Satipaṭṭhāna (1) Introduction

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Welcome to the beginning of a journey we will take through the Buddha's teachings on the Four Foundations for Mindfulness – the four ways of establishing awareness. Most of the time, I will use the words "awareness" and "mindfulness" synonymously. If I do not, I will try to indicate that.

This journey uses a very famous text attributed to the Buddha – the "*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*." It is the foundational text for the whole mindfulness movement, which has spread across the world. It is also the foundational text in the Theravada Buddhist world for the vipassana movement that arose over the last 100 years. Vipassana practice became very important in places like

Burma, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Teaching insight meditation, we trace ourselves to that lineage. The "*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*" is central to it all.

We can interpret the "*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*" in many different ways. Different teachings and practices of vipassana, insight, or mindfulness will choose different parts of the text to emphasize or to select as the primary practice. Some people will practice just with the breathing. Others will practice with the four elements or different parts of the body. Some people will practice with the mind states or mental processes. And some people like to practice with them all.

One approach is comprehensive. Even though the text does not say this, the idea is that we can be mindful of everything in its own due time. Nothing is outside the scope of what mindfulness practice can include. Awareness is 360 degrees.

I believe the text is set up in a way that involves a progression to deeper states – a progression to deeper connectivity to oneself. We move progressively from the outer parts to the deeper, more subjective aspects of ourselves. They are subjective in the sense of coming from deep within – the source from which we operate and create the activities of mind. These actions of mind then spill out into how we experience the rest of ourselves and the world around us.

The journey is inward. I like to think of it as a journey home to where we are free and liberated. The text opens with a very dramatic promise or statement. It says:

> *There is a direct way for the purification of beings; for the overcoming of grief and lamentation; for the overcoming of pain and sorrow; for the realization of nibbāna, of freedom.*

The text says there is a direct way. One way of understanding this is with the four areas of practicing mindfulness. If you want to dive right into a path to freedom and liberation – into an intimate connection to the present moment where you can find your freedom – this is the direct way.

There are indirect ways, which are both valuable and foundational. For example, the Buddha considered living an ethical life a foundation for the direct path. If you jump into the direct path before laying a foundation, it will be harder for you. An ethical foundation is that our life is virtuous and peaceful. We are not agitated, worried, scared, or struggle with guilt or remorse for what we have done. With an easeful, ethical inner life, we can have ease entering into this direct path.

There are four foundations for doing this. “Foundation” is an important word. Nowadays, some people like to

translate it as four establishments. They are the basis upon which awareness grows and becomes clarified, revealed, and freed. If we are aware without a strong foundation, our awareness will probably be scattered, unstable, and can easily disappear with the slightest ruffle in the environment or the mind.

We want to create a strong foundation, but it needs a basis. The four bases that the Buddha offers here are: careful grounded attention to the body, grounded attention to what is called “feelings,” grounded attention to mind states, and grounded attention to mental processes.

In September, I went through each of the Four Foundations for Mindfulness. If you want, you can listen to those talks as an introduction. For this series, I will go through the four foundations in a different way. I will go more slowly through the text itself with the idea that it is a practice text. We will practice with what is in the text, rather than just study it.

We call the “*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*” a text, implying a written body of work. We are such a written culture – or have been until the Web. Perhaps now, we may be switching to a more oral culture again. This text was not originally composed as a literary work but as an oral record. Very few people – maybe accountants and the like – wrote in the time of the Buddha. All of his

teachings were composed orally, memorized, and transmitted from one generation to the next by passing on that memorization.

When modern people read a text as a literary work, they often look for something different from what people listen for in an oral text. Repetition in a written text can be boring and put us to sleep. Or our attention wanders. However, repetition in a chanted or recited text adds rhythm. The text benefits from momentum because people participate in the recitation. Like a song, it taps into our memory. We repeat the song's chorus or refrain, and everyone is carried along in a wave of familiarity. So much of our body participates in a refrain that we can do it hundreds of times, whereas reading a refrain a hundred times would not keep us engaged.

I will try to give you a sense of the journey of this text. I think an oral participant would feel that. They would feel the rhythm of the text – wave after wave after wave – coming, surging, and passing. They would feel a movement into something, through it, and then to the other side, where there is peace and a freedom. The rhythm appears again and again – thirteen times in the text. I think that rhythm gives listeners – the ancient people chanting – a sense of participation in what the text talks about.

The medium of the text itself demonstrates for people or evokes in them what is actually talked about in the text. This is one thing that makes the text quite brilliant. The very way the text is organized allows the listener or the chanter to experience what is being said in an embodied, full way.

I have simplified the text to give you a sense of the repetition that goes on. Before I read it, there are a few key words to know so that you can feel it more. First is the word “abiding,” which sometimes is translated in English as “dwelling.” To abide is to live in a place as if it is your home. You are fully there. *Viharati* (to abide) is a very important word in the ancient texts. *Viharati* is used in particular for abiding in wondrous and beneficial states of mind.

Another important word is “observing.” In the text, the word observing is used for very deep states of meditation. It is nonreactive awareness that sees but does not affect or fixate on touching or manipulating our experience. We sit back and observe in a very spacious, open way. There are four areas to abide in observing: the body, feelings, mind states, and mental processes.

The text begins, “There is a direct way for the realization of *nibbāna*.” And it ends, “Observing in this way leads to liberation.” Between “this is a direct way” and “this leads

to liberation” is this journey. The surge, the repetition of the same phrase, is very important – may be the most important part:

Observing change. Abiding, not clinging to anything. You will hear this phrase repeated thirteen times.

There is a direct way for the realization of nibbāna.
Abiding, observing the body.
Mindful of breathing.
Observing change in the body.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Mindful of posture.
Observing change in the body.
Abiding, not clinging to anything,

Mindful of bodily activities.
Observing change in the body.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Mindful of parts of the body.
Observing change in the body.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Mindful of the four physical elements.
Observing change in the body.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Mindful of decaying corpses.

Observing change in the body.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Abiding, observing feelings.
Mindful of feelings.
Observing change in the feelings.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Abiding, observing the mind.
Mindful of mind.
Observing change in the mind.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Abiding, observing mental processes.
Mindful of the hindrances.
Observing mental processes change.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Mindful of the aggregates of clinging.
Observing mental processes change.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Mindful of being knotted up with sense experience.
Observing mental processes change.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

Mindful of the constituents of awakening.
Observing mental processes change.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.

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Mindful of four insights.
Observing mental processes change.
Abiding, not clinging to anything.
Observing in this way leads to liberation.

This is my simple summation of the whole text. It gives special emphasis to the idea of abiding, observing, seeing change, and coming to a place of not clinging to anything. Going through the process of connecting and being mindful of all these things opens us to the world of change in a particular way. It leads us to a place of non-clinging, which is synonymous with liberation and freedom – *nibbāna*.

That was a general introduction to this series. Hopefully, we will practice with the text during the thirty-minute meditation and then have some teachings around it each weekday for the next few weeks.

Thank you all very much.