



# satipatthāna

THE DIRECT PATH TO REALIZATION

Anālayo

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# CONTENTS

[List of Figures](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Introduction](#)

Translation of the Satipaṭṭhana Sutta

[I General Aspects of the Direct Path](#)

[II The “Definition” Part of the Satipaṭṭhana Sutta](#)

[III Sati](#)

[IV The Relevance of Concentration](#)

[V The Satipaṭṭhana “Refrain”](#)

[VI The Body](#)

[VII Feelings](#)

[VIII Mind](#)

[IX Dhammas: The Hindrances](#)

[X Dhammas: The Aggregates](#)

[XI Dhammas: The Sense-Spheres](#)

[XII Dhammas: The Awakening Factors](#)

[XIII Dhammas: The Four Noble Truths](#)

[XIV Realization](#)

[XV Conclusion](#)

Bibliography  
List of Abbreviations  
Glossary  
Notes



## LIST OF FIGURES

- 1.1 Structure of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*
- 1.2 Progression of the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations
- 1.3 Correlations for the four *satipaṭṭhānas*
- 2.1 Key characteristics of *satipaṭṭhāna*
- 3.1 The position of *sati* among important categories
- 5.1 Key aspects of the *satipaṭṭhāna* refrain
- 6.1 The body contemplations
- 6.2 Survey of *ānāpānasati* in sixteen steps
- 6.3 Four aspects of “clear knowledge” in the commentaries
- 7.1 Three and six types of feeling
- 8.1 Eight categories for contemplation of the mind
- 9.1 Survey of contemplation of *dhammas*
- 9.2 Two stages in the contemplation of the five hindrances
- 9.3 Commentarial survey of factors for overcoming or inhibiting the hindrances
- 10.1 Two stages in the contemplation of the five aggregates
- 11.1 Two stages in the contemplation of the six sense-spheres

- 12.1 Two stages in the contemplation of the seven awakening factors
- 12.2 Commentarial survey of supportive conditions for developing the awakening factors
- 13.1 The fourfold structure of ancient Indian medicine and the four noble truths
- 13.2 Two stages in the contemplation of the four noble truths
- 15.1 Central characteristics and aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna*
- 15.2 Dynamic interrelation of the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations

Ven. Anālayo was born in 1962 in Germany, was ordained in 1995 in Sri Lanka, and completed his PhD on *satipaṭṭhāna* at the University of Peradeniya in 2000. At present he is mainly engaged in the practice of meditation, and among other things contributes to the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*.

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*Jhāyatha, mā pamādattha,  
mā pacchā vip̐paṭisārino ahuvattha!*

Meditate, don't be negligent,  
lest you may later regret it!

## INTRODUCTION

The present work, which is the combined outcome of my Ph.D. research at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka and my own practical experience as a meditating monk, attempts a detailed exploration of the significance and the practice of mindfulness meditation according to its exposition in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and placed within its early Buddhist canonical and philosophical context.

Mindfulness and the proper way of putting it into practice are certainly topics of central relevance for anyone keen to tread the Buddha's path to liberation. Yet for a proper understanding and implementation of mindfulness meditation the original instructions by the Buddha on *satipaṭṭhāna* need to be taken into consideration. In view of this, my inquiry is in particular concerned with the discourses recorded in the four main *Nikāyas* and the historically early parts of the fifth *Nikāya* as centrally important source material.

*Satipaṭṭhāna* is a matter of practice. In order to ensure that my exploration has practical relevance, I have consulted a selection of modern meditation manuals and related publications. The nature of this selection has been mainly a matter of availability, yet I hope to have included a fairly representative number of meditation



teachers. Apart from these, I have also relied on various academic monographs and articles on early Buddhism in order to illustrate the philosophical framework and historical context within which the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is to be understood. These provide the background information for understanding particular passages or expressions in the discourse.

To help maintain text flow and readability, I have kept the main body of the text as free as possible from direct quotations and tangential observations. Instead, I have made extensive use of footnotes, which provide references of interest and discussions of additional information. The general reader may prefer to focus on the body of the text during a first reading, and only turn to the information in the footnotes during a second reading.

My exposition follows the sequence of the passages in the discourse as closely as possible. At the same time, however, my treatment is not restricted to simple comments, but allows for minor digressions in order to explore relevant points and to provide a background for better understanding the section under discussion.

The first chapter deals with general aspects and terminology in relation to *satipaṭṭhāna*. The next three chapters are concerned with the second paragraph of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the “definition”, especially with the implications of *sati* and the role of concentration. In the fifth chapter I turn to a set of general instructions repeated throughout the discourse after each meditation exercise, the “refrain”. With the sixth chapter I begin to examine the actual exercises of the “direct path” of

mindfulness meditation, concerned with contemplating the body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas*. At the end of this examination of the individual meditation practices I turn to the final paragraph of the discourse and to the implications of *Nibbāna*. By way of conclusion, I try to highlight some key aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* and to evaluate its importance.

In general, my purpose in the present inquiry is less to prove and establish a particular point of view than to provide suggestions and reflections in the hope of opening up new perspectives in regard to *satipaṭṭhāna*, and in the hope of inspiring the reader to engage in its actual practice.

