Rethinking Satipaṭṭhāna

From investigating Dhamma
to dwelling in jhāna

Bhikkhu Cintita

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Preface

Satipaṭṭhāna (most commonly—though not here—translated as ‘foundations of mindfulness’) is an essential practice in early Buddhism for one intent on awakening. It is represented in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, in the *Ānāpāṇasati Sutta*, in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-saṁyutta*, and in many shorter discourses in the Pali canon, and in their parallels in the Chinese canon, and is acknowledged as the early source of modern *vipassanā* or insight meditation, and of modern “mindfulness” practice. *The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (henceforth “the *Sutta*”) is possibly the most widely studied and discussed discourse in the Pali canon in the modern context.

Unfortunately, there is much we do not understand about the message of these early *satipaṭṭhāna* texts, or rather, there is astonishingly little in these early texts that we interpret consistently or convincingly. *Satipaṭṭhāna* confused me for a long time, and I’m certainly not alone. My detailed investigation of this topic began as a result of my dissatisfaction with the interpretation of clauses such as …

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

… as having to do with contemplating one’s own body then contemplating someone else’s body. I was not convinced. It also alarmed me that no one seemed able to explain the significance of body, impressions (*vedanā*), mind and *dhammas* as the four categories of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Although the *Sutta* is obviously a practice tutorial for investigating many specific *Dhamma* teachings, I wondered why there was so little *Dhamma* in the ways the modern derivatives of *satipaṭṭhāna* are taught.

Moreover, many teachers of *satipaṭṭhāna* and *vipassanā* insist that these contemplative practices are incompatible with the silence of *samādhi* and *jhāna*, even while the early *satipaṭṭhāna* discourses (albeit marginally in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself) consistently and clearly describe the close integration of the *jhānas* into *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.[1] At least one early text even describes *satipaṭṭhāna* itself as “a *samādhi*,” and *samādhi* is elsewhere claimed to develop “knowledge and vision of how things are.” This inconsistency also

1. For instance, some might find the subtitle “from investigating *Dhamma* to dwelling in *jhāna*” incoherent, even though it simply summarizes the seven awakening factors.

concerned me.

It seemed to me that part of the confusion about what the *satipaṭṭhāna* texts say comes from a history of re-interpretation of key concepts. It has now been abundantly documented and is becoming widely acknowledged, for instance, that the meaning and role of *samādhi* and *jhāna* found in the commentaries, particularly in the seminal *Visuddhimagga*, contrast markedly with what is found in the early texts. Much of the confusion around *satipaṭṭhāna* seems to have resulted from attempting to reconcile multiple contrasting historical frameworks that, in principle, don't cohere.

The methodology of this study

Recent progress in dating Buddhist texts has encouraged prioritizing the scholarly study of "Early Buddhist Texts" (EBT), the earliest stratum of Buddhist scriptures. This approach allows us, in principle, to avoid becoming entangled in the inter-sectarian inconsistencies that have developed historically by focusing on the *Dhamma* as the Buddha taught it, as far as we can determine. What generally count as EBT are roughly the bulk of discourses of the Buddha and early disciples found in the first four *Nikāyas*, parts of the fifth *Nikāya*, and parts of the *Vinaya*, as found in the Pali canon, as well as in in parallel traditions preserved in other languages, primarily in Chinese.[2] The EBT paradigm chooses to let these texts speak for themselves, and this is what I will attempt to allow here.

Since the Buddha and his disciples did not have the advantage of the *Visuddhi-magga* or other later resources at their disposal, the authority of these later texts in interpreting the early texts is contestable. However, the early texts seem clearly to have been articulated in the context of the early *Upaniṣads* or other related, but no longer existent, pre-Buddhist teachings, and in a certain cultural, intellectual, and physical milieu. These form a source of relevant clues, particularly in the etymology of early Buddhist terminology, for accurately interpreting early Buddhist texts.

In addition to assuming the EBT perspective, I also employ criteria of "functionality," "coherence," "field testing," and "cognitive viability" in rethinking *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Underlying "functionality" is my own—and others'—conviction that the *Dhamma* serves almost entirely as a support for practice, and that practice is the source of benefits in terms of soteriological and practical goals. Even the most philosophically sophisticated and astute points of *Dhamma* are no more than parts of the scaffold that upholds practice. Accordingly, we can ask of any

2. A good account of the scope and provenance of the Early Buddhist Texts is provided by Sujato and Brahmali (2014).

Dhammic teaching, “How do we put this into practice?” or “Why would the Buddha teach this? Where is the benefit?” Functionality offers a strong constraint on what can be considered a viable interpretation of the early texts, much as a cookbook is expected to uphold cooking.

I also view the early texts as remarkably “coherent,” systematic, and well-spoken. This point is easily obscured, first, because the early *Dhamma* was spoken in many very short discourses that share terminology and conceptual frameworks with other short discourses, and second, because the early Buddhist discourses themselves are often shown to be unreliable victims of ancient editing. Our task in recognizing the underlying coherence is therefore like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle in which some pieces are missing, and in which other pieces have been mixed in from other jigsaw puzzles. At some point we nevertheless recognize, “By George, it’s the Golden Gate Bridge!” A particular interpretation of the whole has shone forth that we cannot easily disregard, and once this has happened it becomes the basis of interpreting the remaining unplaced pieces, and of rejecting some of these altogether as intruders from other people's jigsaw puzzles. Although such conclusions are still debatable, the convergence of evidence from many sources leave little doubt about their viability. And what shines forth is repeatedly, it seems to me, a coherent, functional system of teachings. Since the Buddha was a very systematic and practical thinker, coherence offers another strong constraint on interpretation.

“Field testing” occurs through the actual “practice” of a particular candidate interpretation of *Dhamma*. The Buddha made abundantly clear that the *Dhamma* is to be “verified by the wise” and instructs us to “come and see,” and so we do. In fact, the purpose of *satipaṭṭhāna*, in particular, is to support such experiential verification of *Dhamma*. It follows that the Buddhist adept, accomplished in practice, will be in an especially good position to evaluate viable interpretations in terms of practice experience, in fact, in a far better position to witness this shining through than the mere scholar. The adept is like the jigsaw enthusiast who has actually been *on* the Golden Gate Bridge, who is already familiar with its features and the contours of the landscape and sea-scape around it. Field testing is an essential, ultimate constraint on interpretations, that might otherwise easily result solely from scholastic cleverness.

Finally, “cognitive viability” asks that our interpretation makes sense in terms of what is independently known about how the human mind works. When we practice *samādhi*, when we gain insight into non-self and impermanence, when we gain independence from crippling attachments, or when the most progressed among us attain awakening, it must be within the capabilities of human cognition. As an erstwhile cognitive scientist, I bring a useful degree of erudition to the table in this regard, alongside great admiration for possibly the

world's first cognitive scientist: the Buddha.

My experience has been that the constraint of cognitive viability, in fact, *expands* as well as *limits* the scope of possible interpretations; the reason is that we tend to underestimate the capabilities of human cognition. I have found that a cognitive perspective seems to have been particularly productive for understanding what is going on in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. For instance, *Dhamma* practice is about acquiring and applying skills: effectively it teaches us to become "a virtuoso of virtue," "a wizard of wisdom," and "a master of maturation [*bhāvanā*]." Modern research tells us that skill acquisition and training are largely a matter of "internalization" of previously explicit conceptual know-how so that it becomes spontaneous, effortless, intuitive, quick and quiet. A virtuoso pianist does not think, but lets the music simply arise through her, as if in a trance. This helps us understand the how the silence of the *jhānas* helps, rather than hinders, acquiring the wisdom of the Buddha.

How to read this book

The six chapters in this book qualify as independent essays on the same broad theme. They can be read selectively, and in any order. However, they are integrated in that any topic raised in a cursory manner in one is often treated from a different perspective or with more detail in another, so that the reader can easily explore any such topic more fully as it is encountered. I've provided appropriate references by chapter and section number, for instance, 'See 5.4.2.' The zero in '6.0,' would refer to the introductory text (before 6.1) of chapter 6. The glossary at the end of the book also provides such references.

Sutta references follow common standards, such that "AN 5.26 iii 21," for instance, refers to *Sutta* 26 in the "Fives" chapter of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, and specifically to a passage that appears on page 21 of volume three of the Pali Text Society's (PTS) edition of this *Nikāya*. The text of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* found as an appendix includes the PTS numeration within MN 10.

I've introduced a novel notation to abbreviate pericopes, which I think will make them easier to sort out. A "pericope" is a series of almost identical passages among which alternative words or phrases fill certain "slots" in a common "matrix." Highly redundant, they are generally abbreviated by translators, often in confusing ways. The following is the first instance in a pericope series in the notation advanced here:

> One remembers to abandon wrong |view| and to enter and remain in right |view|: This is one's right recollection. (MN 117 iii 72-76)

The filled slots in the common matrix are marked as "|…|." We simply note these slots are alternatively filled with |intention|, |speech|, |action| and

|livelihood| to reproduce the complete series of five clauses.

Typographical error reports are appreciated.
Please sent to bhikkhu.cintita@gmail.com.

Overview of the chapters

The chapters of *Rethinking satipaṭṭhāna* are as follows:

1. **A back-roads tour of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.** The *Sutta* is a practice tutorial consisting of a series of exercises between a short introduction and a short conclusion. This chapter is a brief but comprehensive overview of the intricacies of the *Sutta*.

2. **The *satipaṭṭhāna* standards.** The phrase "ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world," which occurs at the beginning of the *Sutta*, is intended to ensure full "skillful engagement," potentially in any practice task, even outside of Buddhist practice. I argue that "right recollection" (*sammā sati*) is simply the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards applied to the practice of *Dhamma*.

3. **The miracle of *samādhi*.** *Samādhi* is a natural phenomenon through which the cognitive and affective functions of the mind are progressively narrowed to rely almost exclusively on internalized, effortless, implicit, or intuitive application of skills in the performance of a task. Its fruits are clarity, insight, knowledge and vision of things as they are, which lead ultimately to liberation.

4. ***Sati* no longer means 'mindfulness.'** The word 'mindfulness' has come to designate something in popular usage that was not intended when the early scholar Rhys Davids aptly adopted it in 1881 to translate the Pali *sati* in the context of *sampajaññā*. This translation has outlived its usefulness in serious scholarship.

5. **Major themes of *satipaṭṭhāna* investigation.** *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice "verifies" and "internalizes" specific *dhamma* teachings in terms of direct experience. This chapter provides a brief account of the various teachings referred to in the twenty-one exercises of *Sutta*, the conceptual understandings of which are necessary for successful *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.

6. **The *jhānas*: *Dhamma* made easy.** The account offered in these chapters of right recollection, of right *samādhi* and particularly of the role of the *jhānas* in Buddhist practice is shown to cohere with, and also significantly to be explained by, modern research within the cognitive sciences, particularly in skill acquisition, positive psychology, and dual-

level processing.

A companion volume. *Satipaṭṭhāna Rethought: a meditation manual based on earliest Buddhist texts* is a nuts-and-bolts meditation guide based on the more theoretical account presented here.

Acknowledgments

The influence of many great practitioners, scholars and teachers are found in these pages. I began serious systematic, scholarly examination of *satipaṭṭhāna* and *samādhi* sometime in 2021, shortly after finishing my book *Dependent Coarising*. Since then I've posted articles and podcasts online on these practices. *Rethinking* is built on a rich literature, and benefited further from early exchanges with Ven. Kumāra (Malaysia), Ven. Sunyo (Australia) and other contributors to the Discuss and Discover forum at Sutta Central, Leigh Brasington and Happy Heilman (Tennessee). Of course, any errors found here are my own.

I began adapting the methods of my own sitting practice as I reached various conclusions, and last spring produced practice manual, *Satipaṭṭhāna Rethought: a meditation manual based on earliest Buddhist texts*. A number of pioneers had also begun adapting these methods in their own practice, particularly Alan Penton, Bruce Sebecke, John Tohkubbi, and Scott Conn. I offered my first *Satipaṭṭhāna* Retreat for about sixty participants at the American Bodhi Center in Hempstead, Texas on May 24-27, 2024. I am grateful to the staff and supporters of Jade Buddha Temple in Houston who made this retreat possible, particularly to Lee-Wen Teh, who handled the logistics, and to Lee Olsen who served as my participant-assistant.

I received much feedback from retreat participants concerning the methods recommended in my research, both during the retreat in private interviews and in Q&A after my talks. I have also continued to benefit from ongoing discussions with a number of people during the last few months, particularly with Cory Provost, the aforementioned Scott and Lee, and Harry Adams. Reports on the efficacy of these methods in their practice has been gratifying.

*Rethoug*ht and *Rethinking* are companion volumes. The small manual is a hands-on presentation based on the various scholarly writings produced up to that time. In return, chapter 5 of the current book, "Major themes of *satipaṭṭhāna* investigation," is a scholarly distillation and reworking of *Satipaṭṭhāna Rethought*. Ven. Ñāṇadhammiko, as a colleague here in Minnesota, served admirably as proofreader for the manual. Abdul Kalam (as arranged by my student Jan Naidu) designed the cover of *Rethought*. I decided to use the same cover design for *Rethinking* with minor modifications, and managed to recruit three volunteer proofreaders: Colleen Kastanek, Bruce

Sebecke and Tiffany Determan. Colleen has been particularly instrumental, at a professional level, for improving the consistency of the style of the current book. The completion of *Rethinking*, along with ongoing feedback, will call for an updated edition of *Rethought* in the near future.

As a monk, I live in constant gratitude toward many monastery donors—during the course of this project I've dwelt at the Sitagu Dhamma Vihara in Minnesota, at the Sitagu Buddha Vihara in Austin, Texas, and at the Buddhist Temple in Nashville, Tennessee. The assurance of material support allows me to undertake projects such as this at will, in the absence of a salary or academic grant support. Additionally, the monks with which I live maintain a harmonious, uplifting and supportive environment in which to pursue meditation, study and writing.

May these teachings be a way to pay forward the generosity of those who have supported this project in one way or another, and may their merit be a causal factor in their awakening. *Idaṁ me puññaṁ bodhiñāṇassa paccayo hotu.*

Bhikkhu Cintita
Chisago City, MN
January, 2025

1. A back-roads tour of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) is a practice tutorial. It describes a practice of contemplating *Dhamma* in terms of direct experience through a series of exercises, which are grouped under the four thematic categories of body, impressions (*vedanā*), mind, and *dhammas*. Their purpose is to develop "right view," whereby individual *Dhammic* teachings are verified in experience, familiarized and internalized, such that *Dhamma* becomes ultimately a matter of direct perception or behavioral response, 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 "maturation" (*bhāvana*) factors of right effort, right recollection (*sati*) and right *samādhi*, for that final push toward liberation.

This chapter describes the ins and outs of the central text of the Pali *sati-paṭṭhāna* literature, the Pali *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (aka "the *Sutta,"* which appears as an appendix). We will compare the parallel versions of other schools and related discourses as we go.

1.1. The opening of the *Sutta*

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*, the 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 ultimate importance in the attainment of awakening, but keep in mind that it is not capable in itself of fulfilling that goal. Rather it is a near-final step on a very long path of practice, with many prerequisites. For instance, in the *Saṁyutta Nikāya* we have:

> Then, *bhikkhu*, when your virtue is well purified and your view straight, based upon virtue, established upon virtue, *then* you should develop the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in a threefold way.[1] (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, deal with restless children and tank up multiple times, before we reach a point where the garage door will actually respond to a thumb's touch.[2]

> What are the four? Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides impression-contemplating among the impressions, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides mind-contemplating in the mind, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas*, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

This paragraph lays out two intersecting schemes, which I call "the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards" and "*satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations" per se. The contemplations, also referred to in the literature as "the four *satipaṭṭhānas*" are as follows:

(1) body-contemplation in the body, …
(2) impression-contemplation among the impressions, …
(3) mind-contemplation in the mind, …
(4) *dhamma*-contemplation among the *dhammas* …

We will see that contemplation in *satipaṭṭhāna* is also accurately described as "investigation" (*vicaya*); it is quite active (see 1.5.2 below).

The *satipaṭṭhāna* standards ensure full "skillful engagement" in the practice of investigation by one who is:

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1. The three ways are "internally," "externally," and "both internally and externally," which we will describe in 1.6 below.

2. See 4.6 on the danger of neglecting prerequisite practices.

(1) ardent,
(2) discerning,
(3) recollective,[3] and
(4) "having put away covetousness and grief for the world."

"Discernment" and "recollection" form the engine of investigation, in which we investigate and discern experiential "observables" (for instance, physical sensations identified as breath) in terms of "recollected" *Dhamma* (for instance, teachings on impermanence). Just as recollection brings *Dhamma* to mind and keeps it there to guide investigation, so investigation improves our understanding of *Dhamma*.

In fact *Dhamma* teachings start out as "know-what," but are internalized as "know-how" as we first "verify" the *Dhamma* in the observables, then come to perceive the *Dhamma* as integral to the variables and ultimately see the world as *Dhamma*. I'll often use "know-how" as a blanket term for both, so that we might say that the object of recollection is, properly speaking, "*Dhammic* know-how." The recollected "know-how" represents a kind of growing skill in the task of investigation.

"Ardency" provides the energy or enthusiasm that keeps us engaged. Controlling "covetousness and grief" is also known as "seclusion," a narrowing and stabilizing of the scope of attention through keeping the five hindrances at bay, so that we are not distracted from the practice task. Ardency and seclusion together achieve utmost "attentiveness" or "engagement" in the practice task.[4]

1.2. The exercises

Twenty-one targeted exercises organized as **"**the four *satipaṭṭhānas* form the bulk of the *Sutta*, sandwiched between the opening and the conclusion. Each exercise has two parts:

(1) a unique "signature exercise" and
(2) a variant of the common "refrain."

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3. 'Mindfulness' is the customary translation of the Pali*sati*. 'Recollection' is a literal translation. 'Mindfulness' commonly denotes a reduced twentieth century derivative of "skillful engagement" (see chapter 4).

4. See 2.1 for more details on these four standards, and chapter 2 overall for the profound roles these standards play in the maturation of practice.

The exercises are as follows:

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

The signature exercise identifies experiential "observables," such as qualities of breath.[5] It may or may not identify particular "Dhamma teachings" to be verified in terms of those observables. The refrain uniformly identifies a small but critical set of teachings."

1.2.1. Signature exercises. The twenty-one signature exercises are cited in the *Sutta* in the appendix, but here, to save flipping, is an initial example:

> Again, *bhikkhus*, when walking, a *bhikkhu* discerns, "I am walking." When standing, he discerns, "I am standing." When sitting, he discerns, "I am sitting." When lying down, he discerns, "I am lying down." Or he discerns accordingly however his body is disposed.

This passage serves only to identify observables, in this case bodily movements and postures. These are to be investigated in terms of the *Dhamma* teachings cited in the refrain. Notice that this particular exercise probably takes place *outside* of the expected conventional "on the cushion" meditative context, where most exercises can be performed.

Notice also that the observables of this passage are physically present in the practice situation. This is not always the case, for observables are quite often brought into awareness through "visualization," as in the following signature exercise:

> 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."

Direct "visualization" of an "observable" seems like a bit of a stretch, but makes sense if we are confident that such things are in fact directly present in

5. See 5.1 for a detailed discussion of observables

other practice situations. In this case, we take for granted that a corpse in a charnel ground would at least sometimes be as we visualize it. Once again, this signature exercise identifies observables (allowing the stretched sense), but is notably short on references to *Dhamma*. In contrast, each of the *dhamma exercises* of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* identifies a well-established, clearly named and general complex teaching. The observables to which it applies are implicit in the teaching. For instance,

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

The "aggregates of appropriation" is a teaching expounded in many places in the early texts. The practitioner will become increasingly familiar with this teaching with repeated practice of this exercise, and as a result, what is brought to mind will be a progressively more "internalized" rendering of the teaching.[6]

We should also note that the very first exercise (on breath) provides additional information not found in the subsequent exercises. Most importantly, it describes the establishment of a meditation context optimally supportive of the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards, and conducive to the practice of most (but not all) of the other exercises as well:

> Here a *bhikkhu*, 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, recollectively attending to what is in front. Recollective, he breathes in, recollective, he breathes out. …

The phrase '… recollectively attending to what is in front' translates *parimukhaṁ* [in-front] *satiṁ* [recollection'] *upaṭṭhapetvā* [having attended to], which summarizes the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards.[7] 'What is in front' are the relevant observables which are discerned in terms of recollected *Dhamma*

6. "Internalization" turns "know-what" into "know-how" and eventually integrates it into the whole of memory. This is basic to acquiring the "skill" of *Dhamma*. See 6.3.2 for further discussion.

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

teaching in the practice of the particular exercise. “Attentiveness” in skilled engagement is achieved through discernment, ardency and seclusion.

1.2.2. The refrain. The refrain found in the body exercises is as follows (the refrain for the other three *satipaṭṭhānas* makes appropriate substitutions):

(1) In this way (a) he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, or (b) he abides body-contemplating in the body externally, or (c) he abides body-contemplating in the body both internally and externally.

(2) He abides contemplating in the body the nature of origination, or he abides contemplating in the body the nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in the body the nature of both origination and vanishing.

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

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

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

The refrain describes a specific mode of *Dhammic* analysis directed toward verifying and internalizing the foundational teachings of the “three signs” (*tilakkhaṇa*) of non-self, impermanence and suffering. Since there is little *Dhammic* content in many of the signature exercises themselves, we see that the three signs are the dominant (but far from only) *Dhamma* teaching verified and internalized in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.

Clause (1) has to do with “non-self.” It offers us three ways of undertaking the preceding signature exercise: (a) puts aside the self in favor of investigating the direct observables (“internally”), (b) investigates the experience of “the self” (“externally”), and (c) tries to reconcile the self with the direct observables. The self is a non-observable but “presumed” factor that is investigated in the *Sutta* in terms of its three “facets,” each of which is potentially identified with “the self”:

(1) my body,
(2) my consciousness,[8]
(3) my mind.

We discuss the investigation of non-self in 1.6 below.

Clause (2) directs us to investigate bodily observables in terms of “conditionality” and “impermanence.” It is the basis of exploring subtle contingencies, and is also the topic of 5.2.

8. The single exercise of the second *satipaṭṭhāna* refers specifically to “impressions” (*vedanā*), but generalizes to “consciousness,” as explained in 5.4.

Clause (3) acknowledges the practical usefulness of the fabrication of the self (in its body facet) to be used when it is useful. This is explained in 5.5.1.

Clause (4) describes the fulfillment of the conditions for ending suffering. The refrain as a whole is clearly about the foundational "three signs" teaching of "impermanence," "suffering," and "non-self." However, the reference to suffering here is indirect and cursory, alluding optimistically to its *resolution* in non-clinging.

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

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

1.3. The concluding message of the *Sutta*

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* ends on a positive note:

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

The humorous equivocation here might be partially explained in terms of the variation in how much progress the individual *bhikkhu* has made in the prerequisite factors of the path (the virtue and wisdom factors) prior to

beginning *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, as well as in the level of ardency and talent he brings in applying the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards in *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation.

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

This echos the opening of the *Sutta*. The *Sutta* concludes:

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

… as they virtually always were.

1.4. The correlates of the *Sutta*

The *Sutta* I have been citing is the Pali version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10). The Pali tradition also includes many shorter, related "*satipaṭṭhāna* discourses" primarily in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-saṁyutta* (SN 47) and in the *Anuruddha-saṁyutta* (SN 52). The middle-length *Ānāpānasati* (MN 118) and the *Kāyagatāsati* (MN 119) *Suttas* also share thematic content with the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Parallel texts were likewise transmitted in other early historical sects and then collected after translation into the Chinese canon: Correlates of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* are found both in the Chinese *Madhyama Āgama* (which derives from the early Sarvāstivāda sect) and in the Chinese *Ekottarika Āgama* (which possibly derives from the early Mahāsaṅghika sect).[9] The *Saṃyukta Āgama* (also from the Sarvāstivāda sect) contains a division parallel to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-saṁyutta.*

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and its parallels are widely considered a later addition to the early Buddhist literature, possibly 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 the *Aṅguttara Nikāya,* and comparative evidence suggests complex historical development,[10] since its parallels from other traditions differ significantly in structure and content. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta,* along with its parallel versions, has been

9. Translations into English from the Chinese Canon are found in the appendices of Kuan (2008).

10. Kuan (2008, pp. 112, 133, and chapter 5).

called a "poorly organized" late compilation.[11] I emphatically disagree with the claim of poor organization. The *Sutta* is coherent in almost all of its details, and is highly consistent with the body of early teachings. This should be evident by the end of this chapter. I further note that the various correlates share in common:[12]

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

However, these may be found in structurally different places in the different variants. For instance, the three-fold mode of analysis is found more commonly in the introductory passage of a given discourse. For instance, in the *Saṁyutta Nikāya* we have:

> Here, *bhikkhu*, dwell body-contemplating in the body internally, ardent, discerning, recollective, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world, Dwell body-contemplating in the body externally … Dwell body-contemplating in the body internally and externally … Dwell impression-contemplating among the impressions … (SN 47.3)

Furthermore, I note also that the various correlates tend to share the integration of *samādhi* as an essential factor in *satipaṭṭāna*.

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

For instance, each of the four *satipaṭṭānas* in turn is similarly demonstrated to fulfill the seven awakening factors in the foundational *Ānāpānasati Sutta*,[13] which includes *samādhi*.

Although the Theravāda *Satipaṭṭāna Sutta* itself does not highlight this role of *samādhi* (except locally within the awakening factors exercise), many of the other Theravāda correlates routinely refer to *samādhi* as a factor of *satipaṭṭhāna*. For instance, in the *Saṁyutta Nikāya* we have:

> Come, friends, dwell body-contemplating in the body, ardent, discerning, unified, with limpid mind, in *samādhi*, with one-centered

11. Sujāto (2012, p. 133).

12. Sujāto (2012, pp. 190, 193, 204).

13. MN 118 iii 85-7.

> mind, in order to know body as it really is. Dwell impression-contemplating among the impressions . . . Dwell mind-contemplating in the mind . . . Dwell *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas*, ardent, discerning, equipoised, with limpid mind, in *samādhi*, with one-centered mind, in order to know *dhammas* as they really are. (SN 47.4)

'In *samādhi*' translates the participle form (*samāhitā*) of *samādhi*. 'Equipoised' (*ekodibhūtā*) and 'one-centered' (*ekagga*) are *jhāna* factors (see 3.3).

Nonetheless, the *Sutta* and its parallels differ markedly in their repertoire of exercises in the "body-contemplation" and "*dhamma*-contemplation" sections.[14] Of the two parallel versions of the *Sutta*, the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the *Ekottarika Āgama* versions, only the anatomical parts, elements and corpse exercises are common to both body sections, and only the awakening factors and hindrances are common to both *dhamma* sections.

This sectarian variation has been explained 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* but not *subtracting* exercises.[15] However, the assumption that the evolution of sectarian variants, in general, traces back to singular proto-discourses has been questioned,[16] and I would also point out that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is of a special nature that makes it highly unlikely that the texts evolved 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, and probably by many voices. As with a math tutorial, the range of exercises would likely have been unbounded. It is hard to imagine that it would not diversify into many variants in just this way, right from the beginning, as teachers compose new exercises based on underlying principles. I suggest that early variants of this tutorial opened up to an *inclusive* or *open-ended* range of exercises, rather than the handful of exercises that these venerable scholars suggest.

Moreover, since the *satipaṭṭhāna* is concerned with verifying and internalizing *Dhamma* teachings, and there are innumerable *Dhamma* teachings in the early texts, it would be surprising if the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, in particular, were not

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

15. Sujāto (2012, p. 140) and Anālayo (2014, p. 176).

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

in principle flooded with qualifying exercises. Essentially, any *Dhamma* teaching that might in principle be verified in observable experience should be a potential candidate for *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation.

1.5. *Satipaṭṭhāna* as development of right view

In the remaining sections of this chapter I look at the logic of *satipaṭṭhāna*: its function and how it fulfills that function. Although it is often identified with right recollection (*sati*), I argue that the function of *satipaṭṭhāna* is to develop right view in investigating and internalizing *Dhamma* teachings through verification in observable experience. It makes critical use of the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards and the *jhānas* in order to fulfill that function. I make a complementary argument in 2.4 that *satipaṭṭhāna* should not be identified with right recollection, though right recollection does incorporate the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards.

The development of "right view" (*sammādiṭṭhi*) begins with a conceptual exposure to the *Dhamma*, acquired and remembered through *hearing* or (in later centuries) *reading* the *Dhamma*. This is followed by stages of reflection and contemplation necessary to make sense of the *Dhamma*, and to verify it in practice. Right view is ultimately internalized and woven into the fabric of experience, so that in the end *Dhamma* becomes how we perceive and act spontaneously in our experiential world. When developed to perfection, right view becomes "knowledge and vision" (*ñāṇadassanā*), a precursor to awakening. Through the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* we learn to see through the eyes of the Buddha.[17] Let's examine two teachings that place *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation into this broader process of developing right view: the "five stages of liberation" and the "seven awakening factors."

1.5.1. The five stages of liberation. Developing proficiency in right view is laid out systematically by the Buddha in five steps in the *Stages of Liberation Sutta*.[18]

> (1) Here, bhikkhus, the Teacher or a fellow bhikkhu in the position of a teacher teaches [a/the] *Dhamma* to a *bhikkhu*. In whatever way the Teacher or that fellow *bhikkhu* in the position of a teacher teaches the *Dhamma* to the *bhikkhu*, … (AN 5.26 iii 21)

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. The refrain

17. Shulman (2014, pp. 105-8, 152).

18. *Vimuttāyatana Sutta*. AN 5.26, DN 33 iii 241-2 is similar.

repeated at each stage actually begins mid-sentence:

> … in just that way he experiences inspiration in the meaning and inspiration in the *Dhamma*. As he does so, delight arises in him. When he is delighted, rapture arises. For one with a rapturous mind, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body feels pleasure. For one feeling pleasure, the mind attains *samādhi*. This is the |first|second|third|…| 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)

What may surprise some readers is the arising of *samādhi* in the refrain simply through recitation with others. Section 3.2 documents the rarely recognized ubiquitousness of *samādhi* in the early texts in conjunction with a wide variety of practices.[19] The last sentence of the refrain describes liberation, which is the goal of the five stages as a whole, and which is equivalent to the goal of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation.

> (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 iii 21-2)

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 supplementary 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 iii 22)

Now he recites the teaching 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*

19. Rote recitation is a primary basis of meditation for most Burmese monastics today.

> 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 iii 22-3)

He is doing some serious pondering: he 'thinks about, deliberates, and mentally inspects' (*anuvitakketi anuvicāreti manasānupekkhati*) the teaching under consideration. This is the point at which what he is doing begins to align with *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation. The wording here is significant, since thinking and deliberation (*vitakka-vicāra*) characterize the first *jhāna*, but not deeper *jhānas*.[20] This is "discursive thinking," and the *samādhi* attained in the refrain is therefore likely to be limited to the first *jhāna*.[21]

It is elsewhere declared that there are three kinds of wisdom: based on hearing (*sutamayā paññā*), on reflection (*cintāmayā paññā*), and on maturation (*bhāvanāmayā paññā*).[22] The first two have been nurtured so far, the third comes in the final stage:

> (5) Again, he has grasped well a certain theme [*nimitta*] 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 iii 23-4)

At this final stage, *satipaṭṭhāna* investigation is evident and it has clearly taken us into *samādhi*. However, given that there is no longer a reference to *vitakka-vicāra*, it has presumably taken us into the deeper (second to fourth) *jhānas*, where certain cognitive faculties are curtailed.[23] Notice that the teaching that is the theme of study and of contemplation has become a "theme of *samādhi*" (*samādhi-nimitta*, see 3.2, 6.1.2). This accords with the statement:

> The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are the theme of *samādhi*. (MN 44 i 301)

This locates the theme of *samādhi* within the realm of body, impressions, mind, and *dhammas*. Continued contemplation and insight are critically dependent on the deeper *jhānas* in order to penetrate the *Dhamma* and to

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20. Such "*jhāna* factors" are detailed in 3.3 and 6.4.

21. See 3.3.

22. DN 33 iii 219.

23. On curtailment see 3.3.0 and 6.1.3.

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

What has been achieved in this final stage of liberation? "Knowledge and vision" here is assuredly the result of discernment in dependence on recollected know-how. This is repeated with regard to |impression-contemplating among the impressions|, |mind-contemplating in the mind|, and |*dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas*|. Mastery of right view has now been developed through the five stages of liberation, from memorized scripture by rote, to something penetrated with wisdom. *Dhamma* has been internalized, where it has become intuitive, spontaneous and effortlessly applicable. The teaching has been integrated into a wide fabric of experience and internalized to the point that we implicitly perceive effectively through the eyes of the Buddha.[24] These belong to the maturation of right view.

