

Satipaṭṭhāna (42) Prioritizing Beneficial States of Mind

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Yesterday we discussed the shift in focus in the second half of the third foundation of the *Satipaṭṭhāna*. The focus shifts to a state of mind that is the outcome of cultivating awareness. In this state, we no longer prioritize states or attitudes of greed, hatred, and delusion, or their subsidiaries – ways in which we get caught and limited by our thinking, and where we are excessively focused on objects of awareness.

To give an example, suppose I suddenly start thinking that it would be nice to replace a carpet at home, then I

become very aware of the carpet here at IMC. I focus on it and study it to the point that I lose touch with what I am talking about. Carpets become the most important object of attention. In that focus on carpets, I am certainly present and mindful, but this is not the same as an arising of awareness that is free – present for things, but knowing it is present, not lost and caught up in mental activity.

When mindfulness becomes stronger, the sense of awareness is not limited or bound by what the object of attention is. As this larger, unlimited sense of awareness continues to develop, its presence is represented by a sense, a feeling, or a knowing that we know we are aware. Awareness is not submerged in some object. Awareness is like a lotus growing out of muddy water. The lotus does not blossom in the mud. It comes out of the water to blossom. Similarly, the mind, the awareness, blossoms and becomes spacious.

The important point I want to emphasize here is that the mind is no longer caught and preoccupied with thoughts, feelings, emotions, and reactivity to the world. Now the mind becomes infused with this wider awareness, this presence, this attentiveness. Some people might describe it as a broad, inclusive sense of being conscious of experience.

At some point, there is a shift in what gets prioritized in the mind. Rather than prioritizing our preoccupation with what we want to get, what we are angry or upset about or afraid of, we begin prioritizing a state of mind that is peaceful, calm, and easeful. In that calm and peace, there is no narrow, tight, limited attention to some specific thing. The awareness feels broad and expanded.

This shift in the third foundation begins like this:

One knows an expanded mind as an expanded mind. And one knows a mind that is not expanded as a mind that is not expanded.

We begin to sense the size of the mind. The mind can be large, spacious, and boundless. Or it can be limited, constricted, and preoccupied with something.

The point is that the mind under stress is limited. Sometimes as the mind begins to open up, we can feel the places where the mind, the body, or the brain is tense. We can feel how that tension creates a limit on, a boundary for, or a constriction of the open awareness and presence.

In this shift, we have as a reference point the possibility of a calm, peaceful, expansive awareness. This possibility is useful as a reference point, but even better is to begin giving it more priority than the mind's usual inclination to prioritize unhealthy states of mind. You

might think you don't prioritize, but the mind will do it for you. We can get pulled into a world of preoccupations and concerns that can be quite stressful.

We can prioritize the peaceful, calm, open mind instead. Not by holding on to it, making it an object, or constricting ourselves around it. Rather, we rest in that open mind, open to it, and allow it.

This can be like someone who wants to go swimming but is talking on their cell phone, completely absorbed in an engaging or upsetting conversation. They walk right into the water, which gets deeper and deeper. Suddenly there is a ledge and no more ground. They are so wrapped up in the phone call, not paying attention to the need to float, that they drown.

But as we enter the water of consciousness, we sense there is a possibility of floating and swimming there. So we may prioritize floating, like that person might prioritize floating if there is no bottom. We prioritize this wider state, this peaceful place. As we do so, it develops and gets stronger. At some point, we can "know a mind that is unsurpassable," and we can "know a mind that can be surpassed." We know the difference between a mind that is ultimate and a mind that is not ultimate.

This line in the sutta refers to states of enlightenment, states of realization. The movement into open awareness and calm peaceful states can grow and deepen. At some point, it feels like: “*This* is ultimate. There is nothing better than this. Nothing is higher than this.” In this state, there is zero suffering, stress, tension, and fear – nothing limits it. There cannot be anything more ultimate than this because it is so peaceful. Nothing disturbs it.

There is not even a self to be preoccupied with, caught up in, or contracted around. There is not a ripple of self-concern. This state feels so ultimate that now it becomes a reference point for not only a peaceful mind, but a mind free of suffering. This state becomes a powerful reference point for what is possible. We know it is possible to live in this radical freedom.

The next line of the sutta says:

*One knows a steadied mind as a steadied mind,
one knows an unsteadied mind as an unsteadied
mind.*

This means knowing that there is a mind that is peaceful and has no ripples on it. One also knows when there are ripples on it. After deep realization experiences, the practice continues. Now that we have a reference point for what it is like to have no ripples, we are much more sensitive to the subtlest ripples in the mind (or the big ones), where there can be a subtle prioritization of our

preoccupations and concerns, and where there is still a little bit of attachment.

The sutta then says:

One knows a liberated mind as a liberated mind.

I understand this to refer to a mind that is fully liberated. All roots of attachment have been pulled out – there are no more attachments, no more tendency for the mind to cling. And this can be known. This kind of liberation is the ultimate and final goal of *Satipaṭṭhāna*.

The third foundation describes the whole path of practice from the perspective of our mind states. Next week, we will go on to the fourth foundation, which presents the path from a different perspective, that of insight.

I would like to leave you with two ideas from the third foundation: the idea that you have reference points and the importance of prioritizing them. What reference points do you have for a state of mind that is valuable and precious – better than the alternative ways your mind sometimes functions? Maybe it is a state you have experienced in meditation. How can you use it beneficially as a reference point? One way is to give priority to that state of mind. Do not take it for granted. Do not think it is only available in certain rarefied states like meditation. The more you experience it, the more you see there may be hints or small clues of it. Maybe it

is always present to some degree. Maybe you can prioritize it, or let it inform you and support you in becoming more free, relaxed, and present.

Another interesting exercise is to review your day at the end of the day. Write the autobiography of the day based on what the mind was prioritizing. See if you had to prioritize that and whether that was really in your best interest. Could you have prioritized differently so that something else could have blossomed – so your lotus could blossom out of muddy water?

Thank you very much.