## TRANSLATION OF THE *SATIPATṬHĀNA SUTTA*<sup>1</sup>

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living in the Kuru country at a town of the Kurus named Kammāsadhamma. There he addressed the monks thus: “Monks.” “Venerable sir,” they replied. The Blessed One said this:

[DIRECT PATH]

“Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of *dukkha* and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of *Nibbāna*, namely, the four *satipatṭhānas*.

[DEFINITION]

“What are the four? Here, monks, in regard to the body a monk abides contemplating the body, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings, diligent, clearly knowing, and

mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to the mind he abides contemplating the mind, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas*, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.

[BREATHING]

“And how, monks, does he in regard to the body abide contemplating the body? Here, gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, he sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.

“Breathing in long, he knows ‘I breathe in long,’ breathing out long, he knows ‘I breathe out long.’ Breathing in short, he knows ‘I breathe in short,’ breathing out short, he knows ‘I breathe out short.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body,’ he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in calming the bodily formation,’ he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out calming the bodily formation.’

“Just as a skilled turner or his apprentice, when making a long turn, knows ‘I make a long turn,’ or when making a short turn knows ‘I make a short turn’ so too, breathing in long, he knows ‘I breathe in long,’ ... (continue as above).

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body internally, or he abides contemplating the body externally, or he abides contemplating the body both internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising in the body, or he abides contemplating the nature of passing away in the body, or he abides contemplating the nature of both arising and passing away in the body. Mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body.

[POSTURES]

“Again, monks, when walking, he knows ‘I am walking’; when standing, he knows ‘I am standing’; when sitting, he knows ‘I am sitting’; when lying down, he knows ‘I am lying down’; or he knows accordingly however his body is disposed.

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body internally ... externally ... both internally and externally. He abides contemplating the

nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in the body. Mindfulness that 'there is a body' is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body.

[ACTIVITIES]

“Again, monks, when going forward and returning he acts clearly knowing; when looking ahead and looking away he acts clearly knowing; when flexing and extending his limbs he acts clearly knowing; when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl he acts clearly knowing; when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting he acts clearly knowing; when defecating and urinating he acts clearly knowing; when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent he acts clearly knowing.

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body internally ... externally ... both internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in the body. Mindfulness that 'there is a body' is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides



independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body.

[ANATOMICAL PARTS]

“Again, monks, he reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, enclosed by skin, as full of many kinds of impurity thus: ‘in this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, bowels, mesentery, contents of the stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.’

“Just as though there were a bag with an opening at both ends full of many sorts of grain, such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice, and a man with good eyes were to open it and review it thus: ‘this is hill rice, this is red rice, these are beans, these are peas, this is millet, this is white rice’; so too he reviews this same body.... (continue as above).

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body internally ... externally ... both internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in the body. Mindfulness that ‘there is a

body' is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body.

[ELEMENTS]

“Again, monks, he reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, as consisting of elements thus: ‘in this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element’.

“Just as though a skilled butcher or his apprentice had killed a cow and was seated at a crossroads with it cut up into pieces; so too he reviews this same body.... (continue as above).

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body internally ... externally ... both internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in the body. Mindfulness that ‘there is a body' is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body.

[CORPSE IN DECAY]

“Again, monks, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground – one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter ... being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms ... a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews ... a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews ... a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together with sinews ... disconnected bones scattered in all directions ... bones bleached white, the colour of shells ... bones heaped up, more than a year old ... bones rotten and crumbling to dust – he compares this same body with it thus: ‘this body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’<sup>2</sup>

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body internally ... externally ... both internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in the body. Mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body.

[FEELINGS]

“And how, monks, does he in regard to feelings abide contemplating feelings?

“Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel a pleasant feeling’; when feeling an unpleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel an unpleasant feeling’; when feeling a neutral feeling, he knows ‘I feel a neutral feeling.’

“When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel a worldly pleasant feeling’; when feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling’; when feeling a worldly unpleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel a worldly unpleasant feeling’; when feeling an unworldly unpleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel an unworldly unpleasant feeling’; when feeling a worldly neutral feeling, he knows ‘I feel a worldly neutral feeling’; when feeling an unworldly neutral feeling, he knows ‘I feel an unworldly neutral feeling.’

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings internally ... externally ... internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in feelings. Mindfulness that ‘there is feeling’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to feelings he abides

contemplating feelings.

[MIND]

“And how, monks, does he in regard to the mind abide contemplating the mind?

“Here he knows a lustful mind to be ‘lustful’, and a mind without lust to be ‘without lust’; he knows an angry mind to be ‘angry’, and a mind without anger to be ‘without anger’; he knows a deluded mind to be ‘deluded’, and a mind without delusion to be ‘without delusion’; he knows a contracted mind to be ‘contracted’, and a distracted mind to be ‘distracted’; he knows a great mind to be ‘great’, and a narrow mind to be ‘narrow’; he knows a surpassable mind to be ‘surpassable’, and an unsurpassable mind to be ‘unsurpassable’; he knows a concentrated mind to be ‘concentrated’, and an unconcentrated mind to be ‘unconcentrated’; he knows a liberated mind to be ‘liberated’, and an unliberated mind to be ‘unliberated.’

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to the mind he abides contemplating the mind internally ... externally ... internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in regard to the mind. Mindfulness that ‘there is a mind’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous

mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to the mind he abides contemplating the mind.