1.5.2. 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:

> recollection → *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 teaching and thinks it over. Whenever, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* dwelling thus withdrawn recollects that teaching and thinks it over, on that occasion the awakening factor of recollection is aroused by the *bhikkhu*; on that

24. See 6.3.2 on internalization.

> occasion the *bhikkhu* develops the awakening factor of *recollection*; on that occasion the awakening factor of *recollection* comes to fulfillment by development in the *bhikkhu*. (SN 46.3)

"Recollection" (*sati*) brings the level of know-how acquired for a particular teaching to mind. This is the same teaching that was carried through the stages of liberation. As the first awakening factor, *sati* brings "that teaching" (*taṁ dhammaṁ*) to mind at whatever level of proficiency has been developed in regard to that teaching. The *Virtue Sutta*[25] continues:

> Dwelling thus, he examines that teaching 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*) corresponds to the fourth stage of liberation, and is, in fact, none other than *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation.

> While he discriminates that teaching 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)

This is ardency. With energy and seclusion we have fulfilled the requirements of the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards, and we are skillfully engaged in the practice. The awakening factors continue by itemizing antecedent factors leading to *samādhi*:

> → rapture → tranquility → *samādhi*

In both the stages of liberation and the awakening factors, examination is carried into *samādhi*, the insight factory in which that teaching is turned to wisdom.[26]

1.5.3. *Dhamma*-contemplation as the general case. Surely, the five stages of liberation and the seven awakening factors offer an open invitation to subject any teaching to this process, insofar as it admits of identifiable observables. In

25. See also MN 10 i 61-2 (the *Sutta* in the appendix) and the *suttas* in SN 46.

26. See 3.1.3 for discussion of the significance of this progression.

fact, verification in terms of observable experience is a general quality of the *Dhamma* across the board:

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

The claim that the fourth *satipaṭṭāna* is restricted to a limited set of teachings is unwarranted. There is no reason to doubt that the five *dhamma* exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* are but representative members of a large, open-ended set,[27] as are the alternative sets described in the Chinese *Āgama* parallels.

I conclude that *satipaṭṭhāna* is a development of right view.

1.6. Investigating non-self

The refrain as a whole is rich in *Dhamma*, for it brings to bear the foundational teachings of the "three signs" (*tilakkhaṇa*) of non-self, impermanence and suffering. The refrain does not mention "self" or "non-self" directly, and so it is easy to miss the degree to which *satipaṭṭhāna* is about non-self. In fact, this is the topic of clause (1) of the refrain, which introduces a "three-fold mode of analysis."

(1) In this way
  (a) he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, or
  (b) he abides body-contemplating in the body externally, or
  (c) he abides body-contemplating in the body both internally and externally.

In the present account, this describes two fundamental perspectives we might assume when investigating breath, for instance: the "internal" perspective (movements and pressures in the body) and the "external" perspective (the breath or the body or the self as a whole). These are markedly distinct. Although the external is generally preferred by the worldling, *satipaṭṭhāna* practice works for the most part with the internal.

Most of us make a "presumption"[28] that there is a self as a substantial and fixed thing or essence, a "me" that's been there as long as we can remember. We organize our world-view around this presumption, then famously suffer as a result. But we do not directly "observe" that self. To understand the difference, suppose you are lying on the sofa and hear purring behind your

27. Contrary to Sujāto (2012, p. 140) and Anālayo (2014, p. 176).

28. See 5.1 and 5.5.1 for further discussion of presumptions.

head. You directly *observe* the purring, but you only *presume* the cat is there (he probably is) doing the purring. Similarly, as you directly *observe* breath, you tend to *presume* the whole body doing the breathing. Virtually all of us presume a self in this way, along with some additional presumed qualities of that self:

(1) that the self is *permanent*, at least relatively fixed or unchanging,

(2) that the self is *substantial*, and manifests as what is directly observable (as body or mind),

(3) that the self is *conscious*, and stands in relation to the world "out there" in its awareness,

(4) that the self has a degree of *control*, both over its observable manifestations and as an agent acting in the world "out there."

The practice of non-self is to quell (weaken or eliminate) these presumptions. In order to do this, we consider every form of direct observable we can think of that has the potential for verifying the presumption, and then find it wanting. These observables group into three "facets" of the self:

(1) the "body/self,"
(2) the "consciousness/self," and
(3) the "mind/self."

For instance, it is natural to think, "I have a body, therefore I am!" or "I witness the 'world out there,' therefore I am!" or more famously, "I think, therefore I am!"

We notice that these three facets correspond respectively to the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*.[29] The fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* is constituted differently: recall that each exercise of the fourth focuses explicitly on a complex, well-established and clearly named *Dhamma* teaching. However, among the exercises of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, the hindrance and awakening factor exercises could, in principle, be included in the mind *satipaṭṭhāna*, and the aggregates and sense spheres exercises under the consciousness *satipaṭṭhāna* (see 5.3, 5.4). Qualification for membership in the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* is orthogonal to those for membership in the first three: it collects together exercises based on more complex *Dhammic* teachings, many of which in principle (were they simpler)

29. This is not immediately apparent in the case of the second *satipaṭṭhāna,* in which one literally "impression-contemplates" rather than "consciousness-contemplates." However, as 5.4.4 points out, impressions are strongly implicated as conditioning factors of consciousness.

might have been allocated to one of the other *satipaṭṭhānas*.

Let's continue looking at clause (1) of the refrain:

"Internal contemplation" focuses on the direct observables described in the signature exercises, particularly with respect to the nature of origination and vanishing.

"External contemplation" focuses on the presumption of the self in one of its facets, particularly with respect to the presumed qualities of the self listed above.

"Both internal and external contemplation" notes the incongruities that result from holding what is observable and what is presumed in mind at the same time.

The incongruities may be felt intuitively (especially in deeper *jhānas*), but in many cases the Buddha gives us an explicit explanation of the incongruities of both internal and external contemplation.

For instance, the following walks us through one of the incongruities we might discover:

> A pleasant impression is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, bound to decay, to vanish, to fade away, to cease; and so too is a painful impression and a neither pleasant not painful impression. So anyone who, on experiencing a pleasant impression, thinks, "This is my self," must, at the cessation of that pleasant impression think: "My self has gone!" and the same with a painful and a neither pleasant not painful impression. Thus whoever thinks: "impression is my self" is contemplating something in this present life that is impermanent, a mixture of happiness and unhappiness, subject to origination and passing away. Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "impression is my self." (DN 15 ii 66-7).

This passage considers the prospect that impressions are equivalent to the self, and argues that this cannot be. The presumption is unsupported by what is directly observable. Whatever we experience as impressions is always fragmentary, situation-specific, and ever-changing, that is, lacking the substantial fixedness that accompanies the presumption of the self. Similarly, the Buddha argues in terms of lack of control over observables assumed to manifest in the consciousness facet of the self:

> Consciousness is non-self. If consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lend itself to un-ease. It would be possible [to say] with

> regard to consciousness, “Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.” But precisely because consciousness is non-self, consciousness lends itself to un-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to consciousness, “Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.” (SN 22.59)

A more detailed discussion of the analysis performed in the first clause of the refrain is undertaken in 5.5.

1.7. Conclusions

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

The brilliance of *satipaṭṭhāna* is that (once the prerequisite trainings are in place, including a strong foundation in virtue, solid familiarity with *Dhamma*, and an understanding of the *satipaṭṭhāna* framework itself) the daily practice of the exercises is simple, grounded, intuitive, and progressivley effortless as the various *Dhamma* teachings are internalized (see 6.3). It becomes a simple matter of dwelling quietly in *samādhi*, watching the *Dhamma* verify itself in observed experience. Find more about *samādhi* in chapters 3 and 6.

2. *Satipaṭṭhāna* Standards

> *Having spotted the lone rōnin standing on the dusty street, the miscreants arrayed themselves in a show of opposition, with weapons drawn. However, the ten of them together were about to prove no match for Sanjuro. His keen gaze assessed the situation impassively as he approached at a steady pace. When warned to come no closer, he immediately quickened his pace, but with sword still sheathed. When the pistoleer drew and aimed his weapon, Sanjuro shot a hidden dagger through the gunman's wrist, leaped into the fray, and within seconds had dispatched all but one of the men, a young coward whom Sanjuro out of compassion allowed to flee.*[1]

Sanjuro displayed masterful behavior that day that his ten opponents, even collectively, could not match. We might ask, What qualities did he bring into the fray? They certainly would have included ardency, discernment, know-how and composure. Sanjuto's "ardency" might have included a compassionate urgency to protect the innocent and restore justice, a fully internalized moral code, and the intrinsic need to excel in the practice that he had mastered. Sanjuro's "discernment" captured the fine details of the unfolding practice situation, providing a profound degree of perception that was already pregnant with possibilities for action, enabling him to respond instantaneously, precisely, and without thought. Sanjuro's "know-how" was the cumulative fruit of many years of intense training under samurai masters, acquiring the elements of an ancient practice tradition step by step until it had become second nature. This implicit know-how provided the basis of his discernment. Sanjuro's "composure" was the careful management of his cognitive faculties, placing his attention unwavering exactly where it needed to be, and putting aside emotional reactiveness, even concern for his very life. What a guy!

These are the standards that set Sanjuro's manner of "skillful engagement" in the fray apart from his opponents. These same standards are also found well beyond the martial arts. Buddhism is also a practice tradition, but in which the practitioner is skillfully engaged in the pursuit and execution of virtue and wisdom. These same standards of "skillful engagement" are employed by the

1. This is a depiction of the climax of Akira Kurosawa's 1961 film *Yojimbo.*

advanced *satipaṭṭhāna* practitioner as well

2.1. *Satipaṭṭhāna*: practice and standards

In the beginning passage of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* we read:

> Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides impression-contemplating among the impressions, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides mind-contemplating in the mind, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas*, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. (MN 10 i 56)

***2.1.1. Satipaṭṭhāna* practice.** This passage outlines *satipaṭṭhāna* practice in terms of two intersecting schemata. The first is the "four *satipaṭṭhānas,*" outlined in terms of four "themes" of contemplation:

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

The Pali word that I'm translating as 'contemplating,' used throughout the *satipaṭṭhāna*, is a variant of the gerund *anupassanā*, literally 'seeing along' or 'watching.' These four primary practices involve a kind of deep or penetrating seeing of *Dhamma* in terms of direct experience that I will also refer to as "investigation." Here our interest falls on the second schema

***2.1.2. Satipaṭṭhāna* standards.** Full skillful engagement in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice requires of the practitioner:

(1) ardency,
(2) discernment,
(3) recollection, and
(4) putting away covetousness and grief for the world.

We will see in the course of this chapter that these standards also play a role in

the range of virtue and wisdom practices, as well as in *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, and in fact that these standards define the basis of "right recollection" (*sammā sati*). In the meantime, let's look at these critical standards in more detail:

"Ardency" (*ātappa*) is also translated as 'zeal,' or 'exertion.'[2] It is the active energy of Buddhist practice, closely aligned with "right effort" (*sammāvāyāma*),[3] and motivated by Buddhist values and by an untold variety of other factors.

"Discernment" (*sampajañña*) is also translated as 'clear comprehension,' 'watchfulness,' 'alertness' or 'deliberation.' It is an executive function that determines a *Dhammically* apt interpretative or behavioral response to relevant circumstances in the current practice situation and informed by recollection.

"Recollection" (*sati*) is most commonly translated as 'mindfulness.'[4] What is recollected (brought to mind and borne in mind) is the acquired "*Dhammic* know-how" relevant to the practice task. Recollection provides the "skill" of "skillful engagement." Sanjuro's know-how is likewise the object of his recollection.

"Absence of 'covetousness and grief for the world'" limits attention by eliminating worldly self-concern. It is commonly equated with the removal of the "hindrances"[5] and with "seclusion" (*viveka*). Sanjuro's composure likewise began here.

I will most often refer to this standard more tersely as "seclusion." Seclusion is a close precursor of *samādhi* ('composure') (see 3.2, 6.1.2) a further narrowing of attention around the practice task.[6] This is close to Sanjuro's composure.

Recollection provides the practical skill or "know-how" of *Dhamma*. We

2. According to the PTS dictionary.

3. Thanissaro (2012, pp. 2, 13).

4. I deliberately avoid translating *sati* as 'mindfulness,' whose meaning has become corrupted in modern usage (see chapter 4). 'Recollection' is a literal translation of *sati*.

5. Scholars and teachers generally consider that "covetousness and grief for the world" refers to the first two of the five hindrances, and to stand for all five. This makes sense, since each has a potential for reducing skillfulness.

6. See chapters 3 and 6 for a detailed discussion of *samādhi* and the *jhānas* in the context of skilled engagement.

commonly think of *Dhamma* as "know-what," a set of declarative statements about doctrine: standards, values, conceptualizations and systems of thought. However, know-how is practical, procedural, and readily engaged to determine our perceptions and behaviors in practice. Although know-how begins with "know-what," it is developed through training and eventually internalized so that *Dhammic* perception and behaviors eventually become effortless and beyond thought (consider the immediacy and fluidity of Sanjuro's mastery).

"Discernment" is the assessor that draws on know-how to determine the course of engagement under currently unfolding circumstances. These two work intimately together, as reflected in the common occurrence of the compound *sati-sampajañña* ('recollection-discernment') in the early texts.[7] Ardency and seclusion provide utmost "attentiveness" to determine the depth of skillful engagement. I will generally refer to these *satipaṭṭhāna* four standards as constituting "skillful engagement," since its range of applicability (as we will see) is much broader than *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, within Buddhist practice and without.

2.1.3. Acquiring know-how. The standards of skillful engagement optimize performance, whether in *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, in ethical practices, or in non-Buddhist practices such as martial arts. They also optimize the acquisition of further know-how for improved future performance. What is recollected benefits from study, but it particularly improves with repetition and further insight in practice. We "learn by doing" and "practice makes perfect."

The process of acquiring know-how is described repeatedly in the early texts as 'development and training' (*bhāvanā bahulīkammaṁ*). As "development," successful results of discernment become a basis for improved know-how. Through "training" (*bahulīkammaṁ* means literally 'doing a lot'), our know-how across the board is habituated and restructured in memory and thereby "internalized" (see 6.3.2), such that it becomes more automatic and intuitive, requiring less and less thought or deliberation. This gives us the famous "learning curve" that we are all familiar with.

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7. Several scholars have described the function of recollection-discernment in similar terms: Rhys Davids, who aptly translated *sati* as 'mindfulness' fourteen decades ago, noted "the constantly repeated phrase 'mindful and thoughtful' (*sato sampajâno*) … [is] that activity of mind and constant presence of mind which is one of the duties most frequently inculcated on the good Buddhist." Shulman (2014, pp. 112-4) describes *sati* in terms of the fusion of memory and attention, and Thanissaro (2012, pp. 1, 15) in terms of active memory that provides an immediate "framework" for understanding experience and what has to be done in this regard. *Sati* is a faculty of memory that bears in mind the *Dhamma* in a manner relevant to the practitioner's spiritual quest.

Consider, for instance, how a toddler has to give full attention to bumbling around in learning to walk, but how an adult normally walks effortlessly with almost no awareness of the movement of feet and knees. Or consider how you had to give full attention to trying to navigate through traffic while learning to drive, but now drive effortlessly on autopilot, while giving your attention to life's other problems or enjoyments. Skillful engagement optimizes learning of this sort even while it optimizes performance. We begin with the know-what of *Dhamma*, which is presented to us explicitly as values, conceptualizations, procedures, constraints on behavior and so on. Then through practice *Dhamma*-based know-how is "internalized," transformed and packed into an intuitive means of processing.[8]

2.2. The etymology of *satipaṭṭhāna*

Let me point out something that has not been appreciated: *satipaṭṭhāna* refers *literally* to the *standards*, not to the contemplative *practice*, of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The word is a compound of two words:

> *sati* 'recollection' + *upaṭṭhāna* 'attending.'

It might well be translated 'recollection-attentiveness.' Let me explain.

2.2.1. Recollection. *Sati* 'recollection' is one of the four *satipaṭṭhāna* standards introduced above. The Pali word is a derivation of a root meaning 'memory' or 'recollection' and corresponds to the verb *sarati* 'remember' or 'recollect.' The cognate word in Sanskrit, *smṛti*, has a similar meaning and was also commonly used at the time of the Buddha specifically in reference to memory of sacred Brahmanic texts or even to the body of sacred texts itself, which for many centuries were preserved in rote memory before they were committed to palm leaf.[9]

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

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8. See 6.3.2 for discussion of the cognitive mechanics of "internalization."

9. We should not forget that this same practice of rote memorization of scriptures was successfully emulated in the early Buddhist *Saṅgha* as well, apparently uniquely among non-Brahmanical schools. It therefore makes sense that *sati* would have an analogous connotation in the early texts, as recollection of (*Dhammic* or*Vedic*) know-what, if not know-how.

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

As a practical matter, a *Dhamma* teaching is brought to mind as the first awakening factor as the practitioner's associated know-how at its current state of development. This fulfills recollection. The second awakening factor, "investigation of *dhammas,"* then begins to examine how this teaching manifests in present experience. This fulfills discernment. The third factor fulfills ardency and the rest of the series fulfills composure. Recollection based on the *Dhamma* is what we must continually bring to mind and hold in mind in order to practice *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation,[10] or in order to engage in virtually any other Buddhist practice.[11]

Elsewhere the Buddha offers us the following example of recollection:

> Just as the gatekeeper in the king's frontier fortress is wise, recollective, and intelligent, one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances, for protecting its inhabitants and for warding off outsiders, so too a noble disciple is recollective, possessing supreme recollection and discrimination, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. With recollection as his gate-keeper, the noble disciple abandons the unwholesome and develops the wholesome, abandons what is blameworthy and develops what is blameless, and maintains himself in purity. (AN 7.67 iv 110-1)

The gatekeeper performs his occupation by bringing previous know-what and know-how to bear in assessing each person who seeks entry. Aside from any acquired intuition about what constitutes looking suspicious (developed naturally through repeated practice), he will draw on this memory of particular incidents involving particular people that he might now recognize from the (ofttimes distant) past. This is his recollection. The noble disciple is then asked to develop an analogous recollection in *Dhammic* practice in assessing which of his own thoughts and intentions to be kept out and which to be admitted.[12]

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10. In fact, the three beginning awakening factors correspond to the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplative practice.

11. See 1.5.2 on the seven factors of awakening.

12. In SN 48.9 the noble disciple's recollection is described in exactly the same way, including the recollection and bearing in mind of things that were done and said long ago.

Recollected "know-how" is far more important for our purposes than "know-what." Know-how includes not only learned principles that can be put into practice to perform tasks, but also their internalized manifestations, whose application has become automatic and effortless through years of practice, much as years of learning scales and chords manifest in spontaneous movements of the virtuoso's fingertips. In Buddhism, I daresay, our development and training of know-how in practice also marks our progress on the path. In acquired know-how lie the ultimate fruits of our practice, and in recollected know-how lie its immediate applicability.

2.2.2. Recollection-attentiveness. With regard to the second part of the compound *satipaṭṭhāna*, two alternative etymologies have been proposed:

> *sati* 'recollection' + *paṭṭhāna* 'foundation,''establishment,' or
> *sati* 'recollection' + *upaṭṭhāna* 'attending to.'

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

> *pa-* 'forth' + *ṭhāna* 'standing,'

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

> *upa-* 'close' + *ṭhāna* 'standing,'

hence something like 'caring for' or 'attending to.'[13] Most modern scholars seem now to agree that this second analysis is correct[14] for several reasons:

(1) The equivalent of *satipaṭṭhāna* in Sanskrit Buddhist texts is *smṛtyupasthāna*, which is unambiguously built on the cognate of *upaṭṭhāna*, not on that of *paṭṭhāna*.

(2) The gerund form *paṭṭhāna* does not occur by itself in the early Pali texts.

(3) The other inflections of the verb *upaṭṭhahati* routinely occur in association with *sati*, for instance, *upaṭṭhitā sati* ('attentive recollection').

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

13. The PTS dictionary lists "attendance, waiting on, looking after, service, care, ministering."

14. See Anālayo (2007, pp. 29-30). Yet, oddly, most continue to gloss it as 'foundations' or 'establishment.'

this etymology in alternative inflections of cognate terms,

> … *parimukhaṁ satiṁ upaṭṭhapetvā* …
> '… having attended recollectively to what is in front …'[15]

I will translate *upaṭṭhāna* as 'attentiveness,' which connotes a more active degree of engagement than 'attending.' The compound *satipaṭṭhāna* can accordingly be translated literally as 'recollection-attentiveness,' but I will generally leave it untranslated for reasons that will become clear.

Picture a nurse standing close to her patient in order to attend to his needs caringly. She is alert, sensitive and composed. This is *upaṭṭhāna*. In her attentiveness, she brings all of her training and knowledge to bear to the assessment of his needs in order to respond appropriately. This is *sati*. The nurse is skillfully engaged in her profession. Likewise, a Buddhist practitioner sits close to experiential factors in the present practice situation–raw sensations in the eye, the arising of perceptions, of ill-will, and so on–with the same attentiveness. That is *upaṭṭhāna*. In attending to their experiential world, the practitioner brings *Dhammic* know-how to bear in order to interpret experiences and to recognize the conditions by which they arise. This is *sati*. In this way, they skillfully engage in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.

***2.2.3. Satipaṭṭhāna* as 'skillful engagement.'** Notice that the etymology of the compound '*satipaṭṭhāna*' reflects quite closely the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards themselves. Nothing in the term suggests the practice of contemplation (*anupassanā*) as opposed to any other skillful practice. In fact, the phrase "skillful engagement" also reflects the meaning of *satipaṭṭhāna*, albeit not literally: "skillful" is the quality mediated by recollection, and "engagement" is the attentiveness of discernment backed by ardency and seclusion. Nonetheless, in spite of all this, the term *satipaṭṭhāna* is *almost* always used with reference specifically to the *contemplative* practice. This suggest an historical semantic shift of the nominal compound form away from its literal meaning. To avoid confusion, I will clearly distinguish, where appropriate, in what follows, "the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards" from "the *satipaṭṭhāna* (contemplative) practice."

However, the broader applicability of the standards beyond the contemplative practice is illustrated in the following passage:

> And how is recollection its [the spiritual life's] authority?

15. MN 10 i 56. Here, *parimukhaṁ* ('what is up front,' that is, what is thematically relevant to the practice task at hand) is the object of the verb, and *satiṁ* is an adverbial accusative.

> Recollection is internally well-attentive: ‘In just such a way I will *fulfill the training pertaining to good conduct* that I have not yet fulfilled, or assist with wisdom in various respects the training pertaining to good conduct that I have fulfilled.’
>
> …
>
> Recollection is internally well-attentive: ‘In just such a way I will *scrutinize with wisdom the teachings* that I have not yet scrutinized, or assist with wisdom in various respects the *Dhamma* that I have scrutinized. (AN 4.245)

Two distinct tasks are cited here (I’ll put aside two additional tasks in the complete passage, which need not concern us here) to which recollection is attentive: (1) training in good conduct and (2) scrutinizing the *Dhamma*. The first pertains to developing and training “virtue,” and the second pertains to developing and training “wisdom.” The second is also the task of the contemplative practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* itself. The phrase ‘recollection is … well-attentive’ is *sati su-upaṭṭhitā hoti*, part of which is cognate with *satipaṭṭhāna*. This demonstrates that the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards of attentive recollection apply to skillful engagement both in virtue and in wisdom practices. However as noted, the nominal compound *satipaṭṭhāna* is limited to the wisdom practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The samantic shift must have effected only the nominal compound, and not the verbal cognates.

2.2.4. Recollection-discernment. We should note that the compound *satisampajañña* (‘recollection-discernment’) mentioned earlier, seems also to be used to refer to the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards, albeit by including ardency and seclusion only implicitly. The existence of this near-synonym would help explain the semantic shift of *satipaṭṭhāna* away from its literal reference to the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards. ‘Recollection-discernment’ seems to occur widely always in reference to the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards of skillful engagement. It occurs sometimes in wisdom contemplation:

> This is Nanda’s recollection-discernment: Nanda knows impressions as they originate, as they remain present, as they disappear; he knows perceptions as they originate, as they remain present, as they disappear; he knows thoughts as they originate, as they remain present, as they disappear. That is Nanda’s recollection-discernment. (AN 8.9 iv 168)

However, *satisampajañña* occurs most commonly in the early texts in association with virtue practices, where the theoretically equivalent term *satipaṭṭhāna* is noticeably absent. Here it is with shame and conscience:

> *Bhikkhus*, when there is no recollection-discernment, for one deficient in recollection-discernment, shame and conscience lack their proximate cause. (AN 8.81 iv 336)

Here it is with sense restraint:

> Restraint of the sense faculties, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for restraint of the sense faculties? It should be said: recollection-discernment (AN 10.16 v 115)

In short, the term *satisampajañña* refers to the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards (for skillful engagement) as a stand-in for what *satipaṭṭhāna* would otherwise mean literally. The availability of the term *satisampajañña* is likely to have facilitated the semantic shift of the term *satipaṭṭhāna* from its literal to its accepted meaning as the contemplative practice.

2.3. Training in skillful engagement

Skillful engagement is an "auxiliary practice," in that it works to optimize performance and skill acquisition of a "primary practice," but in that it is also a skill in itself, a "skill of skillfulness." An example of a primary practice is (of course) *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, which investigates and internalizes wisdom teachings with the help of the auxiliary *satipaṭṭhāna* standards. I call skillful engagement a "practice" because it is also performed on the basis of acquired know-how and it is possible to improve our know-how by training ourselves through development and training. *Samādhi* is also an "auxiliary practice." A simile in the *Saṁyutta Nikāya* graphically illustrates how training in the skill of skillfulness is accomplished:

> The Blessed One said this: "*Bhikkhus*, suppose that on hearing, 'The most beautiful girl of the land! The most beautiful girl of the land!' a great crowd of people would assemble. Now that most beautiful girl of the land would dance exquisitely and sing exquisitely. On hearing, 'The most beautiful girl of the land is dancing! The most beautiful girl of the land is singing!' an even larger crowd of people would assemble. Then a man would come along, wishing to live, not wishing to die, wishing for happiness, averse to suffering. Someone would say to him: 'Good man, you must carry around this bowl of oil filled to the brim between the crowd and the most beautiful girl of the land. A man with a drawn sword will be following right behind you, and wherever you spill even a little of it, right there he will fell your head.' What do you think, *bhikkhus*, would that man stop attending to that bowl of oil and out of negligence turn his attention outwards?"

> "No, venerable sir." (SN 47.20)

The task to be performed here is that of carrying the bowl without spilling a drop of oil. However, we can see each of the factors of skillful engagement fully at work: the sword represents ardency and the girl represents a potential challenge to seclusion. Discernment and recollection are represented by the task of keeping the oil in the bowl. Although the scope of the man's attention must be very broad, it must at the same time be sharply circumscribed: by all means it must strictly *exclude* the girl dancing and singing, for she could easily become a fatal distraction. Although the basis for ardency is "wishing to live, not wishing to die," the hindrance of fear must also be put aside, alongside the hindrance of lust.

What is recollected in this simile is not *Dhammic*, it is the know-how concerning subtle movements of the body, particularly in walking. Most of this know-how was certainly internalized long ago, and therefore not commonly brought to attention. However, in this instance, the skill of movement must be brought to mind. Why? Because each movement must be monitored by discernment with care and deliberation, for any careless lapse in control of a single movement might be fatal, and movements are conditioned by many random factors: the movements of the various people present, potentials for being bumped, the reliability of walking surfaces, the improper placement of any step, down to the potentially fatal effects of a gust of wind.

The discourse concludes:

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

This conclusion is striking. It recommends training in recollection-attentiveness itself, through choosing physical tasks connected with the body and then skillful engaging in those tasks, attentive to details as if our life depended on it. Developing and training 'recollection directed to the body' (*kāyagatā sati*), making it our vehicle, making it our basis, stabilizing it, exercising ourselves in it, and fully perfecting it, is an effective way to train our skills in the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards. By extension, we might do something similar to whatever task we undertake, not only to tasks defined by *Dhamma*, and not necessarily to tasks having to do with the body. The preference for the body is

echoed in another *sutta*:

> … one thing, when developed and trained, leads to recollection-discernment … What is that one thing? Recollection directed to the body. (AN 1.276)

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

> And how, great king, is the *bhikkhu* endowed with recollection-discernment? Herein, great king, in going forward and returning, the *bhikkhu* acts with discernment. In looking ahead and looking aside, he acts with discernment. In bending and stretching the limbs, he acts with discernment. In wearing his robes and cloak and using his alms-bowl, he acts with discernment. In eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting, he acts with discernment. In defecating and urinating, he acts with discernment. In going, standing, sitting, lying down, waking up, speaking, and remaining silent, he acts with discernment. In this way, great king, the *bhikkhu* is endowed with recollection-discernment.[16] (DN 2 i 70-1)

The challenge of this practice is that the *bhikkhu* is already so masterful in these observable routine activities that they require little effort and rarely any thought or attention. Under these conditions, the attention of the untutored worldling would normally be scattered. Yet, even without the urgency of the previous example, the *bhikkhu* is asked to elevate what is normally overlooked into explicit attention. That is where the challenge lies, in maintaining attentiveness anyway, where know-how is so great that the task is otherwise devoid of challenge.[17] This requires narrowing attention and stilling the mind (see 6.3.2, 6.5.3).

2.4. Right recollection

“Right recollection” (*sammā sati*) is the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path. In this chapter we’ve managed to look at recollection (*sati*) itself, as well

16. This passage also shows up almost word for word as an exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself, at MN 10 i 57, but (given the following refrain) as a basis for contemplating the *Dhamma* teachings of impermanence and non-self.

17. Notice that this practice of recollection directed to the body looks a lot like what is often called “everyday mindfulness” by Nhat Hanh (1975) .

as its progressive enhancements as recollection-discernment (*satisampajañña*), as the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards (skillful engagement) and finally as the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplative practice. We would hope that right recollection would correspond in the Buddhist context to one of these degrees of elaboration, if not to the root concept of recollection itself.

I will suggest here that right recollection is, in fact, the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards (recollection-attentiveness or skillful engagement) applied to properly understood and internalized *Dhammic* know-how. But to reach that conclusion, we must first look at two alternative and seemingly inconsistent ways in which right recollection is described in the early texts. The first is as something that runs and circles around the other factors of the path. The second is as the "four *satipaṭṭhānas*" themselves.

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

> Right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong |action| as wrong action, and right |action| as right |action|. … One tries to abandon wrong |action| and to enter into right |action|: This is one's right effort. One remembers to abandon wrong |action| and to enter and remain in right |action|: This is one's right recollection. Thus these three factors–right view, right effort, and right recollection–run and circle around right |action|. (MN 117 iii 72-76)

This passage is stated verbatim for each of the first five factors of the noble eightfold path: |view|, |intention|, |speech| |action| and |livelihood|. The path practices in which we gain know-how fall under the categories of wisdom (right view and right intention[18]) and virtue (right speech, right action and right livelihood). The "maturation" (*bhāvanā*) factors (right effort, right recollection and right *samādhi*) are not mentioned[19]; they serve as "auxiliary" practices in boosting the efficacy of these five "primary" practices.[20] A wisdom factor and two maturation factors are claimed to run and circle around of the wisdom and

18. *Mettā* meditation is an example of practice in right intention (*sammā saṅkappa*).

19. "Wisdom, virtue and maturation" refer to the three groups of path factors. 'Maturation' (*bhāvanā*) plays the critical role of helping wisdom and virtue develop into an advance stage of maturity or mastery.

20. I claim that *samādhi* is also an "auxiliary practice." In chapters 3 and 6, I argue that this role is tightly aligned with right recollection, fine-tunes seclusion and composure and promotes insight and internalization.

virtue practices. Understanding right recollection in terms of skillful engagement makes perfect sense in this passage:

> **"Right view"** is the primary practice of developing a correct, mature and accessible understanding of the *Dhamma*, which serves as a guide for all of the other path factors. Right view begins with study, and *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation itself is an advanced practice within right view.[21]
>
> **"Right effort"** is the energy that drives actual engagement in a practice, in speech, body and mind, under the guidance of right recollection.

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

> **"Right recollection"** is the intermediate factor between right view and right effort, between the guiding light of *Dhamma* and momentary practice choices. It determines what thought or behavior in the practice situation is *Dhammically* appropriate, then awaits right effort's implementation.

