

Satipaṭṭhāna (2) Knowing in a New Way

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mindfulness, *sati*, mindful, establish, abide, cultivate, farmer, plant, whale, know, breathing, recognize, observe, *paṭissati*, lucid, awareness, register, glasses, heightened, mother

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This second talk focuses on the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness practice. Many years ago, I eagerly picked up the "*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*" because I wanted to discover what the Buddha actually says about mindfulness and practicing mindfulness. The Pali word is *sati*.

As I went through the text, I was surprised and a little shocked to find how little he actually says about mindfulness. The title of the text is the Four Foundations for Mindfulness, so I thought there surely would be many references to the word *sati* (mindfulness). Surprisingly, there were very few. In the introduction, there is only a statement about mindfulness: "One is

mindful, clearly aware, and ardent.” Here, “mindful” is an adjective.

As I said yesterday, a section at the beginning of the text says:

Going to a forest, the root of a tree, an empty building, sitting cross-legged, body upright, and establishing mindfulness to the forefront.

The word mindfulness does not reappear in the very long text until the end, in kind of a conclusion.

None of the exercises or instructions for what to do use the word mindfulness. I was a bit surprised. I thought, “What does this mean?” As I started looking through the texts of the Buddha, there is nothing that would compare to the English expression, “Be mindful.” For example, when I was young, my mother might have told me, “Be mindful, Gil.” Here, “mindful” is used as a verb – an activity that we would do – do mindfulness.

However, *sati* – translated as “mindfulness” – is not something we do. *Sati* is something we establish. As I went through the teachings of the Buddha, I saw that *sati* was associated with the verbs: to abide in, to establish, and to cultivate. It is like when a farmer cultivates a plant, the farmer is not doing the growing. The farmer is creating the conditions where the plant can grow.

We abide in, dwell in, something. I love the expression “abiding” because that is a peaceful way of just being here, like being at home where I am supposed to be. To abide in *sati*, in mindfulness, is to come to rest in it. I once used an underwater photograph of a big whale, floating peacefully in the ocean, to represent abiding in *sati*, in awareness.

Sati is not associated with an activity of doing. It is more like a state of being aware. So how are we supposed to do it? What is the activity? If we look at the “*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*,” the actual activities – the practices we do – are not practices. Maybe they could be called mindfulness practices in that they are there to cultivate, establish, and grow mindfulness so that we can abide in it.

In this discourse, in the verbs for things we are doing – the first one, in the instructions, is to know. To know one is breathing long when one breathes a long breath – and short when one breathes a short breath. Later, there are instructions to clearly recognize what is happening. To recognize something requires mental activity of a somewhat higher order. I will talk more about that later.

The text also talks about observing. Then it talks about *paṭissati*, a compound of *sati*. This is lucid awareness. I like to translate *sati* as “awareness” rather than

“mindfulness.” It is partly because of the mindfulness movement in our modern world. The meanings and definitions of mindfulness are very much influenced by how that movement teaches mindfulness. There is nothing wrong with this, but they use the word mindfulness differently than how the Buddha uses it.

For the Buddha, the word *sati* is a state we can abide in, establish, cultivate, and grow. *Sati* is not an activity that we do. The activity we do is knowing. We do not want to do a meditation practice that feels like a lot of work and makes us busy.

Knowing – to know something – is a wonderful, special quality. It does not have to be so cognitive or involve a lot of thought. If I am sitting and talking with a friend, fully engaged and absorbed in conversation – my attention is there for sure. Then I might put my glasses down and continue talking. I might also get up to go to the bathroom, get some tea, and come back. Then I might say, “Where are my glasses?” I have no idea where they are, even though I put them down just five minutes ago.

I put my glasses down without clearly knowing I was putting them down or being clearly present for the experience of putting them down. The idea is to be present enough to let the experience register – so it can stay in our memory a little bit.

Before the Buddha, the word for *sati* had associations with memory. It is the kind of receptivity and attention required for us to remember something later, like where my glasses are. It is not like memorizing, which is an even higher-order mental activity. I like the expression: “We stop to know. We pause to know. We engage knowingly with what we are doing.”

We are present for what we are doing. We do one thing at a time. We are really there – present for it. In that presence, there is a heightened kind of knowing or recognition – a heightened attentiveness to the experience. As that heightened attention or knowing operates, it then supports the cultivation and growth of awareness.

Awareness follows in the wake of the practice of knowing. It is a peaceful practice. It begins with just knowing the breathing. Mindfulness of breathing is a powerful practice. It is not suitable for everyone. Doing other practices is fine. But it is wonderful to acquire the ability to get focused and centered on breathing – to concentrate on breathing. We are learning to gather the mind together – so that when we are with the experience of breathing, we are not scattered and distracted. We are just there with it – we are present to know it well.

It is the kind of attention we bring to something we have looked at for a long, long time. We have passed by it. We have been with it. We stop and look – to discover something new that we have never noticed before. It is not straining to know or discover. It is just to relax – glancing at it, looking, roaming around it. “Oh, look at that. I never noticed that before.” It requires the kind of knowing that registers something deeply so we can remember it.

I spend a lot of time with my mother, who has advanced dementia. We have wonderful exchanges back and forth. They are very clear in the moment, but her memory probably lasts thirty seconds. I say something, and she comes back with a wonderful reply. Ten seconds later, I could ask the same question, and she would have the same or a different reply. She does not remember what she said.

For her, nothing sticks. She has clarity, but the attentiveness is not all there. It needs a place to register – to stay or stick. I do not really understand how dementia works, but whether my understanding is accurate is not so important. I want to convey the specialness of knowing – to attend to. So we know it in a deeper way, without it being a heavily cognitive, investigatory, questioning, or thought-filled exploration – just very simple.

As we know the breathing, we become more and more centered and present for just the breathing. We know it more clearly. The mind also gets quieter, more peaceful, and calmer.

The difference between concentration practice and mindfulness practice is that in concentration practice, we get absorbed in the breathing. We just try to hold the mind still in a certain way, rather than let the experience become richer in the knowing mind. In mindfulness practice, if we get absorbed, it is in the knowing and clarity of awareness that takes in the experience. We are more available in mindfulness to register the details, fullness, and richness of an experience, and how it changes over time.

So *sati* is awareness. Tomorrow I will talk about how the exercises of knowing, recognition, and observation lead to heightened awareness. The path to heightened awareness is the trajectory or journey of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the foundations for awareness.

In the meantime, you might explore the nature of your awareness – your attention, your knowing – all the faculties of attentiveness you have. Today, especially notice your faculty of knowing, the simplest knowing – the kind of knowing that if you really let it register, you would remember where you put your glasses or keys.

Just that simple. Thank you, and I look forward to tomorrow.