[HINDRANCES]

“And how, monks, does he in regard to *dhammas* abide contemplating *dhammas*? Here in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the five hindrances. And how does he in regard to *dhammas* abide contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the five hindrances?

“If sensual desire is present in him, he knows ‘there is sensual desire in me’; if sensual desire is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no sensual desire in me’; and he knows how unarisen sensual desire can arise, how arisen sensual desire can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed sensual desire can be prevented.

“If aversion is present in him, he knows ‘there is aversion in me’; if aversion is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no aversion in me’; and he knows how unarisen aversion can arise, how arisen aversion can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed aversion can be prevented.

“If sloth-and-torpor is present in him, he knows ‘there is sloth-and-torpor in me’; if sloth-and-torpor is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no sloth-and-torpor in me’; and he knows how unarisen sloth-and-torpor can arise, how arisen sloth-and-torpor can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed sloth-and-torpor can be prevented.



“If restlessness-and-worry is present in him, he knows ‘there is restlessness-and-worry in me’; if restlessness-and-worry is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no restlessness-and-worry in me’; and he knows how unarisen restlessness-and-worry can arise, how arisen restlessness-and-worry can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed restlessness-and-worry can be prevented.

“If doubt is present in him, he knows ‘there is doubt in me’; if doubt is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no doubt in me’; and he knows how unarisen doubt can arise, how arisen doubt can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed doubt can be prevented.

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* internally ... externally ... internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in *dhammas*. Mindfulness that ‘there are *dhammas*’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the five hindrances.

[AGGREGATES]

“Again, monks, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the five aggregates of

clinging. And how does he in regard to *dhammas* abide contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the five aggregates of clinging?

Here he knows, ‘such is material form, such its arising, such its passing away; such is feeling, such its arising, such its passing away; such is cognition, such its arising, such its passing away; such are volitions, such their arising, such their passing away; such is consciousness, such its arising, such its passing away.’

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* internally ... externally ... internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in *dhammas*. Mindfulness that ‘there are *dhammas*’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the five aggregates of clinging.

[SENSE-SPHERES]

“Again, monks, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the six internal and external sense-spheres. And how does he in regard to *dhammas* abide contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the six

internal and external sense-spheres?

“Here he knows the eye, he knows forms, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented.

“He knows the ear, he knows sounds, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented.

“He knows the nose, he knows odours, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented.

“He knows the tongue, he knows flavours, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented.

“He knows the body, he knows tangibles, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented.

“He knows the mind, he knows mind-objects, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of

the removed fetter can be prevented.

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* internally ... externally ... internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in *dhammas*. Mindfulness that ‘there are *dhammas*’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the six internal and external sense-spheres.

[AWAKENING FACTORS]

“Again, monks, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the seven awakening factors. And how does he in regard to *dhammas* abide contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the seven awakening factors?

“Here, if the mindfulness awakening factor is present in him, he knows ‘there is the mindfulness awakening factor in me’; if the mindfulness awakening factor is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no mindfulness awakening factor in me’; he knows how the unarisen mindfulness awakening factor can arise, and how the arisen mindfulness awakening factor can be perfected by

development.

“If the investigation-of-*dhammas* awakening factor is present in him, he knows ‘there is the investigation-of-*dhammas* awakening factor in me’; if the investigation-of-*dhammas* awakening factor is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no investigation-of-*dhammas* awakening factor in me’; he knows how the unarisen investigation-of-*dhammas* awakening factor can arise, and how the arisen investigation-of-*dhammas* awakening factor can be perfected by development.

“If the energy awakening factor is present in him, he knows ‘there is the energy awakening factor in me’; if the energy awakening factor is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no energy awakening factor in me’; he knows how the unarisen energy awakening factor can arise, and how the arisen energy awakening factor can be perfected by development.

“If the joy awakening factor is present in him, he knows ‘there is the joy awakening factor in me’; if the joy awakening factor is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no joy awakening factor in me’; he knows how the unarisen joy awakening factor can arise, and how the arisen joy awakening factor can be perfected by development.

“If the tranquillity awakening factor is present in him, he knows ‘there is the tranquillity awakening factor in me’; if the tranquillity awakening factor is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no tranquillity awakening factor in me’; he knows how the unarisen tranquillity awakening factor can arise, and how the arisen tranquillity

awakening factor can be perfected by development.

“If the concentration awakening factor is present in him, he knows ‘there is the concentration awakening factor in me’; if the concentration awakening factor is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no concentration awakening factor in me’; he knows how the unarisen concentration awakening factor can arise, and how the arisen concentration awakening factor can be perfected by development.

“If the equanimity awakening factor is present in him, he knows ‘there is the equanimity awakening factor in me’; if the equanimity awakening factor is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no equanimity awakening factor in me’; he knows how the unarisen equanimity awakening factor can arise, and how the arisen equanimity awakening factor can be perfected by development.

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* internally ... externally ... internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in *dhammas*. Mindfulness that ‘there are *dhammas*’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the seven awakening factors.



[NOBLE TRUTHS]

“Again, monks, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the four noble truths. And how does he in regard to *dhammas* abide contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the four noble truths?

“Here he knows as it really is, ‘this is *dukkha*’; he knows as it really is, ‘this is the arising of *dukkha*’; he knows as it really is, ‘this is the cessation of *dukkha*’; he knows as it really is, ‘this is the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*.’