In short, right recollection is *Dhammically* appropriate skillful engagement. For instance, a constant and well-trained faculty of skillful engagement is necessary in making proper ethical choices as we find ourselves repeatedly in morally charged situations, weighing a constellation of factors such as our own motivations, our vows and commitments, the imperative to harmonize with others and do no harm, and our rough calculations of anticipated benefits or harm. With even a momentary lapse in attentiveness, we may fail to act appropriately at the right time.

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

2.4.2. Right recollection and the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. Right recollection is alternatively defined in an oft-repeated formula as follows:

> And what, *bhikkhus*, is right recollection? Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* dwells contemplating |body| in the |body|, ardent, discerning,

21. That *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation belongs to right view is advanced in 1.5.

> recollective, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. **…** This is right recollection. (SN 45.8)

The middle clause is repeated as for |body|, also for |impressions|, |mind| and |*dhammas*|, thereby enumerating the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. This passage appears to equate right recollection specifically with *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplative practice, rather than with the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards of the previous definition. The two definitions seem incongruous. For instance, if right recollection as *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation were to run and circle around right speech, then its task would be *contemplation* of right speech, rather than determining the skillful *performance* of right speech. In fact, among the many contemplative practice exercises found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and other *satipaṭṭhāna* texts, none touches on right speech nor shows interest in any other virtue practices.[22] Nor does the term *satipaṭṭhāna* seem ever to occur anywhere in the early texts in association with ethical practices, like guarding the senses.

2.4.3. Reconciliation. There is a way to reconcile these two seemingly incompatible descriptions of right recollection. Definitions in the early texts are often definitions "by example." For instance, the following defines "perception":

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

Clearly, the four colors are merely representative examples, and are implicitly understood to generalize to orange, green, birds, faces, tastes, harmonious sounds, the moon and so on. Similarly, the following defines "fabrication" (*saṅkhāra*) in its three facets by example:

> Friend Visāka, in-breathing and out-breathing are the bodily fabrication, thought and deliberation are the verbal fabrication, and perception and impression are the mental fabrication. (MN 44 i 301)

I propose that the definition of right recollection as the four *satipaṭṭhānas* is similarly a definition by example. The path practices around which skillful engagement runs includes *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, but alongside a wide range of other path practices, unmentioned in the second definition.

The choice of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplative practice to exemplify right

22. In fact, if Sujāto (2012, pp. 140, 192, 305) and Anālayo (2014, p. 176) are right, the earliest *satipaṭṭhāna* practice would even be limited to a greatly pared down set of wisdom exercises.

recollection in the definition is natural, for it is emblematic of the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards. First, the contemplative practice is utterly dependent on the standards (such that the standards are built into the practice instructions). Second, the contemplative practice commonly provides optimal conditions for the full force of the standards (since you commonly sit in a quiet place while practicing). Third, the contemplative practice opens the standards to immediate inspection (as in contemplation of the seven awakening factors). Even though the standards are broadly applied throughout Buddhist practice, never is it as successfully applied and so vividly apparent as when one is sitting, secluded, under a tree in meditation posture, engaged in *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation. This is why *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is emblematic of right recollection.

The same conditions that make this contemplative practice emblematic for right recollection also help explain the semantic shift of the term *satipaṭṭhāna* from the *standards* to the *practice* as a case of "metonymy," based on the salient association between the standards and this specific practice. We've already seen that the availability of an almost synonymous term for the standards (*satisampajañña*) might also have facilitated the shift.[23] However, we have also seen that the shift is incomplete, in that its non-nominal cognates (e.g., *sati upaṭṭhitā* 'attentive recollection') retain the literal meaning as standards.

There seems to be an exception that proves the rule: in a single instance in the Pali *suttas*, the nominal compound *satipaṭṭhāna* refers to a primary practice other than *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation. In the *Majjhima Nikāya* the Buddha describes himself as practicing "the three *satipaṭṭānas*," but in this case his task is to

> "… teach the *Dhamma* to his disciples out of compassion,"

under three alternative conditions:

(1) "his disciples will not give ear and exert their minds to understand,"

(2) "some of his disciples will give ear and exert their minds to understand," and

(3) "[all] his disciples will give ear and exert their minds to understand." (MN 137 iii 121)

Here the practice is "teaching" rather than "contemplating" *Dhamma*, but certainly the application of the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards is what the two

23. Note that the term *paticca-samupāda* ('dependent co-arising') seems similarly, but not so completely, to have shifted semantically from a principle based on conditional relations, to the *twelve links* of dependent co-arising that manifest that principle.

identically *named* practices must share in common.[24]

I conclude that “right recollection” is the application (running and circling around) of the standards of skillful engagement (the *satipaṭṭhāna* standards) to right everything else.

2.5. Conclusions

We began this exploration by catching the thread of a foundational teaching in the introduction to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, in which we recognized the standards of “skillful engagement.” We then found the standards reflected in the etymology of the compound *satipaṭṭhāna* (as well as *satisampajañña*), and noted the ambiguity of that term in referring either to the standards of skillful engagement or to *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplative practice. We found these “*satipaṭṭhāna* standards” are applicable to many practices beyond *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, and even beyond Buddhist practice, and that there are *Dhammic* practices for developing and training these standards. Finally, we argued that “right recollection” (*sammā sati*) is none other than skillful engagement (the application of *satipaṭṭhāna* standards) in the context of *Dhamma*.

Common similes of Buddhism draw repeatedly from music, crafts and professional life. Buddhism is a practice tradition concerned with learning, internalizing, mastering and eventually becoming a virtuoso in what we might call the skill of life, or in the skills of “wisdom,” “virtue,” and “maturation.” The thought-world of Buddhism is accordingly organized around skill in practice: around action (*kamma*), both skillful (*kusala*) and unskillful (*akusala*), around competence (*pariyatti*) and performance (*patipatti*), around development (*bhāvana*), and training (*bahulīkata*) of know-how. Those firmly on the path are “in training” (*sekha*) and those who have mastered it, “beyond training.” (*asekkha*). This chapter has highlighted the art of skillful engagement in practice, and has located its rightful position in the noble eightfold path.

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

3. The miracle of *samādhi*

Samādhi occupies a prominent role in the early Buddhist texts. It is the final factor of the noble eightfold path to which the higher achievements of wisdom, or of knowledge and vision of things as they are (*yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*) are attributed. It is a profound state of serenity, differentiated into the four *jhānas*, through which the mind becomes progressively stilled and centered, various cognitive faculties are silenced, and complete ease and equanimity are attained.

Etymologically, *samādhi* is derived from *sam* 'together' + *ādhi* 'put,' and so has to do with gathering or collecting something together. *Samādhi* is most commonly translated as 'concentration,' implying a narrowing or focusing of attention. However, as we will see, concentration is one of two dimensions that characterize *samādhi*; the other is the progressive "curtailment" of various cognitive faculties as we progress through the *jhānas*. At every stage *samādhi* establishes an orderly array of mental faculties, and this (consistent with its etymology) recommends a translation as 'collectedness' or 'composure.'[1] I will, for the most part, simply leave *samādhi* and *jhāna* untranslated to avoid confusion.

Etymologically, *jhāna* is the gerund of the verb *jhāyati*, apparently in use before the Buddha's time to denote almost any contemplative or meditative activity.[2] The Buddha sometimes uses this term in its common meaning, but alongside the technical sense of the "four *jhānas*," which seems to have been novel at the time of his teachings. In its technical sense the Buddha equates the fourfold *jhāna* with *samādhi*,[3] such that there is no *samādhi* independent of the four *jhānas* in the early texts.[4]

Unfortunately, *samādhi* has become a controversial topic within the Theravāda

1. These two translations are recommended by Kumāra (2022).

2. There seems to be no pre-Buddhist precedent for the term *samādhi.* See Walshe (1987, p. 556), who attributes this conclusion to Rhys Davids.

3. For instance, in SN 45.8.

4. In distinguishing the two senses in the early texts, Arbel (2016, p. 39) points out that in the technical sense the "four *jhānas"* never appear in verbal form. Rather one "enters and abides" (*upasampajja vihārati*) in this kind of *jhāna*.

tradition, where much confusion seems to have resulted historically first from a redefining of *samādhi*, then from an attempt to reconcile contrasting frameworks that don't in principle cohere. The debate persists even among the adherents to the authority of the early Buddhist texts, where contrasting evidence is cited for "hard" or "soft" *jhānas* (respectively difficult and easy-ish to attain), and where there is still no consensus about how *Dhammic* insight is even possible in *jhāna*.

In this chapter, I develop an account of what *samādhi* is and how it works according to the early Buddhist texts. I will point out some common, but widely neglected, passages concerning the ubiquitousness and spontaneous nature of *samādhi*, and about the fruits of *samādhi*. I will also examine some details of how *samādhi* is claimed to integrate in practice with other factors. I hope thereby to contribute to a fuller illumination of this remarkable multifaceted culminating factor of the noble eightfold path.[5]

3.1. How *samādhi* arises

Many of us learn, as beginning meditators, a special technique to induce a meditative state. Typically, we pick a meditation "object" (like the sensation of the breath, a *kasiṇa*, an imagined sound, etc.), fix our attention right there one-pointedly and keep it there for a while. Although this induces a profound state of absorption, there is, surprisingly, almost no hint of the employment of such "synthetic" techniques in the early texts.[6]

3.1.1. *Samādhi* arises naturally. Instead, the early texts repeatedly report a "natural" transition into *samādhi* from any of a number of underlying conditions, apparently unassisted. For instance:

> *Bhikkhus*, for a virtuous person, one whose behavior is virtuous, no

5. Chapter 6 supplements this chapter with greater attention to the evidence of cognitive science, particularly of skill acquisition and deliberative vs. intuitive cognition.

6. The absence of such a mechanism in the early texts has been pointed out by Vetter (1988, p. xxv), Arbel (2017, especially pp. 46, 156), Polak (2011, p. 206). Polak (2024, ch. 5) devotes a whole chapter to this issue, and points out (p. 260) that the Chan/Zen school makes use of no such mechanism. I will draw some contrasts between what the early texts tell us and the highly influential *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa (2003) as we go along. The *Visuddhimagga* forms the basis of modern *Vipassanā* meditation, in which *samādhi* resorts to synthetic techniques. It is now widely acknowledged in modern scholarship that the meaning of *samādhi* in this later tradition had become something quite distinct from its meaning in the early texts. See Shankman (2008, esp. pp. 101-4), Kumāra (2022, pp. 10-22), Thanissaro (1996, pp. 248-51), Polak (2011).

> volition need be exerted, "Let satisfaction [non-regret] arise in me." It is natural that satisfaction arises in one who is virtuous, one whose behavior is virtuous.
> … It is natural that delight arises in one with satisfaction.
> … It is natural that rapture arises in one who is delighted
> … It is natural that the body of one with a rapturous mind is tranquil.
> … It is natural that one who is tranquil in body feels pleasure.
> … It is natural that the mind of one feeling pleasure dwells in *samādhi*. (AN 11.2)

The arising of *samādhi* while practicing "recollection of the triple gem" is likewise attested in similar terms:

> When a noble disciple recollects the Buddha, on that occasion his mind is not obsessed by lust, aversion, or delusion; on that occasion his mind is simply straight, based on the Buddha. A noble disciple whose mind is straight gains inspiration in the meaning, gains inspiration in *Dhamma*, gains delight connected with *Dhamma*. 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 comes into *samādhi*. … You should develop this recollection of the Buddha while walking, standing, sitting and lying down. You should develop it while engaged in work and while living at home in a house full of children. (AN 11.12)

Notice that in each of these passages we begin with some recognized Buddhist practice, after which a common series of antecedent states unfolds before *samādhi* blooms. This series is found often in the *suttas*:[7]

> SOURCE → delight (*pāmujja*) → rapture (*pīti*) → tranquility (*passaddhi*) → pleasure (*sukha*) → *samādhi*.

In some texts only two of these antecedent factors are mentioned:

> SOURCE → rapture → tranquility → *samādhi*.

In yet another instance, we find this same stepwise unfolding of *samādhi* in the context of learning *Dhamma* through group or private recitation in the "stages

7. In addition to the examples above, we have additional sources: AN 11.1, MN 40, MN 7, SN 54.13, SN 54.14, MN 118, SN 47.10, SN 47.8, SN 42.13, SN 35.246, SN 35.97, AN 11.1, AN 6.10, AN 11.15, AN 3.95, SN 12.23. The conditioning practices in these cases are heavy on ethics, faith and sense restraint, in addition to wisdom, and uniformly lead to *samādhi* through the same antecedent factors.

of liberation":[8]

> In whatever way …, he experiences inspiration in the meaning and inspiration in *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 gains *samādhi*. (AN 5.26)

The "seven factors of awakening" provide the best known example of this same series of antecedent states leading to *samādhi*:[9]

> recollection → investigation of *dhammas* → energy → rapture → tranquility → *samādhi* → equanimity.

"SOURCE" in this case seems constituted in the first three links, which together likely correspond to *satipaṭṭāna* contemplation, whereby individual *Dhamma* teachings, such as mind or aggregates of appropriation, are brought to mind (recollection), then investigated in terms of observable experience. It is abundantly clear in the early texts that *satipaṭṭhāna* is practiced routinely in conjunction with *samādhi*.[10] In any case, SOURCE is a matter of *active* engagement under the guidance of *Dhamma* (see 2.1), in the midst of which *samādhi* may emerge to bring composure or order to the mind.

The Buddha makes the natural and spontaneous nature of this unfolding into *samādhi* unmistakeably clear in the following:

> Just as, bhikkhus, when rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountain top, the water flows down along the slope and fills the cleft, gullies, and creeks; these, being full, fill up the pools; these, being full, fill up the lakes; these, being full, fill up the streams; these, being full, fill up the rivers; and these, being full, fill up the great ocean; so too, … with faith as proximate cause, delight; with delight as proximate cause, rapture; with rapture as proximate cause, tranquility; with tranquility as proximate cause, pleasure; with pleasure as proximate cause, *samādhi*; with *samādhi* as proximate cause, the knowledge and vision of things as they really are; … (SN 12.23)

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8. See also 1.5.1 on the stages of liberation.

9. MN 10 i 61-2 (see the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the appendix), SN 46.1, etc.

10. This association is mentioned in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself, but only in the exercise specific to the awakening factors. However, the *suttas* repeatedly depict *satipatthana* practice in close association with *samādhi* or the *jhānas*, e.g., MN 44 i 301, SN 47.8, 47.40, AN 4.94, AN 4.170, Dhp 372. Moreover, AN 8.63 iv 300-1 even refers to each *satipaṭṭhāna* as "a *samādhi*."

Likewise, within *samādhi* we proceed from one *jhāna* to the next spontaneously: the mind simply lets go of what it is holding onto in one *jhāna* when it is ready, "you don't even have to wish for it."[11] The conditioned *natural* unfolding of *samādhi* found in the early texts is in sharp contrast with synthetic techniques found in later traditions for *inducing samādhi*.[12]

3.1.2. The Buddha discovered *samādhi*. Recognizing the natural unfolding of *samādhi* gives us some insight into the meaning of the following statement:

> The Buddha awakened to *jhāna*.[13] (SN 2.7 i 48)

'Awakened' (*bujjhā*) in Pali means figuratively 'discovered' in many contexts. Either way, it suggests that he did not invent *jhāna*, but appropriated something already present in human cognition, ready to arise under certain conditions. A synthetic technique would have been invented. In fact, this is exactly what is described when, as a young child, the Buddha-to-be entered the first *jhāna* "spontaneously" while sitting under a rose apple tree.[14]

What makes the fourfold *jhāna* uniquely Buddhist,[15] if *samādhi* is already a natural faculty? I think the answer is that the Buddha taught the practitioner to "develop and train it": he recognized its potential and the processes whereby it could bear fruits, and then refined and internalized it accordingly. He made it into an art. "Feeding" similarly comes naturally to humans, but through cultivation we get *haute cuisine*, plates, avocado slicers, and table manners.[16]

3.1.3. Right recollection gives rise to *samādhi*. I have declared "SOURCE" as the root condition that gives rise to *samādhi*. However, exactly what constitutes SOURCE? Do all Buddhist practices qualify? Can non-Buddhist practices qualify? The answer advanced here is, in a nutshell, that *samādhi* arises in the context of active "skillful engagement" in a practice task. This answer may surprise some, given *samādhi*'s reputation for stillness and ease.

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11. Gunaratana (2009, pp. 142, 149).

12. Polak (2011, pp. 30, 206).

13. *Jhānam bujjhā buddho.*

14. MN 36 i 246.

15. As Arbel (2017, p. 39) claims it is.

16. I would venture to speculate that the meditations in which the Buddha-to-be trained were synthetic, preempting the natural unfolding of *samādhi*, and that this produced a state less integrated into other aspects of practice. He then recalled the natural state of *samādhi* he had discovered as a child and ran with that. Sujāto (2012, p. 155) suggests that the Buddha uniquely discovered "deep absorption," which is exactly the opposite of what I claim here.

Buddhism is a practice tradition and practice is a matter of developing and applying skills. The *arahant* has perfected the skill and performance of virtue and wisdom to become a kind of virtuoso of *Dhamma*. Like the would-be piano virtuoso, the would-be *arahant* gave whatever it took to achieve perfection, and this was skillful engagement at its finest. To see how skillful engagement works, we need look no further than the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which requires that four qualities be maintained by us as practitioners (see also 2.1.2). We must be …

> … ardent, discerning and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. (MN 10 i 56)

"Ardency" is motivation or energy. "Discernment" is *Dhammically* correct understanding the practice situation. "Recollection" is what develops and brings *Dhammic* "know-how" aptly to mind to guide discernment. Finally, "putting away covetousness and grief" (elsewhere known as 'seclusion,' *viveka*) keeps attention on track. Skillful engagement keeps us focused, energetic, wholehearted and discerning as we bring all our relevant skills to bear in performing the practice task.

Subjectively, people delight in such skillful engagement, particularly if they are challenged but not overwhelmed by the task (at which point their skills are developing quickly), even to the point of taking up dangerous sports to gain that feeling. Identifying skillful engagement as SOURCE thereby explains the source of the factors of pleasure, delight and rapture that are antecedent to the arising of *samādhi*.

Right recollection is in fact skillful engagement in the practice of *Dhamma* (see 2.4). With respect to recollection of *Dhamma*:

> One remembers to abandon wrong |view| and to enter and remain in right |view|: This is one's right recollection. (MN 117 iii 72-76)

This passage is repeated as for |view|, for |intention|, |speech|, |action| and |livelihood|, making all of the factors of the wisdom and virtue groups in the noble eightfold path subject to the constraints of right recollection. This is to let one's *Dhammic* know-how guide these practices. I will call practices within the scope of the first five path factors "primary practices." We can think of the remaining three factors (right effort, right recollection, and right *samādhi*, categorized as the "maturation," *bhāvanā*, group of the path) as "auxiliary practices" (see 2.3, 2.4.1), for they play a supportive role in improving the efficacy of the primary practices. Since right recollection applies to all of the wisdom and virtue factors, we predict the arising of *samādhi* in a swath of diverse practices.

Right recollection is the maturation factor of the eightfold path just prior to right *samādhi*. And in fact the Buddha tells us at one point:

> For one of right recollection, right *samādhi* springs up. (SN 5.25-6)

Since *samādhi* is a natural phenomenon, albeit highly refined in Buddhist practice, we should expect that it will arise under similar circumstances outside of the Buddhist context. In fact, the phenomenon of "flow" (see 6.1.1), widely studied in positive psychology, seems to be the unrefined counterpart of Buddhist *samādhi*. Flow is described as associated with states of elation, of intense concentration and of altered consciousness. It also arises naturally under conditions of skillful engagement in some task, particularly in which someone has attained a level of advanced expertise.[17]

3.2. *Samādhi* as concentration

Attention for the untutored worldling is typically scattered or engaged in multiple tasks at the same time. However, in skillfully engaged Buddhist practice, the "scope of attention" is optimally centered around the "theme" of the primary practice task, whereby the experiential factors relevant to the task fall within that scope. For instance, the theme might be investigation of impermanence of breath, to which observable features of breath and teachings related to impermanence are relevant. To be functionally optimal, the scope of attention must be as broad or narrow as the practice task demands. It optimally excludes that which is irrelevant to the task.

However, it is critical that the narrowing of the scope of attention not overshoot the theme, lest it choke off the primary practice. It should be stable, but dynamic, as the demands of the practice task evolve. The phrase "having put away covetousness and grief for the world" delineates a "base level" for the narrowing of the scope of attention imposed in right recollection. *Samādhi* takes over from there to center even more tightly around the single theme. Narrowing the scope of attention to the theme of the practice task is "one-centeredness."

> *Samādhi* is one-centeredness of mind. (MN 34 i 301)

What I am translating as 'one-centered,' *ekagga*, is commonly translated as 'one-pointed' (*eka* 'one' + *agga*), with the understanding that the mind is thereby willfully fixed on a single object and held there. This seems to be the general principle behind most synthetic techniques for entering states of deep

17. See 6.1.1. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) is one many references on flow.

concentration, which seem, however, to be virtually absent in early Buddhist practice.[18]

In fact, *agga* does not mean 'point,' and *ekagga* does not mean 'one-pointed.' Rather *agga* seems to be associated with two semantic "clusters":[19] one is a salient feature, like a mountain peak or the finest of delicacies, that easily becomes the center of attention.[20] The other is a meeting place, like a meditation center. 'One-centered' seems to capture both senses. Eka 'one' seems to convey that the mind avoids occupying more than one mountain peak (as in multitasking), and avoids jumping from one meeting house to the next (as in restlessness). Cittass' *ekaggatā* 'one-centeredness of mind' is the condition in which there is a single well-defined "theme" for the practice task at hand, around which attention is concentrated.

In sum, the dynamically one-centered mind optimizes task performance, and no further narrowing of concentration is desirable. Right *samādhi* manages concentration. With the arising of *samādhi*, the primary task becomes the "theme of *samādhi*" (*samādhi-nimitta*).[21] This explains the following:

> One-centeredness of the mind is *samādhi*. The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are the themes of *samādhi*. The four right efforts are the prerequisites for *samādhi*. The pursuit, development and training of these very same things are the development of *samādhi*. (MN 44 i 301)

Sometimes it is desirable to nudge ourselves into *samādhi* in pursuit of its fruits, and this is accomplished by managing its conditioning factors. Achieving stability in one-centeredness is often challenging, because the

18. *Ekagga* is analyzed as 'one-pointed' in the *Visuddhimagga*. Arbel (2017, pp. 46, 175) finds no evidence in the *Nikāyas* for such deep concentration. Thanissaro (2012, p. 27) points to full-body awareness in descriptions of the *jhānas* in MN 119 iii 92-4, AN 5.28, etc. as counterexamples to deep concentration. Kumāra (2022, p. 47) likewise points to examples of listening to *Dhamma* or of moving around with an "*ekagga* mind":

> While listening to the good *Dhamma* … one listens to the *Dhamma* with an undistracted and one-centered [*ekaggacitto*] mind; one attends to it appropriately. (AN 5.151)

Iti 111 and AN 4.12 provide similar examples.

19. Thanissaro (2016).

20. The point of a needle, its most salient feature, is indeed *agga*, but so is the sharp edge of a knife or the peak of excellence in *Dhamma*.

21. The more common translation '*object* of *samādhi*' is not appropriate, because the theme ranges potentially widely over many actively relevant objects and relations. I adapt the term 'theme' from Thanissaro (2012, p. 31), used in a similar context.

arising of *samādhi* is acutely sensitive to a range of subtle factors, particularly to external disruptions and responsibilities and to internal restlessness. Stability is more likely to be present, for instance, when one is sitting cross-legged, secluded under a tree, surrounded by the hushed sounds of nature. However, if we habituate the entrance into *samādhi*, this will enable us routinely and more quickly to enter into *samādhi* as an inclination of mind. For instance, in practicing *satipaṭṭhāna* we are told we can develop *samādhi* naturally, in an undirected manner, but:

> While he is body-contemplating in the body, there arises in him, based on the body, either a fever in the body or sluggishness of mind, or the mind is distracted outwardly. That *bhikkhu* should then direct his mind towards some inspiring theme [*pasādanīye nimitte*]. … It is in such a way, Ānanda, that there is development by direction. (SN 47.9 v 156)

He chooses a theme conducive to *samādhi* temporarily, then, after the mind has settled, returns to his bodily theme. With familiarity we will find that we, as in all things, learn to manage subtle conditions intuitively, much as a child learns (but cannot explain) how to swing higher in a playground.

3.3. The *jhānas*

Samādhi operates in two dimensions:

"Concentration" is the narrowing of the scope of attention, as described in the last couple of pages.

"Curtailment" is the narrowing of available "cognitive faculties," about to be described in this section (see 6.1.3 for more discussion).

As we pursue a primary practice task, right recollection abandons wrong view and enters and remains in right view. As a result we may, with a bit of skillful nudging, spontaneously enter *samādhi*. Beyond this, we are commonly encouraged further to develop and train this practice by making a point of allowing it to pass through the progressive stillness and silence of the *jhānas*. From the first *jhāna*, the second *jhāna* unfolds, and so on. From *jhāna* to *jhāna*, cognitive or cognitive/affective faculties are curtailed. The Buddha took great care to define which faculties are present and which are absent in each of the *jhānas*; he must have felt that it is important for us to be able to navigate among them.[22]

22. Curtailment as a separate dimension of *samādhi* makes 'concentration' inadequate as a translation of *samādhi*. 'Composure,' as a kind of cognitive stance, comes closer to capturing both dimensions.

Let's consider an example. *Mettā* ('kindness') contemplation is a fundamental practice of right intention:

> When, *bhikkhu*, your mind is firm and well settled internally, and arisen bad unwholesome states do not obsess your mind, then you should train yourself thus: "I will develop and train the liberation of the mind by *mettā*, make it a vehicle and basis, carry it out, consolidate it, and properly undertake it." Thus should you train yourself. (AN 8.63 iv 299)

Mettā practice is optimized through right recollection, from which *samādhi* is expected to arise naturally under favorable conditions. In the phrase "develop and train," development (*bhāvanā*) indicates a restructuring of recollected know-how, and training (*bahulīkata*, literally 'done a lot') indicates repeated practice which internalizes such restructurings.[23]

3.3.1. The first jhāna. The *sutta* continues:

> "When this *samādhi* has been developed and trained by you in this way, then you should develop this *samādhi* with thought and deliberation. … (AN 8.63 iv 299-300)

"Thought and deliberation" are cognitive faculties, which together constitute "discursive thinking," and which are generally available and employed incessantly by the untutored worldling outside of Buddhist practice. The first *jhāna* is certainly intended in this passage, in which we are free to make use of these faculties, since nothing has yet been curtailed. This is a standard description at this first stage of *samādhi*:

> (1st *jhāna*) Here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a *bhikkhu* enters upon and abides in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by thought and deliberation, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. (MN 141 iii 252)

Being secluded (*vivicca*) from sensual pleasures and unwholesome states is the definitive factor in the first *jhāna*. It is often equated with the elimination of the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*)[24] as well as with the expression in the opening paragraphs of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* "having put away covetousness and grief for the world" (see 3.1). Thought and deliberation (*vitakka-vicāra*) are ubiquitous factors outside of *samādhi*. They are simply the discursive (and ofttimes rambling) mind:

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23. This restructuring is "internalization (see 6.3.2).

24. DN 2 i 73.

> Thought and deliberation are the verbal fabrication, one breaks into speech. (MN 44 i 301)

Their presence in the first *jhāna* indicates that no major cognitive faculties are curtailed in the first *jhāna*, even while is one-centered on the theme of *mettā*. In the first *jhāna*, the mind is not free to wander into choosing a color for that new addition, into plotting revenge, or into worrying about paying off our credit cards, because seclusion narrows the scope of attention from wandering that far.[25] "Born of seclusion" indicates that seclusion precedes the first *jhāna*.[26]

3.3.2. The second jhāna. The *mettā* practice continues:

> … you should develop it without thought but with deliberation only;[27] you should develop it without thought and deliberation. You should develop it with rapture; … (AN 8.63 iv 299-300)

When we are without thought and deliberation, we have reached the second *jhāna*. The second *jhāna* arises wherever thought and deliberation subside in favor of some quieter mode of cognition. This represents a significant narrowing of cognitive faculties. This is a standard description:

> (2nd *jhāna*) With the stilling of thought and deliberation, he enters upon and abides in the second *jhāna*, which has tranquility and mental equipoise without thought and deliberation, with rapture and pleasure born of *samādhi*. (MN 141 iii 252)

The disappearance of the discursive faculty in the second *jhāna* is perhaps the most abrupt instance of curtailment in the series of *jhānas*. The Buddha

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25. In the *Visuddhimagga*, *vitakka-vicāra* is described "initial and sustained application" of the mind on a fixed object, providing the "synthetic technique" by which "one-pointedness" is achieved in order to enter a meditative state. However, there is no support for this technical meaning of what is elsewhere an everyday phrase in the early texts: Cousins (1992) identifies forty occurrences of the combination of *vitakka* and *vicāra*, all of which have to do with ordinary modes of thought. See also Arbel (2017, p. 68), Shulman (2014, p. 22), Polak (2011, p. 14), Kumāra (2022, pp. 56-60).

26. This suggests a gap between the beginning of seclusion and the onset of *samādhi* (with one-centeredness).

27. The words *vitakka* and *vicāra* almost always occur in combination and Kuan (2008, p. 38) suggests that they are synonymous in the early texts. If this is the case, the absence of either one might simply indicate a more subdued, intermediate level of both thought and deliberation.

accordingly calls the second *jhāna* "noble silence" (*ariya tuṇhībhāva*).[28] We can anticipate that curtailment will tend also to have the effect of "stabilizing" seclusion and one-centeredness, since over-energetic faculties are the primary potential promoters of distraction. On the other hand, if the remaining active faculties (such as simple perception) absorb some of this excess energy, it is plausible that they will function with enhanced lucidity.

'Equipoise' (*ekodibhāva*, often translated 'unity') is widely regarded a synonym for 'one-centeredness' (*ekaggatā*). However, its etymology suggests (very tentatively) that it might be the curtailment counterpart of the concentration term 'one-centeredness.'[29] "Born of *samādhi*" refers to the prior presence of the *samādhi* of the first *jhāna*. Rapture and pleasure would have been, as we have seen, already present as antecedent states prior to entering *samādhi*, and now they remain.

3.3.3. Can skillful engagement persist in *jhāna*? Many have puzzled over the question of whether *Dhammic* know-how can work together with *samādhi* at all. This is particularly relevant to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, which deals with some of the most intellectually sophisticated teachings (see chapter 5). The early texts make clear that they do work together in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, yet most scholars resist that conclusion; they seem to presume that this would be beyond the capabilities of human cognition.[30] However, Shulman (2014) presents two convincing arguments for the viability of bringing *Dhamma* into *samādhi*. At least I'm convinced:

First, he argues that *Dhamma*, in its very early form, tended to be descriptive of actual experience. For instance, the four noble truths are sometimes described in this way:

> Bhikkhus, develop *samādhi*. A *bhikkhu* who is in *samādhi* understands things as they really are. And what does he understand as it really is?

28. E.g., SN 21.1 ii 273.

29. Kumāra (2022, pp. 49-52) proposes this translation. *Ekodi* = *eka* 'one' + *udi* 'rising.' My theory is that equipoise harmonizes the various faculties, curtailing some, to optimize the practice task in a way that reflects how much the task has been internalized. See 6.4.2.

30. Accordingly, as Shulman (2014, pp. 9-11) points out, Gomrich, Conze, Rahula, Collins and Hamilton downgrade *samādhi*, either as unnecessary or as a means of preparing the mind *before* contemplation, leaving final liberation as a primarily intellectual endeavor. Wayne and Bronkhorst, on the other hand, view *samādhi* itself as the basis of liberation, independent of any conceptual content. The *Visuddhimagga* tradition similarly marginalizes the role of right *samādhi*, contrary to what the early texts tell us.

> He understands as it really is: "This is suffering." He understands as it really is: "This is the origin of suffering." He understands as it really is: "This is the cessation of suffering." He understands as it really is: "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering." (SN 56.1)

He notices that the pronoun 'this' (*idaṁ/ayaṁ* in Pali) is reserved for objects that can be pointed to explicitly (e.g., "*this* instance of suffering/craving") or that the *bhikkhu* is experiencing right now. Only later did the noble truths become generalized to describe abstract universals. For instance, the formula for the second noble truth (in its best known formulation) came to be:

> Now this, *bhikkhus*, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination. (SN 56.11 v 421)

The later rendering of the second noble truth would, indeed, be very difficult to hold or internalize as a theme of *samādhi*, but the earlier is quite nuts-and-bolts.[31] In accord with Shulman's position, I argue that investigation in *satipaṭṭhāna* always involves verifying *Dhamma* teachings in terms of experiential "observables" (See 5.1).

