

Satipaṭṭhāna (21) Unhurried Attention

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We are currently studying mindfulness of activities, which overlaps with what is called “mindfulness in daily life.” In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the list of activities to be mindful of is quite extensive.

When I was living in a Zen monastery in Japan, there was a practice of reciting *gāthās*, four-line verses. We were given a book of *gāthās* to memorize. Each *gāthā* was an aspirational verse, “As I do this activity, may I ...” Before doing ordinary activities – eating, showering,

washing hands, going to the bathroom, sitting, putting on clothes – you would recite the appropriate verse. As far as I remember, they all had to do with dedicating the activity to the welfare and benefit of everyone.

At the Tassajara Zen monastery in California, we used this practice mostly when we went to the baths.

Tassajara has natural hot springs that are piped into the baths. It was a lovely place to shower and bathe. As you entered, there was an altar. You would bow to the altar and recite the four-line verse written above it. The *gāthā* went something like, “As I enter the bath with all beings, cleaning myself inside and out ...” I do not remember it all.

There is a *gāthā* for handwashing at IRC, our retreat center. It was written a few years ago. When 40 people live together, touching the same utensils, it is very important that everyone washes their hands before serving themselves from the buffet table. To emphasize the value of handwashing, we have this little verse posted:

*Cleaning my hands,
I clean my heart and mind.
Cleaning my heart and mind,
I clean the world for others.*

If you memorize this kind of verse, you dedicate a certain amount of attention and time to doing

something. You prepare yourself for it. You funnel your attention, energy, and time to do the activity. When you recite a four-line verse before doing something, you are not in a hurry to do it.

Reciting *gāthās* in a Zen monastery is training in learning how to take your time – to slow down, not be in a hurry, and just do what you are doing when you are doing it. The idea is when you are doing something, just do it. When walking, just walk. When eating, just eat.

I thought I would read a *gāthā* of Thich Nhat Hanh, but I do not have it here. Thich Nhat Hanh has a whole little book of *gāthās*.

What I am trying to convey is that when you practice mindfulness of activities, do not do things in a hurry. This does not necessarily mean you have to slow down. You can do things fast, sometimes, without hurrying. Hurrying is being ahead of yourself. It is propelling yourself through something, or to the other side of it, as quickly as possible. Mindfulness, on the other hand, means being there for the activity. If something is done quickly, then be fully there, surrendering to the activity.

After being in the monastery, I was a short-order cook for a while. What I learned in the monastery – how to surrender to each activity and really be present for it – I applied to short-order cooking. It was a dance of

spinning, turning, and cooking many dishes at once. That was all I did. I surrendered to the dance. I would usually leave my job feeling more concentrated than when I entered because of how I gave myself over to what I did.

So, give yourself over to the activity you are doing, without hurry. To live a mindful life – a life where there is some momentum for mindfulness to grow and enhance your life – bring a good quality of attention to what you are doing in the present moment.

I will go through the list of activities in the *sutta* again.

One acts in full awareness when going forward and returning.

If you go someplace – the bathroom, the kitchen, the bookcase – and come back, that can be your meditation time. That is a time to cultivate your capacity for awareness. It is not just to be aware of what you are doing, which is valuable. With the *Satipaṭṭhāna* – the four foundations *for* mindfulness – we are trying to do activities so that awareness becomes stronger. Present moment awareness becomes second nature rather than something you have to remind yourself to do. So mindfulness of activities is done for the purpose of being present and the purpose of enhancing and developing awareness. Awareness is like a muscle – you can develop it.

One acts in full awareness when flexing and extending one's limbs.

This refers to reaching for something. In Thailand, there was a school of vipassana, insight meditation, that did not rely on breathing. I do not know if it is still there. In this school, you would watch your arm as you move it. You would lift your arm, put it down to the side, lift the arm up, put it down to the side, and be very focused and concentrated on the sensations of that movement. The mind would get concentrated. A lot of calm would develop. For some people, the movement of the arm was easier to track than breathing. Eventually, the people who did this practice became concentrated. With concentration, they would develop the further steps of vipassana.

Wearing one's robes and carrying one's bowl.

This means putting on one's clothes and wearing them. For monastics, being mindful of their robes is important because it is one of the minor rules. Monastics wear a skirt and an outer robe that extends down to the edges of the skirt. The bottom of the robe has to line up parallel with the bottom of the skirt. If it does not, it is a little violation.

It takes a certain amount of mindfulness to keep the robes just right. So monastics have to be attentive to their clothes. When I was a monastic, I was surprised by this. But I came to like it a lot because it was a call to be

constantly mindful and attentive. Rather than seeing it as a nuisance, I saw it as a way of staying relaxed, not rushing ahead, not getting complicated – just staying present.

One acts in full awareness when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting.

The Pali for “tasting” is more like “savoring” in English than exactly “tasting.” You certainly do not want to be attached to tasting, but rather be really present to feel and sense the taste. Part of the lore in the records of the ancient Buddhist commentaries was that a lot of practitioners became enlightened while they were eating. There is something about that detailed attention.

The first real opening experience I had in Buddhist practice occurred while I was sipping a cup of tea. These simple activities can be really powerful if we are present for them and give ourselves over to them – sense them, and be with them.

Full awareness when defecating and urinating.

Sometimes it is said a really good poop is like a minor *nibbāna*, a minor awakening. Be present for the bodily functions you do every day.

When walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

When I go to bed at night, I find it very nice to be present for the experience of being there – relaxing my body, being mindful, checking in, and letting go of any stresses that are easy enough to let go of.

My teachers in Burma wanted us to be aware right up to the moment of sleep and be able to actually know if we fell asleep on the inbreath or the outbreath. I tried that for a long time. I have never been able to do it, so I have given up on it. They also wanted us to be present when we woke up and know if we woke up on the inbreath or the outbreath. This is also something I have never been able to do. So, to wake up and begin mindfulness as soon as we remember.

I have tried to convey today how valuable it is to practice with activities. Mindfulness of activities is valuable because there is heightened attention to what we are doing, which is nice. It is also a way of strengthening and developing our capacity for mindfulness, for awareness. Each activity, listed in this text, we do is valuable and even has the potential for realization, for waking up.

Drinking tea, eating food, going to the bathroom – you want to be present for all these activities. Perhaps, an activity you do today will be the one that is dharmically significant for you and your practice. You do not want to miss or gloss over it. We do not know which one this

might bring. So be careful today with all your activities. Who knows which one will bear wonderful fruit?

Here is a *gāthā* from Thich Nhat Hanh:

*Before starting the car,
I know where I am going.
The car and I are one.
If the car goes fast, I go fast.*

There are lots of these wonderful verses. You can write your own four-line verses. Reciting it can be a way of supporting yourself to enhance your engagement with what you are doing.

Thank you. I look forward to being here with you tomorrow.