

Satipaṭṭhāna (19) Awareness in Activity

January 28, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

third exercise, daily, activities, *sampajāna*, full awareness, purpose, context, impact, eating, drinking, urinating, defecating, walking, standing, sitting, talking, keeping silent, reaching, tea, action, words, specific, tangible, abide

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Today we begin discussing the third exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourse on the Four Foundations for Mindfulness. One way of reading this text is that the first three exercises are progressive – one can lead to the next.

The first exercise is meditation practice centered on breathing. As we get focused, concentrated, and settled here in our breathing – calm, settled, and very present – we bring that calm presence into our activities. The simplest way to practice this is to know our postures. This is the second exercise. When we stand, we know we're standing; when we walk, we know we're walking, and so forth.

If we can stay mindful and present after meditation, inhabiting awareness as we go through our activities – rather than giving only a half or a quarter of our attention to the activity – there can be a delightful calm presence for that activity. This presence may be here to such a degree that it is actually enjoyable to just be here – to feel and experience the simplicity of what we're doing.

This is more enlivening, rich, and beneficial than the alternative of wandering off in thoughts and concerns. We do things better when we have that kind of presence and attention.

I'll read you the third exercise. It is one of the longer ones.

A practitioner is one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning;

Who acts in full awareness when looking ahead and looking away;

Who acts in full awareness when flexing and extending the limbs;

Who acts in full awareness when wearing their robes and carrying their outer robe and bowl (this refers to monastics; it applies differently to laypeople);

Who acts in full awareness when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting;

Who acts in full awareness when defecating and urinating;

Who acts in full awareness when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

These are all ordinary daily activities that many people do. Here, the text uses the word “full awareness.” The Pali is *sampajāna*. I love this translation of “full awareness.” I am not completely sure what it means, but I have a good sense from my own experience. I love the feeling of fullness of awareness in all that we do as we go through our lives.

The tradition views *sampajāna* as a fuller understanding of what we are doing. So, as we come out of meditation and start doing activities, we are aware of more than just the activity itself. If we are doing walking meditation, we are just settling in and walking. That is all we are doing. But if we’re walking to our kitchen, we also know we are going to our kitchen. We are not just walking. There is also the knowing of going to the kitchen.

If we are reaching for a cup to have tea, we know that we are reaching for the cup in order to have tea. If we are reaching for the faucet to put water in the tea kettle, we sense that we are doing this for a purpose. The purpose is to fill the kettle to make tea. We are also thirsty, and it is good to be hydrated.

In the immediacy of awareness, a number of things are clear: the purpose or why we're doing something and the context in which we do it. When we walk into a room, planning to walk through it, we know that other people are in the room. We are not just walking as if our walking is all that is going on. We take into account the context of the people. We might walk around them rather than walk through them or expect them to move.

So full awareness takes in much more. We are beginning to use the intelligence of the mind a little more. But, as we do an activity, we are not using our intelligence to fantasize about tomorrow or get lost in thoughts about something else. For instance, as we reach for the faucet, perhaps we know we are doing it if someone asks us about it later. But we are not really present. There is not full awareness of the activity, the context, and the purpose. Maybe we already started thinking: "Can't wait for lunch. I wonder what we should have for lunch." And we haven't even had breakfast.

This exercise is a call to bring our mindfulness into all our daily activities. I love that it ends with both talking and remaining silent, and puts them both on the same level of importance. To have full awareness means to know when we are talking, why we are talking, and the context for why we are talking. It is the same with

silence: to know the purpose, context, and appropriateness of our silence.

The tradition says full awareness also means that one knows what part of ourselves we need to stay grounded in as we do the activity. It explicitly tells us to stay connected to the four foundations for mindfulness. For example, sometimes we enter into the world of the activity very much with our bodies. Some activities are physical. Sometimes we are present for our mind states – the quality of the mind. Sometimes we are aware of the feeling tone or the mental processes involved. These are all among the exercises we will be talking about as we go through the *sutta*. We practice mindfulness with all these different aspects of ourselves.

In this way, mindfulness keeps us here, rooted and grounded in the present moment, and capable of taking in the fuller context, purpose, and value of what we are doing. Mindfulness also helps us know the impact of our activities on us and on what is happening.

It is one thing to walk and be aware that we are walking. It is another thing to feel that we are walking in such a hurry that we are getting tense. Full awareness would notice that tension. Or we might be walking in a way that feels nourishing, delightful, and satisfying. Then we walk with that satisfaction and feel it.

One way of understanding this practice is to see it as mindfulness in activity. It is very common among English-speaking practitioners to refer to it as “mindfulness in daily life.” That is a great concept. However, it is very abstract and refers to too much. In the Buddha’s words, his instructions are more concrete, specific, and tangible.

In the *sutta*, daily life awareness is defined as “mindfulness in action.” It directs us to infuse our activity with awareness, with attention. It is not so much that we have to think actively about the context or the purpose. Rather, we have a relaxed, open awareness, where the context or purpose of the activity is seen, understood, and taken into account. It is a rich world.

The activities I just read are generally pretty simple: eating, defecating, urinating, extending your arm, falling asleep, and waking up. Over this weekend, you might look for simple activities you do, with which you can practice full awareness and full understanding of what is happening – without searching or analyzing. Is there some way of being really present for the activity so that there is clear knowing of the context, the purpose, and the influence the activity has on you?

Being present so that your system can take in the context or purpose, register it, and know it as part of the

full picture of your present moment experience. Then you can abide in the present moment, calm and confident, available to take in the fuller picture of what the activity is about and how it is going.

So choose a few simple activities throughout the day – maybe washing dishes, sweeping the floor, or driving – to practice and experiment with so that mindfulness or awareness can begin growing, expanding, and spreading into more of your life.

Thank you very much.