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* internally ... externally ... internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising ... of passing away ... of both arising and passing away in *dhammas*. Mindfulness that ‘there are *dhammas*’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the four noble truths.

[PREDICTION]

“Monks, if anyone should develop these four *satipaṭṭhānas* in such a way for seven years, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now,

or, if there is a trace of clinging left, non-returning. Let alone seven years ... six years ... five years ... four years ... three years ... two years ... one year ... seven months ... six months ... five months ... four months ... three months ... two months ... one month ... half a month ... if anyone should develop these four *satipaṭṭhānas* in such a way for seven days, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now, or, if there is a trace of clinging left, non-returning. So it was with reference to this that it was said:

[DIRECT PATH]

“Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of *dukkha* and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of *Nibbāna*, namely, the four *satipaṭṭhānas*.”

That is what the Blessed One said. The monks were satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

# I

## GENERAL ASPECTS OF THE DIRECT PATH

To begin, I will survey the underlying structure of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and consider some general aspects of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. I will then examine the expressions “direct path” and “*satipaṭṭhāna*”.

### 1.1 OVERVIEW OF *THE SATIPAṬṬHĀNA SUTTA*

*Satipaṭṭhāna* as the “direct path” to *Nibbāna* has received a detailed treatment in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.<sup>1</sup> Precisely the same discourse recurs as the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the only difference being that this version offers a more extensive treatment of the four noble truths, the last of the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations.<sup>2</sup> The topic of *satipaṭṭhāna* has moreover inspired several shorter discourses in the *Samyutta Nikāya* and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the Pāli sources, expositions on *satipaṭṭhāna* are also preserved in Chinese and Sanskrit, with intriguing occasional variations from the Pāli presentations.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the discourses in the *Samyutta Nikāya* and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* mention only the bare outline of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, without going into the details of their possible applications. This functional division into four *satipaṭṭhānas* seems to be a

direct outcome of the

Buddha's awakening,<sup>5</sup> a central aspect of his rediscovery of an ancient path of practice.<sup>6</sup> But the detailed instructions found in the

*Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* apparently belong to a later period, when the Buddha's teaching had spread from the Ganges valley to the distant Kammāsadhamma in the Kuru country, where both discourses were spoken.<sup>7</sup>

In Fig. 1.1 (below) I have attempted to offer an overview of the structure underlying the detailed exposition of *satipaṭṭhāna* given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, with each of the sections of the discourse represented by a box and arranged from bottom to top.

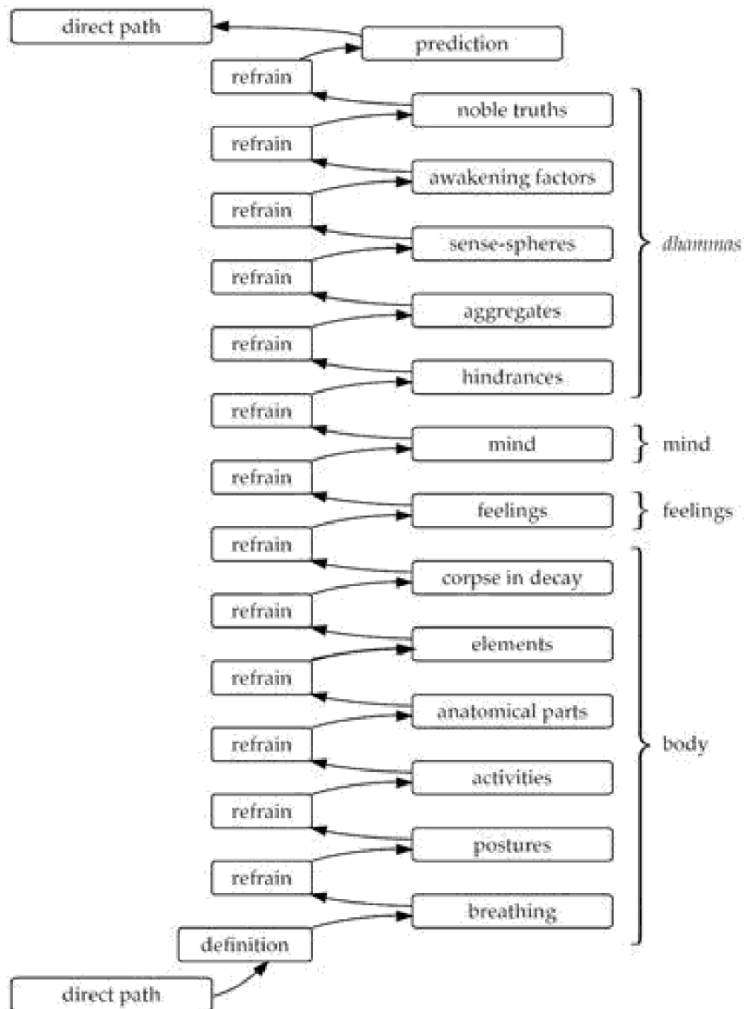


Fig. 1.1 Structure of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*

The starting and concluding section of the discourse is a passage which states that *satipaṭṭhāna* constitutes the direct path to *Nibbāna*. The next section of the discourse offers a short definition of the most essential aspects of this direct path. This “definition” mentions four *satipaṭṭhānas* for contemplation: body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas*.<sup>8</sup> The “definition” also specifies the mental qualities that are

instrumental for *satipaṭṭhāna*: one should be diligent (*ātāpi*), clearly knowing (*sampajāna*), mindful (*sati*), and free from desires and discontent (*vineyya abhijjhādomanassa*).