Second, Shulman argues that through repeated study and meditative practice, *Dhammic* knowledge is "restructured" in a way that is generally unacknowledged by scholars.[32] For Shulman, *satipaṭṭhāna* is a method by which "philosophy" is turned into an "active way of seeing," in which it is beyond rational thinking but not beyond some restricted understanding.[33] In fact, we tend to sell the power of the silent *jhānas* short, for it is the curtailed quick and quiet cognition of the deeper *jhānas* that is most directly associated with the highest levels of expertise in task performance. Training in any skill "internalizes" (see 6.3.2), through repetition, abilities that are less conceptually and more intuitively based, that in their highest manifestations become virtuosity almost devoid of any thought. For instance, a novice violinist will think, deliberate and annoy neighbors at every step, while a virtuoso simply steps out of the way and lets the music express itself through their fingers to

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31. In chapter 1 I argue that *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation is a matter of verifying and internalizing *Dhamma* in terms of directly experienced "observables," consistent with, and in fact inspired by, Shulman's proposal. In chapter 5 I analyze the various *Dhamma* teachings presented in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in observable terms.

32. This restructuring is "internalization," described in 6.3.2.

33. Shulman (2014, pp. 32, 47, 111).

the delight of all without thinking about it. The novice has yet to internalize their incipient know-how to acquire an intuitive grasp, to make it their own. A practice task in the second or deeper *jhānas* will be possible only if the task is sufficiently internalized. Chapter 6 explains how the *jhānas* facilitate the internalization of potentially complex concepts.

3.3.4. The third *jhāna*. The *mettā* practice continues:

> … you should develop it without rapture; you should develop it accompanied by comfort. … (AN 8.63 iv 299-300)

Here we are in the third *jhāna*. The antecedent factor of rapture has been curtailed. This is a standard description:

> (3rd *jhāna*) With the fading away as well of rapture, he abides in equanimity, recollective and discerning, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third *jhāna*, on account of which noble ones announce: "He has a pleasant abiding, who is equanimous and recollective." (MN 141 iii 252)

Although "rapture" is ostensibly an affective factor, with its fading away any remaining conditioned cognitive factors caught up in the excitement of rapture will also fade away. Concentration will become particularly stable and this reallocation of energy will produce a particularly lucid experience centered around the theme of *samādhi*, which in this case is *mettā*. "Recollective" and "discerning" refer to the central factors of right recollection (see 2.2.4) and therefore mark continued skillful engagement in the practice task. However, with the curtailment of cognitive faculties in the deeper *jhānas*, this engagement is likely to be intuitive and not consciously apparent. Their reference here seems to be a reassurance that this engagement will continue to operate under the radar of consciousness on behalf of the practice task, even in deep *jhāna*.[34]

3.3.5. The fourth *jhāna*. The *mettā* practice concludes:

> … and you should develop it accompanied by equanimity. (AN 8.63 iv 299-300)

Finally we have arrived at the fourth *jhāna*. This is its standard description:

> (4th *jhāna*) With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters and abides in the fourth *jhāna*, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of recollection due to equanimity. (MN 141 iii 252)

34. See chapter 6.

"The abandoning of pleasure and pain" is the abandonment of impressions (*vedan*ā**)**, and since impressions are a primary conditioning factor of perception (*saññā*), perception is also significantly curtailed. Little of conceptual experience remains, which is to say engagement in the practice task is almost entirely intuitive and under the radar. Nonetheless, "purity of recollection" in the fourth *jhāna* suggests an advanced development of recalled know-how, a refined continuation of development and training, which seems to be an important source of intuitive insight (see 3.5.2 below and 6.5.2). The fourth *jhāna* refines *mettā* into its purest form.

3.3.6. *Jhānas* support many practices. The development of *mettā* benefits somehow from abiding in each of the *jhānas* while centered on this theme. This same process is then repeated in AN 8.63 as for *mettā* also for the three remaining *brahmavihāras* (*karuṇa*, *mudita*, *upekkhā*). It is then repeated for the four *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations (body, impressions, mind, *dhammas*). These last four practices belong to right view (they are concerned with verifying and internalizing *Dhamma*), which are also optimized by right recollection.

The curtailment of cognitive faculties is itself a natural process, requiring no effort, but is nonetheless developed and trained in Buddhist practice to become readily invoked and managed. Experience shows that we can also move from one *jhāna* to the next simply "by wishing it."[35] Progressing from one *jhāna* to the next is experienced as the mind settling, enabled by the progressive familiarization and internalization of the specific practice, and accompanied by a corresponding "shift in consciousness."

3.4. The fruits of *samādhi*

It is easy to appreciate that a primary practice will benefit from right recollection. But what does *samādhi* do for us? *Samādhi* is declared to lead to four benefits, some of which bring us close to the soteriological goals of Buddhist practice:

> *Bhikkhus*, there are these four developments of *samādhi*. What four?
>
> (1) There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, leads to dwelling happily in this very life.
>
> (2) There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, leads to obtaining knowledge and vision.
>
> (3) There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained,

35. As Gunaratana (2009, pp. 142, 149) puts it.

> leads to recollection-discernment.
>
> (4) There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, leads to the destruction of the taints. (AN 4.41)

We will provide a brief explanation for each development in *samādhi* in turn. Section 6.5 provides a more detailed analysis on the basis of a deeper understanding of the cognitive process of internalization. Since many of these explanations rely on the skillful engagement in the primary practice task that gives rise to *samādhi*, how synthetic methods might produce these fruits remains unexplained.

3.4.1. Dwelling happily in this very life. The Buddha-to-be recognized that there are pleasures that transcend mundane sensual pleasures, when he recalled that, as a boy sitting under a rose apple tree, he had spontaneously entered the first *jhāna*, and found there:

> … that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unskillful mental qualities. (MN 36 i 247)

"Mundane" (or everyday) pleasure is based in sensuality, for instance, in food, sex, a stock portfolio, catchy tunes, roller skating, and illicit drugs. Such pleasures tend to be problematic, fraught and unsatisfying, because they are fleeting and get entwined with craving and appropriation (*upādāna*) as "me" and "mine." In contrast, spiritual, immaterial or "non-carnal" (*nirāmisa*) pleasures arise spontaneously, beginning in the states that are antecedent to *samādhi*, and self-concern (and with it the allure of sensuality) dissolves as the mind becomes progressively secluded, one-centered, silent and equanimous. Once one experiences spiritual pleasure, one is eager to upgrade from one's more problematic sensual pleasures.[36] Spiritual pleasure, aside from being valuable in itself, is thereby an incentive for Buddhist practice in general, as a substitute for the pursuit of mundane pleasures that keep us locked in *saṁsāra*.

3.4.2. Obtaining knowledge and vision. We should note that *samādhi* and particularly *jhāna* are discussed in the early texts repeatedly in association with attainments that approach awakening.[37]

> 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)

36. Thanissaro (1999).

37. Arbel (2017, p. 4).

Such "knowledge and vision" are factors of wisdom attributed to *samādhi* repeatedly in the early texts. They represent a stage close to final liberation, at which it might be said that we see what the Buddha saw.

> There is no *jhāna* for one with no wisdom, no wisdom for one without *jhāna*. But one with both *jhāna* and wisdom, he's on the verge of *nibbāna*. (Dhp 372)

I can think of five reasons why *samādhi* should result in such wisdom:

First, bringing practice into silence might serve ongoing internalization of recollected know-how by pushing the novice practitioner more quickly to abandon reliance on thinking and deliberation.[38] This is much as a soldier learns to disassemble and reassemble his rifle in five minutes, then to do the same blindfolded. "OK, private, now let's see it in the third *jhāna*!"

Second, progressive curtailment of cognitive faculties entails a "shift in consciousness." This develops our flexibility to reach new understandings of *Dhamma*, "experiencing otherwise," and providing a clear demonstration of the mental constructedness of what we take to be real and substantial.[39]

Third, our worst "presumptions," such as of the existence of a substantial self, are generally upheld by our most abstract and conceptual forms of overthinking. These are among the first faculties to be curtailed.[40]

Fourth, curtailment of the more complex faculties directs energy to simpler faculties more grounded in direct experience, resulting in lucid clarity of experiential observables.

Fifth, silence encourages those "aha" moments when we finally "get it" in a deeper way. Such an insight typically begins with thought and deliberation about a challenging problem, which then reaches an impasse. This is followed by an "incubation period," during which there is little or no discernible process of analysis concerning the problem, but out of which the solution suddenly erupts spontaneously.[41] Deep *jhāna* provides the incubation period.

A single insight is momentary and, though remarkable, is only a glimpse of what the Buddha saw routinely. Through repetition, what we at first only glimpse becomes integrated as a matter of spontaneous perception, and we

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38. The mechanics of this process is explained in 6.3.2 and 6.5.2.

39. The value of recognizing the constructedness of the world is discussed in 5.4.

40. The danger of presumptions is discussed in 1.6 and 5.1.

41. Slingerland (2014, p. 147).

begin to see as if through the eyes of the Buddha. The internalized content of recollection weaves it into the very structure of perception.[42]

3.4.3. Recollection-discernment. We've seen that recollection and discernment are the core factors of skillful engagement. Recollection brings "*Dhammic* know-how" aptly to mind, and discernment draws on this know-how in evaluating how to respond in the experiential context. Together they create the spark from which *samādhi* arises, which acts as an aid to their operation and therefore maturation. In ongoing practice, recollected know-how develops as something more intuitive, quicker and quieter, and discernment becomes less challenging, less effortful. *Samādhi* facilitates this "pursuit, development, and training" (see 3.2 above) of recollection-discernment.

3.4.4. The destruction of the taints. The taints (*āsava*) are sensuality (*kāma*), becoming (*bhava*), and ignorance (*avijjā*), the fundamental misguided tendencies of the mind. "The destruction of the taints" (*āsavakkhāya*) is thereby a common reference to final liberation. Progress toward awakening is progress in the development of recollected know-how in the practice of *Dhamma*. Liberation is the perfection of this know-how, effectively virtuosity in the skill of life. In the silence of *samādhi* the taints are destroyed.

3.5. Conclusions

In summary, the meditative state that is described in the early Buddhist texts is almost too good to be true. It is a state associated with delight, rapture, serenity and contentment that settles into four stages, the *jhānas*, through which attention is narrowed and the cognitive and affective functions of the mind are progressively curtailed. Yet it produces the fruits of clarity, insight, and intuitive understanding, which lead ultimately to knowledge and vision of things as they are, and thereafter, liberation. Moreover, *samādhi* makes its appearance often, spontaneously, naturally, and effortlessly. The early texts tell us this. *Samādhi* is a "miracle."

42. As Shulman (2014, pp. 106-7) puts it.

4. *Sati* no longer means “mindfulness”

By 1881 the scholar T.W. Rhys Davids found the optimal translation for the Pali word *sati*. Previous translators had variously tried ‘remembrance,’ ‘memory,’ ‘recollection,’ ‘thinking of or upon,’ ‘calling to mind,’‘active state of mind,’ ‘fixing the mind strongly upon any subject,’ ‘attention,’ ‘attentiveness,’ ‘thought,’ ‘reflection,’ ‘consciousness,’ ‘correct meditation,’ and so on.[1] Most of them seem to have understood that the root meaning of the noun *sati* was ‘memory,’ and that the Buddha explicitly defined it that way himself, but were looking for something more narrowly suggestive of its specific active role in Buddhist practice.

Rhys Davids explained his choice of ‘mindfulness’ with respect to *sammā sati* ‘right mindfulness’:

> “*Sati* is literally 'memory' but is used with reference to the constantly repeated phrase 'mindful and thoughtful' (*sato sampajâno*); and means that activity of mind and constant presence of mind which is one of the duties most frequently inculcated on the good Buddhist.”[2]

On the basis of his later works it’s clear that Rhys Davids understood that what the good Buddhist was mindful of were “facts” like impermanence, and “natural law” (*Dhamma*) more widely, much as devout Christians are mindful of the glory of God in everything they do.[3]

That was then and this is now. Unfortunately the felicitous marriage of *sati* and ‘mindfulness’ did not survive the contingencies of the twentieth century. One hundred and twenty-five years later, the Buddhist scholar B. Alan Wallace emailed the scholar-monk Bhikkhu Bodhi,[4]

> “As you well know, in the current *Vipassanā* tradition as it has been

1. Gethin (2011, pp. 264-5).

2. Rhys Davids (1881, p. 145). *Sampajâno* is a variant of *sampajañña* ‘discernment,’ discussed in 4.2 below.

3. Gethin (2011, pp. 264-5).

4. The resulting correspondence was subsequently made public as Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

> widely propagated in the West, *sati* is more or less defined as 'bare attention,' or the moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness of whatever arises in the present moment. There is no doubt that the cultivation of such mindfulness is very helpful, but, strangely enough, I have found no evidence in traditional Pāli, Sanskrit, or Tibetan sources to support this definition of *sati* (*smṛti*, *dranpa*)."

It seems that Rhys Davids' original intent grounded in the earliest scriptures had become obscured.

As Wallace alludes, the concept "mindfulness" (I use the double quotes throughout to indicate roughly whatever is commonly understood nowadays under the word 'mindfulness') is a critical point of reference for most Buddhist practitioners, around which we orient ourselves as we navigate our world of practice. It certainly shaped my early practice, for instance. For each of us, it corresponds subjectively and individually to very real experiences that we learn to cultivate and through which we make progress in our practice. My intention is not to deny such experiences, but to point out that because of a semantic shift in the word 'mindfulness,' the word no longer serves as a viable translation of *sati*. As long as it is retained, the *Dhamma* will never quite make sense in English translation. This acknowledgment is critical for scholars and for anyone who is intent on a deep understanding of the *Dhamma* in any of its traditional forms.

We will first consider in more detail how "mindfulness" is understood in modern Buddhism and then contrast that with how *sati* was used as a technical term in the early texts. We will then attempt to trace how "mindfulness" has been shaped by the demands and fashions of modern popular culture.

4.1. Modern understandings of "mindfulness"

"Mindfulness" is widely regarded as a meditative state. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines 'mindfulness' as,

> "The practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis."

Perhaps the definition most consequential for the modern understanding was that of the German monk Nyanaponika Thera in 1954, apparently initially as a provisional definition for those beginning meditation practice, but widely regarded as definitive:

> "Mindfulness (*sati*) applies preeminently to the attitude and practice of

> Bare Attention in a purely receptive state of mind.”[5]

The great Sri Lankan-American monk, meditation teacher and scholar Bhante Guṇaratana clarifies ‘bare’ as ‘non-conceptual’:

> “Mindfulness is non-conceptual awareness. Another English term for *sati* is ‘bare attention.’”[6]

Gunaratana also makes explicit that “mindfulness” is *not* about memory:

> “It just observes everything as if it was occurring for the first time. It is not analysis that is based on reflection and memory.”[7]

Sylvia Boorstein is often cited:

> “Mindfulness is the aware, balanced acceptance of the present experience. It isn’t more complicated than that. It is opening to or receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, just as it is, without either clinging to it or rejecting it.”

“Mindfulness” is similarly described as a state of open “choiceless awareness,” or simply receptive of present experience without elaboration. Thich Nhat Hanh tells us:

> “Mindfulness is the energy that helps us recognize the conditions of happiness that are already present in our lives. You don’t have to wait ten years to experience this happiness. It is present in every moment of your daily life.”[8]

And Jon Kabat-Zinn states:

> “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”[9]

4.2. Early Buddhist understanding of *sati*

The Pali word *sati* is a derivation of a root meaning ‘memory’ or ‘recollection’ and corresponds to the verb *sarati* ‘remember’ or ‘recollect.’ It occurs in its adjectival form as one of the factors of what I call “the *satipaṭṭhāna*

5. Nyanaponika (1973, p. 15).
6. Gunaratana (1996, p. 140).
7. Gunaratana (1996, p. 190).
8. Nhat Hanh (2010).
9. Kabat-Zinn (2005).

standards,"[10] described in the following phrase from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*,

> … ardent, discerning, and *sati*-ful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

The cognate word in Sanskrit, *smṛti*, has a similar meaning but is also commonly used specifically in reference to memory of sacred Brahmanic texts or even to the body of sacred texts itself. For many centuries these were preserved in memory before they were committed to palm leaf.[11]

Sati is explicitly described as a form of memory in the earliest texts.[12] *Sati* is the first of the seven awakening factors (*bojjhaṅga*), where it is clearly allocated the function of bringing a *Dhamma* teaching to mind so that it can then be examined and investigated by means of the second awakening factor, *dhamma-investigation* (*dhamma-vicaya*):

> … when one has heard the *Dhamma* from such [accomplished] bhikkhus …, a *bhikkhu* dwelling thus withdrawn recollects that *dhamma* and thinks it over, on that occasion the awakening factor of *sati* is aroused by the *bhikkhu* . … The *bhikkhu* fulfills the awakening factor of *sati* at that time. Whenever, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* dwelling thus recollective [*satimā*] discriminates that *dhamma* with wisdom, examines it, makes an investigation of it, on that occasion the awakening factor of *dhamma*-investigation is aroused by the *bhikkhu.* (SN 46.3)

Elsewhere the Buddha offers us the following definition of *sati* :

> And what is the faculty of *sati*? Here, monks, the noble disciple is *sati*-ful, possessing utmost *sati* and prudence, recalling and bearing in mind even things that were done and said long ago. This is called the faculty of *sati*. (SN 48.9, also similarly at MN 53 i 356)

Moreover, various examples and similes that the Buddha offers for *sati* involve the skillful performance of some task[13] (each of which demands attentiveness, and also some degree of "know-how"), bringing to mind the relevant background knowledge, standards, perspectives and skills one has learned and

10. See chapter 2.

11. Levman (2017).

12. This is also affirmed in key texts of the later tradition as well, such as the *Visuddhismagga* (xiv 141), the *Milindapañhā* (Gethin 2011, p. 269). Levman (2017) provides many examples.

13. Kuan (2015) provides an overview of such similes.

holding them there. In fact, almost all examples of *sati* in the early *Dhamma* are specifically activated in working memory for quick interpretation or response with regard to present circumstances.[14]

For instance, as an example of "*sati* directed at the body" (see 2.3), the Buddha tells us of a man tasked with carrying a bowl of oil filled to the brim past the most beautiful girl of the land, who is dancing and singing before a great crowd, without spilling a drop, lest he lose his head.[15] Then there is the gatekeeper, who is "wise, recollective [*satimā*], and intelligent, one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances, for protecting its inhabitants and for warding off outsiders" (see 2.2.1). In either case, it is imperative that one draw on all of one's know-how to accomplish a practical task. The Buddha declares once again that "a noble disciple" is like that: "recollective, possessing supreme *sati* and discrimination, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago."[16]

Then there is the example of someone walking through a thorny forest without being pricked, a simile in which the thorns represent sensual attractions.[17] This case exemplifies perhaps the most common type of reference for *sati*, having to do with restraint of the senses, a practice that demands the continuous remembrance of learned *Dhammic* standards throughout the day. As Rhys Davids put it: "one of the duties most frequently inculcated on the good Buddhist." Remembering our standards is the basis of restraining our behavior and is compared in another simile to binding animals to a post in order to constrain their movements.[18]

"Skillful engagement" is perhaps the most central concept in this book, in which *sati* serves to bring to mind and maintain in mind, those aspects of *Dhamma* that are relevant to the fulfillment of the current practice task.[19] Recall that Rhys Davids actually adopted 'mindfulness' on the basis of two Pali words that commonly co-occur: *sato* [*sati*] and *sampajâno* [*sampajañña*]. *Sampajañña* is translated here as 'discernment,' and elsewhere often as '(clear) comprehension.' *Sati-sampajañña* ('recollection-discernment') comes to a clear understanding of the immediate needs of the practice task in the current situation in accordance with *Dhamma*:

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14. See Dreyfus (2011) on *sati* as working memory.

15. SN 47.20. See 2.3 for more discussion of this example.

16. AN 7.67 iv 110-1.

17. SN 35.244 iv 189.

18. SN 35.247 iv 199-200.

19. See 2.1.2 and 6.3 for further discussion of skillful engagement.

> And what is the nutriment for restraint of the sense faculties? It should be said: recollection-discernment. (AN 10.16 v 115)

I argue that these two factors together form the core of "skillful engagement" or "right recollection" (*sammā sati*)[20] to support performance in accordance with *Dhamma* of any aspect of Buddhist wisdom or ethical practice. Right recollection thereby works alongside right effort and alongside right view:

> Right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong |action| as wrong |action|, and right |action| as right |action|. … One tries to abandon wrong |action| and to enter into right |action|: This is one's right effort. One remembers to abandon wrong |action| and to enter and remain in right |action|: This is one's right *sati*. Thus these three qualities–right view, right effort, and right *sati*–run and circle around right |action|. (MN 117 iii 72-76)

This passage is presented also with respect to |resolve|, |speech|, |action|, and |livelihood|. Buddhist practice across the board is thereby performed on the basis of *Dhammic* proficiency: standards, values, viewpoints, and learned skills, which have been acquired in developing right view, internalized through repeated practice, brought to bear in right *sati*, and energized through right effort.

The practice of right *sati* will often give rise spontaneously to right *samādhi*:[21]

> For one of right recollection, right *samādhi* springs up. (SN 5.25-6)

Accordingly, we remember our precepts as we go about our lives. We remember to monitor our intentions. We remember the standards for differentiating wholesome and unwholesome intentions. We keep in mind the values of renunciation, kindness and non-harming as guiding principles throughout the day, as well as our commitment to living a Buddhist life. We recall what the Buddha taught about impermanence and non-self.

4.3. Differences in early and modern understandings

The disconnect between *sati* in the early texts and modern "mindfulness" is easily and strikingly appreciated if we try to imagine how the gatekeeper, or how the bloke carrying the oil past the dancing girl mentioned in the similes above, would gain any help whatever through entering into a state of "bare, pre-conceptual or non-judgmental awareness." Moreover, how would we

20. The near equivalence of these terms is explained in 2.4.

21. See 3.2 for further discussion of this point.

guard the senses with no idea of what is evocative of unwholesome desires that we need to guard against? How would “mindfulness” help if it were to circle around right action, for instance, if it cannot fulfill its function of discerning wholesome and unwholesome? Moreover, how would we revisit or train insights *previously* obtained through “mindfulness” if we “observe everything as if it was occurring for the first time”?

The disconnect is also appreciated in noting that “mindfulness” is consistently represented as passive or receptive in modern literature, whereas in the early texts, *sati* is actively involved as a conditioning factor in the successful performance of particular tasks. For instance, if a “CRASH!” were suddenly to occur in the next room, it would likely disrupt our “mindfulness” but draw our attention along with recollection of similar crashes and their causes, in order to assess what the hell is going on.

A striking difference between the early and modern accounts of these matters is how comparatively precise and detailed the early teachings are in marked contrast to the hazy and variant descriptions of a stand-alone “mindfulness” factor. For instance, “mindfulness” is often described as “being present.” How can one *not* be present? Even reminiscence, or a daydream arises in the present moment. Many of the exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* depend on “visualizing” what is not immediately physically apparent in the present situation, for instance, visualizing the body in future states of decay, or visualizing the body parts below the skin. Would the requirement of presence preclude these? Suppose you were following this guided meditation: “… If you should be distracted by a noise in the room, just let the distraction go, and gently return to where you were in the daydream ….” Would the requirement of presence preclude this? I’m not sure.

4.4. The genesis of “mindfulness”

The story of how the meaning of Rhys Davids’ ‘mindfulness’ became “mindfulness” seems to begin in colonial Burma about the turn of the twentieth century and takes us to the United States by the 1970’s.

Burma. The influence of European colonial power in the nineteenth century was very disruptive of the traditional cultural and religious fabric in many Asian lands, with varying indigenous responses. Prior to British occupation, the *Buddhasāsana* had been supported by three pillars of society in Buddhist Burma: the royal government, the *Saṅgha* and the society at large. However, the British deposed the king in 1885 to fully control the levers of governmental power throughout Burma, showed little interest in supporting

the *Sāsana* themselves, and curtailed the ability of the *Saṅgha* to participate in domestic affairs. This resulted in great concern in Burma for the viability of the S*āsana* and for the continued well-being of Burmese society at large.

A prominent monk, Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923),[22] encouraged a doubling-down on Buddhist practice by householders as a way to respond to the situation: in ethics, in doctrinal study (largely of *Abhidhamma*), and later in "insight meditation" (*vipassanā*, based on the fifth-century *Visuddhimagga*[23]) for *all* Buddhists. Ledi began a lecture circuit throughout Burma, established *ad hoc* study and practice groups wherever he went, and published widely,[24] in order to convey this message. He had already been a well-known public figure and popular speaker before the king was deposed, with a knack for teaching complex *Dhammic* concepts in simple terms, and without the traditional heavy reliance on the Pali language.

Let's pause here for a moment to make a quick reality check of something I ran across in Eric Braun's book on Ledi Sayadaw with regard to the topic of interest. He describes Ledi's understanding of *sati* as follows:

> "… the ability to bring knowledge of the *dhamma* to bear on the present moment, rooted in one of the 'establishings' (*upaṭṭhānas*). In other words, it is a sort of double-faceted mental state: recollection of Buddhist truths combined with awareness of immediate sensate experience."[25]

Ledi was precisely on board with the age-old traditional view described above as the early Buddhist understanding, and recognized by his contemporary Rhys Davids. Now, back to our story:

Ledi's promotional efforts are generally regarded as the primary impetus for a mass movement of lay participation in aspects of Buddhist practice, theretofore largely occupied by monastics. Many prominent teachers of *Dhamma* and *vipassanā* (almost all of them monks) facilitated this development. The degree of the popular interest in meditation practice was *almost* unprecedented in Buddhist history, such that various meditation teachers attracted large followings and founded schools that are still well known in Burma today, now

22. Braun's (2013) excellent book on Ledi Sayadaw recounts much of what follows.

23. Cousins (1994, p. 41) claims that insight or *vipassanā* meditation did not exist in anything like its current form before the nineteenth century.

24. It was apparently under the British that the mass publication of Buddhist books first became possible.

25. This is Braun's (2013, p. 143) paraphrase or summary from a source he does not cite.

almost certainly the meditating-est nation in the world.[26]

Many teachers promoted techniques that were well integrated with the body of Buddhist practice and understanding, ethics and doctrinal study. For instance, Mohnyin Sayadaw was popular in the 1930’s and required that students learn *Abhidhamma* before beginning *vipassanā* practice. Mogok Sayadaw taught a method rooted in studying dependent co-arising before beginning *vipassanā* practice. However, it should be noted that *vipassanā* schools across the board tended to disregard the teaching of *samādhi* or *jhāna*, since these were treated as extremely difficult and unnecessary in the foundational *Visuddimagga*, in stark contrast to the early texts.[27] This marginalization of *jhāna* would play a significant role in our story of how “mindfulness” would come to be understood in modernity.

4.4.1. Popular *vipassanā*. Other early *vipassanā* masters recognized the limits in time and energy available to most householders, and so promoted methods whereby *vipassanā* could be taken up wholeheartedly as a stand-alone practice, largely isolated from ethics and doctrine, as well as from an ascetic lifestyle. This second trend naturally garnered more popular appeal, but also evoked criticism for “weakening the *Dhamma*,” as discussed below.

In early twentieth century Burma, one of the most successful popularizers was U Ba Khin (1899–1971), a government official, second in a rare non-monastic teaching lineage, whose first teacher was authorized to teach by Ledi himself. U Ba Khin downplayed study, developed a simple method that was intentionally congenial even to non-Buddhists, but also advocated a rigid schedule of meditation with ten-day periods of intense practice. U Ba Khin’s disciple, SN Goenka (1924–2013), a businessman who emigrated to India in 1969 and further marginalized doctrine, claimed that the Buddha had only taught an “art of living” rooted in meditation. Goenka founded a world-wide meditation movement that significantly, but not entirely, distanced itself from its Buddhist roots.

Most influential among the early popularizers was Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (1870–1955), from whom most modern *vipassanā* teachers in Myanmar descend.[28] He endeavored to strip the teaching of *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* down to

26. Author’s assessment.

27. It is now widely acknowledged in modern scholarship that the meaning of *samādhi* in this later tradition had become something quite distinct from the early meaning, for instance Shankman (2008, esp. pp. 101-4) Kumāra (2022, pp. 10-22), Thanissaro 1996, pp. 248-51), Polak (2011).

28. Braun (2013, p. 161).

its most essential elements so that it could be mastered with minimal effort. He seems to have taken very seriously the description of the *satipaṭṭhāna* as 'the one way' (*ekāyano maggo*) to liberation as justification for treating it as a stand-alone practice, and as the basis of the claim (unsupported in the early texts) that one could acquire an initial stage of awakening in very short time through *vipassanā* alone.[29] With the downplay of *Dhammic* wisdom and of virtue as skills acquired through long and sustained practice, progress was measured in terms of transformational "spiritual experiences" or "altered states of consciousness."[30]

Mingun appears to have developed the expedient of making sparse reference to *Dhamma*, at least in the introductory stages of his method,[31] in contrast to many of his peers in Burma. Like U Ba Khin, he made use of an intensive retreat format, and in fact had founded the very first group meditation center in Burma in 1911. A clever, innovative, and valuable method of "noting" allowed practice to be brought into ever-changing contexts ubiquitously and fluidly throughout the day. Rather than taking up the standard exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* one by one, this turned even distractions into opportunities for practice.

Mingun's most prominent student was Mahāsi Sayadaw (1904–1982). Mahāsi refined his teacher's techniques and founded what is the most widely known internationally among the Burmese *vipassanā* schools, after receiving a large boost through Burmese government sponsorship in the 1950's. The German monk Nyanaponika Thera (1901–1994), who had long lived in Sri Lanka, studied meditation in Myanmar under Mahāsi Sayadaw in the early fifties, and became highly influential abroad through his 1954 book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, in which he coined the term 'bare attention.'

In this book Nyanaponika describes what he calls "the Burmese method," based on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as explicated by Mingun and Mahāsi, as a practice of continuous observation in a manner that breaks down common experience into discrete momentary and localized events. To achieve this requires careful management of attention and non-distractedness. The first steps of this method are grounded in the practitioner's own experience without theoretical explanation, although a meditation master can provide some input

29. Sharf (2014, p. 944). I argue against this justification in 1.1.

30. Sharf (1995) argues convincingly that the role attributed to meditative *experience* is characteristic of Buddhist modernism, but has little precedent in scripture. For instance, "by rendering Buddhist wisdom a mental event as opposed to an acquired skill, the rigors of monastic training could be circumvented" (p. 267).

31. Braun (2013, p. 161), Sharf (2014, p. 952).

by suggesting that a student turn his attention to a particular experience, so that the practitioner might gain insights into phenomena as they present themselves.[32]

4.4.2. America. Mahāsi’s technique, as well as that of Goenka, were designed to be taken up quite readily by anyone at any level of Buddhist commitment and opportunity in Burma, and each was easily exported to foreign lands.[33] Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzburg were three young pioneers, who traveled separately to Asia and studied *vipassanā* with Mahāsi, Goenka and others, and also in Thailand and India. They collaborated in the United States to found the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Massachusetts in the mid-1970's, which came to focus on the Mahāsi method. They would exert an enormous influence on the American *vipassanā* movement, and on the development of westernized Buddhism in general.

It was a match made in heaven when the Mahāsi method and other methods adapted for popular application in Burma encountered American popular culture. The culture of the wild west of Buddhism valued personal experience and, in all its individualism, was suspicious of institutions and external authority.[34] Rather than promoting *Dhamma*, it asked that one “find one's authentic voice, one's own inner truth.”[35] The early vision of IMS was of bare practice with almost no rituals, nor non-meditation activities. For IMS, authority came from meditation practice itself.

Moreover, “spirituality” was being increasingly commodified in America as a kind of spiritual marketplace arising in a pluralistic context in which free agents need no longer accept the authority of family traditions. One might attend a *vipassanā* retreat one month and learn Sufi dancing the next. The term “spirituality” itself, as in, “I'm spiritual but not religious,” apparently came into vogue in the 1950's with the rise of the consumerist lifestyle,[36] with a mix-and-match, plug-and-play, “build-your-own” quality to which “mindfulness” as a stand-alone practice was amenable. It is therefore not surprising that meditation methods that were modular, led quickly to intense personal experiences, and minimized doctrine would have great appeal in this modern culture.

