

Discourse on Establishing Mindfulness

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 10)

The mind is a monkey. Anyone who has seriously contemplated the nature of everyday thought, from Indian renunciants to Sigmund Freud, has recognized how profoundly disorganized is ordinary consciousness, how our thoughts flit from one image to the next without discipline or apparent logic. One of the aims of Buddhist meditation is to tame this flood of thoughts and develop “one-pointedness” of mind, enabling the practitioner to concentrate on an object of meditation and develop insight into the true nature of things.

Probably the earliest Buddhist meditative practice in the service of this endeavor is found in a discourse included in the Majjhima Nikāya (“Middle Length Sayings”) in the Pāli canon. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, or “Discourse on Establishing Mindfulness,” recommends a regimen of undistracted attention to what it terms the “four foundations of mindfulness”: attention to (mindfulness of) the body, one’s feelings, consciousness, and dharmas, “mental objects.” The core of the meditation is patterned after the practice discussed in the section on the body, in which the practitioner is to develop awareness of the content of his or her experience at the moment it occurs (“I am savoring the taste of this coffee,” “I am experiencing anger”). As one modern commentator puts it, “In satipaṭṭhāna, the act of attending to each occasion of experience as it occurs in the moment fixes the mind firmly on the object. The continuous attention to the object, even when the object itself is constantly changing, stabilizes the mind in concentration, while the observation of the object in terms of its qualities and characteristics brings into being the insight knowledges.”¹

This bare attention is designed to focus the mind, identify—and calm—the constant flow of distracting “free associations” that inhibit concentration, and to induce equanimity and aid in overcoming the “five hindrances” (see below) to meditative absorption (dhyāna). Dedicated practitioners of this regimen are assured, at very least, of becoming a “non-returner,” one who will experience no further rebirth in this Realm of Desire.

In the 20th century, the scripture became central to the modern Vipassanā (Insight) movement, which uses satipaṭṭhāna meditation to develop insight into the “three marks” of existence: suffering or unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and non-Self.

Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed One was living among the Kurus, at Kammasadamma, a market town of the Kuru people. There the Blessed One addressed the

¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his commentary on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, <https://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/soma/wayof.html>

bhikkhus thus: "Monks," and they replied to him, "Venerable Sir." The Blessed One spoke as follows:

This is the only way, monks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of suffering and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbana (*nirvāṇa*), namely, the four foundations of mindfulness. What are the four?

Herein (in this teaching) a monk

- I. lives contemplating the body in the body (alt. "in and of itself")—ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having overcome, in this world, covetousness and grief;
- II. lives contemplating feelings in feelings—ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having overcome, in this world, covetousness and grief;
- III. lives contemplating consciousness in consciousness—ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having overcome, in this world, covetousness and grief;
- IV. lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects—ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having overcome, in this world, covetousness and grief.

I. The Contemplation of the Body

I.1. Mindfulness of Breathing

And how does a monk live contemplating the body in the body?

Herein, monks, a monk, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty place, sits down with his legs crossed, keeps his body erect and his mindfulness alert.

Ever mindful he breathes in; mindful he breathes out. Breathing in a long breath, he knows, "I am breathing in a long breath"; breathing out a long breath, he knows, "I am breathing out a long breath"; breathing in a short breath, he knows, "I am breathing in a short breath"; breathing out a short breath, he knows, "I am breathing out a short breath."

"Experiencing the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe in," thus he trains himself. "Experiencing the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe out," thus he trains himself. "Calming the activity of the (breath-) body, I shall breathe in," thus he trains himself. "Calming the activity of the (breath-) body, I shall breathe out," thus he trains himself.

Just as a skillful turner or turner's apprentice, making a long turn, knows, "I am making a long turn," or making a short turn, knows, "I am making a short turn," just so the monk, breathing in a long breath, knows, "I am breathing in a long breath"; breathing out a long breath, he knows, "I am breathing out a long breath"; breathing in a short breath, he knows, "I am breathing in a

short breath"; breathing out a short breath, he knows, "I am breathing out a short breath."
"Experiencing the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe in," thus he trains himself. "Experiencing the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe out," thus he trains himself. "Calming the activity of the (breath-) body, I shall breathe in," thus he trains himself. "Calming the activity of the (breath-) body, I shall breathe out," thus he trains himself.

Thus he lives contemplating the body in the body internally, or he lives contemplating the body in the body externally, or he lives contemplating the body in the body internally and externally. He lives contemplating origination factors in the body, or he lives contemplating dissolution factors in the body, or he lives contemplating origination-and-dissolution factors in the body. Or his mindfulness is established with the thought: "The body exists," to the extent necessary just for knowledge and mindfulness, and he lives detached, and clings to nothing in the world. Thus also, monks, a monk lives contemplating the body in the body.

I.2. The Postures of the Body

And further, monks, a monk knows, when he is going, "I am going"; he knows, when he is standing, "I am standing"; he knows, when he is sitting, "I am sitting"; he knows, when he is lying down, "I am lying down"; or just as his body is disposed so he knows it.