After this “definition”, the discourse describes the four *satipaṭṭhānas* of body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas* in detail. The range of the first *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of the body, proceeds from mindfulness of breathing, postures, and activities, via analyses of the body into its anatomical parts and elements, to contemplating a corpse in decay. The next two *satipaṭṭhānas* are concerned with contemplating feelings and mind. The fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* lists five types of *dhammas* for contemplation: the mental hindrances, the aggregates, the sense-spheres, the awakening factors, and the four noble truths. After the actual meditation practices, the discourse returns to the direct path statement via a prediction about the time within which realization can be expected.

Throughout the discourse, a particular formula follows each individual meditation practice. This *satipaṭṭhāna* “refrain” completes each instruction by repeatedly emphasizing the important aspects of the practice.<sup>9</sup> According to this “refrain”, *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation covers internal and external phenomena, and is concerned with their arising and passing away. The “refrain” also points out that mindfulness should be established merely for the sake of developing bare knowledge and for achieving continuity of awareness. According to the same “refrain”, proper *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation takes place free from any dependence or clinging.

The entire discourse is framed by an introduction, which conveys the occasion of its delivery, and a conclusion, which reports the delighted reaction of the monks after the Buddha’s exposition.<sup>10</sup>

By placing the “definition” and the “refrain” at the centre of

the above figure, I intend to highlight their central role in the discourse. As the figure shows, the discourse weaves a recurring pattern that systematically alternates between specific meditation instructions and the “refrain”. Each time, the task of the “refrain” is to direct attention to those aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* that are essential for proper practice. The same pattern also applies to the start of the discourse, where a general introduction to the topic of *satipaṭṭhāna* through the “direct path” statement is followed by the “definition”, which has the role of pointing out its essential characteristics. In this way, both the “definition” and the “refrain” indicate what is essential. Thus, for a proper understanding and implementation of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the information contained in the “definition” and the “refrain” is of particular importance.

## I.2 A SURVEY OF THE FOUR *SATIPAṬṬHĀNAS*

On closer inspection, the sequence of the contemplations listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* reveals a progressive pattern (cf. Fig. 1.2 below). Contemplation of the body progresses from the rudimentary experience of bodily postures and activities to contemplating the body’s anatomy. The increased sensitivity developed in this way forms the basis for contemplation of feelings, a shift of awareness from the immediately accessible physical aspects of experience to feelings as more refined and subtle objects of awareness.

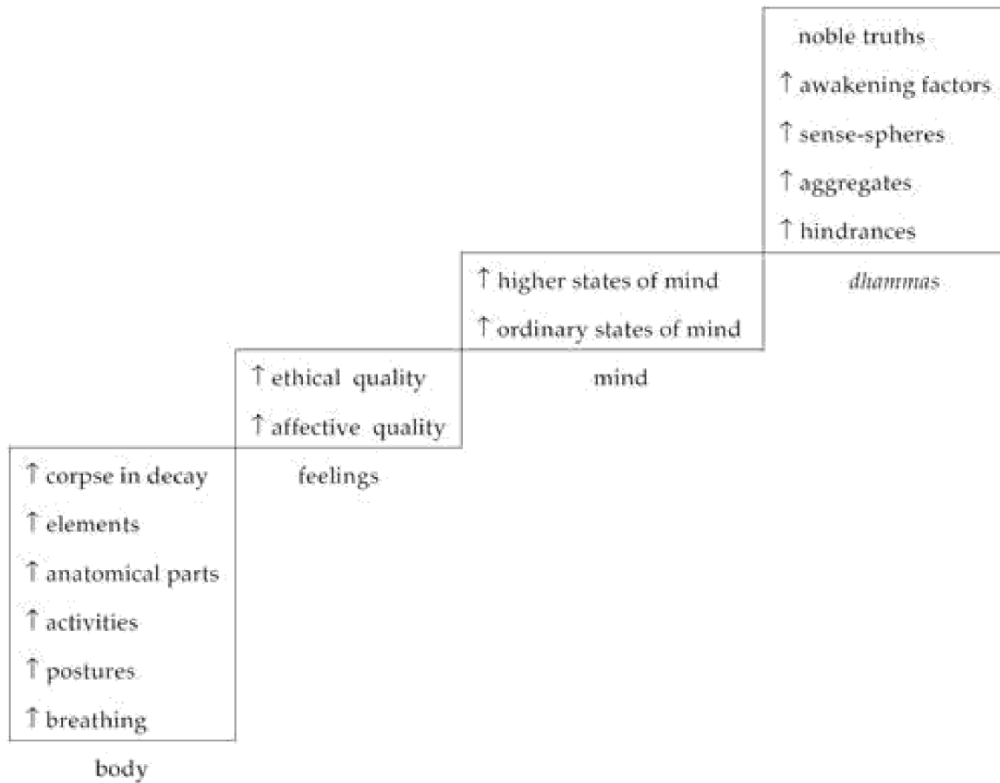


Fig. 1.2 Progression of the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations

Contemplation of feeling divides feelings not only according to their affective quality into pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral types, but also distinguishes these according to their worldly or unworldly nature. The latter part of contemplation of feelings thus introduces an ethical distinction of feelings, which serves as a stepping-stone for directing awareness to the ethical distinction between wholesome and unwholesome states of mind, mentioned at the start of the next *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of the mind.

