplating feeling in the feelings? Here, when experiencing a pleasant feeling, a *bhikkhu* comprehends: “I experience a pleasant feeling”; when experiencing a painful feeling, he comprehends: “I experience a painful feeling”; when experiencing a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he comprehends: “I experience a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.” When experiencing a worldly pleasant feeling, he comprehends: “I experience a worldly pleasant feeling”; when experiencing an unworldly pleasant feeling, he comprehends: “I experience an unworldly pleasant feeling”; when experiencing a worldly painful feeling, he comprehends: “I experience a worldly painful feeling”; when experiencing an unworldly painful feeling, he comprehends: “I experience an unworldly painful feeling”; when experiencing a worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he comprehends: “I experience a worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling”; when experiencing an unworldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he comprehends: “I experience an unworldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.”

We have seen above that, in the early texts, feeling is described as a facet of the self alongside the body and the mind (I have claimed, as a stand-in for consciousness). However, in contrast to their prominent role in early texts, feeling is often marginalized in modern teaching and scholarship, so this status is easy to miss. Since feeling gives rise to perceptions and the rest of what constitutes the world we are conscious of, its internal contemplation suffices to overturn the presumption of consciousness as a fixed whole, since the fragmentary, situation-specific, and ever changing nature of feeling carries over to these perceptions and the rest. Nonetheless, the aggregates exercise of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* carries this thought experiment to its conclusion through internal contemplation of all five levels of experience: form, feeling, perception, fabrications and cognizance. We will look at this exercise below.

The mind exercise

The third *satipaṭṭāna*, contemplation of mind is also represented by a single exercise:

And how, *bhikkhus*, does a *bhikkhu* abide contemplating mind in the mind? Here a *bhikkhu* comprehends mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. He comprehends mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate, and mind unaffected by hate as mind unaffected by hate. He comprehends mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion. He comprehends contracted mind as contracted mind, and distracted mind as distracted mind. He comprehends exalted mind as exalted mind, and unexalted mind as unexalted mind. He comprehends surpassed mind as surpassed mind, and unsurpassed mind as unsurpassed mind. He comprehends composed mind [i.e., a mind in *samādhi*] as composed mind, and uncomposed mind as uncomposed mind. He comprehends liberated mind as liberated mind, and unliberated mind as unliberated mind.

‘Mind’ is *citta* in Pali, a term used rather informally in the discourses as something that assumes different qualities at different times – for example lust, delusion, kindness, serenity, agitation, *samādhi*, or even liberation – or as

something to be tamed, guarded, directed, purified in practice, or as something that can cause problems for us.

Although the language around mind might encourage us to take it as something substantial and equate it with the self, the exercise breaks it down into a series of impermanent states or qualities, much as the body is broken down into parts, elements, postures, actions and stages, to demonstrate its insubstantiality.

Dhamma exercises

The function of the *dhamma* exercises exceeds the vital but narrow concerns of the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*. Generally written with small ‘d,’ “*dhammas*” are specific teachings of “the *Dhamma*” or their experiential manifestations, and each *dhamma* exercise is based on a recognized *dhamma* teaching, apart from the three characteristics. 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* comprehends: “Such is form, such its origin, such its disappearance, such are feelings, such their origin, such their disappearance; such is perception, such its origin, such its disappearance, such are fabrications, such their origin, such their disappearance, such is cognizance, such its origin, such its disappearance.” (MN 10 i60-1)

In the Pali discourse, the following *dhammas* are taken up:

five hindrances	sixfold sphere
five aggregates of appropriation	seven awakening factors
four noble truths	

Although relatively few exercises are listed, it is clear that an enormous range of *Dhamma* topics will benefit from contemplation within the parameters set within the *satipaṭṭāna* method, while bringing quiet attentiveness to contemplation of the *Dhamma*. We only require that these *dhammas* are verifiable in actual phenomenal experience.¹⁶

16 See my related paper *A back-roads tour of the Satipaṭṭāna Sutta* for a functional perspective on the contemplation of *dhammas*.