Thus he lives contemplating the body in the body. . .

I.3. Mindfulness with Clear Comprehension

And further, monks, a monk, in going forward and back, applies clear comprehension; in looking straight on and looking away, he applies clear comprehension; in bending and in stretching, he applies clear comprehension; in wearing robes and carrying the bowl, he applies clear comprehension; in eating, drinking, chewing and savoring, he applies clear comprehension; in walking, in standing, in sitting, in falling asleep, in waking, in speaking and in keeping silence, he applies clear comprehension.

Thus he lives contemplating the body in the body . . .

I.4. The Reflection on the Repulsiveness of the Body

And further, monks, a monk reflects on this very body enveloped by the skin and full of manifold impurity, from the soles up, and from the top of the head-hairs down, thinking thus: "There are in this body hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidney, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, gorge, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, nasal mucus, synovial fluid, urine."

Thus he lives contemplating the body in the body . . .

I.5. The Reflection on the Material Elements

And further, monks, a monk reflects on this very body, however it be placed or disposed, by way of the material elements: "There are in this body the element of earth, the element of water, the element of fire, the element of wind."

Just as if, monks, a clever cow-butcher or his apprentice, having slaughtered a cow and divided it into portions, should be sitting at the junction of four high roads, in the same way, a monk reflects on this very body, as it is placed or disposed, by way of the material elements: "There are in this body the elements of earth, water, fire, and wind."

Thus he lives contemplating the body in the body . . .

I.6. The Nine Cemetery Contemplations

(1) And further, monks, as if a monk sees a body dead one, two, or three days; swollen, blue and festering, thrown in the charnel ground, he then applies this perception to his own body thus: "Verily, also my own body is of the same nature; such it will become and will not escape it."

Thus he lives contemplating the body in the body . . .

II. The Contemplation of Feeling

And how, monks, does a monk live contemplating feelings in feelings?

Herein, monks, a monk when experiencing a pleasant feeling knows, "I experience a pleasant feeling"; when experiencing a painful feeling, he knows, "I experience a painful feeling"; when experiencing a neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling, he knows, "I experience a neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling." When experiencing a pleasant worldly feeling, he knows, "I experience a pleasant worldly feeling"; when experiencing a pleasant spiritual feeling, he knows, "I experience a pleasant spiritual feeling"; when experiencing a painful worldly feeling, he knows, "I experience a painful worldly feeling"; when experiencing a painful spiritual feeling, he knows, "I experience a painful spiritual feeling"; when experiencing a neither-pleasant-nor-painful worldly feeling, he knows, "I experience a neither-pleasant-nor-painful worldly feeling"; when experiencing a neither-pleasant-nor-painful spiritual feeling, he knows, "I experience a neither-pleasant-nor-painful spiritual feeling."

Thus he lives contemplating feelings in feelings . . .

III. The Contemplation of Consciousness

And how, monks, does a monk live contemplating consciousness in consciousness?

Herein, monks, a monk knows the consciousness with lust, as with lust; the consciousness without lust, as without lust; the consciousness with hate, as with hate; the consciousness without hate, as without hate; the consciousness with ignorance, as with ignorance; the consciousness without ignorance, as without ignorance; the shrunken state of consciousness, as the shrunken state; the distracted state of consciousness, as the distracted state; the developed state of consciousness as the developed state; the undeveloped state of consciousness as the undeveloped state; the state of consciousness with some other mental state superior to it, as the state with something mentally higher; the state of consciousness with no other mental state superior to it, as the state with nothing mentally higher; the concentrated state of consciousness, as the concentrated state; the unconcentrated state of consciousness, as the unconcentrated state; the freed state of consciousness, as the freed state; and the unfreed state of consciousness as the unfreed state.

Thus he lives contemplating consciousness in consciousness . . .

IV. The Contemplation of Mental Objects

And how, monks, does a monk live contemplating mental objects in mental objects?

IV. 1. The Five Hindrances

Herein, monks, a monk lives contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Five Hindrances.

How, monks, does a monk live contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Five Hindrances?

Herein, monks, when **sense-desire** is present, a monk knows, "There is sense-desire in me," or when sense-desire is not present, he knows, "There is no sense-desire in me." He knows how the arising of the non-arisen sense-desire comes to be; he knows how the abandoning of the arisen sense-desire comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned sense-desire comes to be.

When **anger** is present, he knows, "There is anger in me," or when anger is not present, he knows, "There is no anger in me." He knows how the arising of the non-arisen anger comes to be; he knows how the abandoning of the arisen anger comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned anger comes to be.

When **sloth and torpor** are present, he knows, "There are sloth and torpor in me," or when sloth and torpor are not present, he knows, "There are no sloth and torpor in me." He knows how the arising of the non-arisen sloth and torpor comes to be; he knows how the abandoning of the arisen sloth and torpor comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned sloth and torpor comes to be.