Contemplation of the mind proceeds from the presence or absence of four unwholesome states of mind (lust, anger, delusion, and distraction), to contemplating the presence or



absence of four higher states of mind. The concern with higher states of mind in the latter part of the contemplation of the mind naturally lends itself to a detailed investigation of those factors which particularly obstruct deeper levels of concentration. These are the hindrances, the first object of contemplation of *dhammas*.

After covering the hindrances to meditation practice, contemplation of *dhammas* progresses to two analyses of subjective experience: the five aggregates and the six sense-spheres. These analyses are followed by the awakening factors, the next contemplation of *dhammas*.

The culmination of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is reached with the contemplation of the four noble truths, full understanding of which coincides with realization.

Considered in this way, the sequence of the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations leads progressively from grosser to more subtle levels.<sup>11</sup> This linear progression is not without practical relevance, since the body contemplations recommend themselves as a foundational exercise for building up a basis of *sati*, while the final contemplation of the four noble truths covers the experience of *Nibbāna* (the third noble truth concerning the cessation of *dukkha*) and thus corresponds to the culmination of any successful implementation of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

At the same time, however, this progressive pattern does not prescribe the only possible way of practising *satipaṭṭhāna*. To take the progression of the meditation exercises in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as indicating a necessary sequence would severely limit the range of one's practice, since only those experiences or phenomena that fit into this preconceived pattern would be proper objects of awareness. Yet a central characteristic of *satipaṭṭhāna* is awareness of phenomena as

they are, and as they occur. Although such awareness will naturally proceed from the gross to the subtle, in actual practice it will quite probably vary from the sequence depicted in the discourse.

A flexible and comprehensive development of *satipaṭṭhāna* should encompass all aspects of experience, in whatever sequence they occur. All *satipaṭṭhānas* can be of continual relevance throughout one's progress along the path. The practice of contemplating the body, for example, is not something to be left behind and discarded at some more advanced point in one's progress. Much rather, it continues to be a relevant practice even for an *arahant*.<sup>12</sup> Understood in this way, the meditation exercises listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* can be seen as mutually supportive. The sequence in which they are practised may be altered in order to meet the needs of each individual meditator.

Not only do the four *satipaṭṭhānas* support each other, but they could even be integrated within a single meditation practice. This is documented in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, which describes how mindfulness of breathing can be developed in such a way that it encompasses all four *satipaṭṭhānas*.<sup>13</sup> This exposition demonstrates the possibility of comprehensively combining all four *satipaṭṭhānas* within the practice of a single meditation.

### I.3 THE RELEVANCE OF EACH *SATIPAṬṬHĀNA* FOR REALIZATION

According to the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, it is possible to develop a variety of different aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation with a single meditation object and in due course cover all four *satipaṭṭhānas*. This raises the question how far a single *satipaṭṭhāna*, or even a single meditation exercise, can be taken

as a complete practice in its own right.

Several discourses relate the practice of a single *satipaṭṭhāna* directly to realization.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the commentaries assign to each single *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation the capacity to lead to full awakening.<sup>15</sup> This may well be why a high percentage of present-day meditation teachers focus on the use of a single meditation technique, on the ground that a single-minded and thorough perfection of one meditation technique can cover all aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna*, and thus be sufficient to gain realization.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the development of awareness with any particular meditation technique will automatically result in a marked increase in one's general level of awareness, thereby enhancing one's capacity to be mindful in regard to situations that do not form part of one's primary object of meditation. In this way, even those aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* that have not deliberately been made the object of contemplation to some extent still receive mindful attention as a by-product of the primary practice. Yet the exposition in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* does not necessarily imply that by being aware of the breath one automatically covers all aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna*. What the Buddha demonstrated here was how a thorough development of *sati* can lead from the breath to a broad range of objects, encompassing different aspects of subjective reality. Clearly, such a broad range of aspects was the outcome of a deliberate development, otherwise the Buddha would not have needed to deliver a whole discourse on how to achieve this.

In fact, several meditation teachers and scholars place a strong emphasis on covering all four *satipaṭṭhānas* in one's practice.<sup>17</sup> According to them, although one particular meditation practice can serve as the primary object of attention, the other aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* should be

deliberately contemplated too, even if only in a secondary manner. This approach can claim some support from the concluding part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the “prediction” of realization. This passage stipulates the development of all four *satipaṭṭhānas* for contemplation to lead to the realization of the higher two stages of awakening: non-returning and arahantship.<sup>18</sup> The fact that all four *satipaṭṭhānas* are mentioned suggests that it is the comprehensive practice of all four which is particularly capable of leading to high levels of realization. The same is also indicated by a statement in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta*, which relates the realization of arahantship to “complete” practice of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, while partial practice corresponds to lesser levels of realization.<sup>19</sup>

In a passage in the *Ānāpāna Saṃyutta*, the Buddha compared the four *satipaṭṭhānas* to chariots coming from four directions, each driving through and thereby scattering a heap of dust lying at the centre of a crossroads.<sup>20</sup> This simile suggests that each *satipaṭṭhāna* is in itself capable of overcoming unwholesome states, just as any of the chariots is able to scatter the heap of dust. At the same time this simile also illustrates the cooperative effect of all four *satipaṭṭhānas*, since, with chariots coming from all directions, the heap of dust will be scattered even more.

