

Satipaṭṭhāna (70) Aware at the Time of Death

May 5, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

dying, letting go, releasing, freedom, direct path

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning. We are coming to the penultimate talk on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. After all these months now – over four months – of going through it slowly, we are coming to the end. We will all come to an end at some point.

This *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice is considered to be one of the greatest practices to do as we are dying. If we wait until we are dying to begin our practice, we will not have developed our practice. It will not be there as a strong resource for us at the time of our dying.

What I have learned through doing the *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice for many decades is that it generally gives me a very positive feeling about dying. My relationship to my death – if I am lucky to die consciously, without dementia or too much pain – is that I anticipate it to be

one of the great things to be present for. This letting go that undoubtedly happens as we are dying is one of the best things going, a wonderful thing to do.

I now associate the experience that I have had of letting go deeply with the experience of dying. I do not feel that dying is so much an end as it is a releasing and letting go. A letting go into...? I do not know. It does not matter so much to me what we are letting go into, maybe nothing. But the letting go is so wonderful, so peaceful, happy, and freeing.

One of the purposes for this practice we have been doing all these months is to come to terms with and find our peace, our center, our freedom, in relationship to some of the deepest and most challenging aspects of human life. This relationship is represented by how the text begins and ends. In the end, the text says:

It was for this reason that it was said, “This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for overcoming sorrow and distress, for vanquishing pain and distress, for attaining the right approach, for realizing Nibbāna, namely, The Four Foundations for Awareness.”

In some Theravadan countries, there is often a practice in the temples of reciting the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as someone is dying or after they have died.

One of the ways to appreciate this is to know as we are dying, all kinds of things are no longer that important. When we are taking our last breaths, we are not concerned about whether or not we need to buy more socks or what we are going to have for supper.

The practice teaches us to let go of concerns and thoughts that are not relevant at the time of dying. To be able to let go of fears, desires, and distress. To really not have those concerns get in the way of the fullness of the moment, the opportunity of the moment. The *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice teaches us that we have something better to do than be distressed. Something better to do than be afraid. Something better to do than be lost in fantasy, thoughts, projections, and ideas.

Not that we can necessarily put all those things aside, but our life and interest, our energy and attention do not go there anymore. We can let go of them and focus on this practice of *Satipaṭṭhāna*. We practice being aware, being awake, being present. That is the better alternative than so many of the ways our minds can go.

To practice *Satipaṭṭhāna*, this practice of mindfulness, on a regular basis helps us to see over and over again in a deeper, clearer way how it is the better alternative. This is where life is found, freedom is found, peace is found, more often than in the other things the mind is doing.

Through this practice, we see that there is something better to do than indulge the compulsion to have certain thoughts, feelings, and attitudes – as much as they might seem important to us. There is something much more freeing, more peaceful, more alive, and more satisfying to do than to think about our resentments, how other people are wrong, or the regrets we have had over our lifetime.

All those things can have a place in life, but we realize that they are not the best alternative. They are not the best place, the most valuable place to be. Do not invest so much in so many things that are to our detriment, that diminish us, that are wind drag for us. We can see that being awake, being aware, being present is the best alternative going.

Even at the very end, this last breath that we have, what is the best thing to do at that point? Do you know that? Do you have a feeling for how you want that last breath to be? I hope it is not wondering who is going to get your socks when you die. I hope that there is really something there. Maybe there is a letting go of the world around you. Maybe there is a letting go into being awake, into being aware. Letting go into release.

So, during all these months that we have been doing *Satipaṭṭhāna*, it comes to this. It is really about some of

the most essential, deepest aspects of our life. Death represents that. There are all kinds of suffering that human beings have. The human realm is filled with challenges. How do we meet it? How do we address it? How do we find our way through it?

For the Buddha, this is the unified way. This is the direct way. I think of it as the simplest, most uncomplicated way, all the way through to freedom, to liberation.

Thank you. The last talk of this series will be tomorrow. I look forward to our time together. Thank you.