However, *dhammas* are often regarded as too complex or “philosophical” for experiential analysis, particularly in states of *samādhi*, in spite of the Buddha’s invitation to “come and see” (*ehi-passiko*). Nonetheless, a little thought will often reveal simple and direct experiential correlates, though modern tutorials generally fail to do that for us.¹⁷ For instance, perception (*saññā*) is listed as one of the factors in the aggregates exercise, but is most often described as a human mental faculty, in fact, a “personality factor.” Observing *saññā* in these terms would seem to get us no further than observing the external body, mind or consciousness, if it were treated as a singular thing, presumed to stand behind direct experience. However, the direct, internal experience that would constitute evidence for such a presumption is a kind of momentary awareness event: we recognize a face (“Why, it’s George!”); that is a perception in direct experience, here and now. The fact that perception is an “aggregate” should make clear that we are contemplating awareness events, not fixed human faculties.

Here we discover a glitch: The dhamma exercises share the same refrain as the other three *satipaṭṭhānas*. In spite of sharing the common refrain, it appears that the match of some *dhamma* exercises to the refrain seems often anomalous. In particular, the five hindrances and seven factors of awakening clearly serve to monitor aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice itself, and that function seems to be unrelated to internal and external analysis as means of quelling the presumption of the self. The hindrances provide a basis for fulfilling the requirement of “having put away covetousness and grief for the world” as a prerequisite of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.¹⁸ The awakening factors describe the further narrowing of attention leading to the arising and consolidation of *samādhi* during *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.¹⁹

On the other hand, the aggregates and the sixfold sphere exercises share the concerns of the refrain. Each presents an alternative way of modeling the world of consciousness, and thereby addresses the same facet of the self that is addressed in the feeling exercise. In fact, quelling the presumption of a self in

17 More generally, Shulman (2014) has argued persuasively that the earliest statements of the *dhammas* were well grounded in experience and became more “philosophical” later. I argue in my related paper *The miracle of samādhi* that even conceptually complex content can be retained even in higher jhānas once it has been internalized through habitual practice.

18 See my related paper *The satipaṭṭhāna method*.

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

terms of the aggregates is the topic of the famous encounter of the *bhikkhuni* Vajirā with Māra, in which she explains to him:

Just as, with an assemblage of parts,
The word “chariot” is used,
So, when the aggregates exist,
There is the convention “a being.” (SN 5.10)

In spite of anomalous dhamma exercises, the common refrain remains constant for all exercises as well, except for the addition of a reference to the particular *dhamma* under consideration in each case, for instance,

... That is how a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating *dhammas* in *dhammas in terms of the five aggregates of appropriation.*

Oddly, although the hindrances and the awakening factors seem a poor match to the analysis of the refrain, we find an unexpected analysis of these two, together, elsewhere in terms of “internal” and “external.” In the *Pariyāya Sutta*²⁰ some disciples of the Buddha discover that teachers of other non-Buddhist sects also teach the hindrances and the seven awakening factors, and are hard put to explain what is so special about the Blessed One’s teachings in this regard. So they ask the Buddha directly. The Buddha points out to his disciples that only he teaches that each of the hindrances and awakening factors is in fact a dichotomy, as follows:

Hindrances

lust	internal/external
ill-will	internal/external
sloth-torpor	sloth/torpor
restlessness-remorse	restlessness/remorse
doubt	internal/external

awakening factors

proficiency	internal/external
investigation of <i>dhammas</i>	internal/external
energy	bodily/mental
rapture	silent/discursive
tranquility	bodily/mental

20 *The method of exposition discourse*, SN 46.52.

<i>samādhī</i>	silent/discursive
equanimity	about things internal/external

There seems to be a fascinating logic in these dichotomies that perhaps suggests a more finessed generalization of the analysis of the refrain, that nonetheless remains murky, at least to me. To begin with, the application of the internal/external dichotomy to proficiency and to the investigation of *dharmas* is clear: these describe *satipaṭṭhāna* practice itself, which is, as we have seen, differentiated into internal and external analysis. For the rest, I want to point to the following (rough) correlations:

internal	=	pre-presumptive	~	non-narrative	~	silent
external	=	presumptive	~	narrative	~	discursive