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32. Nyanaponika (1973, pp. 90-91).

33. Sharf (2014, p. 942).

34. McMahan (2008, pp. 58, 188). The essence of Buddhism was to become an inner experience (pp. 42-43).

35. McMahan (2008, p. 189).

36. Carrette and King (2004, pp. 42, 128).

4.5. The limits of "mindfulness" practice

A fundamental thesis of this book is that *satipaṭṭhāna* is a process of acquiring and internalizing the skill of *Dhammic* perception and behavior. *Dhamma* is not totally absent in "mindfulness" meditation, but it tends to be limited to the teachings of impermanence and conditionality. Bhikkhu Bodhi expresses his concern that contemporary teachers seldom emphasize right view and right intention in their understanding of "mindfulness," in favor of merely being present. They go so far as regarding *Dhamma*—quoting other teachers—as "claptrap" or "mumbo-jumbo," while their meditation is "unconstrained by dogma,"[37] presumably referring to *Dhamma*. Meanwhile, Alan Wallace is concerned that *vipassanā* had become a radically simplified teaching for the general lay public, "dumbed down" and overlooking the richness of *the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.[38] Robert Sharf bemoans the lack of engagement of "mindfulness" with Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist ways of life.[39] Jay Garfield regards "mindfulness" as hijacked by the "mindfulness industry and missing its earliest resonances, including its sense of ethical commitment."[40]

Sharf[41] likewise regards historical popularization movements quite critically and draws striking parallels between the early twentieth century movement in Burma and historical developments in the Chan/Zen tradition in eighth-century China. In the latter case, Buddhist masters in the capital simplified meditation practice for the benefit of elite lay devotees without doctrinal training, nor grounding in an ascetic lifestyle. The masters promised quick results and thereby promoted an effective democratization of awakening. As a result, meditation widely evolved to become a matter of setting aside distinctions and conceptualizations, and letting the mind rest in the flow of here and now. This is similar to what we see with in modern *vipassanā* movement. Sharf points out that, at the time, traditionalists in China had criticized such methods as weakening the *Dhamma*.

With the *weakening* of Dhama, the function of popular meditation is often reconceptualized in terms of facilitating certain subjective "experiences" or "states of consciousness": religious, spiritual, or mystical. Often these experiential states are popularly identified with degrees of awakening (such as stream entry), levels of *jhāna*, or glimpses of awakening (*kensho*, *satori*).

37. Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

38. Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

39. Sharf (2015, p. 477).

40. Garfield (2012, p. 86).

41. Sharf (2014, 2018, etc.).

However, traditional Theravada or Mahayana texts, including the early Buddhist texts, provide scant reference to the value of personal experiences. Such experiences do occur, but where such experiences are mentioned in the early texts, they generally serve only as reference points in traditional instructions, rather than as goals of practice.[42]

4.6. The danger of “mindfulness” practice

David McMahan spotlights what may be the greatest pitfall of modern “mindfulness.” Modern “mindfulness” teachers often claim that “mindfulness” and popular *vipassanā* facilitate personal *discovery* of the *Dhamma* in our personal experience. Sometimes “mindfulness” is even described as a technology for gaining a transparent, objective view of the content of the mind in order to realize “things as they are” (*yathā-bhūta*), shorn of all cultural conditioning, biases, and emotional entanglements, and beyond concepts and doctrine.[43]

While offering a justification for the dearth of *Dhamma* in Buddhist “mindfulness” practice, this claim sounds like trying to reinvent the *Dhamma* wheel, leaving one wondering, “Why did the Buddha teach so much *Dhamma* if simple ‘mindfulness’ is all we need to accomplish what he had accomplished?”

In fact, this account has it backwards:[44] in Buddhist practice one starts with *Dhamma*, then perfects it through right recollection and *satipaṭṭhāna*. In fact, for best results, one immerses oneself in *Dhamma*, lives in a like-minded community (ideally with paragons of *Dhammic* virtue and wisdom), studies *Dhamma*, and attempts to embody the principles and practices of *Dhamma* in one’s daily life.[45] Those intent on musical virtuosity must similarly immerse themselves in music, musical culture and musical training. For McMahan, without a proper, sociocultural context, meditation practice is unintelligible.[46]

However, if “mindfulness” is not practiced in a proper *Dhammic* context, and “mindfulness” does not generate its own *Dhamma*, what exactly does “mindfulness” do? I think the answer is that it serves to support and strengthen

42. Sharf (1995).

43. McMahan (2023, pp. 16, 83).

44. The chapters of this book should make this clear.

45. *Satipaṭṭhāna* is never a stand-alone practice in the early texts, but an advanced practice with *Dhammic* prerequisites (see 1.1), particularly in the maturation of virtue.

46. McMahan (2023, p. 55). McMahan (2023, p. 154) makes the claim that the context is always sociocultural.

the principles and practices of whatever context it happens to be embedded. These are likely to include secular cultural conditioning, biases, emotional entanglements, concepts, and doctrine of the dominant culture. Let me give an example:

"Individualism," is a pervasive concept and practice in modern culture, perhaps nowhere more than the United States. "The self" is regarded as autonomous, as the home of spirituality, creativity and morality, along with the imperative to be "true to oneself," in opposition to social pressures.[47] This ideology is so familiar to most of us, that it is rarely questioned; it is "common sense," a form of blind faith. Nonetheless, this way of thinking arose only in 17th to 18th century Europe, to be promoted in the European Enlightenment, Romanticism, humanistic psychology, and the human potential movement, where it had no influence Buddhism.

In spite of its obscure, non-Buddhist origins, the autonomous self is presented by many western Buddhist teachers as being at the core of Buddhism itself,[48] according to which one's purpose is to "discover your true self." From a Buddhist perspective, this ideology is based on a questionable metaphysics that is inimical to understanding of the Buddhist teaching of "non-self." I propose that this manner of teaching arose as a result of "mindfulness" and *vipassanā* practice that was grounded in secular culture, rather than grounded in *Dhamma*. Modern Buddhism is burdened, as McMahan puts it, with "cultural baggage."[49]

Unfortunately, corporations have gotten wind of the kind of docility produced in secular "mindfulness," and adapted it to the corporate context. Regarding it as a kind of mental capital,[50] they have invested heavily in promoting "mindfulness" practices in the workforce. Google's "Search Inside Yourself" mindfulness training program is one of the best known examples.[51] The pervasiveness of such programs in the corporate world has prompted Slavoj Žižek to declare that "mindfulness" is "establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism," helping us "to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retraining the appearance of mental sanity."[52] Marianne

47. McMahan (2023, pp. 147-149).

48. McMahan (2023, pp. 150-151). McMahan (2008) and Thanissaro (2013) catalog ideologies of Western origin often presented in modernity as Buddhist.

49. McMahan (2023, p. 134).

50. Purser (2018, p. 29)

51. Purser (2018, p. 131)

52. This is quoted by Purser (2018, p. 29).

Williamson, speaking at Google, and in response to a particular protest whose “heartfelt message” had been been glibbly addressed through “mindful” reflection, critiqued, “Only in modern America could we come up with some ersatz version of spirituality that gives us a pass on addressing unnecessary human suffering in our midst.”[53]

How does Buddhist practice retain its integrity in the context of the modern secular world? McMahan reminds us that early Buddhism developed in an ascetic counter-cultural movement that was disillusioned with the dominant society and skeptical of its goals, values and religious institutions.[54] This movement formed the core of the early *Saṅgha*, in which disciples of the Buddha—drop-outs from conventional life—were able to immerse themselves in *Dhamma* in a like-minded community. Because of the way the *Saṅgha* is constituted, they were able to do this in relative isolation from the counter-vailing influence of the dominant culture, yet from there, could serve as role models, and project *Dhammic* influence back into the prevailing society. The *Saṅgha* continues to play this role to this day, generally sustaining its radical qualities in any prevailing culture.[55]

4.7. Conclusions

“Mindfulness” is an historical accident, nonetheless useful in its time and place as a provisional understanding of mental cultivation. I have no doubt that “mindfulness” practice will continue to have a large following in the west and will continue to benefit many people. I would hope, however, that its promoters will understand and be forthright about its ultimate limits, and make clear that it is unlikely to fulfill the Buddhist fruits often attributed to it as a stand-alone practice. In this way, those of high aspiration and opportunity will be aware of an opportunity for Buddhist practice beyond the limits of the “mindfulness” movement.

Moreover, serious scholars and teachers, in particular, do well to reconsider critically this provisional teaching as the *Buddhasāsana* matures in the modern world. We need to look beyond “mindfulness” in order to develop an accurate and complete understanding of the practice of *Dhamma* reflective of ancient traditions. Unfortunately Rhys Davids’ once apt translation of *sati* is, I am convinced, firmly co-opted, and perhaps irrevocably bound to, our pervasive

53. This is quoted by Purser (2018, p. 181).

54. McMahan (2023, p. 137).

55. The role of the Saṅgha in sustaining the integrity of Buddhism is the theme of Cintita (2014).

modern understanding “mindfulness.” This suggests that it might be best not only to shed the naïve concept “mindfulness” from our discussion of the ancient texts, but to find a new translation for *sati*, as well. Quite simply, scholars and teachers of traditional Buddhism no longer own the English word ‘mindfulness,’ and must appropriate another.

In the other chapters of Rethinking *Satipaṭṭhāna* I simply revert to translating *sati* as ‘recollection,’ with the understanding that this is recollection of “*Dhammic* know-how.” I am also partial to Garfield’s[56] recommendation of ‘conscientiousness’ as a translation of *sati*. It captures much of Rhys Davids’ original (but now lost) intent in translating *sati* as ‘mindfulness.’

56. Garfield (2021, p. 86).

5. Major themes of *satipaṭṭhāna* investigation

The contemplative practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is a process of verifying and internalizing *Dhamma* through experiential investigation (See 1.5). Step by step, it investigates a "*Dhamma* teaching" (also known as "*dhamma*," in lower case, or simply "teaching") in terms of experiential "observables."

dhamma **→ investigation ←** **observables**

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10, hereafter "the *Sutta*," see appendix) is a practice tutorial that presents a series of twenty-one exercises in which this practice is to be pursued. Each exercise investigates a set of *Dhamma* teachings in terms of defined observables. The exercises are grouped into four overarching "themes," known as the "four *satipaṭṭhānas*." The twenty-one exercises presented in the *Sutta* as follows.

I. Body

1. breath
2. postures
3. activities
4. body parts
5. elements

6-14. corpse decay

II. Impressions
(only one exercise)

III. Mind
(only one exercise)

IV. *Dhammas*

1. hindrances
2. aggregates
3. sense-spheres
4. awakening factors
5. noble truths

In this chapter, "Ex. I.3" will refer to the activities exercise, "Ex. II" will refer to the impressions exercise, and so on. Each exercise consists of two parts:

signature exercise + refrain

The "signature exercise" delineates the range of observables relevant to the respective exercise and may, or may not, make reference to teachings relevant to the exercise. The observables and teachings together constitute the "themes" of the exercise. The "refrain" is—with minor variations—common to all of the exercises, and consistently refers to the teachings of the "three characteristics" (*tilakkhaṇa*) of "non-self," "impermanence" and "suffering." For instance,

here is the text of Ex. I.2:

> **[Signature exercise.]** Again, *bhikkhus*, when walking, a *bhikkhu* Discerns, "I am walking." When standing, he discerns, "I am standing." When sitting, he discerns, "I am sitting." When lying down, he discerns, "I am lying down." Or he discerns accordingly however his body is disposed.
>
> **[Refrain.]** In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, or he abides body-contemplating in the body externally, or he abides body-contemplating in the body both internally and externally.
>
> He abides contemplating in the body the nature of origination, or he abides contemplating in the body the nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in the body the nature of both origination and vanishing.
>
> Recollection that "the body exists" 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 body-contemplating in the body.

This particular signature exercise simply defines the observables but no *dhammas*, and the refrain defines the *dhammas* to be investigated in terms of those observables. The necessary starting point for performing each of these twenty-one exercises is an initial "intellectual understanding" of the relevant teaching. Through repetition, that initial understanding will subsequently become internalized as a kind of *Dhammic* "know-how." This chapter undertakes to provide a nuts-and-bolts, intellectual understanding of the various *dhammas* referred to in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, in which the relevant observables are readily apparent. For how these *dhammas* are then internalized in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, see chapters 1, 2, 3 and 6.

5.1. How to experience *Dhamma* as observables

Buddhism is a practice tradition: Rather than learning an abstract speculative philosophy for its own sake, the practitioner trains perception and behavior with *Dhamma* as a guide. Accordingly, the Buddha invites us to "come and see," and declares that the *Dhamma* is "experienced by the wise" in the oft recited "Recollection of the *Dhamma*" (*dhammānussati*):

> 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,

Thag 6.2)

Nonetheless, the *Dhamma* is often represented in sweeping, abstract "philosophical" terms. Shulman (2014) doesn't buy it; he argues across the board for a very nuts-and-bolts (my description) interpretation of *Dhamma* in which the terms used in the earliest *Dhamma* teachings make consistent reference to factors in observable practice experience. As a consequence, the teachings are almost entirely subject to verification in terms of direct observables. *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice would be ineffectual if this were not the case.

In *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice we begin by choosing one of the exercises, then picking one of its teachings along with its associated observables as the current "theme of investigation." The theme might, for instance, focus on "impermanence" of breath if we chose Ex. I.1, or any of the five "appropriation-aggregates" if we chose Ex. IV.2. It is important that we already have an adequate understanding of the teaching, beginning with studying the *suttas* or derivative resources, such as this chapter. The practice on that theme will itself breed further understanding through familiarization.

The observables should provide potential verification of the teaching. The five aggregates, for instance, are collections of "awareness events," and awareness events are indeed observable in experience as they originate and vanish moment by moment. Observables, furthermore, should be distinguished from "presumptions" (*maññita*), things that we experience and are convinced are there or true, but that we do not directly observe. For instance, you directly *observe* the purring emanating from behind the sofa, but you *presume* the cat is there. You do not directly observe the cat. The existence of "the self" is the foremost presumption addressed in the *Sutta*. A presumption, in principle, might be true or false, but, in either case, ungrounded in direct observation.[1] Through *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, we tend to gain observables while we shed presumptions. We now possess the basis for practicing the chosen exercise.

The challenge for me, as author, is to describe the various *Dhamma* teachings in nuts-and-bolts terms. Many might think that it can't be done. In the rest of this chapter we will explore the various *Dhammic* teachings referred to in the *Sutta* in order to gain an adequate understanding of each one, so that we might undertake the exercises of the *Sutta*. It should be noted that an open-ended set of *dhammas* is, in principle, subject to *satipaṭṭhāna* investigation. In fact the Chinese correlates of the *Sutta* present alternative but overlapping sets of

1. Direct observations themselves may turn out to be somewhat presumptive as well, but for practical purposes we can put this finer point aside.

exercises.[2]

5.2. Impermanence and conditionality

"Impermanence" is a major theme of *Dhamma* in general, but specifically of the refrain. Since each exercise repeats the refrain, impermanence is in principle a *dhamma* subject to investigation in each exercise. The second clause of the refrain for the first (body) *satipaṭṭhāna* (and equivalently for each of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*) is as follows:

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

Observables come and go, but what we *presume* to exist might *appear* permanent to us. For instance, "the self" or "the body" is practically permanent (I say "practically," since we treat it a permanent for practical purposes, except in marginal cases, like death). However, what is observable "directly" is impermanent, at least upon close investigation.

I translate the Pali word *samudaya* as 'origination' here, in lieu of the also common translation, 'arising.' 'Origination' is better, because it suggests discerning not only the *arising* of an observable, but also what an observable arises *from*.[3] *Samudaya* is the word used, for instance, where the origin of suffering in the second noble truth is equated with craving. That is, *samudaya* integrates impermanence and conditionality. Conditionality is very simple for the Buddha:

> When this is, that is.
> From the arising of this follows the arising of that.
> When this isn't, that isn't.
> From the cessation of this follows the cessation of that. (Ud 1.3)

In short, conditionality consists in observable relations among observables. It does not invite investigation of hypothetical underlying mechanisms, in the manner of modern science, which would be presumptions.[4]

"Contingency" is a nice English word that expresses the necessarily transitory nature of phenomena as critically dependent on other contingent phenomena.

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2. My account (Cintita, 2021) of the links of dependent co-arising, for instance, provide material for many additional teachings described in nuts-and-bolts, observable terms.

3. Thanissaro (2012, p. 37).

4. See Cintita (2021, sect. A.4) for more on conditionality.

We can visualize the scope of origination as a network of contingency in constant flux. When we fail to recognize the highly contingent nature of the things of our world of experience, we live in terms of many presumptions about things that are practically fixed, such as “the self” and other objects of clinging. Such presumptions lead to a disappointing life of broken promises and we suffer for it. This is the message of the *Sutta*’s refrain.

5.3. Mind

“Mind” is the theme of the third *satipaṭṭhāna*. ‘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 or purified in practice, or as something that can cause problems for us.

There are actually three “mind exercises”: the lone exercise of the third (mind) *satipaṭṭhāna*, is supplemented by two more complex and overlapping exercises of the fourth (*dhamma*) *satipaṭṭhāna*: the “five hindrances” and the “seven awakening factors.”[5]

5.3.1. The simple mind exercise. The observables listed for Ex. III are states that tend to dominate the mind temporarily, and that for the most part have distinctive significance in *Dhamma* and practice. The signature exercise reads as follows:

> Here a *bhikkhu* discerns mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. He discerns mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate, and mind unaffected by hate as mind unaffected by hate. He discerns mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion. He discerns contracted mind as contracted mind, and distracted mind as distracted mind. He discerns exalted mind as exalted mind, and unexalted mind as unexalted mind. He discerns surpassed mind as surpassed mind, and unsurpassed mind as unsurpassed mind. He discerns composed mind as composed mind, and uncomposed mind as uncomposed mind. He discerns liberated mind as liberated mind, and unliberated mind as unliberated mind.

“Lust,” “hate” and “delusion” are pervasive in the discourses in reference to

5. The first three *satipaṭṭhānas* cover the categories of body, consciousness and mind respectively. The fourth is reserved for more complex teachings, each of which might properly belong to one of the first three categories.

unskillful or unwholesome factors of mind. 'Lust' is sometimes replaced by 'greed' in the early texts. We can also understand these as neediness, aversion and confusion. Lust and hate are forms of craving: wanting to acquire or keep something, and wanting to avoid or get rid of something. Delusion is not seeing what is going on. The opposites of lust, hate and delusion are renunciation, kindness and wisdom. At any time, one of these six might dominate the mind.

These first three clauses bear highlighting because they underlie the ethical qualities of our everyday behavior. Lust, hate, delusion, and their opposites are strongly implicated in ethical practices, and we have here an opportunity to examine their roles in the network of contingency. In particular greed, hate and delusion are the roots of "unwholesome" *kamma*. When they arise and when we act on them, we commonly end up doing some harm. We don't see things clearly when under the influence of lust or hate, so we might fail to see their downside in the heat of the moment. You should try to recognize that these unwholesome "roots" are accompanied by immediately observable "suffering" or a degree of discomfort. You do well to examine your intentions in these terms before any deliberate action.[6]

The word I translate as 'compact' more broadly means "concise, thin, slender or contracted." The word for "scattered" is derived from the same root, but with a contrary prefix, and can mean "distracted, mentally upset, disturbed or perplexed." Bones can also be scattered. Is your mind ever like that? Attentiveness is required for *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, but scatteredness might instead be present when we sit down to meditate.

'Exalted' seems to mark continued progress in practice. Mind is unexalted when we start out in Buddhist practice, then becomes exalted as we develop qualities like renunciation, kindness and wisdom and we begin to experience exalted states more readily and frequently.

"Superior" and "unsurpassed" refer to higher qualities of mind identified with spiritual progress. These might encompass unworldly impressions, including "rapture," a precursor to a composed mind, described as one of the awakening factors.

What I translate as 'composed' means "in *samādhi*," best observed on the cushion during *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Normally, during *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, the mind will settle into composure and *jhāna*. The exercise of the seven awakening factors traces the process of settling the mind into *samādhi* during *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, first passing through antecedent states of rapture, and

6. See Cintita (2019, pp. 66-9) on these qualities of the unwholesome roots.

serenity.

The distinction between “liberated” and “unliberated” is generally with respect to awakening. However practitioners may sometimes experience fleeting states of liberation when lust, hate, delusion, life’s problems and suffering are all spontaneously absent, only to return a bit later.

5.3.2. The five hindrances. Ex. IV.1 investigates the basic types of distraction which obstruct *satipaṭṭhāna*, as well as other wisdom and ethical practices. These are the “five hindrances” of “sensual desire,” “ill will,” “sloth and torpor,” “restlessness and remorse,” and “doubt.” The hindrances are highlighted, albeit indirectly, in the opening of the *sutta*:

> He abides contemplating body in the body, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

“Having put away covetousness and grief for the world” concentrates the scope of attention by excluding unwholesome worldly distractions. This is widely regarded as shorthand for abandoning the five hindrances, after which one is also said to be “secluded,” a condition for entering *samādhi* at the first *jhāna* (see 2.1, 3.2, 3.3.1).

Each of the hindrances not only potentially disrupts practice, but is also categorized as “unwholesome,” that is, rooted in lust, hate, or delusion as described earlier. It is significant that the more *wholesome* states of mind rarely distract us from practice. We might complain, “I was so angry, I just couldn’t meditate,” but we are not likely to say, “I was so darn overwhelmed with kindness that my mind wouldn’t settle.”

The hindrances are as follows:

“Sensual desire” is the neediness for things of the world: food, sex, companionship, money in the bank, status or reputation, our Oscar.

“Ill-will” includes hate or aversion, anger, fear, envy, vexation, etc.

“Sloth and torpor” together constitute a muddled, dull or sleepy mind.

“Restlessness and remorse” represent an overactive mind.

“Doubt” is lack of conviction either in the efficacy of the practice, or in our ability to perform it.

For most of the hindrances, we might notice two distinct parts: One is a “narrative.” In the case of anger, for instance, this might be a string of thoughts like, “He had no right to do that. I would never do that to anyone. I’m going to get back at him!” The other part consists of particular sensations in body and

mind. In the case of anger, this is likely tightness in the chest, flushing of the face, a kind of boiling sensation in the mind. The narrative is conditioned by mundane circumstances that turn to a proliferation of distracting thoughts, and then becomes fuel for bodily and mental sensations that constitute anger.

The narrative is generally not a subject for contemplation, because attention to it would make things worse, much like a lone news reporter trying to work in the midst of a barroom brawl. However, if we strip the narrative away, even momentarily, we can productively focus on the bodily and mental sensations, simply acknowledging their origination in narrative. This is much like the more astute news reporter who stands outside of the bar and reports on the injured or stunned individuals as they are ejected from the bar though the door or windows. Deprived of fuel, the bodily and mental impressions will be short-lived.

5.3.3. The seven awakening factors. Ex. IV.4 examines the origination of *samādhi*, in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice itself. (At one point in the early texts, *satipaṭṭhāna* is even referred to as "a *samādhi*.") *Samādhi* is critical to producing optimal results in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, and similar fruits are attributed elsewhere to each (also see 1.5.2 on the awakening factors). The seven awakening factors are:

(1) recollection
(2) *dhamma*-investigation
(3) energy
(4) rapture
(5) tranquility
(6) *samādhi*
(7) equanimity

Notice that the first three factors can be understood to describe *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation itself, or more broadly, "skillful engagement." They correspond respectively to "recollection," "discernment" and "ardency" among the "*satipaṭṭhāna* standards" (2.1.2). The missing standard, "seclusion," is already implicit as a precursor to *samādhi* (3.2, 3.3.1).

The remaining factors arise as a consequence of skillful engagement in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, beginning with "rapture." Have you ever been totally engaged in some activity, like fly fishing, or playing chess, or hang gliding, so that an elated state arises while everything but the activity fades into the background. Engagement in *Dhammic* investigation is often like this. Psychological research likewise indicates that a state of "flow" arises typically from an activity in which we have developed a level of recollected know-how, in which our skills are presently challenged, but in which they nonetheless serve the activity well (see 6.1.1 on flow). Concerns have disappeared and we feel completely alive. That's rapture. It is a kind of spiritual pleasure that has a

degree of energy or excitement, along with a sense of well-being.

The first four factors are active and energized. With the fifth factor, "tranquility," the trajectory of the mind begins to change toward greater stillness. This seems to come from the sense of well-being connected with the confidence that our skills are up to the task. Mind becomes still, yet part of mind remains engaged, such that energy and rapture persist. This shift toward greater stillness boosts attentiveness and inhibits distraction. We are "in the groove."

The sixth factor is "*samādhi*" itself, reached at the point at which attention has become "one-centered" (see 3.2), that is, reliably single-mindedly centered around the task at hand, along with the relevant teachings and observables, but to the exclusion of what is not relevant. *Samādhi* differentiates into four *jhānas* of progressively greater depth. The seventh awakening factor, "equanimity," is equated with the deep third and fourth *jhānas*.

Beyond the first three factors, the remaining factors, including *samadhi*, arise spontaneously in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice (3.1.1). You should observe how these factors arise of themselves from the active engagement in practice (3.1.3). In certain later traditions, *samādhi* requires a "synthetic technique" (see 3.1.0, 3.2.2) to bring the mind to a single point (for instance, staring at a *kasiṇa*), that results in a virtual shutting down of all mental activity, sometimes even the functioning of the senses. For our purposes, such *samādhi* would be overkill, choking off the process of investigation.

5.4. Consciousness

We are "in here," but we are conscious of things of the world "out there." We have only to show up and the world "out there" shows up for us in all of its complexity, awaiting our examination and manipulation. We presume that the world "out there" is reliably fixed and very real, and that it would be there even if we were not "in here" to be conscious of it. Accordingly, we experience a reality divided into two parts: (1) Me, with my body and mind, the "subject" that is "in here," and (2) the things of the world, the "objects" "out there." A wall separates what is "in here" from "what is "out there." That I can be "in here," look through the wall, and see "out there" confirms that there is a "me" "in here." At least this is how things appear.

Nonetheless, seeing things as real is not the same as seeing real things. Appearance is not necessary reality. For the Buddha, seeing things in this way is highly presumptive. Moreover, this presumed subject/object dualism leads to a heap of suffering, for (as the great Sinhalese scholar-monk Ñaṇananda put

it) “Where there is a fence, there is offense and defense,” greed and hatred. Moreover, the presumed, reliably fixed and independent nature of the objective world limits our capacity for “experiencing otherwise,” which is necessary for progress on the path.

There are three exercises in the *Sutta* that explore consciousness, which I aptly call the “consciousness group.” These are the single “impression” (*vedanā*) (Ex. II), the “appropriation-aggregates” (IV.2) and the “sixfold sphere” (IV.3) exercises. The exercises in the consciousness group derail the subject/object duality by demonstrating the mentally or subjectively “constructed” nature of what we presume to be the world “out there,” securing for us a basis for experiencing the world more fruitfully “otherwise.”

5.4.1. How do we know? Consciousness is highly presumptive. The Buddha compares it to a magic show, in which the magician, through all of the tricks of the trade, convinces us of an illusory version of the world, but it is the Buddhist practitioner's job to see through the illusion:[7]

> Now suppose that a magician or magician's apprentice were to display a magic trick at a major intersection, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him, seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it, it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a magic trick? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any consciousness that is past, future, or present; inner or outer; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him, seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it, it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in consciousness? (SN 22.95)

Our task is to try to get behind the stage, figuratively, where we have a view of the props (mirrors, black boxes, secret passage ways, and so on) and slight of hand that create the illusion that is consciousness. How do we do that? Through being aware of our awareness!

Consciousness is the culmination of various stages of “awareness.” The intermediate stages, as well as consciousness itself, are directly observable as momentary “awareness events.” These include perceptions, seeing, hearing, impressions, inferences and so on. Consciousness itself is observable only as a series of “peeks” into the world: we *presume* to have immediate access to the whole world all at once, but are at any one instant *observably* focused on some (generally tiny) part.

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7. Ñāṇānanda (2007) is an excellent commentary on this *sutta*.

An "awareness event" is different from other mental factors, such as sadness or restlessness, in that it "refers" (or has the "intention" to refer, as phenomenologists would say more precisely) to something outside of itself, generally to something "out there." We are not just aware, we are aware *of* a house or *of* a mountain. "Awareness" is always "awareness *of*" something. Consciousness is an awareness event: we are "conscious" of something. But likewise, we have an "impression" *of* something, we "perceive" something, we "smell" something, we infer something. We even have a "presumption" *of* something. These are all awareness events. We will call the "something" the "content" of the event. Even if it turns out to be illusory, it has entered our world of experience. Words and sentences, pictures, and thermometers analogously have the quality of referring to something outside themselves.

Awareness is observable: even if the water we are "aware" of turns out to be a mirage, we can still observe the experience of water. Moreover, the content is typically physical. We commonly presume that anything we are "conscious of" will accurately reflect something "out there" in the world, barring certain anomalies, like optical illusions or mirages.

In investigating consciousness from behind the stage, we do not simply take the world "out there" at face value. Rather than asking, "*What* do I know?" we ask, "*How* do I know?" This gets behind appearances to what is really going on. Let's look at an analogy:

> Suppose we see a UFO "out there." We see lights moving in the sky, say, in a bizarre pattern, and infer it is a UFO. We might seek to explain what we have seen in either of two ways.
>
> First, we might seek to explain the UFO *objectively*: "It must be of extraterrestrial origin, because the technology to produce that pattern is unknown on earth. But from what planet did it come? How did it get here?" This is to be credulous.
>
> Alternatively, we might seek to explain it *epistemically*: "Am I hallucinating? Did I pop one too many pills? Is a twiddle bug larva creeping across my glasses? Can weather or optical effects explain what I am seeing?" This is to be skeptical.

Worldlings tend to be credulous. The skeptical man with good eyesight watching from behind the magician's stage employs an "epistemic" approach. He holds off on accepting what he might at first experience as real, and instead investigates the processes that gave rise to that experience, for the most part the accrual of various kinds of awareness events in support of consciousness.

This is exactly what we do in the appropriation-aggregates and in the sixfold sphere exercises. The purpose is not to recognize what is really real, but to recognize how the world "out there" that we *presume* to be real is substantially constructed in the mind, and then "projected" "out there." This is to "see through the illusion."

5.4.2. Appropriation-aggregates. Also known as the "aggregates of clinging," these are the topic of many discourses and of Ex. IV.2. Let's begin with a little story.

> Suppose you are slow to wake up. At first, the world is a conceptual blur, much like one's naïve first impression of abstract art: colors, sounds, but with no sense to it. Then certain patterns begin to stand out and draw your attention. Some of these materialize into recognizable objects: your alarm clock, and it's ringing. Then thinking kicks in: "Alarm clock. Gotta get up. Oh no! Gotta be at work by 8:00." A goal has come into awareness. It might take a few minutes more and a cup of coffee before you become fully aware of the world and able to focus on its details at will.

This describes how five cognitive faculties kick in one by one, from the simplest to the most complex. Once set in motion, they will all be active and mutually conditioning throughout the day. These faculties underlie the five aggregates, which are classifications of observable awareness events big and small.

In Pali, an "aggregate" (*khaṅdha*) is an unordered heap of something: an aggregate of rice, an aggregate of firewood, and so on. "Appropriation" (often translated as 'attachment' or 'clinging') is the presumption of certain things as "me" and "mine." In the *Sutta*, the heaps represent five categories of awareness events ranked from the simplest to the most complex. Our observables are the instances of these aggregates; they are awareness events coming and going. The aggregates are:

"Form" (*rūpa*) refers to the raw, largely pre-conceptual "sensations" within sense fields: visual appearances (shapes and colors), sounds, odors, tastes and bodily sensations.

"Impressions" (*vedanā*) arise from forms, but also from perceptions, fabrications and consciousness itself. They mark things that "matter," and therefore condition attention and further analysis.

"Perception" (*saññā*) is the spontaneous recognition of objects and qualities in the world of experience. For instance, a pattern of shapes

and colors in the visual sense field becomes, in an instant, a familiar face, or our coffee mug.

"Fabrications" (*saṅkhāra*) are literally "puttings together" in Pali, the compounding of experiential factors to derive new factors, often by inference or by assembling parts into wholes. They also take the form of calls to action, that is, volition as well. "Presumptions" are *fabrications* that are taken as real.

"Consciousness" (*viññāṇa*) is a self-fulfilling "peek" into the world "out there," which is a immediate unfolding in awareness of details located at the focal point of "attention."