Thus any single meditation practice from the *satipaṭṭhāna* scheme is capable of leading to deep insight, especially if developed according to the key instructions given in the “definition” and “refrain” of the discourse. Nevertheless, an attempt to cover all four *satipaṭṭhānas* in one’s practice does more justice to the distinct character of the various meditations described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and thereby ensures speedy progress and a balanced and comprehensive

development.<sup>21</sup>

#### I.4 THE CHARACTER OF EACH *SATIPAṬṬHĀNA*

The need for such comprehensive development is related to the fact that each *satipaṭṭhāna* has a different character and can thereby serve a slightly different purpose. This is documented in the *Nettipakaraṇa* and the commentaries, which illustrate the particular character of each *satipaṭṭhāna* with a set of correlations (cf. Fig. 1.3 below).

According to the commentaries, each of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* corresponds to a particular aggregate: the aggregates of material form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) match the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*, while the aggregates of cognition (*saññā*) and volitions (*saṅkhārā*) correspond to the contemplation of *dhammas*.<sup>22</sup>

On closer inspection, this correlation appears a little forced, since the third *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of the mind, corresponds to all mental aggregates and not only to consciousness. Moreover, the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of *dhammas*, includes the entire set of the five aggregates as one of its meditations, and thus has a wider range than just the two aggregates of cognition (*saññā*) and volition (*saṅkhārā*).

Nevertheless, what the commentaries might intend to indicate is that all aspects of one's subjective experience are to be investigated with the aid of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. Understood in this way, the division into four *satipaṭṭhānas* represents an analytical approach similar to a division of subjective experience into the five aggregates. Both attempt to dissolve the illusion of the observer's substantiality.<sup>23</sup> By

turning awareness to different facets of one's subjective experience, these aspects will be experienced simply as objects, and the notion of compactness, the sense of a solid "I", will begin to disintegrate. In this way, the more subjective experience can be seen "objectively", the more the "I"-identification diminishes.<sup>24</sup> This correlates well with the Buddha's instruction to investigate thoroughly each aggregate to the point where no more "I" can be found.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the aggregate correlation, the commentaries recommend each of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* for a specific type of character or inclination. According to them, body and feeling contemplation should be the main field of practice for those who tend towards craving, while meditators given to intellectual speculation should place more emphasis on contemplating mind or *dhammas*.<sup>26</sup> Understood in this way, practice of the first two *satipaṭṭhānas* suits those with a more affective inclination, while the last two are recommended for those of a more cognitive orientation. In both cases, those whose character is to think and react quickly can profitably centre their practice on the relatively subtler contemplations of feelings or *dhammas*, while those whose mental faculties are more circumspect and measured will have better results if they base their practice on the grosser objects of body or mind. Although these recommendations are expressed in terms of character type, they could also be applied to one's momentary disposition: one could choose that *satipaṭṭhāna* that best corresponds to one's state of mind, so that when one feels sluggish and desirous, for example, contemplation of the body would be the appropriate practice to be undertaken.

	body	feelings	mind	<i>dhammas</i>
aggregate	material form	feeling	consciousness	cognition + volition
character	slow craver	quick craver	slow theorizer	quick theorizer
insight	absence of beauty	unsatisfactoriness	impermanence	absence of self

Fig. 1.3 Correlations for the four *satipaṭṭhānas*

The *Nettipakaraṇa* and the *Visuddhimagga* also set the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in opposition to the four distortions (*vipallāsas*), which are to “mis-take” what is unattractive, unsatisfactory, impermanent, and not-self, for being attractive, satisfactory, permanent, and a self.<sup>27</sup> According to them, contemplation of the body has the potential to reveal in particular the absence of bodily beauty; observation of the true nature of feelings can counter one’s incessant search for fleeting pleasures; awareness of the ceaseless succession of states of mind can disclose the impermanent nature of all subjective experience; and contemplation of *dhammas* can reveal that the notion of a substantial and permanent self is nothing but an illusion. This presentation brings to light the main theme that underlies each of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* and indicates which of them is particularly appropriate for dispelling the illusion of beauty, happiness, permanence, or self.<sup>28</sup> Although the corresponding insights are certainly not restricted to one *satipaṭṭhāna* alone, nevertheless this particular correlation indicates which *satipaṭṭhāna* is particularly suitable in order to correct a specific distortion (*vipallāsa*). This correlation, too, may be fruitfully applied in accordance with one’s general character disposition, or else can be used in order to counteract the momentary manifestation of any particular distortion.

In the end, however, all four *satipaṭṭhānas* partake of the same essence. Each of them leads to realization, like different gateways leading to the same city.<sup>29</sup> As the commentaries

point out, the fourfold division is only functional and can be compared to a weaver splitting a piece of bamboo into four parts to weave a basket.<sup>30</sup>

So much for a preliminary survey of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. By way of providing some background to the title I have chosen for this work, I will now turn to the two key expressions “direct path” and “*satipaṭṭhāna*”.

