

# *Satipaṭṭhāna* (8) Calming the Bodily Formations

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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There is a saying: “To be wise, be tranquil first. To be wise, be calm first.” If we are agitated or restless, it is hard to access our wisdom, deeper understanding, or inner goodness, which can inform how we live our lives. Some degree of calm and tranquility gives us more access to different parts of our inner life than does anger, fear, anxiety, or desire.

The function of deepening this meditation practice is not to become calm or tranquil for its own sake. Tranquility is a preparatory state that allows for something deeper to happen – deeper wellsprings of wisdom and meditation.

Meditation is often associated with becoming calm. Whether the word should be “calm,” “tranquil,” or “relaxed” depends on what is most obvious in any given moment. There are times when relaxing feels front and center, and that is what we should do. Other times, we need to become calmer, so we take a few deep breaths and relax. We step away from a tense situation. We take ten steps and return to discharge some of the tension that has built up.

I like the word “tranquility.” I do not like using the verb form, as in “tranquilize the body.” I associate that with euthanizing animals or using tranquilizer darts on wild animals. It may be unfortunate that I have those associations.

Tranquility is such a beautiful state. How tranquility is felt – how to describe it – is probably very personal. People experience tranquility differently, so I feel a little shy to suggest how it is. But I will point out how you can feel tranquility more fully. I think of tranquility as glowing stillness, warm coolness, warm peacefulness, and vibrating stillness. I feel the tranquility as it spreads through and suffuses parts of my body. Sometimes I feel it spreading down into my arms towards my elbows or around the front of my ribcage.

Tranquility sometimes feels pervasive, but it can feel stronger in some places than in others. In places where

tranquility is strong, it feels like a wondrous absence. There is nothing there except a sense of peacefulness in the center of my chest.

When I first started doing vipassana or insight practice, I thought that the most meaningful way of practicing was not to try to make anything happen but to really show up for what is there. Showing up for what is happening is a profound and wonderful way of practicing. When we do insight meditation, sooner or later, that is the name of the game – to just show up and be present for what is there.

But over time, I learned that it is not a crime to be a little more actively involved in meditation and try to change our experience, within reason. We can be an agent of change, but it is best to keep that simple. The simplest thing is to relax the body and the mind. And that is a doing – it is not just being.

Then we prioritize certain things to be aware of. In the breath meditation at the beginning of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we prioritize feeling the breathing and the whole body as we breathe. First, we take time to get centered on breathing, getting focused and concentrated. Learning to be centered coming into and staying with the breath – not wandering off – might be months of practice for a beginner. Maybe for the first ten minutes of sitting, you are gathering yourself around the

breathing, keeping it simple, not trying to do more than coming back to breathing, resting in the breathing, and getting focused.

But as stability develops, we can open up the awareness to the whole body or open to a wider awareness. The breathing may be like a warm, refreshing wind blowing through us that allows us to feel different parts of our body as we breathe. So we prioritize feeling the body, being grounded in the body, and knowing the body.

As the body is more known, some things happen without our choosing or making them happen. As we simply settle more and more into breathing, things tend to relax. The mind, which is chasing experience or thoughts, relaxes. We begin to experience a natural way of opening our awareness to the senses. We tend to become more embodied as we practice, especially if breathing is the focus of meditation.

Whether feeling the whole body is a natural byproduct of getting focused on breathing, or we choose to open the awareness up, we want to start feeling the whole body more broadly at some point. As we feel the body more, this allows for relaxation, the last step of the first exercise. It calms the body down, helping it become more tranquil.

Here the emphasis is on the body and not being too concerned with the mind. That comes later in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. The focus on the body partly prepares the ground for later. The more we can be centered and grounded in our embodied experience, the easier it is to be wise about what goes on in the mind. It is easier to observe the mind in a way that is meditative, helpful, and supportive of the path to liberation.

We begin appreciating what it feels like to be tranquil. As we go about our day, we see the difference between having some calm tranquility in the body and being agitated, restless, or tense in the body. See that clearly. Do not let yourself succumb to greater and greater tension. Do not give yourself over to getting more agitated in the body.

Many forces reinforce our unconscious or subconscious ideas that it is important to get tense, important to take care of ourselves. Tension can build up. Sometimes a lot of small movements of tension build over the day, and by the end, we are exhausted or very tense. Be careful with that. Notice the difference between when you start getting tense and agitated and when you can be more peaceful and tranquil.

When there is a choice, try choosing the calm way. You will see that you can do whatever needs to be done just fine from a place of tranquility and peace. You may do it

better because if you want to be wise, be tranquil first. If you want to do things well, be tranquil first.

There have been times when I worked quickly and took longer to finish because I made mistakes that required fixing. The idea that tranquility or calm may not be a way to care for ourselves or get things done is not always a wise policy. We can appreciate tranquility and value it.

In Buddhist practice, embodied tranquility and peacefulness are the precursor and foundation for a deep sense of happiness. It is not evaluative happiness like, “I won the California Lottery and, therefore, I’m really happy.” That is a mental, cognitive kind of happiness. Instead, it is a deep, settled, warm-hearted, warm-bodied happiness that glows and feels nice. The movement of tranquility is towards creating the foundation for happiness, well-being, and joy. For meditation, tranquility is a foundation for the joy and happiness that will come.

I talked yesterday about taking time to feel the impact, influence, and after-effect of things, like relaxation. You can also feel the after-effect of tranquility. As we settle into tranquility, we can begin to have feelings of joy, delight, and well-being. These feelings are wonderful to open up to because they, in turn, support greater tranquility.

So we are allowed to work on changing our experience a little in *satipaṭṭhāna*. Most *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness practice is, in fact, about just being present and aware of how things are without changing them. That is very profound to do. But at times in this practice, we are also allowed and encouraged to move our practice along in some direction – to move into relaxation, calm, and tranquility of the body. Meanwhile, we stay alert and upright so we do not slump or get too relaxed. The combination of being alert and tranquil is wonderfully delicious.

But do not try too hard or do too much. Know how to moderate, follow, and monitor yourself so that you do not get agitated or restless. Let your efforts be calm. Let your calming efforts be calm themselves.

In the next few days, we will build on the breath meditation that is the beginning of *satipaṭṭhāna*. We will talk about how breath meditation moves into the refrain, which describes the deepening of the practice. Thank you.