A river of all these kinds of awareness events is passing by you right now, as you read the words on this page or play with your dog. The repeated arising of consciousness at various focal points leads to the illusion that the world "out there" is continuously present all together in all of its depth and breadth; we just show up and decide what we want to look at or do. However, the coherence and continuity of the world are themselves presumptions that seem to be confirmed by the fluidity with which scattered conscious glimpses arise into that presumed world. Wherever consciousness "descends" or alights, the world "grows" or blooms through the aid of the other aggregates. In this way an illusion is "magically" constructed.[8]

The aggregates are not as distinct from one another as advertised, but rather merge and flow in association with each other.

> Impression, perception, and consciousness, friend: these states are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives; and what one perceives, that one is conscious of. (M 43 i 293)

So expect some ambiguity as you classify observables in this exercise. Close analysis often reveals the *fabricated* character of impression, perception and consciousness. An effective strategy for investigation is to focus on one aggregate at a time, starting with form. Other aggregates will likely intrude into your experience, and as you attend to form, you may be able to observe these individually, most easily percepts (a table, a chair, etc.) and then instances of the other aggregates.

5.4.3. The sense spheres. The "sixfold sphere" (*saḷāyatana*, often translated as

8. This process of descent and growth as described and verified in the early texts is discussed in more detail in Cintita (2021, sect. 3.4).

the "six sense spheres") is another very prominent *Dhamma* teaching indeed, link in dependent co-arising, and the theme of Ex. IV.3. Central to this teaching is the role of the senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue body and mind. According to the Buddha, the eye (along with the others) is important to understand.

> Without directly knowing and fully understanding the |eye|, without developing dispassion for it and abandoning it, one is incapable of destroying suffering. (SN 35.111)

This is then said of |ear|, |nose|, etc.[9] The importance both of the aggregates and of the sixfold sphere is that, in investigating them, we actually gain insight into the process whereby our presumptions are constructed.

The following gives a quick overview of the observables we are asked to discern in investigating the sense spheres.

Internal sphere	exterior sphere	
eye	forms	eye-consciousness
ear	sounds	ear-consciousness
nose	odors	nose-consciousness
tongue	flavors	tongue-consciousness
body	tangibles	body-consciousness
mind	phenomena	mind-consciousness

Let's begin with the exterior sphere. The category of "form" (sensation) in the *aggregates* is differentiated into six distinct sense fields in the sixfold sphere: "Forms" (visual sensations), "sounds," "odors," "flavors" and "tangibles." These are "exterior," apparently in that they seem not to be conditioned by other observables, as if emanating from outside.

The text of Ex. IV.3 actually refers to "fetters" rather than "consciousness." However, consciousness is more common in other texts concerned with the sixfold sphere. Consciousness is a "fetter" because its presumptive nature holds back progress in our practice, but fetters get ahead of the game. Consciousness always has something to sell: It offers us alluring content, something that is "out there" and that is more substantial than a mere transitory awareness event. It presumes its content in an unrealistically favorable light as substantial, discrete, relatively fixed, existing independently, reliable, ripe for craving and appropriation. And most of us believe it all. However, when we recognize that these are fetters to our well-being and spiritual progress, we gain the incentive to abandon them. Like the exterior

9. Also see other discourses of SN 35.

sphere, consciousness is differentiated into six channels. We generally have no difficulty distinguishing that certain aspects of consciousness are visually based, or audibly based, etc.[10]

Finally, let's turn to the interior sphere. We can think of the eye (and each of the other elements of the internal sphere) functionally as a "probe," comparable to a thermometer, an oscilloscope, or even a Mars probe. A probe is something we place into a rich sense field (where sense data can be detected: auditory, visual, but in principle also electrical, temperature, pressure, and so on) in order to gain meaningful intelligence (which is a "reading," such as degrees Fahrenheit, displayed data from a three-dimensional MRI scan, DNA sequences, and so on). A probe performs some degree of analysis for us in order to produce a meaningful result, sometimes a quite sophisticated analysis, as in the case of an MRI scan.

Similarly, an eye is a probe that begins as observable *form* and finishes as an observable instance of *consciousness*. If we place the eye into a visual field (form), it returns a reading as an instance of consciousness of some visible object or situation. An eye is therefore a "conditional relation" whereby observable form gives rise to eye-consciousness. For instance, a small, vague red shape within a bright color scheme appears within the visual field as form, and eye-consciousness arises of a bird, of a cardinal. The descent of consciousness is generally followed by a rapid growth of details at the point of descent, facilitated by instances of the various aggregates. An eye is focused within a narrow field, but a relentless stream of eye probes jumping from one focus to another against the background presumption of spatial continuity, gives us the conviction that we are exploring a coherent and immediately present world "out there."

The Buddha made a claim about the eye that further reveals how it functions:

> And what, *bhikkhus*, is old *kamma*? The |eye| is old *kamma*, to be seen as generated and fashioned by intention, as something to be experienced. (SN 35.146)

Equivalent statements are made for |ear|, |nose|, |tongue|, |body| and |mind|. "Old *kamma*" refers to learned dispositions that result from past actions. These dispositions condition present fabrications. As a result, our experience of the world, presumed to be there even in our absence, is highly dependent on our past conditioning.

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10. On the other hand, other instances of consciousness seem to be based on two or more channels at once.

The Buddha is adamant that our whole experience of the world can be traced back to what happens in the sixfold sphere. Here he calls it "the all."

> And what, *bhikkhus*, is the all? The eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, the tongue and tastes, the body and tangibles, the mind and mental phenomena. This is called "the all." If anyone, *bhikkhus*, should speak thus: "Having rejected this all, I shall make known another all," that would be a mere empty boast on his part. (SN 35.23)

There is nothing independent of the senses and their fields. And similarly,

> In the six the world has arisen,
> In the six it holds concourse.
> On the six themselves depending,
> In the six it has woes. (SN 1.70)

Ultimately, liberation comes not from seeing what is "out there" in some reality independent of experience, but from realizing how the eye (with the help of aggregates) fabricates consciousness, which presumes to see things "out there."

> If one is intent on renunciation and solitude of mind; if one is intent on non-affliction and the destruction of appropriation; if one is intent on craving's destruction and non-confusion of mind: when one sees the spheres' arising, one's mind is completely liberated. (AN 6.55)

The final step toward complete liberation occurs "…when one sees the [sense] spheres' arising…," that is, one sees that the eye is fabricating the world.

"Knowledge and vision of things as they are" is an attainment close to awakening. How things are is that we *presume* to know how things are in the world "out there." Although our concepts are designed to refer to things beyond themselves, with regard to the world "out there" they come up "empty" of *real* content. This is good to realize, because our woes are not really "out there," they are in the world "as we experience it," and we are free to experience otherwise. One is able to overcome all presumptions on the path to awakening.

5.4.4. Impressions. Impressions are the second of the five aggregates, but Ex. II is also dedicated to impressions specifically. This aggregate therefore deserves a closer look. 'Impression' is *vedanā* in Pali, more commonly translated as 'feeling' or 'sensation.' It is a hugely important factor within the scope of *Dhamma*, and a link in "dependent co-arising," where it originates in

contact and gives rise to craving.

We find that impressions are classified in two ways. First, Impressions come in flavors of "pleasant" or "unpleasant," or of a third quality of "neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant." In all cases, however, the content of an impression in one way or another "matters" to us or has value in an otherwise impersonal world: beautiful music, beautiful people, scrumptious food, curiosities, a job well done, kindness, potential dangers, vulture capitalism, appalling violence, excrement. Second, an impression is either "worldly" or "unworldly." Worldly impressions are sense-based, looking at the world "out there," where relatively few objects are impressive and the rest are ignored. On the other hand, unworldly impressions, such as rapture or *jhāna*, apply to *no* specific objects "out there," but are confined to the subjective realm, to mind.

Impressions are ubiquitous, they arise in virtually any context, so we will not lack in opportunity to observe them. The Buddha's special interest in impressions is probably their pivotal role in cognition. They are rich in conditionality:

> All things … come together in impression. (AN 9.14)

Impressions are natural attractors of attention; the mind wants to go there, the eyes want to look in that direction. Then once attention alights on an impression, further analysis almost always ensues, setting cognitive wheels in motion, growing the world, but then spinning easily out of control.

> With contact as condition there is impression. What impresses one, 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 with respect to past, future, and present… (MN 18, i 112-3)

The mediation of attention between the initial impression and perception is not mentioned here, but we can easily verify it in experience. Alternatively, attention can be deliberately directed to pursue something other than impressions, like the breath at the tip of the nose. But once attended to, impressions grow into so much more, enabling most of our consciousness of the world.

It is striking that, with further analysis, impressions of things "out there" for the most part seem to be *subjectively* conditioned, then "projected" onto the world "out there," to be experienced as if they were real. We have a saying, "Beauty in the eye of the beholder" to remind ourselves of such projections.

Seeing beauty as real is not the same as seeing real beauty. Similarly, we might ask, Is the pleasing taste of vanilla really a quality of the complex vanillin molecule "out there," or does it belong to our subjective experience "in here"? After the vanillin molecule encounters the tongue, the subjective experience is certainly projected back "out there" as a quality of the vanilla yogurt. "Mmmm, *this* tastes good." Consider that maybe dung tastes to a dung beetle exactly like vanilla tastes to us. The recognition that much of what is going on "out there," such as eyesores and attractions, would not be there in our absence, reveals that the wall between subject and object is highly permeable, that much of the world "out there" is "mentally constructed."[11]

5.5. Non-self

Non-self is one of the most profound teachings of the Buddha, and one known to leave many scratching their heads in bewilderment. It is also the primary teaching investigated in the *Sutta*. Let me clarify from the outset that the self is, for the Buddha, primarily something we *do* mentally, not something about whose existence or non-existence we need to speculate philosophically. The Buddha often spoke in terms of "I-making" (*ahaṅkāra*). I-making involves the conviction that there is a substantial self and is quite deep-rooted in human thinking. Unfortunately, I-making causes us a lot of problems of a spiritual nature. But if the self is something we do, then it should be something we can *not* do.

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* mentions neither "self" nor "non-self" directly, and so it is easy to miss the degree to which the *satipaṭṭhāna* is about non-self. However, the first clause of the refrain presents a structured strategy for practicing non-self in experiential terms. For instance, the body refrain begins as follows:

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

This involves, as before, the practice of investigating observables, but in the case of the teaching of non-self there a hitch: there are no direct observables

11. The foregoing analysis of the Buddha's consciousness teachings are based critically on Ñāṇānanda's (1974, 2008, 2012, 2015) interpretation of the upstream links of dependent co-arising. Cintita (2021) also provides a detailed discussion of consciousness as the central theme of the first six links of the twelve links of dependent co-origination, which implicate all of aggregates, including impressions, as well as the sixfold sphere.

that correspond to "self," much less to "non-self." Instead the best we can do is to demonstrate repeatedly that observables consistently *fail to confirm* the existence of the self.

Let's divide experience into three parts: bodily experience, mental experience, and worldly experience. This gives us three places in which the self might conceivably lie. Although we never observe our body as a whole, we presume that our body is there and encompasses our bodily experiences: our breath, our posture, the visible surface of our body, our bodily activities, and so on. Although we never observe our mind as a whole, we presume that our mind is there and encompasses our mental experiences: observable thoughts, emotions, calm, our impulses, and so on. Although we never observe the world "out there" as a whole, we presume that our consciousness is there and encompasses a substantial part of it. Therefore we might infer that I am my body, I am my mind, and I am my consciousness. This gives us three "facets" of the self: the "body/self," the "mind/self" and the "consciousness/self," each of which is the *presumed* self, but manifests in a distinct set of observables.[12]

5.5.1. Why is the self a problem? The untutored worldling presumes that the self exists as a real, substantial and fixed thing, and makes that self a major feature of their experiential world. They think and plan in terms of that self. However, in the Buddha's teaching "the self" is a presumption (*maññita*), a cognitive fabrication (*saṅkhāra*) that is taken as real. The Buddha had a low regard for presumptions:

> 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 iii 246)

There is no self present in him. For the rest of us, we do well to recognize that "*to experience things as real is not to experience real things*." If what we experience as real causes us problems, then we may have the option of experiencing otherwise. This is the case with the self.

Before we go off on a campaign to eradicate the self and all other presumptions, let us reflect that the self, like a sharp knife, is both a useful tool and a dangerous hazard, depending on when and how it is wielded. How is the self useful? The world is an overwhelmingly complex place, and the network of contingencies relevant to any of life's decisions is impossible to trace reliably.

12. The "facets of self" (body/self, consciousness/self and mind/self) are discussed in detail in 1.6.

As we try to understand what is going on in the world, there is an explosion of ways to combine the raw data to come to any reliable large-scale interpretation. The usefulness of presumptions is that they abstract away large swaths of the network of contingencies into unitary objects or views, and in this way they prune back the network of contingencies, artificially, but to a traceable level.

There are many things that we presume to exist, so let's consider a more marginal object to see the practical value in presuming: a shadow. Most would agree that a shadow is not really an "object." The illusion of what we call a "shadow" originates when some physical object intercepts light before it reaches a surface which would otherwise be illuminated. Yet, presuming that the shadow exists as an object has a practical advantage: we abstract away its contingent origination to regard it as stable, we attribute properties to it, and we reason about it productively. We acquire, in this way, something we can refer to and say things about. This "shadow" thereby takes on length and breadth, can prevent sunburn or make a picnic more enjoyable. It can even serve as an essential component of a physical artifact: a sundial.

The presumption that the self exists has a similar practical benefit. The presumption of the self reduces a huge swath of the network of contingencies to a unitary object that possesses agency and consciousness, that has attributes, and that plays a role in human reasoning. For instance, it is easier for a unified object, rather than for a swath of contingencies, to cross the street without getting run over by a UPS truck. But notice that its effectiveness, and the effectiveness of all presumptions, is based in "ignorance," that is, based on ignoring the mass of contingencies that are abstracted away by imposing a unitary object. What is ignored, nonetheless, remains at play and produces consequences. As a result, the presumption of a self quite regularly leads to faulty conclusions. By removing or de-emphasizing the role of "selves" from the network of contingencies, finer causal relations that are otherwise obscured come to light.

It is possible to fabricate something without being convinced of its real existence. Kids do this all the time in play. Some of us might do this with shadows. We can, if we want, abandon the *presumption* of the self, but re-fabricate it as needed, after we know we can remove it at will from our experience. We catch the Buddha himself repeatedly wielding the expedient of referring to him-*self* as "I" or as "the *Tathāgata*" in this way, "as if" he himself were also a unitary object. We gain the option of "experiencing otherwise" through *satipaṭṭhāna* practice: I'm a unitary self now when it is useful, and a swath of contingencies later when it is not.

The third clause of the refrain acknowledges the practical usefulness of the self alongside that of non-self. It gives us permission to use the self as a tool, much as we use the shadow, without the need to presume it as real:

> Recollection that "the body exists" is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and recollection.

"The body exists" allows us provisionally to refer to the body/self, as the Buddha does in the first clause.

In any case, the Buddha is most concerned with revealing the *disadvantages* of the self as a cause of suffering, and that will also be our focus. The presumption of the self is the source of enormous suffering. It easily leads to craving and to a widening circle of appropriation of things as "me" and "mine." Moreover, many contingencies go unnoticed when we have a self, with important consequences. It is sobering to realize that everything and everyone we cling to will, as a result, be lost to us one by one, until the ones that remain lose us. The precious 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 the other alluring and enduring substantial things that we cling to. And we suffer as a result, because beyond our presumptions everything is in fact highly contingent. Our presumptions, in their ignorance, simply cannot keep pace with the unfolding of a highly contingent world over time. From the spiritual perspective, the presumption of the self is a scourge to be abandoned. Yet this presumption is deeply ingrained and therefore extremely difficult to abandon. This is one place where *satipaṭṭhāna* practice plays a critical role.

5.5.2. The presentation of non-self in the *Sutta.* The first clause of the body refrain reads, once again, as follows:

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

The refrains for the other three *satipaṭṭhānas* are similar|. This clause relies on a metaphor of containment, in which "the body" is the "container" within which "body-contemplation" occurs and within which "bodily observables" (breath, elements, activities, stages of decay, etc.) are found. "Body-contemplating" (*kāyānupassī*) is translated here from Pali literally as a noun-verb compound, which is understood as contemplating bodily observables defined in the respective signature exercise and their contingencies. "In the

body" (*kāye*) employs a simple locative case.[13] "The body" is identified with "the self" that is *presumed* to exist in its body/self facet. Similarly in the third *satipaṭṭhāna*, "the mind" is conceived as a container for mental observables, and identified with the self in its "mind/self" facet. A "consciousness/self" facet is that which apprehends the world "out there."[14]

Based on this metaphor the remaining terms make sense. "Contemplating internally [*ajjhatta*]" is contemplation of bodily observables and their contingencies "contained" within the body/self. "Contemplating externally [*bahidhā*]" brings the container, the body/self, into contemplation, presumed as a conditioned and conditioning factor, but never directly observable. "Contemplating both internally and externally discovers the incongruity of the body/self and the bodily observables.[15]

Interestingly, the very first signature exercise (Ex. I.1, the breath contemplation), describes the same threefold mode of investigation clearly, redundantly, in its own words.

(1) Recollective, he breathes in, recollective he breathes out. Breathing in long, he discerns, "I breathe in long"; or breathing out long, he discerns, "I breathe out long." Breathing in short, he discerns, "I breathe in short"; or breathing out short, he discerns, "I breathe out short."

(2) He trains thus: "I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body"; he trains thus: "I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body."

(3) He trains thus: "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily fabrication"; he trains thus: "I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily fabrication."

Step (1) describes internal contemplation of the observables. Step (2) describes

13. English requires a preposition here but not necessarily 'in.' Translating *kāye* as 'in the body' makes it consistent with the containment metaphor. For the second *satipaṭṭhāna* we have a plural locative, best translated as 'impression-contemplating among the impressions' (*vedanāsu vedanānupassī*). But the plural locative in Pali also supports the meaning of containment, as in *Māgadhesu viharati* 'he lives in Magadha' (literally 'among the Magadhans').

14. Whereas the body/self and mind/self view the self as including body and mind within it, the consciousness/self, in truth, views the self as being in relation to what is beyond the self, that is, what is "other."

15. The "internally/externally/both …" formula is attested in all parallel versions (two in the Chinese canon) of the *Sutta* and found repeated in other correlates. In most cases it is promoted to the introduction of the discourse, as Sujāto (2012, p. 205) points out.

external contemplation, by bringing to mind and experiencing (*paṭisaṁvedī*) the "whole body" (*sabbakāya*), that is, the body/self. Step (3) refers to the body/self alternatively as the "bodily fabrication" (*kāyasaṅkhāraṁ*). Recall that the self and its facets are *presumptions*, and presumptions are *fabrications* that are taken as real. In step (3), we try to bring back to mind the finer contingencies of step (1), alongside the experience of the whole body. We are unable to reconcile the finer observables with the body/self, and so put to rest (*passambhayaṁ*) the body/self in favor of the swath of observable contingencies.

Let's make a second pass through the threefold mode of investigation: "Internal contemplation" requires that we *set aside* "the self," "me," "my (whole) body," "my mind," "my consciousness," and the like, as we absorb ourselves in investigating fine details in the network of contingencies. This has a way of shifting our attention from presumptions (in which the worldling tends to dwell) and onto observable details (which commonly go unnoticed). Nonetheless, it is a challenge to completely shake off the self, and you will likely find it somehow lurking in the background.

"Contemplating externally" is to shift the attention to the body/self, mind/self, or consciousness/self. Simply imagine the self pulling the strings, doing the breathing, moving the feet, etc., making decisions, standing with a flashl**i**ght to bring what is "out there" into its consciousness, etc. The shift from internal to external contemplation may feel something like being with a group of friends, chatting amiably and fluidly, sharing the space equally, delighting in the interplay of reflections and quips, "losing themselves" in favor of the group dynamics, and then being suddenly invaded by someone named "Ace," a successful and portly life insurance salesman who dominates every conversation, consistently subverting it to be about "him" and "his." It's enough to set the previous interlocutors back a *jhāna* or two, as they lose the tenor of the earlier conversation. Each of them suddenly remembers somewhere else they need to be.

The practice of "contemplating both internally and externally" is to try to hold onto internal and external contemplations at the same time, or rather the observables and the presumption of the body, and to get a sense of how the direct observables cohere with this intrusion of the self. Generally the incongruities are self-evident, and the presumption of the self appears intrusive. As a result, we end up "tranquilizing" the bodily/mental/conscious fabrication in order to restore coherency in favor of the direct observables, bringing us comfortably back to internal contemplation, having better discerned the insubstantiality of the self.

Contemplating both internally and externally might feel like you are skydiving for the first time with a friend as instructor, suddenly surrounded by tiny water droplets so that you can barely see your friend two feet away hanging on to a fringe of your jump suit. Your friend manages to get close enough to shout, "Cloud!" You shout back, "Huh? Where?" Your concept of a cloud is simply foreign to anything you are currently experiencing.

5.5.3. Incongruity arguments. Although it should suffice to recognize intuitively the disconnect between observables and the presumption of the self, the Buddha has presented three kinds of rational "internal and external" arguments against the viability of the self *vis-à-vis* relevant observables:[16] Demonstrating any of the following premises are assumed to discount the viability of the self:

(1) The self lacks managerial control over its internally observable manifestations.

(2) All internally observable manifestations of the fixed (relatively permanent) self are impermanent.

(3) The self is of a fabricated nature, decomposed into internally observable parts.

An example of an argument of type (1) is:

> Consciousness is non-self. If consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lend itself to un-ease. It would be possible [to say] with regard to consciousness, "Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus." But precisely because consciousness is non-self, consciousness lends itself to un-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to consciousness, "Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus." (SN 22.59)

An example of an argument of type (2) is:

> A pleasant impression is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, bound to decay, to vanish, to fade away, to cease, and so too is an unpleasant impression and a neither pleasant not unpleasant impression. So anyone who, on experiencing a pleasant impression, thinks, "This is my self," must, at the cessation of that pleasant impression think, "My self has gone!" and the same with an unpleasant and a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant impression. Thus whoever thinks "Impression is my self," is contemplating something in this present life that is imper-

16. Collins (1990, p. 97) lists the first two and I've added the last.

> manent, a mixture of happiness and unhappiness, subject to arising and passing away. Therefore it is not fitting to maintain, “Impression is my self.” (DN 15 ii 66-7).

Another instance of type (2) concerns “the eye” as a manifestation of consciousness. The worldling presumes,

> The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world. (SN 35.116)

However, recall that an eye is a momentary probe into the visual field. For this reason,

> If anyone says, “An eye is the self,” that is not tenable. The rise and fall of an eye are discerned, and since its rise and fall are discerned, it would follow: “My self rises and falls.” That is why it is not tenable for anyone to say, “An eye is the self.” Thus the eye is not self. (SN 35.32)

Arguments of type (3) are found in exercises that “decompose” the self, such as the body parts and elements exercises (Exs. I.4 and I.5). But let’s take as an example the most famous incongruity argument of all: It seems that the *bhikkhunī* Vajirā, an early disciple of the Buddha, was sitting in meditation when she was visited by the demon Māra, whose mission in life seems to have been to disrupt the practice of Buddhists. Māra, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in Vajirā, desiring to make her fall away from *samādhi*, approached her and addressed her in verse:

> “By whom has this being been created?
> Where is the maker of the being?
> Where has the being arisen?
> Where does the being cease?” (SN 5.10)

Māra was trying to confuse her with questions about the thorny issue of the self (‘this being’), but she immediately recognizes who he is, and her reply, also in verse, has had an enduring influence on Buddhist thought:

> “Why now do you assume 'a being'?
> Māra, is that your speculative view?
> This is a heap of sheer fabrications:
> Here no being is found.” (SN 5.10)

The self is fabricated, it is a speculative view, a presumption. Then she offers her famous simile:

> “Just as, with an assemblage of parts,

The word ‘chariot’ is used,
So, when the aggregates exist,
There is the convention ‘a being.’

“It's only suffering that comes to be,
Suffering that stands and falls away.
Nothing but suffering comes to be,
Nothing but suffering ceases.” (SN 5.10)

Sad and disappointed, Māra disappears. Vajirā has disassembled the *consciousness/self* into the five aggregates, much like the body/self is disassembled through contemplation into the body parts.

5.6. Conclusions

I have proposed that the contemplative practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is a process of verifying and internalizing *Dhamma* through investigation of experiential “observables.” Through such investigation, we move beyond a mere intellectual understanding of *Dhamma* onto an effortless, intuitive, and automatic way of seeing (See 6.2, 6.5). The starting point for each of these exercises is thereby an initial intellectual understanding of the relevant teaching(s). I have described each of these teachings in a nuts-and-bolts way from which the relevant observables can be clearly gleaned.

I hope in this chapter to have offered the practitioner a necessary and firm basis in *Dhamma* for fully engaging in the practice of this brilliantly conceived and wonderfully effective *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.

6. The *jhānas*: *Dhamma* made easy

What follows is an account of the *jhānas* and the fulfillment of the functions attributed to them in the early texts. The *jhānas* are *samādhi* (meditative states) in the early texts, but differentiated into four stages, according to which different set of "*jhāna* factors" (thought and deliberation, rapture, pleasure, etc.) is present in each. I will refer here primarily to *jhānas* rather than *samādhi*, because I am particularly interested in explaining the roles of each of these stages. I hope to answer three questions:

(1) What precisely are the *jhānas*?
(2) What functions do the *jhānas* fulfill?
(3) How do *jhānas* fulfill these functions?

Strangely, in spite of the clarity of the early texts, which include a precise specification of the *jhāna* factors, an answer even to question (1) is likely to meet with controversy, for many will insist that *jhānas* are difficult or almost impossible to attain, others that at least some of them are well within reach of the average meditator. Some will insist that they are necessary for awakening, or even the lone basis of awakening, others that they are dispensable. Most will insist they constitute a practice that is incompatible with investigation of *Dhamma* (for instance, in *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation), in spite of many statements like this:[1]

> 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)

It is advisable to ask questions like (2) for any *Dhamma* teaching: How do I put this into practice? How does this practice produce progress on the path to awakening? Answers, when forthcoming, might help ensure a proper understanding of the teaching, reveal how it integrates into the whole of practice, and encourage wholeheartedness in view of its importance. In the

1. Shulman (2014, pp. 9-10) points out that scholars accordingly divide themselves into those for whom liberation results from *samādhi* alone and those for whom liberation results from "philosophical" thinking alone. Very few recognize the middle way suggested by the cited passage.

case of *samādhi*, the Buddha tells us explicitly what functions are fulfilled:

> *Bhikkhus*, there are these four developments in *samādhi*. What four?
>
> - There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, is conducive to dwelling happily in this very life.
> - There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, is conducive to obtaining knowledge and vision.
> - There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, is conducive to recollection-discernment.
> - There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, is conducive to the destruction of the taints. (AN 4.41)

The main concern of this chapter is (3), the largely neglected question of how the *jhānas* fulfill these functions. The *jhānas* arise in human cognition, and therefore: (a) an account of the *jhānas* must minimally *accord* with the mechanics of human cognition, and (b) there is the prospect that the mechanics of human cognition will *explain* how the *jhānas* fulfill their functions. The explanatory account offered here will build on a modern understanding of the "mechanics" of human cognition involved in producing the *jhānas*. Fortunately, these cognitive mechanisms are easily comprehensible, and will be rather evident to the reader once I point them out. Nonetheless, their significance is routinely neglected in Buddhist scholarship.

A typical practice (Buddhist or otherwise) will have two features: (1) "performance" and (2) "maturation." Consider the practice of *mettā*. We practice *mettā* in everyday situations as acts of sincere kindness, with immediate benefits for self and others. This is our performance. At the same time, the more we practice, the more *mettā* becomes inscribed as an intrinsic aspect of our character (we "learn by doing"). This is maturation. Buddhism, as practice toward awakening, tends to put great weight on thoroughgoing maturation. This is why we also mature *mettā* on the cushion without the immediate benefit in performing *mettā* for others.

In the course of this chapter, we will take a look at modern insights into performance and development for the skillfully engaged practitioner: We will see in 6.2 that practice is distributed over two distinct cognitive processes: an "explicit" process, which is conscious, deliberate and ponderous, and an "implicit" process, which is unconscious, intuitive and effortless. We will see that those who master skills—chess, for instance—depend almost exclusively on the *implicit* process, contrary to common belief. We will also look in 6.3 below into the nature of skill development, and how it leads to expertise and,

for that matter, progress on the path. Finally, we will see how these modern insights, by-and-large, explain how *jhāna* fulfills its functions, essentially by maturing the intuitive and effortless level of practice. In effect, *jhāna* makes *Dhamma* easy.

But first, let's answer the first half of the question (1) of what *jhāna* is:

6.1. What is *samādhi?*

Although I'm likely to open a can of controversy, it is necessary to be clear about what *samādhi* is before I can explain how it fulfills its functions. We will break *samādhi* down into *jhānas* in 6.4 below. Briefly, s*amādhi* is *the* meditative state in the early texts[2] and manifests as various stages and forms, and in a variety of experiences, including profound stillness, rapture, altered consciousness and spontaneous insights. *Samādhi* is in not limited to *Dhamma* practice but is refined there. "Right *samādhi,*" is the culminating factor of the noble eightfold path. I would like to highlight three primary attributes of *samādhi*:

(1) *Samādhi* arises naturally, with no effort.

Many of us learn, as beginning meditators, a special technique to induce a meditative state. However, the early texts consistently report a natural, effortless transition into *samādhi* through a number of antecedent states (including rapture and tranquility) in which "no volition need be exerted."[3] Nonetheless, *samādhi* is "developed and trained" (*bhāvitā bahulīkatā*) into a uniquely Buddhist practice[4] as a refined skill in itself, internalized through training, so that it arises spontaneously, but even more readily. Section 3.1.1 provides detailed support for this claim.

(2) *Samādhi* arises most typically in the context of "skillful engagement" in a primary *Dhamma* practice.

As examples, *samādhi* arises in close association with skilled tasks like *satipaṭṭhāna* investigation, *mettā* contemplation, recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, ritual performances, chess and sometimes even washing dishes.

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2. There is no meditative state corresponding to our modern understanding of "mindfulness" in the early texts (as argued in chapter 4), though *samādhi* certainly plays a contributing role in what we experience as "mindfulness."

3. AN 11.2. See 3.1 for a detailed discussion of this point and for many references in the *suttas*. The seven awakening factors (see 1.5.2, 5.3.3) exhibit the same antecedent factors.

4. Arbel (2017, p. 39).

See 3.1.3 for additional support for this claim. The attribution of skillful engagement in a practice task as the source of *samādhi* may seem incongruous with its stillness, but we will make sense of this, in the course of this chapter, in terms of the manner in which skills are acquired and internalized.

(3) *Samādhi* is characterized by the narrowing of "attentional factors" in stages (*jhānas*) in two dimensions: concentration and curtailment.

The dimensions are distinct, but each entails a form of stilling the mind.

"Concentration" reduces and stabilizes the thematic scope of attention.

Attention in everyday life is commonly divided or scattered and unstable, unless there is a critical need for us to focus on something of immediate concern through withdrawal from what is not relevant to that concern. Concentration on the particulars of the practice task in which we are skillfully engaged is critical to performance and development. This entails that concentration can rarely be "one-pointed" without forsaking the practice task.

"Curtailment" attenuates or shuts down certain cognitive faculties.

Cognitive faculties are functions of explicit cognition such as seeing, hearing, perceiving, thinking, fabricating. Particular faculties might not be needed under certain circumstances or might even handicap performance. The *jhānas* represent stages of progressive concentration and curtailment.

6.1.1. A counterpart in modern psychology. This is our first point of comparison with the modern understanding of the mechanics of human cognition. There has been a productive area of research within the field of positive psychology on the phenomenon of "optimal experience" or "flow" that bears a close resemblance to *samādhi*, in a wide variety of non-*Dhammic* domains.[5] At the core of this phenomenon is a set of experiences, frequent for some people and rare or non-occurring for most, that bear many commonalities that subjects repeatedly describe unprompted using the word "flow." A composer describes it this way:

> "You yourself are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don't exist. I've experienced this time and time again. My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what is happening. I just sit there watching it in a state of awe and

5. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) is the most accessible introduction to flow theory, by its leading proponent. There is also a substantial academic literature. Csikszentmihalyi recognizes (pp. 103-6) a possible link between flow experience and *samādhi* (albeit *samādhi* as defined in later Yoga traditions). Bronkhorst (2023) also recognizes the relationship of flow to *samādhi*.

