

Satipaṭṭhāna (18) Posture as a Mirror for Oneself

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

second exercise, refrain, open awareness, body, inside, outside, internally, externally, shifts, variation, posturing, leaning, understanding

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This will be the last talk on mindfulness of postures, the second exercise of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. As with the first exercise, the refrain follows the second exercise. The refrain is the same for each of the 13 exercises. This implies that simple mindfulness of posture, as a foundation, can lead to the deepening of practice described in the refrain. It can lead to an open awareness that is receptive to both what is inside and outside – to how we experience our body from the inside out and the outside in. It is just open awareness – to know what is arising.

As we do this, there starts to be a sensitivity to how things just appear, even though there might be some predominant thing that lasts. At the same time, we

notice that new things appear into awareness from the body, within the posture and sensations of the body. To receive the comings and goings of sensations and to know them in this simple way can allow a deepening, quieting, settling, and stilling of the mind. Then we start tasting something of the freedom of radical simplicity, where there is no craving or clinging to anything. That is one direction in which mindfulness of posture can go.

I would like to take mindfulness of posture in a different direction. As we become more sensitive and attentive to our posture, we can become aware of the details or the subtle variations in our posture as we go through our lives. We can develop a tremendous amount of self-understanding by noticing the shifts in our posture.

The shifts in posture do not have to be big. It does not have to go from standing to sitting or from sitting to lying down. If you are standing talking with someone or sitting with someone doing an activity, what does your posture express? Are you tense? Maybe you are unhappy with what is going on, and as you are sitting, you push back into the chair.

Perhaps you are eager to understand someone. And in this desire to understand, you lean forward. Maybe someone says they know the winning lottery number for a big prize. Then you lean forward out of the desire for something.

Maybe you feel discouraged because someone says something personal about you. Someone might say to me that a self-respecting dharma teacher does not wear blue shirts. Then I notice that my shoulders sag and slump a little. There is deflation, discouragement, or disappointment.

Posture varies with all these little movements. As you pay attention and are sensitive to your posture, you can become aware of the subtle shifts and variations. Someone says something, and you notice yourself turning away or holding yourself tensely. Your posture expresses what you are feeling. It expresses some intention or purpose. All kinds of things are expressed in the posture.

This idea is represented by the English word “posturing.” When we say someone is posturing, they are asserting themselves or their status, trying to assume a place in the hierarchy or situation. They are trying to prove themselves or show who they are in relation to others. Posture can express that.

Posture can express confidence. Care and attentiveness can be expressed in posture. To really be present for someone can be expressed in posture.

Many years ago, I met with a series of people, maybe three, over a year. I noticed that if I stood directly facing them and listened to them speak, they would turn almost 90 degrees away from me. Perhaps, when I faced them directly, I was a little intimidating. If I moved to face them more directly, they would turn around 360 degrees without knowing it. They did not want that direct contact. I was quite surprised by this, partly because they seemed unconscious of it.

I have not experienced that for almost 30 years. When it was happening, I did not know what was going on. It might have been something about how I was. Maybe I was too forthcoming in my attention. It can go in all kinds of ways.

Sometimes we pay attention to other people's posture, and it tells us how they are responding and reacting to us. This is one of the meanings or interpretations of the first part of the refrain, "One experiences (or one observes) the body internally and the body externally." Some people say it means to pay attention to the bodies of other people. So you can notice other people's posture and their shifts in posture. As they speak and do things, their posture can tell us a lot about their emotional state or attitude.

So this exercise, mindfulness of posture, can take on a more subtle form. Noticing variation in posture is a

means of understanding ourselves and other people. Our psychology, attitudes, feelings, and emotions can become very clear and are even first revealed through shifts in our posture.

That happens to me sometimes. I first know that I am tense when I am leaning forward. Sometimes when I am giving a dharma talk and am a little concerned that people are not understanding or following me, I notice that I begin leaning forward. The leaning forward tells me that I am a bit worried about how people are hearing me or how clear I might be. Occasionally, leaning forward does not mean that, but sometimes it does. When I notice that, I come back, relax, and settle in again.

I hope that these days of looking at mindfulness of posture have heightened your attention, interest, and sensitivity to posture – your posture. Its value can be an anchor to the present moment – staying present, staying mindful, being here, and not wandering off in thoughts. Thank you very much.