

Satipaṭṭhāna (30) Choiceless Awareness of Sensations

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This will be the last talk on mindfulness of the elements, the fifth exercise of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. I like to call it mindfulness of the properties: the earth property, the water property, the fire property, and the air property. This is a mindfulness of sensations meditation. The basic sensory awareness exercise is to just be present for sensations as they directly and immediately occur.

There are a variety of ways of practicing this. One is the way we practiced in the guided meditation today. Some people find this easier than meditating on their breath. They find it easier to be grounded in the sensations of the body, and if the mind wanders off, to come back to the body and the flow of sensations. The attention is directed to the whole body. It is rooted in the body,

floating, roaming around, and touching into the present moment with the different sensations as they flow through and come into being.

Some people find that breathing actually works better as an anchor to the present. If they stay in the present, they can develop their stability, concentration, and mindfulness. This is also a sensation meditation. We are aware of all the sensations that come into play as we breathe.

Technically, the four elements meditation is what we are doing in vipassana when we are tuning into the breathing. Now, the attention is on a much narrower, smaller area of our body – just where the breathing occurs or where the breathing is predominant. We are there with the flow of sensations. We let the attention float within the location where we are focusing on the breathing. We let the sensations come into that floating awareness or we let the floating awareness settle on the ripple of sensations that come into play.

As we get quieter and quieter, and the breathing gets stiller, it is easier to stay with the simple sensations that come and go as we breathe. This is still a sensation meditation. We are still doing a four elements meditation, but because it is rooted in a particular place, some people find it easier to do. The mind does not wander off as much. It is easier and simpler to settle in.

But as I said, some people find it simpler to do whole body meditation.

Sometimes in mindfulness meditation, I like to teach that we are rooted in the breathing. It is like the default. That is where we cultivate stability and steadiness of mind – to stay in the present moment. But if a more compelling sensation arises in the body, we contentedly and relaxedly let the attention float to that other place. We begin doing the sensation meditation in that place, such as the knees, the back, or wherever the sensations might be strong.

There too, the idea is not to fixate the attention. Let your attention roam around. It is like touching a cave wall you can't see in the dark. You let your hand move around and feel the wall – the texture, temperature, whatever it might be.

This sensation meditation is going in the same direction as all the other exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna*: to be steady and stable enough in the present moment so that the mind is not wandering off anymore. We are right here in the present moment just feeling the experience. Because the mind is now stable and not wandering off easily, we can settle back and just observe the experience.

The idea of observing the experience is meant to be peaceful. We are not interfering or making a lot of work. It is very receptive and allowing – just observing as the flow of sensations, of experience, comes through. In particular, as we settle back and there is more and more stability in the present moment – we are right in the present moment – then we see that everything is passing and moving in the present moment.

I do not know if this is a good analogy, but take an old film composed of many squares or frames and have it pass by a little slot. Each frame comes in front of the slot one after the other. As you settle back and watch, you see that one frame comes, and then another comes, and another. You see that they come and they go, they come and they go. In some relaxed, flowing way, we start seeing more and more things just come and go – come and go. This opens us up to deeper places of letting go and not clinging.

That is the direction we are going, but how do we get there? One way in the tradition is to look at the simile used for this particular exercise. The four elements meditation – being aware of the sensations and these four categories – is like a butcher who has cut up a cow and put out the pieces for people to buy. At this point, people are not relating to the pieces of meat as the cow. It is just pieces of meat. People see the pieces of meat as independent of the cow.

I think this graphic analogy is unfortunate for many of us. The idea is that we are often living in thoughts and ideas we take as our whole self. We identify with ourselves in a particular way. Some of the identities are accurate enough, but if we live in the whole identity, then we miss the parts. This meditation is to not be in the idea of the whole. Rather, we begin tuning into particular elements or parts that make up the whole or that we apply our concepts and ideas to.

For example, if I think I am a lousy person, that is a generalization. If I then feel the sensations in my hand, the sensations themselves are just sensations. There is no lousiness in the hands, in those sensations. If I think I am a great person, that is also a generalization.

The idea is to have an experience of ourselves where we drop below the coarser identities – the coarser ideas of who we are. Often those ideas are sources of suffering. Even if they are sources of happiness, they can also limit us from dropping into a deeper, settled, relaxed, observing place – observing the present moment as it flows by.

By beginning to look at the sensation level of experience, we are looking at the parts of the cow, not the cow as a whole. We are looking at the parts of

ourselves, not the generalizations of who we are. We are dropping down to a deeper level.

This can be quite healing and healthy to do. Some of our ideas and attachments to ideas involve contractions and tightness. They all involve a disconnect with our lived, flowing bodily experience. To be able to drop down into the lived bodily experience and let the sensations flow, move, and not be bottled up – not be restricted or contracted – is healthy spiritually and physically. It is healthy mentally to be in this flow of sensations where the mind is not fixated on its painful ideas or whatever ideas it has.

This exercise is about dropping down into the parts – into the direct experience of what is actually happening – more than the ideas and thoughts about things. It helps us to bring the mind and body together in harmony. If the mind is thinking about tomorrow or yesterday, fantasies, delusions of grandeur, delusions of poor me, we tend to be disconnected from our bodies.

The body is always in the present moment. The task of meditation is to harmonize the body and mind, to let the mind join where the body is. Since the body has a lot to do with sensations, that is where we can find harmony. That is where we can find the meeting, the joining – which is better than if we just stay thinking conceptually about how wonderful the body is and celebrating the

body with ideas. The harmony – this coming together – occurs in the sensation level of experience.

As we move on in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, this becomes really helpful. We connect to deeper dimensions of our heart, deeper dimensions of our inner life. We will get there.

Tomorrow we will start on the sixth exercise of *Satipaṭṭhāna*. I should warn you that it involves a contemplation, maybe a visualization, of a corpse. I am not going to make it graphic. It will be very simple. The exercise is nine different contemplations on the progressive decay of a corpse. I do not think it is meant to be gruesome. The exercise is meant to help us value the present moment – to really show up in the present moment – so that there is a qualitatively improved aliveness to our attention and dedication to the present moment experience.

So hopefully, this will be supportive for you to spend a couple of days on these corpse contemplations. It is a long tradition in Buddhism to contemplate death. We will do that for a few days as part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Thank you.