> wonderment. And it just flows out by itself."

A basketball player similarly reports:

> "The ball feels so light, and your shots are effortless. You don't even have to aim. You let it go, and you know the ball is going in. It's wonderful … It's like a good dream, and you don't want to wake up."

The similarities with Buddhist *samādhi* begin with the presence of states of elation, of intense concentration and of altered consciousness. They also arise naturally under conditions of skillful engagement in some task, particularly in which someone has attained a level of advanced expertise. The demand on "psychic energy" is so great that there is no space for distraction or irrelevant thoughts; time is distorted and self-consciousness disappears.[6] The domains in which flow arises are quite diverse: music, rock climbing, dancing, sailing, chess and so on. Flow is characterized as effortless movement, of "action carrying forward without reflection."

6.1.2. Concentration. Let's assume we are actively engaged in a practice task, for instance, in a "body in the body" exercise of the first *satipaṭṭhāna* in terms of impermanence (the topic of the second clause of the *satipaṭṭhāna* refrain), or in washing dishes (which qualifies as a practice of "recollection directed at body" (see 2.3), or in recollection of the triple gem. Within the chosen "theme" (*nimitta*, see 1.5.1, 3.2) of the practice task, the scope of concentration has an outer and an inner limit. The outer limit is "seclusion," which puts aside worldly concerns. The inner limit is determined by what factors and skills are actually relevant in the current situation to the theme of the current practice task, such as the movements of the hands, the scrubbing, the sponge, the detergent, etc. When the degree of concentration is optimized to the single practice task, it is "one-centered" (*ekagga*).[7]

> *Samādhi* is one-centeredness of mind. (MN 34 i 301)

In addition to establishing the scope of concentration, maintaining its "stability" is critically important. Once we establish a particular scope of concentration we are frequently challenged by our easily distracted monkey minds. In the case of an intermittent distraction, practitioners are taught simply to return to the established scope. However, if we are seriously fully engaged, we generally cannot even tear our attention away from the task at hand.

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6. Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p. 31).

7. See 3.2 for justification of this translation. In virtually all cases, one-pointed undershoots the scope of concentration required for the practice task.

6.1.3. Curtailment. Under everyday, mundane circumstances a very wide range of cognitive "faculties" is active at any one time: thinking, presuming, seeing, perceiving, and so on. The factors associated with the individual *jhānas* indicate that certain cognitive faculties are progressively curtailed as we proceed from the 1st to the 4th *jhāna*, which are initiated as follows.

(1st) Concentration, secluded and one-centered on the theme of *samādhi*.

(2nd) Curtailment of thought and deliberation.

(3rd) Curtailment of rapture.

(4th) Curtailment of pain and pleasure.

This raises the question: If we are skillfully engaged in a practice task, what advantage is there in curtailing perfectly good cognitive faculties? There are, in fact, many circumstances under which curtailment occurs as a natural phenomenon to shut down spontaneously some or virtually all of the cognitive faculties, generally under conditions that require a time-critical response. Just as *samādhi* is a natural process, the *jhānas* are expected to unfold naturally.

For instance, if something vaguely resembles a snake, we automatically jump back *before* the serpentine form enters consciousness:[8] certain visual patterns are detected neurally, the sensory thalamus immediately triggers a response that bypasses the cerebral cortex altogether, and all thinking about the matter is thereby circumvented. This provides the fastest response possible to what was once a commonly recurring potentially lethal emergency situation in our ancestral environment.[9] Similarly, slow and cumbersome faculties will shut down altogether in an *unanticipated* emergency situation, like driving onto an oil slick at a high speed. Most readers will likely have experienced something like this: without thinking, the body simply responds, usually with surprising adeptness.[10] In neuropsychology, the "transient hypofrontality hypothesis"[11] attributes a dedicated mechanism for regular "down regulation" of straggling cognitive faculties to a particular region of the brain. The resulting curtailment leads to corresponding "altered states of consciousness," found, for instance, within dreaming, within endurance running ("runner's high"), within

8. While I was taking a walk with a fellow monk a few years ago in Austin, Texas, a snake slithered across our path, not two feet in front of us. Both of us jumped back in perfect unison as if choreographed. It was a good thing too: In retrospect, it seemed to have been a coral snake, docile but potentially lethal.

9. T.D. Wilson (2002, p. 126).

10. Kahneman (2011, p. 55).

11. Dietrich (2003). Bronkhorst (2023) also discusses the relationship of this work to the *jhānas*, particularly with regard to altered states of consciousness.

meditation, within hypnosis, and the with use of certain drugs. The down-regulated faculties mentioned in the cited paper are similar to those referred to as *jhāna* factors (e.g., “abstract thinking,” “planning,” “willed action,” “working memory,” “attention”).

Intermittent curtailment is most easily observed (at least off the cushion) at critical instances when the potentially winning throw is executed, when the hunter’s shot is fired, when the surgeon makes the critical incision, and so on. At that moment, for the actor, the world seems to reduce to the basics: gun and prey, ball and basket, scalpel and brain tissue. All is silent and even the breath comes to a momentary halt. If there is an audience, even the viewers’ faculties come to a halt, rendering even the most loquacious of chatterboxes silent. These are spontaneous, momentary curtailments that Buddhist practitioners train to stretch out for long periods of time.

6.2. Dual processes in practice performance.

Understanding a “dual-process model” will provide a good basis for understanding the role of *jhāna* below. The dual-process model[12] recognizes two distinct systems in the mechanics of cognition that generally work cooperatively in parallel.

The “explicit” system is conscious, conceptually-based, deliberate and effortful. It is characterized by attention, agency and choice, a degree of rationality, and it is capable of thinking its way through novel problems. The explicit system is very flexible and adaptable, but is an extremely limited resource. It operates very slowly, tires easily and is easily overwhelmed.[13]

The “implicit” system works virtually effortlessly under the radar of consciousness, intuitively, spontaneously and automatically. It is an essentially unlimited resource, and operates super-fast, almost tirelessly. Its great talent is in detecting, remembering and responding to complex patterns[14] that are obscure to the explicit system. However, it is rigid in its habituated responses and adapts only slowly to new circumstances.

12. Kahneman (2011), Gladwell (2005), Bronkhorst (2023), T.D. Wilson (2002), McMahan (2023, p. 73), etc.

13. The sluggishness of the explicit system is reflected in the fact that it actually consumes glucose in the brain at a far higher rate, whose supply is easily exhausted, a condition suggestively called “ego-depletion” in neuroscience.

14. T.D. Wilson (2002, pp. 49, 66).

Either system or a mixture of the two might be responsible for the performance of the same given task. We will see in 6.3 below that the two systems are most evident at opposite ends of a learning curve. The strength of the explicit system is in its power to deal cleverly with novel situations as they are first encountered, whereas the implicit system would require prior habituation. But with proper training, the implicit system operates in an astonishingly refined and efficient manner.

6.2.1. Identifying the two systems. Consider two ways a police detective might identify a suspect at a busy train station: The detective (representing the explicit system), looking for the hoodlum on the basis of a faxed photo, must compare potential candidates feature by feature: "gender: check, height: check, eyebrows: nope." However, if he brings along the suspect's vengeful ex-wife (representing the implicit system), she spots the suspect effortlessly in an instant, and quickly, even in an ocean of faces. Either performs the same task of recognition on the basis of the same raw data: mouth, eyes, brows, chin and every other unobscured facial detail; relative sizes and spatial configurations; unique conditions of lighting, rotation, and even sociocultural context. Habituation is what makes the difference between the detective's and the ex-wife's perceptions, and so it is with the explicit and implicit systems.

The relationship between the two systems has been compared to a rider sitting atop an elephant.[15] Until they learn to work together, the rider (explicit system), depends on the elephant (implicit system) to go anywhere, but also experiences the elephant, to an annoying degree, as driven by its own often erratic and freewheeling impulses, like a sudden need to eat mangoes or to frolic under a waterfall. They also find that the elephant manages to cope with the world quite skillfully on its own terms, even if the rider falls asleep.

However, if the elephant gets itself wedged between two trees or mired in the mud, it is the rider who can work out what to do next with their remarkable all-embracing, head-scratching, problem-solving capacity. Moreover, the rider can monitor and may be able to determine the behavior of the implicit system and to impose executive control, and through repetition of a desired behavior over time they might train the elephant to behave reliably in a desired way.[16]

However, the elephant is far bigger than the driver. What is difficult and will remain difficult for the explicit system will be performed easily, effortlessly, and quickly, after some training, by the implicit system. The implicit system will also grow its skill beyond the conscious reach of the explicit system, fine-

15. Haidt (2005, p. 17).

16. Kahneman (2011, pp. 20, 36).

tuning itself as it detects ever more subtle patterns in the environment so that it will commonly perform the task more precisely than the explicit system can even comprehend. As a result the implicit system can regularly produce intuitions or hunches, arising in the blink of an eye, that are often far more accurate than the results of explicit deliberation.[17]

Remarkably, scholars of Buddhism have widely failed to notice the elephant in the room, because what the elephant does is silent, below consciousness and effortless. It is because we discount the role and capabilities of the elephant that we struggle with the question of how something as sophisticated as *Dhamma* can possibly be pursued in the utter stillness of the deeper *jhānas*.

6.2.2. Dual processes in the early texts. Dual-process theory is a modern model of skill acquisition and performance. However, in the early texts the "implicit system" seems to be found in the various "dispositional" factors posited in early Buddhist teachings, including "fabrications" (*saṅkhāra*, literally 'making together'), "*kamma*," "habit patterns" (*anusaya*, literally 'sleep-alongs'), and "taints" (*āsava*). The word *saṅkhāra* is used in a dual sense, either as an implicit conditioning factor by which conceptual units are fabricated,[18] or else as the explicit units that result from the fabrication process.[19] In many contexts *kamma* and *saṅkhāra* are equivalent,[20] and so "old *kamma*" likewise refers to previously aquired implicit dispositions that condition "new *kamma*," actions, or thought that occur in the present.

In the early texts the explicit system is found in the various observable cognitive "faculties," including the "aggregates" (*khanda*): form, impressions, perception, fabrications (as explicit results) and consciousness. To these we can add the remaining "name" (*nāmarūpa*) factors: volition, contact and attention. And let's not forget the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching. We will give a lot of attention in what follows to the faculty of attention, since *samādhi* and *jhāna* are about the management of attention. "Attention" (*manasikāra*, literally 'doing in the mind') defines an explicit thematic locus at which a set of explicit cognitive faculties are at work. When we are most skillfully engaged in a practice task the scope of attention is ideally determined by relevance to the current task as the "theme" of the task, for instance, the contemplation of the breath in terms of

17. This is the theme of Gladwell (2005).

18. Bodhi (2000, pp. 45-6).

19. The English word 'perception' similarly refers to the silent process by which George is recognized, or to George himself, who is also known as a "percept"

20. Bodhi (2000, p. 45).

impermanence, or the preparation of a sumptuous meal.

6.2.3. Virtuosity. Complete mastery of a skill is "virtuosity" (at least I will define it that way). With virtuosity one can perform even an extremely complex task with virtually no help from the explicit system. What should be noted and appreciated is that the virtuoso entrusts performance almost entirely to the elephant. Consider the case of a virtuoso pianist, having seated herself in front of a live audience, the music seems simply to appear at her fingertips with no effort at all on her part.[21] She is so competent and confident that she can entrust the performance entirely to the implicit system. As a result, she might have no sense that she is present or doing anything at all. Charley Parker once said, "Don't play the saxophone. Let it play you."[22] At this point, agency (a presumption of the explicit system) is gone.

Consider the similar case of the *arahant*: He has developed and trained in *Dhamma* for decades, perhaps lifetimes. He no longer has the sense of being an agent: he creates no *kamma!*[23] He witnesses an implicit, intuitive, non-conceptual, improvisational process of appropriate conduct and perception in response to the world's contingencies that adheres to *Dhammic* standards.[24] He has thoroughly habituated virtuous patterns of action (precepts, generosity, kindness and compassion). He exhibits virtue but does not identify as a person of virtue (his behavior arises spontaneously).[25] He has trained in the wisdom teachings, but now simply "sees with the Buddha's spectacles."[26]

Just for fun, consider the Taoist master. "*Wu wei*" (Chinese, 'not doing') is a foundational concept in early Chinese thought common to Confucianism and Taoism in reference to an effortless, unselfconscious, optimally active and spontaneous state of mind.[27] In the Taoist master, *wu wei* manifests as perfectly skilled action that allows one to move through the physical and social worlds spontaneously but in harmony with the normative order.[28] This sounds a lot

21. Ericsson & Pool (2016, p. 81).

22. Slingerland (2014, p. 1).

23. SN 35.145, AN 4.235.

24. Garfield (2021, p. 24).

25. She is *sīlavā*, but not *sīla-maya*. MN 78 ii 27.

26. Gombrich (1997, p. 36). Shulman (2014, p. 111) refers to "a method by which philosophy [i.e., *Dharma*] is turned into an active way of seeing," and Kuan (2015, pp. 58-9) to directing perception to conform to *Dhamma* such that wisdom results.

27. Slingerland (2014, pp. 7-8).

28. Slingerland (2003, p. 4).

like the virtuoso or the *arahant*, doesn't it?[29]

6.3. The development of practice skills

With "skillful engagement," we perform a practice task, and training over time matures our skill and thereby the ease with which we will perform that task in the future.[30] We perform more quickly, more accurately and with better results than before. Throughout the early texts we repeatedly find the phrase *bhāvanā bahulīkatā* 'development and training' in association with various practices. *Bahulīkatā* 'training' (literally 'do a lot') refers to the repetition required for the continual development (*bhāvanā*) of the skill. This applies to *mettā* contemplation, to observation of precepts, to *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, or for that matter to bird-watching, fly-fishing, or driving a car.

6.3.1. How you got to be an expert at driving a car. Let's consider the acquisition of skill in the domain of driving a car. I will assume that you are now a relatively expert driver, but that you were not always so.

As a novice driver your skill was largely limited to "know-what," that is, based on conceptual instruction: which is the brake and which is the gas pedal, what is the effect of turning the steering wheel clockwise, etc. If you had gotten behind the wheel at the beginning of your training and driven in real traffic, it would have been impossible to know, all at once, when to turn, to speed up, to slow down or to stop, or how to navigate among the swirl of cars, curbs, street signs, bikes, kites, angry drivers honking behind, and pedestrians scattering in front, while fearing for your own dear life. Luckily, at the beginning, your instructor took you to an empty parking lot where you could practice and become adept at one sub-skill at a time in preparation for entering real traffic.

Now you drive effortlessly, with ease: you barely notice, and sometimes may forget altogether, that you are driving. The car seems to drive itself. Unchallenged, your valuable attention is now free to talk on the phone, drink coffee, listen to the radio, text, honk at inept drivers, and lean out the window to flirt with pedestrians, all while the car is conveying you to your destination. Most of the various operations that constitute successful driving, once so difficult, now happen with better results than ever, quickly, quietly, spontaneously, without effort or thought, intuitively, under the radar. That is until something unforeseen happens that requires the intervention of your novel-problem-solving know-how: a flat tire, a blinking light atop a police car, or an empty

29. In fact, *wu wei* was assimilated historically into Buddhist practice in the Zen tradition (see Slingerland 2014, pp. 31-2).

30. "Skillful engagement" is defined in 2.1.2 and developed throughout chapter 2.

tank. How did you get so good?

Learning to drive a car went through three stages. In the first stage (especially at the time you first dared to enter traffic) you were anxious, overwhelmed, perhaps terrified, without confidence in your abilities. Now, in the third stage, driving is routine and a bit boring, which is why you seek distractions. But in between, you might remember, in the second stage, there were a few months in which driving was exhilarating. You were fully engaged, challenged but confident, for it seemed that every time you got behind the wheel it was with more skill than the time before. The second stage was the most rewarding. You may recall other such elated and productive periods of skillful engagement: when learning to play chess, the tuba or tennis; when training to be a brain surgeon or a welder; or when learning meditation. Children experience this exhilaration in play, and it is what attracts adults to hobbies. This exhilaration is *pīti* ('rapture') in Pali,[31] and 'enjoyment' in the technical vocabulary of "flow."

6.3.2. Internalization. "Internalization" is the primary learning process in acquiring a skill. It is capable of making an enormously complex task effortless. It is a process whereby explicit skill or know-how is "offloaded" onto the implicit system. Internalization makes the difference between being a novice and being an expert. It makes the difference between knowing what the Buddha taught, and seeing the world through the eyes of the Buddha. As the implicit system takes over the performance of the task, know-how matures increasingly under the auspices of implicit system.

The implicit system does something very simple, but it does it very well in the most complex circumstances. It learns to recognize and respond to patterns, in this case patterns of behavior and thought, and learns to emulate them.[32] It responds to patterns quickly and effortlessly, relying on the network of neurons and synapses in the brain and in the rest of the body, which provides an optimal architecture for just this kind of capability. The simplest creatures (snails, say) share similar self-learning implicit systems with ourselves, but on a smaller scale. Our explicit system evolved much more recently.

There are strategies that we can use coax internalization along, particularly what I will call "the prop-n-drop" method, which all of us employ quite regularly. We will see below how *jhāna* props and drops for us. Suppose you want to memorize a poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by A. L.

31. *Pīti* is the fourth awaking factor, following the three factors of recollection, *dhamma*-investigation and energy, which describe skillful engagement in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, and followed by tranquility, *samādhi* and equanimity (see 1.5.2).

32. Kahneman (2011, p. 36).

Tennyson, to the point of reciting it flawlessly from memory on demand. You begin with a written text; that is your prop. You read repeatedly, "… Into the valley of Death rode the six hundred…" As the text is internalized, you try dropping the prop, "… within the valley of debt owed the six unfunded…" Encountering mistakes, you pick up the prop again at difficult passages, in this way alternating between prop and drop, gradually with decreasing prop and increasing drop. At some point the written text, can (like a raft) be discarded altogether. Curtailing a cognitive faculty is similar to dropping a prop.

Suppose instead you are a middling golfer. You have already internalized a swing as part of your golf know-how and entrusted it to the implicit system, but a more experienced player gives you some tips on how to improve your swing. You begin by slowly and deliberately thinking your way through the execution of the new swing. This is your prop. To drop the prop you swing *real fast*. This effectively "outruns" the prop, because deliberate thinking is cumbersome and slow, forcing reliance on what you've internalized of the new swing. In spite of annoying interference from your already fully internalized *old* swing, you alternate between deliberation (prop) and outrunning (drop) until you achieve pure drop.

6.3.3. The joy of skillful engagement. Let's look at "skillful engagment" in more detail (see also 2.2.2). The "*satipaṭṭhāna* standards" stated at the beginning of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* capture it well:

> … ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world … (MN 10 i 56)

At the core of skillful engagement are the middle factors: 'Recollection' (*sati*) specifically brings skill or know-how to mind. 'Discernment' (*sampajañña*) assesses the practice situation in those terms. The compound 'recollection-discernment' (*satisampajañña*) occurs throughout the early texts in reference to "skillful engagement." Discernment provides executive control of performance under the guidance of recollected skill.

The remaining two factors fulfill the requirements that must be present if discernment and recollection are to be "fully engaged" in performance. "Ardent" requires no explanation. "Having put away covetousness and grief for the world" is non-distractedness, equivalent to holding the "five hindrances at bay," or maintaining "seclusion." If you think about it, if we can maintain these four factors we will enjoy a high level of performance and maturation in virtually any skilled task we might undertake, *Dhammic* or not.

Significant in skillful engagement are its affective[33] qualities. We absolutely love to be engaged in a challenging task when our skills measure up to the challenge. Children experience this in play, grown-ups in the hobbies they chose to engage in, many of us are lucky enough to experience this in our livelihoods, and Buddhist practice is likewise distinguished by the delight (*pāmujja*), rapture (*pīti*), and pleasure (*sukkha*) experienced by the practitioner. Skillful engagement also conditions flow with "enjoyment" as an accompanying factor. If affective experiences are evolution's way of encouraging certain behaviors that enhance fitness, skillful engagement must have played a huge role in our ancestral environment.[34] To this day, skillful engagement is among the most pleasurable and most useful of human endeavors. Notably, these pleasures are supramundane, not sensual, pleasures. The Buddha likewise recommends that we develop skills well.

The "seven awakening factors"[35] provide perhaps the clearest account of the arising of these affective factors in the context of skillful engagement.

> recollection → investigation of *dhammas* → energy → rapture → tranquility → *samādhi* → equanimity.

The first three factors of this causal chain likely describe skillful engagement in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. The middle factors are the consequent pleasure. The chain ends with the arising of *samādhi* and the fourth *jhāna*.

6.3.4. The rise and fall of skillful engagement. In 6.3.1 above we looked at the three stages of the learning curve of a typical practice. The first stage is difficult because we are over-challenged. However, in the second stage are typically highly skillfully engaged: Our skills are challenged ever anew, and we are delighted as our skills develop with each performance. The practice easily sustains itself as delight stimulates the growth of ardency, ardency raises our level of engagement and engagement stimulates even more delight.[36] This

33. I assume that "affective" faculties are, contrary to common usage, also "cognitive" in that they strongly condition and are conditioned by cognitive factors.

34. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 260) speculates that, "Enjoyment seems to be the mechanism that natural selection has provided to ensure that we will evolve and become more complex." 'More complex' in flow theory seems to refer to the overall development of practice skills.

35. The awakening factors are described in MN 10 i 61-2 (see the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the appendix), in SN 46.1, etc., and also in 1.5.2.

36. The three phases of being over-challenged, comfortably challenged and under-challenged are described by Csikszentmihali (1997, pp. 30-32), who associates the first with anxiety, the third with boredom and only the second with producing conditions conducive to "flow."

level of skillful engagement is capable of taking us down the chain of awakening factors to *samādhi* and presumable also to flow.

In the third stage, successful internalization has rendered the practice unchallenging and routine. Ardency and seclusion easily go missing, the energy once expended by the explicit system is unneeded and boredom often sets in. Our explicit system (already disposed to monkeying around) accordingly turns this untapped energy to multitasking or to a general scattering of attention. As a result, we are no longer skillfully engaged, and further development of skill reaches a "plateau."[37] This plateau can be fatal to one's progress toward awakening, or toward mastery of any domain.

We know that the plateau in skill development is not inevitable, since there those among us many who remain fully skillfully engaged in a particular practice for decades—ardent, recollective, discerning and secluded—who continue to develop their skills and to delight in practice. Consider the case of our virtuoso pianist, who began training years ago in childhood and continues to develop her skills decades later, now widely admired as a virtuoso, through whose fingers the music merely passes effortlessly and unimpeded to fill the concert hall. How did she do it?

I can think of two ways to remain skillfully engaged on the learning curve. I imagine that the virtuoso is a product of both. The first to make the practice task ever more challenging. Teenage boys are well-known for continuing to challenge their skills as drivers by exceeding posted speed limits as well as other legally imposed constraints. The virtuoso violinist Paganini may have had a similar frame of mind, but musical skill provides many opportunities for supplementary challenge. Zen Buddhists make even simple skills, like walking, more challenging through ritualization, imposing exacting standards on how each movement is to be performed.

The second way to remain skillfully engaged seems to be through management of curtailment, skillfully to lose those explicit cognitive faculties that are naturally most energetic and most likely subject to distraction and multi-tasking. Someone once said, "The nice thing about being a meditator is that you never have to be bored."

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37. Ericsson & Pool (2016, pp. 38-40) describe the importance of keeping "out of one's comfort zone," in improving one's skills, and point out (p. 105) that, contrary to popular belief, years of experience in most professional fields do not result in improved performance. Professionals often reach a plateau early in their careers and remain stuck there.

6.4. What are the *jhānas*?

We now have a theoretical basis for understanding what the *jhānas* do. The *jhānas* reflect a naturally occurring stepwise process of concentration and curtailment integral to *samādhi*, most significantly in the context of skillful engagement in a practice task. In practice, the deeper *jhānas* are perhaps most fruitfully put to use in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, the overarching theme of this book. The early texts define the four *jhānas* in terms of which "*jhāna* factors" are present in each, giving us a basis for learning to navigate among the *jhānas* as appropriate. Abstracting away the minor *jhāna* factors, each of the *jhānas* can be quickly characterized as follows:

(1st) Concentration to the degree of seclusion (*vivicca*) and one-centeredness (*ekagga*) on the theme of *samādhi* (*samādhi-nimitta*).

(2nd) Curtailment of thought and deliberation (*vitakka-vicāra*).

(3rd) Curtailment of rapture (*pīti*).

(4th) Curtailment of pain and pleasure (*dukkha-sukkha*).

Here comes the most important theoretical claim of this chapter:

> *The primary function of the jhānas is to facilitate the internalization of Dhammic skills.*

Effectively, the *jhānas* make practice in accordance with *Dhamma* easy. The *jhānas* work in close collaboration with the process of internalization to facilitate the offloading of explicit functions onto the implicit system and to encourage further fine-grained processing within the implicit system. In general, advancement into deeper *jhānas* is enabled according to the current degree of internalization of relevant know-how, in which one *jhāna* serves as a "prop" to be "dropped" through curtailment in the next. Let's look at a standard descriptions of the four *jhānas* from the early texts to see how this theory works out.

6.4.1 The first *jhāna*. Before we enter the first *jhāna*, we have become skillfully engaged in some practice task, which is a primary condition for entering *samādhi* (see 3.2). For instance, suppose we first undertake the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice of investigation of elements with respect to impermanence (Ex I.5 in 5.0). As a novice in this particular practice, we have been developing a conceptual understanding of the teaching "propped up" by "thinking and deliberation," while attention is "centered" around this theme. This theme will be retained in each *jhāna*, though it will be experienced differently in each. Skillful engagement in investigating the theme has already

resulted in "rapture," as described in the awakening factors.

Now we enter the first *jhāna*:

> (1st) Here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a *bhikkhu* enters upon and abides in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by thought and deliberation, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion.

Recall that "seclusion" is the base level of concentration in the definition of skillful engagement (see 6.3.3 above), equated with "having put away covetousness and grief for the world." "Born of seclusion" indicates that this level of concentration *precedes* entry into the first *jhāna*. What is not mentioned here, and mentioned rarely in similar texts, is the slightly deeper level of "one-centeredness" definitive of *samādhi*.[38] "Thought and deliberation" (*vitakka-vicāra*) is a discursive cognitive faculty that is capable of complex reasoning, of presuming what is not directly observable, of spinning narratives and so on.[39] It is already present in most of everyday life, but is certainly active if we are first grappling conceptually as a "novice," for instance, with regard to a particular *satipaṭṭhāna* exercise.

The *jhānas* will get progressively deeper in large increments. The first *jhāna* is relatively shallow: with no faculties yet curtailed, it places no limits on our ability to conceptualize and reason explicitly about even the most complex *Dhamma* teaching. Constrained by the factor of seclusion, and without the rambling generally associated with everyday thought and deliberation, the first *jhāna* is nonetheless experienced as a composed meditative state, distinct from normal human consciousness.[40]

6.4.2. The second *jhāna*. When we have practiced the theme long and well in the first *jhāna*, such that practice is no longer a challenge, our degree of internalization suffices to "drop the prop" of the dominant explicit faculty of the preceding *jhāna*, which is thought and deliberation.

> (2nd) With the stilling of thought and deliberation, he enters upon and abides in the second *jhāna*, which has tranquility and equipoise of mind

38. This seems to be a point of equivocation here in the early texts: do we enter the first *jhāna* with seclusion alone, or also with one-pointedness? The texts suggest the former, but then *samādhi*, by definition, arises with the latter.

39. "Thought and deliberation are the verbal fabrication, one breaks into speech." (MN 44 i 301)

40. As we go along, I will include some qualities of the meditator's subjective experience.

> without thought and deliberation, with rapture and pleasure born of *samādhi*.

"Born of *samādhi*" tells us that *samādhi* (and therefore "one-centeredness") is present prior to the onset of the second *jhāna*. "Tranquility," like rapture, is an awakening factor antecedent to *samādhi* (see 3.1). 'Equapoise' (*ekodibhāva*) is commonly regarded as synonym for one-centeredness (*ekaggatā*), which is already implied by *samādhi*.[41]

"The stilling of thought and deliberation" is the curtailment of the prop that distinguishes the second *jhāna*. The state of consciousness is altered, as presumptions and abstractions (otherwise sustained through thought and deliberation) disappear in favor of simple, direct and very vivid "perception" of what can be directly observed. We get the sense that we are "just sitting" with the various details of the ongoing theme. If the theme seems to elude us, it is appropriate to return to the prop of the first *jhāna*. Otherwise, further investigation has significantly, but not entirely, been entrusted to the implicit system, which works silently; we not aware of exactly what it is doing. The Buddha accordingly calls this stage of curtailment "noble silence" (*ariya tuṇhībhāva*),[42] which will continue into the two deeper *jhānas*. It is the explicit system that has become still, just in time, for its excess energy might otherwise have turned to distraction and multitasking. We are still fully engaged in the practice task, but at a lower energy level.

6.4.3. The third jhāna. When we have practiced the theme long and well in the second *jhāna*, our degree of internalization suffices to drop the prop of rapture, which has been energizing remaining explicit faculties.

> (3rd) With the fading away as well of rapture, he abides in equanimity, recollective and discerning, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third *jhāna*, on account of which noble ones announce: "One has a pleasant abiding, who is equanimous and recollective."

Rapture had been exciting and had energized the mind in many subtle ways. The curtailment of rapture in the third *jhāna* eliminates the excitement of rapture and of whatever other minor cognitive faculties are conditioned by rapture. Very little explicit cognition remains, the mind becomes "equanimous," the potential for distraction is greatly diminished, and attention is

41. Kumāra (2022, pp. 49-52) makes the case etymologically for the translation 'equipoise.' I will provide a potential alternative interpretation in a footnote at the end of this section.

42. E.g., SN 21.1 ii 273.

thereby stabilized so that it remains effortlessly centered and is unlikely to revert haphazardly to a previous *jhāna*, much less be diverted from the theme. "He has a pleasant abiding" suggests that this is the most delightful of the *jhānas*.

Recall (from 6.3.3) that "recollective and discerning" refers to skillful engagement itself (recollection brings in the skill, discernment makes sense of the practice situation), which was already a prerequisite for entry into the first *jhāna*. So why is it mentioned here? To have reached the third *jhāna* we must have already thoroughly internalized the theme, so investigation of the theme has largely disappeared into the implicit system under the radar. Mentioning skillful engagement here is certainly reassurance that investigation is undeterred, although unheard, even at this very deep level of *jhāna*.

6.4.4. The fourth *jhāna*. In the third *jhāna*, explicit engagement is at most a mere whisper. Pleasure remains, which means that what we do experience matters to us. In the fourth *jhāna* we drop even this.

> (4th) With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters and abides in the fourth *jhāna*, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of recollection due to equanimity. (MN 141 iii 252)

"The abandoning of pleasure and pain" curtails the faculty of "impressions" (*vedanā*), upon which virtually every explicit cognitive faculty is dependent (see 5.4.4). Even perceptions are almost completely curtailed as a result.[43] "Joy and grief" are mental correlates of pleasure and pain, but "the disappearance of joy and grief" had not been mentioned with respect to a previous *jhāna*; we might presume it had occurred along with the curtailment of rapture in the third *jhāna*. "Purity of recollection due to equanimity" refers to purity specifically of the skill applied in investigating the theme. This reassures us once again that skill is still developing under the radar. The text here makes no reference to "discernment," as in the third *jhāna*; perhaps skill is developed in the absence of performance, into a particularly pristine or finely tuned form within the implicit system. The fourth *jhāna* is experienced subjectively as an almost trance-like (void of anything that could be construed as "thinking") state along with some vague stirring of activity seeming to emanate from below consciousness.[44]

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43. See 5.4.5 on these qualities of impressions.