“Internal” was defined above as “pre-presumption,” and “external” as “post-presumption,” but let’s generalize this: let’s assume that “presumption” is not specifically reference to the presumption of the self or one of its facets, but more broadly includes the presumption of a host of other agents and objects that have roles in narratives. Presumptions are the stuff of narratives, but at the same time narratives sustain presumptions. What I render here as ‘discursive’ is literally ‘with thought and deliberation’ (*vitakka-vicāra*), a *jhāna* factor present only in the first *jhāna* (the initial stage of *samādhī*). What I render as ‘silent’ is ‘without thought and deliberation,’ but also known as “noble silence” and present in the second, third and fourth *jhānas*. Discursive thought supports narrative, but silence does not.²¹

Now, the *Pariyāya Sutta* also dichotomizes the hindrances of lust, ill-will and doubt as internal/external. In fact, each of these easily, but not necessarily, spawns narratives, which often acquire an emphatic force, as in “She made me mad, she had no right to do that. I am going to get back at her. Once unleashed, my wrath has no bounds, darn tootin’.” The tendency toward narrative is what makes them hindrances, distractions inimical to *satipaṭṭhāna* or *samādhī* practice. However, if such narratives are held at bay, bare subjective factors become evident as manifestations lust, ill-will and doubt: a kind of energy in the mind, tightness in the chest, neck and shoulders, flushing of the face, and so on. Accordingly, The narrative, discursive manifestations of lust, ill-will and doubt are the stuff of external analysis. The silent, non-discursive manifesta-

21 See, once again, my related paper *The miracle of samādhī*.

tions are the stuff of internal analysis. I find this proposal is at least compelling in the absence of an alternative.

Moreover, rapture and *samādhi* are each dichotomized as silent/discursive. In fact each spans the transition from the discursiveness of the first *jhāna* to the silence of the second *jhāna*, where presumptions and narratives are cut off, and is therefore associated in this way with the internal/external dichotomy as well. I find this proposal tenuous but still compelling.

Nonetheless, it is unclear how this proposal might explain the remaining two hindrances that are dichotomized as they are named: “sloth/torpor” and “restlessness/remorse.” Perhaps close semantic analysis of the Pali terms will show that these too correspond to the dichotomy internal/external. The dichotomy “bodily/mental” attributed to energy and tranquility, and the attribution to equanimity of being about things internal and external remain unexplained as well. This is food for future scholarship, if not better to understand the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, then better to understand the *Pariyāya Sutta*.

This teaching of the *Pariyāya Sutta* seems to have the hallmarks of an only partially successful attempt to extend the kind of analysis found in the refrain to the fourth (*dhamma*) *satipaṭṭhāna*. This suggests that the applicability of the analysis of the refrain may have been mistakenly overextended to these exercises sometime in the history of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, perhaps due to the pressure to keep the refrain consistent with its formulation in the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*. This is the best defensible account I’ve come up so far of for the anomalous cases in the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* of exercise-refrain mismatch.

Conclusions

The purpose of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is to investigate and confirm the *Dhamma* experientially and to internalize the *Dhamma* as a matter of direct perception, as an advanced stage of acquiring right view. I would suggest that the sutta actually gives us two practice tracts, one aimed primarily at quelling the presumed self in the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*, and the other at verifying the *Dhamma* more broadly in the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*.

The first three *satipaṭṭhānas* deconstruct the self in its three facets of body, consciousness and mind, through analysis in terms of the three characteristics. Their *Dhammic* content of these exercises is confined almost entirely to the

refrain. Non-self, in particular, requires the specialized method of the analysis of the refrain, because one cannot directly observe a negative proposition, only fail to find observable evidence in support of the presumption of a substantial, fixed self.

The fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* is concerned with the investigation of the entirety of *Dhamma*, at least insofar as it is subject to experiential verification. It should be noted that the contemplation of *dhammas* is referred to clearly and independently of the term *satipaṭṭhāna* in other early teachings, for instance, in the seven awakening factors and in the five stages of liberation.²² Accordingly, the method of analysis of the refrain, which works so well for the deconstruction of the self, fits awkwardly with the more general methods of analysis appropriate for the *Dhamma* more broadly.

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.

22 AN 5.26. These teachings are discussed in my related paper *A back-roads tour of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.