What Is Satipatthana?

The Satipatthana Sutta (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah soo-tah) is arguably the most beneficial teaching in terms of understanding how Buddhism operates. The word *sutta* (sutra in Sanskrit) come from the same root word as the word *suture*--that which binds a wound. In Pali, sutta designates one of the hundreds of teachings that emerge from the life of Siddhattha Gotama, who is known as the Buddha, that is, one who is Awakened. *Satipatthana* is typically translated as *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*; I intend to discuss the meaning and application of satipatthana in this talk. Future talks will elaborate the sections of the sutta, hopefully in ways that are understandable and applicable in our time.

Analayo, a German Theravadin monk, is considered by many contemporary Western practitioners of mindfulness meditation to be a preeminent scholar and teacher regarding Satipatthana; he has written explicitly about the topic in three books: “Satipatthana—The Direct Path To Realization”, “Perspectives On Satipatthana”, and “Satipatthana Meditation—A Practice Guide”. Many other contemporary Buddhist teachers have written books about satipatthana as well. I intend to use Analayo’s commentaries as the primary source for my reviews of the Satipatthana Sutta, with occasional references to other studies.

It is the obligation of each generation to carefully study and then rigorously apply the doctrines of their spiritual tradition, in this case, Buddhism. Each religion, for various reasons, seeks to cultivate and maintain exclusive rights to proclaim the truth of their doctrine; unfortunately, that has led to so many horrible wars and persecutions over the centuries and continues to this day. For myself, I feel an obligation to study carefully, meditate diligently and then formulate what I think is relevant to contemporary cultural norms, sometimes not within the traditional, historical doctrine of Theravada Buddhism; otherwise it becomes useless doctrine to be memorized and doesn’t really accomplish much regarding spiritual development.

For example, there is a section in the sutta that recommends spending days (and nights) in what are called charnel grounds, that is, a place where human bodies are deposited to be torn apart by scavenging animals or simply to rot; we are to contemplate the dissolution of the body as a way to concentrate the mind. Our culture has no such area or opportunity, and in fact, such practices are illegal in many states. Our obligation is to find other contemplations that produce concentration and a strong motivation to not put off training the mind until it is too late to really develop spiritually, which are the intentions of the charnel grounds contemplations.

I want to emphasize those parts of the sutta that can be useful for training the mind, along with other commentarial suggestions for practice I have picked up from various teachers and authors over the years of my studies and meditation practice.

**What Is Satipatthana?**

I already mentioned the traditional translation—The Four Foundations of Mindfulness—and that is quite useful terminology, if only because it has become the standard rendering in English. I also think it is worthwhile to review what Analayo, in “Satipatthana—The Direct Path To Realization”, on pages 29 & 30, writes about satipatthana:

The term *satipatthana* can be explained as a compound of *sati*, “mindfulness” or “awareness”, and *upatthana*, with the u of the latter dropped by vowel elision. The Pali term *upatthana* literally means “placing near”, and in the present context refers to a particular way of “being present” and “attending” to something with mindfulness. In the discourses, the corresponding verb *upatthahati* often denotes various nuances of “being present”, or else “attending”. Understood in this way, “*satipatthana*” means that *sati* “stands by”, in the sense of being present; *sati* is “ready at hand”, in the sense of attending to the current situation*. Satipatthana* can then be translated as “presence of mindfulness” or as “attending with mindfulness”.

The commentaries, however, derive *satipatthana* from the word “foundation” or “cause” (*patthana*). This seems unlikely, since in the discourses contained in the Pali canon the corresponding verb *patthahati* never occurs together with sati. Moreover, the noun *patthana* is not found at all in the early discourses, but comes into use only in the historically later *Abhidhamma* and the commentaries. In contrast, the discourses frequently relate *sati* to the verb *upatthahati,* indicating that ”presence “ is the etymologically correct derivation….

The problem with the commentarial explanation is that, instead of understanding *satipatthana* as a particular attitude of being aware, *satipatthana* becomes a “foundation” of mindfulness, the “cause” for the establishment of sati. This moves emphasis from the activity to the object.