When **agitation and remorse** are present, he knows, "There are agitation and remorse in me," or when agitation and remorse are not present, he knows, "There are no agitation and remorse in me." He knows how the arising of the non-arisen agitation and remorse comes to be; he knows how the abandoning of the arisen agitation and remorse comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned agitation and remorse comes to be.

When **doubt** is present, he knows, "There is doubt in me," or when doubt is not present, he knows, "There is no doubt in me." He knows how the arising of the non-arisen doubt comes to be; he knows how the abandoning of the arisen doubt comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned doubt comes to be.

Thus he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects . . .

IV. 2. The Five Aggregates of Clinging

And further, monks, a monk lives contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Five Aggregates (*skandhas*) of clinging.

How, monks, does a monk live contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Five Aggregates of clinging?

Herein, monks, a monk thinks, "Thus is **material form**; thus is the arising of material form; and thus is the disappearance of material form. Thus is **feeling**; thus is the arising of feeling; and thus is the disappearance of feeling. Thus is **perception**; thus is the arising of perception; and thus is the disappearance of perception. Thus are **formations** (*saṃskāras*); thus is the arising of formations; and thus is the disappearance of formations. Thus is **consciousness**; thus is the arising of consciousness; and thus is the disappearance of consciousness."

Thus he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects . . .

IV. 3. The Six Internal and External Sense Bases

And further, monks, a monk lives contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Six Internal and the Six External Sense-Bases.

How, monks, does a monk live contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Six Internal and the Six External Sense-Bases.

Herein, monks, a monk knows the **eye** and **visual forms** and the fetter that arises dependent on both (the eye and forms); he knows how the arising of the non-arisen fetter comes to be; he knows how the abandoning of the arisen fetter comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be.

He knows the *ear and sounds*... the *nose and smells*... the *tongue and flavors*... the *body and tactile objects*... the *mind and mental objects*, and the fetter that arises dependent on both; he knows how the arising of the non-arisen fetter comes to be; he knows how the abandoning of the arisen fetter comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be.

Thus he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects . . .

IV. 4. The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

And further, monks, a monk lives contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment.

How, monks, does a monk live contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment?

Herein, monks, when the enlightenment-factor of *mindfulness* is present, the monk knows, "The enlightenment-factor of mindfulness is in me," or when the enlightenment-factor of mindfulness is absent, he knows, "The enlightenment-factor of mindfulness is not in me"; and he knows how the arising of the non-arisen enlightenment-factor of mindfulness comes to be; and how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of mindfulness comes to be.

When the enlightenment-factor of *the investigation of mental objects* is present, the monk knows — — —

When the enlightenment-factor of *energy* is present, he knows — — —

When the enlightenment-factor of *joy* is present, he knows — — —

When the enlightenment-factor of *tranquillity* is present, he knows — — —

When the enlightenment-factor of *concentration* is present, he knows — — —

When the enlightenment-factor of *equanimity* is present, he knows — — —

Thus he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects internally, or he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects externally, or he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects internally and externally. He lives contemplating origination-factors in mental objects, or he lives contemplating dissolution-factors in mental objects, or he lives contemplating origination-and-dissolution-factors in mental objects. Or his mindfulness is established with the thought, "Mental objects exist," to the extent necessary just for knowledge and mindfulness, and he lives detached, and clings to nothing in the world. Thus, monks, a

monk lives contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the seven factors of enlightenment.

IV. 5. The Four Noble Truths

And further, monks, a monk lives contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Four Noble Truths.

How, monks, does a monk live contemplating mental objects in the mental objects of the Four Noble Truths?

Herein, monks, a monk knows, "*This is suffering*," according to reality; he knows, "*This is the origin of suffering*," according to reality; he knows, "*This is the cessation of suffering*," according to reality; he knows "*This is the road leading to the cessation of suffering*," according to reality.

Thus he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects . . .

Conclusion

Verily, monks, whosoever practices these four foundations of mindfulness in this manner for seven years, then one of these two fruits may be expected by him: highest knowledge (arahantship) here and now, or if some remainder of clinging is yet present, the state of non-returning.

O monks, let alone seven years. Should any person practice these four foundations of mindfulness in this manner for six years... five years... four years... three years... two years... one year, then one of these two fruits may be expected by him: highest knowledge here and now, or if some remainder of clinging is yet present, the state of non-returning.

O monks, let alone a year. Should any person practice these four foundations of mindfulness in this manner for seven months... six months... five months... four months... three months... two months... a month... half a month, then one of these two fruits may be expected by him: highest knowledge here and now, or if some remainder of clinging is yet present, the state of non-returning.

O monks, let alone half a month. Should any person practice these four foundations of mindfulness in this manner for a week, then one of these two fruits may be expected by him: highest knowledge here and now, or if some remainder of clinging is yet present, the state of non-returning.

Because of this it was said: "This is the only way, monks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of suffering and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbana, namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

Thus spoke the Blessed One. Satisfied, the monks approved of his words.

[Translated by Nyanasatta Thera

The complete discourse can be found at
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.nysa.html>]