

Satipaṭṭhāna (68) The Unity of Awareness and the Path

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

freedom, journey, *pajānāti*, direct, unified, home, transform, transformation, body, feeling tone, *citta*, mind state, *dhmma*, Five Hindrances, Seven Factors of Awakening, refrain, impermanence, equanimity, non-clinging

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We are coming to our last week with the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourse on the four foundations for establishing awareness. I want to tell you a little bit about this text. It is like cliff notes – mostly brief statements. It does not go into a great deal of explanation about what is really being taught. Down through the centuries, teachers have expanded on the text, clarified it, and used it as a basis for practice instructions. The instructions and understandings have changed over time. The text is amenable to many different ways of understanding and interpreting. Maybe one of the reasons why it has remained so popular is that it is like notes, where the meat of the text comes forth in the teachings about it.

In the first years that I studied and enjoyed this text, the lens or interpretation that I used to understand it had a lot to do with a very common verb that is repeated in many places in different exercises. This verb is to understand or to know (*pajānāti*).

Many of the instructions are to know something – not to fix it, not to be concerned with attaining anything or getting anywhere. They are not about judging anything or having a commentary about things, but just simply knowing. I came to appreciate how powerful it is to be present for something and to know it, to be aware of it. This gives the gift of allowing everything to be itself.

Rather than becoming free (maybe we will never be free), we give freedom to everything else. Everything receives freedom from us, including our inner life – so much so, that maybe there is no sense in talking about a self doing it. Everything is given its freedom to be itself.

I found it freeing and satisfying to have very clear present moment awareness, just abiding in the present and allowing things to be as they are. Doing this was very freeing and nice.

Then, as time went along, I came to appreciate more and more a different aspect of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. I understood it as describing a journey. The beginning of the sutta says: “There is a direct path for the purification of beings, for liberation.” Another way of understanding the word “direct” is that it literally means “one.” In the early years, the first translators said: “There is one way.” That was a little jarring for many of us. (There is only one way?) Then this became “the direct way.”

I think that nowadays we interpret that word “one” as “unified”: there is a unified way. All the parts of ourselves get unified. All these practices – all these four foundations – get unified and work together. They work together as a journey or a path that unfolds over time.

There are a number of things in the sutta that suggest a path that we follow. One of them is the way it moves from the body, to the feeling tones, to mind states, then to the inner activities of the mind – the *dhmmas*. The sutta goes from the outside into the depths of who we are – the deeper areas that only we can see.

In terms of the body, you can see your body and other people’s bodies externally. As the ancient world described it, the body has to do with our physicality – things we feel and sense. The other three foundations are often seen as referring to the inner mental world.

The feeling tone is a little more internal. It is how the world has impacted us in ways that are pleasant or unpleasant. Is the feeling welcoming or not welcoming? Feeling something has a deeper consequence in us. Unless it is neutral, feeling tone has an effect on us. More deeply, it is the state of our heart – the state of our

citta, our mind. It is more intimate and more personal than what happens in our body. Feeling tone becomes the operating system or activity of the mind. It is the linchpin for everything else – how we relate to everything, the choices we make, and how we live in the world.

Going from the body, to feelings, to mind states, to *dhammas*, is a journey, which I like to think of as a journey home. We go deeper and deeper into ourselves to a place where we can make a difference. The practice can make a difference and transform us very deeply.

The transformation in the fourth foundation is the transformation from being caught in the Five Hindrances to having awakened the Seven Factors of Awakening. The first leads to darkness, and the other leads to light. One leads to obscuring wisdom, the other to revealing wisdom.

The journey is also manifested in the refrain repeated in each of the thirteen exercises. The journey begins once we are settled and the awareness is strong. Then we have the ability to be 360 degrees aware – within ourselves, outside of ourselves, internally and externally.

As we settle further, we start to see the changing nature of phenomena. We see things arise. We also see things cease. Then we see things arising and ceasing together. It is a journey to deeper and deeper stillness until the rising and ceasing happen together.

Then we go deeper still. There is a deep kind of equanimity – a clarity of mind; a clear, lucid awareness. There is just enough knowledge to know what is happening in the moment in the most simple possible ways. The mind is very equanimous, peaceful, and at ease.

At some point, because of that ease, there is no more effort to protect ourselves, build ourselves up, try to have something, or be anyone. Something deep in our psyche can release. The tradition refers to this as “clinging to nothing whatsoever in the world.”

It is a journey of awareness. On one hand, in the early years, I thought, “There is no journey – just be present for what is.” Later, I came to appreciate that it describes a journey. Then I came to appreciate how these two work together. As we practice just being present for things as they are, we give each thing the freedom to be itself. We are not trying to manipulate or change anything, just to see it. See this, this, this. Not needing anything to change is what brings about change.

One of the ways in which not doing brings about change is that we are no longer doing the common human activity of always instigating change – always trying to fix, maneuver, get, understand, figure out, analyze, or plan. The whole domain of human activities comes to rest when all we do is be present, not trying to do anything.

Not doing anything is a radical thing. It is as if we have built a house of cards and we are running around keeping all the cards in place. When we stop doing that, everything settles, and the cards come to rest on the table. The house of cards that we built is often not needed, or we do not need it all the time. To be always shoring and building it up is exhausting.

The practice of being present for things as they are without needing to change anything begins a process of change. It puts us on a path of maturing in this practice. You almost cannot avoid maturing in this practice if your practice of mindfulness is sincere, and if you are practicing with a certain thoroughness, wholeheartedness, and persistence, like this is what you are doing. Day by day, week by week, month by month, just by being here practicing meditation every day, just being present for what is, something settles.

The advantage of having the sense of a path is that knowing it is leading to a good place encourages us to give ourselves to the practice more fully. The disadvantage is that people will huff and puff and strain. They will have expectations and be discouraged when it is not going the way they want.

The advantage of being present for things as they are, being aware of them in a simple way, is that it is very freeing and relaxing. The disadvantage is that sometimes people do not have a sense of how far this practice can go and how radical a transformation it can bring about in us, so they shortchange themselves. They do not let their inner system go through the open door. There is something inside that is held in check and is not allowed to let go, move, and flow. Maybe that can happen more easily if we know there is an open path to walk, an open door to walk through.

So there are different interpretations or ways of understanding this text – many more than I mentioned. For me, the distinction and the harmony between these two different modes of practicing *Satipaṭṭhāna* have been very important. One mode of practice is just being present for things as they are. The other is being present with the orientation towards a path of practice that we are developing. It is a unified path. We include everything. Everything comes together in this open space of awareness practice.

For the rest of this week, we will continue with a summary or conclusion of this text. Thank you very much.