This presents a problem for me as a student and teacher—I have become quite accustomed to the term Four Foundations of Mindfulness, but I can appreciate the validity of emphasizing that a better rendering would be as he suggests in the title of the book: a *path*, or perhaps an *approach to* or *aspect of* mindfulness.

**What are the Four Foundations?**

It is useful to use the image of a pyramid to describe the formation of satipatthana:

**Mental Formations:**

5 Hindrances, 5 Aggregates, 5 Sense Spheres, 7 Awakening Factors

**Consciousness:**

Alert/Dull, Contracted/Expanded, Exclusive/Inclusive, Ignorant/Awakened

**Feelings:**

Pleasant, Unpleasant, Neutral

**Body**:

Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, Pressure, Pain, Hunger, Fatigue

Imagining your attention to be hovering over the peak of the pyramid, each of the foundations represents one facet of it, as your focused attention “penetrates into” each area with subjective awareness. Regardless of which facet you enter into, the interior of the pyramid has been accessed. Such is the case with the cultivation of *vipassana* (vih-pah-suh-nah), that is, *insight into how the selfing process operates*. The elements of each foundation are dynamically changing, and the “contents” of the pyramid are therefore not the same as they were the moment before.

As suggested in the Analayo book above, the Satipatthana Sutta represents an approach to understanding this “selfing” process rather than constituting a real element of a self. The only “realities” are the various stimuli in the Body; the experience of the self is fabricated by the other three approaches. The fabrication *process* is also real, however, but the *content* is inconstant and ultimately unreliable, and this is what mindfulness practice makes clear. This clarity ultimately “deconstructs” the deeply conditioned experience of selfing, that is, there is an immediate and dispassionate subjective awareness of the process as impermanent, and this is recognizable in the progression towards Awakening. Deep understanding of impermanence supports realizing the absence of an enduring and autonomous self, which is a core goal of Buddhist doctrine and practice. The process of self-organizing is a necessary evolutionary trend and necessary for social life to occur.

Future talks will focus on each of the Four Foundations in more detail, but first, following Analayo’s commentary, some terms must be defined and understood conceptually:

**Definitions in the Satipatthana Sutta**

There is a repeated refrain in the sutta, for example: “*Here, monks, in regard to the body a monk abides contemplating the body, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world*.” Analayo describes *contemplation, diligent, clearly knowing, mindful, free from desires and discontent regarding the world”* more in depth, to be repeated through each of the Four Approaches, and here is a review of Analayo’s comments:

**Contemplation--** In the above-mentioned book, on page 32: “The “definition” of right mindfulness is concerned with “contemplating”. The corresponding Pali word anupassati can be derive from the verb “to see”, passata, and the emphatic prefix anu, so that anupassati means “to repeated look at”, that is, “to contemplate” or “to closely observe”. This observation is intended to focus attention on the Three Characteristics of subjective experience: anicca (ah-nee-chah, impermanence), dukkha (doo-kah, distress and confusion) and anatta (ah-nah-tah, the absence of an enduring/autonomous self).

**Diligent**—The Pali word for this mental quality is *atapi* (ah-tah-pee), typically translated as *diligence* or *ardency*. It manifests as a determined and persistent application of attention and effort. It is closely associated with Right Effort of the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Energy/Effort Awakening Factor. *Appamada* (ah-pah-mah-dah) is another Pali word that is strongly associated with and sometimes replaces atapi in the suttas. It is translated as *heedfulness*, which represents *an attitude that is persistent and conscientious in applying the satipatthana concepts and practices*.