44. We can view each of the *jhānas* as providing a kind of "cognitive profile" or an arraying and ordering of the cognitive factors at work, adjusted and balanced to match

6.5. Realizing the fruits of *samādhi*

We've developed enough understanding of the mechanics of *samādhi* (including the *jhānas)* to advance an explanation how it achieves the functions attributed to it. In the *Samādhi Sutta*, the Buddha lays out the fruits of *samādhi*, repeated here:

> *Bhikkhus*, there are these four developments in *samādhi*. What four?
>
> (1) There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, is conducive to dwelling happily in this very life.
>
> (2) There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, is conducive to obtaining knowledge and vision.
>
> (3) There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, is conducive to recollection-discernment.
>
> (4) There is a development in *samādhi* that, developed and trained, is conducive to the destruction of the taints. (AN 4.41)

Samādhi is not, in general, a stand-alone practice, but an "auxiliary practice" (see 2.3, 2.4.1) in support of some skillfully engaged primary practice such as exercises within the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, *mettā* practice, recollection of the triple gem, or acts of generosity. I have accordingly translated the compound *samādhi-bhāvanā* as 'a development *in samādhi*' (rather than '… *of* …'), since the primary practice is what is developed here, although (as we will see) *samādhi* itself plays a vital causal role in enabling most of these fruits. Let's explore why practice in *samādhi* should exhibit these four points.[45]

6.5.1. Dwelling happily in this very life. Before his awakening, the Buddha-to-be recognized that there are pleasures that transcend mundane sensual pleasures when he recollected an experience that arose spontaneously in his childhood:

> I considered: "I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by thought

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the current stage of practice. This might explain the etymology of *samādhi* ('composure,' 'collecting together') and *ekodibhāva* ('equipoise,' often considered equivalent to *ekaggatā* 'one-centeredness'). The best analogy I can think of for this arraying and ordering is a sound "equalizer" that compensates for distorted tones in audio processing.

45. The following section is a more detailed version of 3.5.

> and deliberation, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Could that be the path to awakening?" Then, following on that memory, came the realization: "That is indeed the path to awakening." I thought: "Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?" I thought: "I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states." (MN 36 i 246-7).

We are not told what task the Buddha-to-be found so engaging to center his attention upon and to think and deliberate about, only that he put aside worldly concerns and that supramundane pleasure and rapture arose. Mundane pleasures, based in sensuality (food, sex, money in the bank, adventure movies, playing pranks on the elderly and booze) tend to be short-lived, problematic, fraught and unsatisfying because they are fleeting and get entwined with craving and appropriation (*upādāna*) as "me" and "mine." Spiritual, supramundane (*lokuttara*), or non-carnal (*nirāmisa*) pleasure arises spontaneously in wholesome Buddhist practice. Let's consider how such non-sensual pleasures might arise.

(1) We've already seen that rapture (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukkha*) arise from skillful engagement as antecedent states prior to the arising of *samādhi*, rapture as one of the "seven awakening factors" (see 6.3.3 above). We love skillful engagement, and the Buddha-to-be must have discovered something he was thrilled to be engaged in as he sat under the rose-apple tree. We've seen that such positive affects continue in *samādhi* and well into the *jhānas*. Because the *jhānas* sustain engagement and avoiding a plateau, if his discovery were to become a long-term hobby, *samādhi* would secure for him much additional rapture and pleasure in the years to come. This is a development in *samādhi* that is conducive to dwelling happily in this very life.

(2) As a whole, *Dhamma* practice discourages, over the long term, what is unwholesome, in particular craving and appropriation (*upādāna*) as "me" and "mine," which would otherwise lead toward suffering. Many other non-Buddhist domains of skillful engagement (like golf or driving) have their own criteria for what is skillful or unskillful, and many are quite unwholesome by *Dhammic* standards (like assassination or like marketing useless or harmful merchandise that customers cannot afford). Although *temporary* seclusion from unwholesome states is, in principle, possible also in *unwholesome* practices (even for a sniper), long-term, unfortunate *kammic* effects (regret and unwholesome dispositions) are expected outcomes. The early texts often speak of the goal of *Dhamma* practice as a whole in terms of the eradication of such suffering, and experience shows that a common consequence within this very

life is a sense of meaning and purpose. This is also a development in *samādhi* that is conducive to dwelling happily in this very life.

(3) Although rapture ceases in the third *jhāna* and pleasure in the fourth, paradoxically the *absence* of pain or pleasure is often regarded as a kind pleasure found in these deepest *jhānas*. For instance, with reference to the absence of "impression" (*vedanā*, of which rapture and pleasure are instances) in *nibbāna*, the following exchange is recorded:

> … Venerable Udāyī said to the Venerable Sāriputta, "But friend, what happiness could there be here when there is no impression here?"
>
> "Just this, friend, is happiness here, that no impression is felt here." (AN 9.34)

In the same way, this is also a development in *samādhi* that is conducive to dwelling happily in this very life.

6.5.2. Knowledge and vision. "Knowledge and vision" are factors of wisdom attributed to *samādhi* repeatedly in the early texts, where they represent a stage close to final liberation, at which it might be said that we see what the Buddha saw.

> 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)

Jhāna, in particular, is discussed in the early texts consistently in association with attainments that approach awakening:[46]

> There is no *jhāna* for one with no wisdom, no wisdom for one without *jhāna*. But one with both *jhāna* and wisdom, he's on the verge of *nibbāna*. (Dhp 372)

"Knowledge and vision of things as they are" (*yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*) begins to develop in the explicit system, in learning to distinguish "right view" from "wrong view." Wrong views are presumptions of the explicit system, for instance self-view, the bifurcation into subject and object, and the conviction that behaviors and observances (*sīlabbata*) have special efficacy. These are comparatively easy to correct "intellectually" at the very adaptable explicit level. However, before we attain knowledge and vision (generally over many lifetimes) their correction will have given rise to behaviors that have been repeated and internalized into the implicit system that counter impulses toward greed, hatred and delusion. Even after our views have been corrected

46. Arbel (2017, p. 4).

explicitly, the behavioral patterns or dispositions they have produced are amenable only to slow development and training in the stubborn implicit system. As a result, even as we abandon self-view, self-centered behaviors and conceit may long linger:

> Ven. Khemaka: "I do not regard anything among these five aggregates of appropriation as self or as of self, yet I am not an *arahant* without taints. For with regard to the five grasping aggregates I'm not rid of the conceit 'I am.' But I don't regard anything as 'I am this.'" (SN 22.89)

Attaining knowledge and vision of things as they are is effectively seeing directly through the eyes of the Buddha, immediately and spontaneously as a result of deep internalization of *Dhamma* through repeated skillful engagement, for which the exercises of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice are particularly well suited. This process commonly proceeds through a series of "insights," or "seeing otherwise," beyond normal experience,[47] indicative of the reconstruction taking place during internalization. We discover, in the mechanics of the *jhānas*, several points at which such insights are plausibly inspired:

(1) Many of our conceptualizations and narratives, including our worst presumptions (such as of the existence of a substantial self) seem not to be sustained after thought and deliberation have been curtailed in the second *jhāna*. For instance, the second *jhāna* and beyond are empty of subject and object.[48] In general, discursive thought tends toward the most pernicious forms of overthinking, and with its abandonment we, at least temporarily, experience a world devoid of such embellishment. With repetition we begin to internalize this way of seeing "otherwise." This is a development in *samādhi* that is conducive to obtaining knowledge and vision.

(2) As the progressive curtailments found in the silent *jhānas* clear away complex conceptualizations, perception acquires crystal clarity.[49]

> Just as if there were a pool of water in a mountain glen—clear, limpid, and unsullied—where a man with good eyesight standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming about and resting, … In the same way—with his mind thus composed [in *samādhi*], purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects,

47. In later tradition, largely informed by the *Visuddhimagga*, insight is attributed to *sati* and considered incompatible with *samādhi*, entirely contrary to what the early texts tell us.

48. Arbel (2017, p. 91).

49. Shulman (2014, p. 36).

> pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability—the monk directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental taints. (MN 39 i 279)

This lucidity plausibly reflects a partial reallocation to the faculty of perception of explicit energy otherwise unused after the curtailment of other faculties. This is another development in *samādhi* that is conducive to obtaining knowledge and vision.

(3) Each point of curtailment entails a shift in what we experience as "reality," and produces an "altered state of consciousness." This in itself is a direct demonstration of an important component of "things as they are," namely the across-the-board "presumptiveness" (see 5.1) of what we take to be real and substantial. Such shifts present various ways in which we might experience the world "otherwise," and more beneficially. This is yet another development in *samādhi* that is conducive to obtaining knowledge and vision.

(4) The deeper *jhānas,* in particular, seem to encourage those mysterious flashes of insight that also in everyday life appear out of nowhere, often inducing one to utter "Aha!" and are accordingly called "aha-experiences."[50] An aha-experience typically has its roots in earlier thought and deliberation about a challenging problem, which had reached an impasse and was put aside. This is followed by an "incubation period," during which the problem is largely forgotten, at least explicitly. However, the resolution suddenly erupts into consciousness, typically at the most unlikely time, from somewhere in the implicit system.[51] I propose that such aha-experiences occur particularly frequently in *jhāna* because the deeper *jhānas* provide a particularly effective context for incubation.[52] Recall that recollection and discernment continue in the deep *jhānas* (see 6.4 above), virtually undetected. This is another development in *samādhi* that is conducive to obtaining knowledge and vision.

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50. Slingerland (2014, p. 147). Zander & Öllinger (2016) observe additionally that this kind of insight is immediately accepted as self-evident and felt as a strong emotional experience.

51. T.D. Wilson (2002, pp. 171-2) points out that gaining insight in this way can be deliberately induced to good advantage (independently of *jhāna*): gather relevant information on the problem, but instead of analyzing it, entrust it to the implicit system for a more accurate result. A day or so later, maybe while taking a shower, "Aha!" (I discovered and made use of this technique myself when I was in graduate school.)

52. Emanating from the implicit system, such insights often defy conceptual explanation. A famous *sayadaw* recounts that when he was a young meditator, he unconvincingly described such an experience to his fellow practitioners as, "You can smell only with the nose." His teacher admonished him, "If you have an insight, don't tell anyone about it; they will think you are crazy."

(5) As know-how is internalized, it is thoroughly integrated with many other domains of knowledge through the unique capacity of the implicit system to recognize complex patterns and associations that encompass diverse factors. For instance, the practices of kindness and generosity will support and be supported by the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation of non-self.[53] This is a final development in *samādhi* that is conducive to obtaining knowledge and vision.

6.5.3. Recollection-discernment. Recall that this compound is closely identified with skillful engagement in the primary task. What is "recollected" (and kept in mind to guide the practice) is *Dhammic* know-how; at the core of engagement is "discernment," the executive control of performance. Although skillful engagement gives rise to *samādhi*, *samādhi* in turn improves efficacy in performance and development of the primary task in these ways:

(1) *Samādhi* establishes one-centeredness, centered around the theme of the primary task. This manages concentration to keep it on task. This is a development in *samādhi* that is conducive to recollection-discernment.

(2) Recall that internalization of skill or know-how eventually reaches the point at which a practice task is relatively effortless and without challenge, such that boredom might easily ensue and the energy otherwise dedicated attention might become dispersed or easily distracted. At this point further development toward expertise or toward awakening would reach a plateau. Through concentration and curtailment of the most energetic faculties, *samādhi* induces the explicit system to operate at a lower energy level, thus keeping the mind fruitfully engaged in the practice task.[54] This is a development in *samādhi* that is conducive to recollection-discernment.

(3) Bringing practice into the silent *jhānas* facilitates internalization, to reduce reliance on the clumsy and costly explicit system and to extend reliance on quick and effortless implicit system. The prop-n-drop method hastens the offloading of skill from the explicit to the implicit system. This is a development in *samādhi* that is conducive to recollection-discernment.

(4) The implicit system takes an active role on its own in development and

53. The viability or direction of many aspects of practice will depend on the values, ideas, social practices, ethical commitments, and so on of sociocultural context in which one lives, and in terms of which meditation practices, in particular, become intelligible, according to McMahan (2023, p. 55). McMahan's book is particularly concerned with the ways in which the "cultural baggage" of modern secularism and individualism effects the results of meditation practice.

54. This might feasibly be subject to verification in terms of glucose consumption in relevant parts of the brain.

performance as it discovers subtle patterns and associations in experience, weaving the internalized content of know-how into broader areas of knowledge and into the very structure of perception.[55] *Samādhi* thereby makes *Dhamma* transformative.[56] This is a development in *samādhi* that is conducive to recollection-discernment.

6.5.4. Destruction of the taints. Knowledge and vision, encouraged by development and training through skillful engagement, bring us close to the "destruction of the taints" (*āsavakkhāya*), a common means of referring to final liberation. The taints (*āsava*) are sensuality (*kāma*), becoming (*bhava*) and ignorance (*avijjā*), the fundamental misguided tendencies of the mind with which the worldling is afflicted, whose complete removal marks the Buddhist virtuoso. The aforementioned developments are developments in *samādhi* that are conducive to the destruction of the taints. There is a development in *samādhi* that is conducive to the destruction of the taints.

6.6. Conclusions

I began this chapter with three questions that I would attempt to answer:

(1) What precisely are the *jhānas*?
(2) What functions do the *jhānas* fulfill?
(3) How do *jhānas* fulfill these functions?

My answers are supported by a close reading of what the early texts say, by a carefully argued interpretation with regard to points of controversy, and also (somewhat distinctively) by a well-motivated modern account of the cognitive mechanisms that stand behind the various factors at play in the early Buddhist texts. These three supports fill a gap in providing a full explanation of the functions of *jhāna*.

In summary, the *jhānas* are depths of *samādhi* defined by progressive steps in thematic concentration and functional curtailment. *Samādhi* and *jhānas* reflect a natural process that occurs in the context of skillful engagement in some practice task, but becomes highly refined in Buddhist practice to be easily serviceable. Right *samādhi* serves most essentially as an auxiliary practice, in that it facilitates the primary practices that give rise to *samādhi* when skillfully engaged.

The practice of *samādhi* and the *jhānas* optimizes the performance and development of the primary practice in a manner conducive to improved

55. As Shulman (2014, pp. 106-7) puts it.

56. Shulman (2014, p. 50).

attentiveness and engagement, to elated affective states, to knowledge and vision, and to full awakening. By bringing cognitive mechanisms into the discussion we gain a deeper understanding of what performance and development of a practice entail, of what the function of curtailing cognitive faculties is, of how *Dhammically* complex practices (particularly contemplations of sophisticated *Dhamma* teachings as in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice) can continue into the silence of the deeper *jhānas* (and in fact "make *Dhamma* easy"), and finally of how the practice of *samādhi* and the *jhānas* produces the fruits attributed to them.

Do practitioners need to understand the cognitive mechanics explained here in order to succeed in practice? Certainly not: they need only to follow the Buddha's instructions. The purpose of this and the preceding chapters is not to teach *satipaṭṭhāna* to the meditator; the companion volume *Satipaṭṭhāna Rethought* serves that purpose. It is rather to advance what I am convinced is a proper interpretation of *satipaṭṭhāna* in order that we understand what the Buddha's instructions are, in the context of much controversy. What I've presented in this book is actually an interlocking set of interpretations concerning *samādhi*, skillful engagement (right recollection), and *satipaṭṭhāna* (right view).

MN 10: *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*

Recollection-Attentiveness Discourse

[Opening.] 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 Kammāsa-dhamma.

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 **[i 56]**, 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*.

What are the four? Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides impression-contemplating among the impressions, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides mind-contemplating in the mind, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas*, ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

[First satipaṭṭhāna, contemplation of body.] And how, *bhikkhus*, does a *bhikkhu* abide body-contemplating in the body?

[I.1 Breath exercise.] Here a *bhikkhu*, 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, recollectively attending to what is in front. Recollective, he breathes in, recollective he breathes out. Breathing in long, he discerns, "I breathe in long"; or breathing out long, he discerns, "I breathe out long." Breathing in short, he discerns, "I breathe in short"; or breathing out short, he discerns, "I breathe out short." He trains thus: "I shall breathe in experiencing the whole

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Bhikkhu Cintita, *Rethinking Satipaṭṭhāna: from investigating Dhamma to dwelling in jhāna*, 2025, Theravada Dhamma Society of Minnesota, Lulu.com.

body"; he trains thus: "I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body." He trains thus: "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily fabrication"; he trains thus: "I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily fabrication."

Just as a skilled lathe-operator or his apprentice, when making a long turn, discerns, "I make a long turn"; or, when making a short turn, discerns, "I make a short turn"; so too, breathing in long, a *bhikkhu* discerns, "I breathe in long" … he trains thus: "I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily fabrication."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, or he abides body-contemplating in the body externally, or he abides body-contemplating in the body both internally and externally.

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

Recollection that "the body exists" is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and recollection.

He abides independent. He doesn't cling to anything in the world. That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.2 Postures exercise.] Again, *bhikkhus*, when walking, a *bhikkhu* discerns, "I am walking." When standing, he discerns, "I am standing." When sitting, **[i 57]** he discerns, "I am sitting." When lying down, he discerns, "I am lying down." Or he discerns accordingly however his body is disposed.

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.3 Activities exercise.] Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* is one who acts with discernment when going forward and returning, who acts with discernment when looking ahead and looking away, who acts with discernment when flexing and extending his limbs, who acts with discernment when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl, who acts with discernment when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; who acts with discernment when defecating and urinating; who acts with discernment when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.4 Body parts exercise.] Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, bounded by skin, as full of many kinds of impurity thus: "In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys,

heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, snot, oil of the joints, and urine."

Just as though there were a bag with an opening at both ends full of many sorts of grain, such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice, and a man with good eyes were to open it and review it thus: "This is hill rice, this is red rice, these are beans, these are peas, this is millet, this is white rice"; so too, a *bhikkhu* reviews this same body… as full of many kinds of impurity thus: "In this body there are head-hairs … and urine."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.5 Elements exercise.] Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, by way of elements thus: "In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element." **[i 58]**

Just as though a skilled butcher or his apprentice had killed a cow and was seated at the crossroads with it cut up into pieces; so too, a *bhikkhu* reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, by way of elements thus: "In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.6 Corpse exercise.] Again, *bhikkhus*, as though he were to see 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."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.7 Corpse exercise.] Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms, 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."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.8 Corpse exercise.] Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside

in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews, 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."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.9 Corpse exercise.] Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews, 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."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.10 Corpse exercise.] Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together with sinews, 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."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.11 Corpse exercise.] Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, disconnected bones scattered in all directions—here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a shin-bone, there a thigh-bone, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here a rib-bone, there a breast-bone, here an arm-bone, there a shoulder-bone, here a neck-bone, there a jaw-bone, here a tooth, there the skull—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."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a bhikkhu abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.12 Corpse exercise.] Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, bones bleached white, the color of shells, 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."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.13 Corpse exercise.] Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, bones heaped up, more than a year old **[i 59]**, 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."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[I.14 Corpse exercise 9.] Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, rotted and crumbled to dust, 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."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides body-contemplating in the body internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides body-contemplating in the body.

[Second *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of impressions.] And how, *bhikkhus*, does a *bhikkhu* abide impression-contemplating among the impressions?

[II. Impressions exercise.] Here, when experiencing a pleasant impression, a *bhikkhu* discerns, "I experience a pleasant impression"; when experiencing a painful impression, he discerns, "I experience a painful impression"; when experiencing a neither-painful-nor-pleasant impression, he discerns, "I experience a neither-painful-nor-pleasant impression."

When experiencing a worldly pleasant impression, he discerns, "I experience a worldly pleasant impression"; when experiencing an unworldly pleasant impression, he discerns, "I experience an unworldly pleasant impression."

When experiencing a worldly painful impression, he discerns, "I experience a worldly painful impression"; when experiencing an unworldly painful impression, he discerns, "I experience an unworldly painful impression."

When experiencing a worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant impression, he discerns, "I experience a worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant impression"; when experiencing an unworldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant impression, he discerns, "I experience an unworldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant impression."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides impression-contemplating among the impressions internally, or he abides impression-contemplating among the impressions externally, or he abides impression-contemplating among the impressions both internally and externally.

He abides contemplating among the impressions the nature of origination, or he abides contemplating among the impressions the nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating among the impressions the nature of both origination and vanishing.

Recollection that "the impressions exist" is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and recollection.

He abides independent. He doesn't cling to anything in the world. That is how a *bhikkhu* abides impression-contemplating among the impressions.

[Third *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of mind.] And how, *bhikkhus*, does a *bhikkhu* abide mind-contemplating in the mind?

[III. Mind exercise.] Here a *bhikkhu* discerns mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. He discerns mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate, and mind unaffected by hate as mind unaffected by hate. He discerns mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion. He discerns attentive mind as attentive mind, and scattered mind as scattered mind. He discerns distinguished mind as distinguished mind, and undistinguished mind as undistinguished mind. He discerns superior mind as superior mind, and unsurpassed mind as unsurpassed mind. He discerns composed mind [mind in *samādhi*] as composed mind, and uncomposed mind as uncomposed mind. He discerns liberated mind as liberated mind, and unliberated mind as unliberated mind.

[Refrain.] In this way he abides mind-contemplating in the mind internally, or he abides mind-contemplating in the mind externally, or he abides mind-contemplating in the mind both internally and externally.

He abides contemplating in the mind the nature of origination, or he abides contemplating in the mind the nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in the mind the nature of both origination and vanishing.

Recollection that “the mind exists” is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and recollection.

He abides independent. He doesn’t cling to anything in the world. That is how a *bhikkhu* abides mind-contemplating in the mind.

[Fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of *dhammas*.] And how, *bhikkhus*, does a *bhikkhu* abide *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas*?

[IV.1 Hindrances exercise.] Here a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among *dhammas* in terms of the five hindrances. And how does a *bhikkhu* abide dhamma-contemplating among *dhammas* in terms of the five hindrances?

Here, there being sensual desire in him, a *bhikkhu* discerns, “There is sensual desire in me”; or there being no sensual desire in him, he comprehends, “There is no sensual desire in me”; and he also discerns how there comes to be the origination of unoriginated sensual desire, and how there comes to be the abandoning of originated sensual desire, and how there comes to be the future nonorigination of abandoned sensual desire.”

There being ill will in him…

There being sloth and torpor in him…

There being restlessness and remorse in him…

There being doubt in him, a *bhikkhu* discerns, "There is doubt in me"; or there being no doubt in him, he discerns, "There is no doubt in me"; and he discerns how there comes to be the origination of unoriginated doubt, and how there comes to be the abandoning of originated doubt, and how there comes to be the future non-origination of abandoned doubt.

[Refrain.] In this way he abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* internally, or he abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* externally, or he abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* both internally and externally.

He abides contemplating among the *dhammas* the nature of origination, or he abides contemplating among the *dhammas* the nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating among the *dhammas* the nature of both origination and vanishing.

The recollection that "there are the *dhammas*" is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and recollection.

He abides independent. He doesn't cling to anything in the world. That is how a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the five hindrances.

[IV.2 Aggregates exercise.] Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* **[i 61]** in terms of the five appropriation-aggregates. And how does a *bhikkhu* abide *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of five appropriation-aggregates? Here a *bhikkhu* discerns, "Such is form, such form's origination, such form's disappearance. Such is impression, such impression's origination, such impression's disappearance. Such is perception, such perception's origination, such perception's disappearance. Such are fabrications, such fabrications' origination, such fabrications' disappearance. Such is consciousness, such consciousness's origination, such consciousness's disappearance."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the five appropriation-aggregates.

[IV.3 Sense-spheres exercise.] Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the six internal and exterior

spheres. And how does a *bhikkhu* abide *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the six internal and exterior spheres?

Here a *bhikkhu* discerns the eye, he discerns forms, and he discerns the fetter that originates dependent on both; and he also discerns how there comes to be the origination of the unoriginated fetter, and how there comes to be the abandoning of the originated fetter, and how there comes to be the future non-origination of the abandoned fetter.

He discerns the ear, he discerns sounds…

He discerns the nose, he discerns odors…

He discerns the tongue, he discerns flavors…

He discerns body, he discerns tangibles…

He discerns mind, he discerns *dhammas*, and he discerns the fetter that originates dependent on both; and he also discerns how there comes to be the origination of the unoriginated fetter, and how there comes to be the abandoning of the originated fetter, and how there comes to be the future non-origination of the abandoned fetter.

[Refrain.] In this way he abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the six internal and exterior spheres.

[IV.4 Awakening factors exercise.] Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the seven awakening factors. And how does a *bhikkhu* abide *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the seven awakening factors?

Here, there being the recollection awakening factor in him, a *bhikkhu* comprehends: “There is the recollection awakening factor in me”; or there being no recollection awakening factor in him, he discerns: **[i 62]** “There is no recollection awakening factor in me”; and he also discerns how there comes to be the origination of the unoriginated recollection awakening factor, and how the originated recollection awakening factor comes to fulfillment by development.

There being the investigation-of-dhammas awakening factor in him, …

There being the energy awakening factor in him, …

There being the rapture awakening factor in him, …

There being the tranquility awakening factor in him, …

There being the samādhi awakening factor in him, …

There being the equanimity awakening factor in him, … comes to fulfillment

by development.

[Refrain.] In this way he abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the seven awakening factors.

[IV.5 Noble truths exercise.] Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the Four Noble Truths. And how does a *bhikkhu* abide *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the Four Noble Truths?

Here a *bhikkhu* discerns as it actually is: "This is suffering"; he discerns as it actually is: "This is the origin of suffering"; he discerns as it actually is: "This is the cessation of suffering"; he discerns as it actually is: "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering."

[Refrain.] In this way he abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* internally, … That is how a *bhikkhu* abides *dhamma*-contemplating among the *dhammas* in terms of the Four Noble Truths.

[Conclusion.] *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*. **[i 63]** 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.

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

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

Glossary

Included are novel technical terms and non-standard or potentially confusing translations of Pali terms. References into the chapters of the book provide additional explanation of how these terms are to be understood here.

ajjhatta - ‘internal.’

anupassanā - ‘contemplation,’ ‘investigation.’

appropriation - *upādāna*.

āsava - ‘taint.’

attentive recollection - *upaṭṭhita sati*.

attentiveness - *upaṭṭhāna*.

auxiliary practice - practice that serves a primary practice, notably the maturation processes of right effort, right recollection and right *samādhi*. See 2.3, 2.4.1.

bahiddhā - ‘external.’

bāhira - ‘exterior.’

bahulīkata - ‘trained.’

bhāvanā - ‘development,’ ‘maturation.’

body/self - see under ‘facet.’

centered - *ekagga*, see under ‘one-centered.’

composed - *samāhita*.

composure - *samādhi.*

concentration - narrowing of attention, ‘one-centeredness.’ See 3.2, 6.1.2.

consciousness/self - see ‘facet.’

contemplation - a*nupassanā*.

curtailment - narrowing of cognitive faculties, aspect of *samādhi*. See 3.3, 6.1.3.

development and training - *bhavanā-bahulīkata*.

dhamma (lower case) - ‘*Dhamma* teaching,’ also ‘factor of experience,’ or ‘observable.’

discerning - *sampajāna*.

discernment - *sampajāñña.*

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discursive thought - *vitakka-vicāra*, = 'thought and deliberation.'

dual-process model - distinguishes explicit and implicit cognition and their functions. See 6.2.

ekagga - '(one-)centered.'

ekodibhāva - 'equipoise.'

equipoise - *ekodhibhāva*.

explicit (cognition, system) - deliberate, conscious, see 'dual-process model.'

fabrication - *saṅkhāra.*

facet (of self) - body/self, consciousness/self or mind/self, presumption of self on basis distinct realm of observables. See 1.6.

flow - state of altered consciousness studied in positive psychology. See 6.1.1.

implicit (cognition, system) - (nearly) unconscious, effortless intuitive, see 'dual-process model.'

impression - *vedanā*, commonly 'feeling,' 'sensation.'

internalization - offloading from explicit to implicit cognition, natural result of development and training. See 6.3.2.

jhāna - *untranslated*.

know-how - (partially) internalized skill.

maññati - 'presume.' See 5.5.1.

maññita - 'presumption.' See 5.5.1.

maturation - *bhāvana*, also 'development.'

maturation group - the auxiliary practices of right effort, right recollection and right *samādhi*.

mind - *citta*.

mind/self - see 'facet.'

nimitta - 'theme.'

observable - factor arising in (direct) experience. See 5.1.

one-centered - *ekagga*, also 'centered,' concentrated around theme of current practice task. See 3.2.

origination - *samudaya*.

pīti - 'rapture.'

presume - *maññati*.

presumption - *maññita*, fabrication with conviction of validity. See 1.6, 5.1, 5.5.1.

primary practice - task served by an auxiliary practice, notably right view, right intention, right speech, right action and right livelihood. See 2.3,

2.4.1.

prop-n-drop method - temporary curtailment.

rapture - *pīti*.

recollection - *sati.* See 2.2.1.

recollection-attentiveness - literal meaning of *satipaṭṭhāna*, but only preserved in cognate forms: *upaṭṭhitā sati* 'attentive recollection.' See 2.2.2.

recollection-discernment - *sati-sampajāñña*, also roughly 'skillful engagement.'

recollective - *satimā*.

right recollection - *sammāsati*. See 2.4.

rūpa - 'form,' raw sense data (not 'body').

samādhi - *untranslated*, also 'composure.'

samādhi-nimitta - 'theme of *samādhi*.'

samāhita - 'composed,' 'in *samādhi*.'

sammā sati - 'right recollection.'

sampajāna - 'discerning.'

sampajāñña - 'discernment.'

samudaya - 'origination,' basis of contingency.

saṅkhāra - 'fabrication.'

sati - 'recollection,' 'mindfulness' not recommended (see chapter 4).

satimā - 'recollective.'

satipaṭṭhāna - *untranslated, sati* + *upaṭṭhāna*, literally 'recollection-attentiveness.' See 2.2.2.

sati-sampajāñña - 'recollection-discernment,' 'skillful engagement.' See 2.2.4.

satipaṭṭhāna standards - "ardent, discerning, proficient, secluded." See 2.1.2.

secluded (mind) - *vivicca*, with hindrances at bay.

seclusion - *viveka*, absence of worldly distractions, hindrances at bay.

signature exercise - exercise within *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* without accompanying refrain.

skillful engagement - practice in accordance with *satipaṭṭhāna* standards. Recollection-discernment and recollection-attentiveness are (near-)synonyms. See 2.1.2, 6.3.

synthetic technique (meditation) - specialized technique to induce deliberately a meditative state. See 3.1.0, 3.2.2.

taint - *āsava*.
teaching (of *Dhamma*) - *dhamma* (lower case).
theme - *nimitta*, factors relevant for performance of current practice task, particularly *dhammas* and observables. See 1.5.1, 3.2, 6.1.2.
theme of *samādhi* - *samādhi-nimitta.* See 1.5.1, 3.2, 6.1.2.
thought and deliberation, - *vitakka-vicāra*, also 'discursive thinking.'
three signs - *tilakkhaṇa*.
tilakkhaṇa - 'three signs.'
upādāna - 'appropriation,' commonly 'attachment,' 'clinging.'
upaṭṭhāna - 'attentiveness.'
upaṭṭhita sati - 'attentive recollection.'
vedanā - 'impression,' commonly 'feeling,' 'sensation.'
vipassanā - active investigation of *Dhamma*.
vitakka-vicāra, - 'thought and deliberation.'
viveka - 'seclusion.'
vivicca - 'secluded.'

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Dependent Coarising: meaning construction in the twelve links. (2021)

Satipaṭṭhāna Rethought: a meditation manual based on earliest Buddhist texts. (2024)

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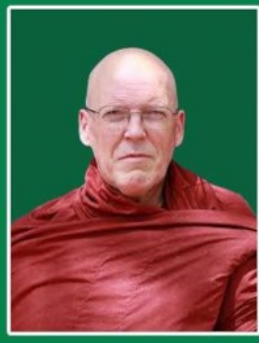
Satipaṭṭhāna (often translated as "Foundations of mindfulness") is the Buddha's method of wisdom contemplation, best known through the ancient practice tutorial *The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. It is recognized as the basis of the modern *vipassanā* or insight meditation movement. Unfortunately, the currents of Buddhist intellectual history have not been kind to this early teaching.

Rethinking Satipaṭṭhāna is a thoroughgoing reevaluation of the early *satipaṭṭhāna* teachings that integrates right view, right recollection and right *samādhi* based on a critical rereading of the earliest Buddhist texts in an effort to recover a doctrinally coherent, cognitively realistic, etymologically sound, functional, and explanatory interpretation of this ancient wisdom practice.

Satipaṭṭhāna is seen as a practice that extends *Dhamma* study to investigation, verification, and internalization in terms of direct experience to produce the fruit of "knowledge and vision of things as they are." The *jhānas* are seen, in accord with modern cognitive research, as an aid to internalization that offloads sophisticated *Dhamma* understandings onto the effortless and intuitive "intrinsic" system of human cognition.



Bhikkhu Cintita is an American Buddhist scholar-monk. He is a former professor and research scientist in linguistics, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence, and has been a meditator for 45 years. Since 2001 he has dedicated himself full time to Buddhist study and practice. He ordained in 2003 as a Soto Zen priest, then in 2009 as a Theravada monk in Myanmar. He lives with 4 Burmese monks in rural Minnesota.