**Clearly Knowing**—The Pali term here is *sampajanna* (sahm-pah-jahn-yah), which can be understood as *attention unafflicted by craving and clinging*. It is very closely associated with the next term, mindfulness, as *satisampajanna.* It not only involves undistorted awareness, but also the likely consequences of one’s thoughts and actions. This involves a formulaic doctrine that provides guidance in decision-making, as follows:

* purpose (Pāli: *sātthaka*): refraining from activities irrelevant to the [path](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path).
* suitability (*sappāya*): pursuing activities in a dignified and careful manner.
* domain (*gocara*): maintaining sensory restraint consistent with mindfulness.
* non-delusion (*asammoha*): seeing the true nature of reality (see [three characteristics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_characteristics)).

**Mindful**—This term is ever-present in satipatthana. The Pali word is *sati,* which has several important meanings and connotations. The original definition related the ability of the Brahmin priests to precisely remember and reliably apply the various chants and ritual behaviors, seeking the approval of Brahma. As was often the case, the Buddha modified the meaning, relating it to *the ability to not be forgetful as to whether what is arising into awareness is wholesome or unwholesome, with the unwholesome to be rejected and the wholesome to be perfected*. Another quality of sati is *to not be absent-minded or superficial in awareness*. This is why sati is closely aligned with clearly knowing and diligence. Sati is also active for discerning anicca, dukkha and anatta. Sati is part of the Noble Eightfold Path as Right Mindfulness and appears as the “guiding factor” of the Seven Awakening Factors in that it functions to monitor the interaction of the other Factors.

Sati is considered to function as the “Chief minister of the King”, whose job is to monitor the actions of the subordinate ministers and general population, then reporting the results of this monitoring to the King, who presumably would take action for the betterment of the kingdom, promoting those virtues that are beneficial and depriving those behaviors that are detrimental of attention and energy.

There is an additional characteristic function of sati that is worth review, which Analayo writes about in the above-cited book on page 49-50:

“The kind of mental state that [sati] functions well can be characterized by a certain degree of breadth, in contrast to a narrow focus. It is this breadth that enables the mind to make the necessary connections between information received in the present moment and information to be remembered from the past. This quality becomes evident on those occasions when one tries to recall a particular instance or fact, but where the more one applies one’s mind, the less one is able to remember it. But if the issue in question is laid aside for a while and the mind is in a state of relaxed receptivity, the information one was trying to remember will suddenly spring to mind.

The suggestion that the mental state in which *sati* is well-established can be characterized as having “breadth” instead of a narrow focus finds support in some discourses which relate the absence of sati to a narrow state of mind (*parittacetasa)*, while its presence leads to a broad and even “boundless” state of mind (*appamanacetasa*). Based on this nuance of “breadth of mind”, *sati* can be understood to represent the ability to simultaneously maintain in one’s mind the various elements and facets of a particular situation. This can be applied to both the faculty of memory and to awareness of the present moment”.

These functions mirror what Culadasa writes about in “The Mind Illuminated” in describing the ability to cultivate focused attention (on the breath) associated with peripheral awareness regarding whatever thoughts might emerge into consciousness. He terms this process as *Introspective Metacognitive Awareness*.

Sati also is closely associated with another important Buddhist term—*yoniso manasikara* (yo-nee-so mah-nah-see-kah-rah), typically translated as *wise attention*. The word *manasikara* literally means “*making in the mind*” and *yoniso* is translated as “*beginning in the womb*” (yoni). In this context, yoniso manasikara directs attention to the immediate forming of a thought with wisdom as to whether the thought and accompanying action promotes the process of Awakening.

**Free from Desires and Discontent Regarding the World**—This phrase addresses the importance of overcoming the effects of the Five Hindrances: Sense Desires, Aversion/Ill-Will, Sloth/Torpor, Restlessness/Worry and Skeptical Doubt. These qualities of consciousness prevent the manifestation of Awakening to take effect. Identifying and setting aside the Five Hindrances is directly addressed in the Fourth Approach to cultivating mindfulness, Dhammanupassana (dah-mah-noo-pah-sah-nah), which will be reviewed in future talks. In the context of this talk, this freedom is intended to foster *samadhi* (sah-mah-dee), translated as *unification of mental phenomena*.

The topic for next week’s review will be how mindfulness of breathing provides the basic support for cultivating satipatthana.