#### I.5 THE EXPRESSION “DIRECT PATH”

The first section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* proper introduces the four *satipaṭṭhānas* as the “direct path” to realization. The passage reads:

**Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of *dukkha* and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of *Nibbāna*, namely, the four *satipaṭṭhānas*.**<sup>31</sup>

The qualification of being a “direct path” occurs in the discourses almost exclusively as an attribute of *satipaṭṭhāna*, thus it conveys a considerable degree of emphasis.<sup>32</sup> Such emphasis is indeed warranted, since practice of the “direct path” of *satipaṭṭhāna* is an indispensable requirement for liberation.<sup>33</sup> As a set of verses in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta* point out, *satipaṭṭhāna* is the “direct path” for crossing the flood in past, present, and future times.<sup>34</sup>

“Direct path” is a translation of the Pāli expression *ekāyano maggo*, made up of the parts *eka*, “one”, *ayana*, “going”, and *magga*, “path”. The commentarial tradition has preserved five alternative explanations for understanding this particular expression. According to them, a path qualified as *ekāyano* could be understood as a “direct” path in the sense of leading



straight to the goal; as a path to be travelled by oneself “alone”; as a path taught by the “One” (the Buddha); as a path that is found “only” in Buddhism; or as a path which leads to “one” goal, namely to *Nibbāna*.<sup>35</sup> My rendering of *ekāyano* as “direct path” follows the first of these explanations.<sup>36</sup> A more commonly used translation of *ekāyano* is “the only path”, corresponding to the fourth of the five explanations found in the commentaries.

In order to assess the meaning of a particular Pāli term, its different occurrences in the discourses need to be taken into account. In the present case, in addition to occurring in several discourses in relation to *satipaṭṭhāna*, *ekāyano* also comes up once in a different context. This is in a simile in the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*, which describes a man walking along a path leading to a pit, such that one can anticipate him falling into the pit.<sup>37</sup> This path is qualified as *ekāyano*. In this context *ekāyano* seems to express straightness of direction rather than exclusion. To say that this path leads “directly” to the pit would be more fitting than saying that it is “the only” path leading to the pit.

Of related interest is also the *Tevijja Sutta*, which reports two Brahmin students arguing about whose teacher taught the only correct path to union with Brahmā. Although in this context an exclusive expression like “the only path” might be expected, the qualification *ekāyano* is conspicuously absent.<sup>38</sup> The same absence recurs in a verse from the *Dhammapada*, which presents the noble eightfold path as “the only path”.<sup>39</sup> These two instances suggest that the discourses did not avail themselves of the qualification *ekāyano* in order to convey exclusiveness.

Thus *ekāyano*, conveying a sense of directness rather than exclusiveness, draws attention to *satipaṭṭhāna* as the aspect of

the noble eightfold path most “directly” responsible for uncovering a vision of things as they truly are. That is, *satipaṭṭhāna* is the “direct path”, because it leads “directly” to the realization of *Nibbāna*.<sup>40</sup>

This way of understanding also fits well with the final passage of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Having stated that *satipaṭṭhāna* practice can lead to the two higher stages of realization within a maximum of seven years, the discourse closes with the declaration: “because of this, it has been said – this is the direct path”. This passage highlights the directness of *satipaṭṭhāna*, in the sense of its potential to lead to the highest stages of realization within a limited period of time.

#### 1.6 THE TERM *SATIPAṬṬHĀNA*

The term *satipaṭṭhāna* can be explained as a compound of *sati*, “mindfulness” or “awareness”, and *upaṭṭhāna*, with the *u* of the latter term dropped by vowel elision.<sup>41</sup> The Pāli term *upaṭṭhāna* literally means “placing near”,<sup>42</sup> and in the present context refers to a particular way of “being present” and “attending” to something with mindfulness. In the discourses, the corresponding verb *upaṭṭhahati* often denotes various nuances of “being present”,<sup>43</sup> or else “attending”.<sup>44</sup> Understood in this way, “*satipaṭṭhāna*” means that *sati* “stands by”, in the sense of being present; *sati* is “ready at hand”, in the sense of attending to the current situation. *Satipaṭṭhāna* can then be translated as “presence of mindfulness” or as “attending with mindfulness”.<sup>45</sup>

The commentaries, however, derive *satipaṭṭhāna* from the word “foundation” or “cause” (*paṭṭhāna*).<sup>46</sup> This seems unlikely, since in the discourses contained in the Pāli canon

the corresponding verb *paṭṭhahati* never occurs together with *sati*. Moreover, the noun *paṭṭhāna* is not found at all in the early discourses, but comes into use only in the historically later *Abhidhamma* and the commentaries.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the discourses frequently relate *sati* to the verb *upaṭṭhahati*, indicating that “presence” (*upaṭṭhāna*) is the etymologically correct derivation.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the equivalent Sanskrit term is *smṛtyupasthāna*, which shows that *upasthāna*, or its Pāli equivalent *upaṭṭhāna*, is the correct choice for the compound.<sup>49</sup>

The problem with the commentarial explanation is that, instead of understanding *satipaṭṭhāna* as a particular attitude of being aware, *satipaṭṭhāna* becomes a “foundation” of mindfulness, the “cause” for the establishment of *sati*. This moves emphasis from the activity to the object. Yet these four *satipaṭṭhānas* are not the only possible cause or foundation for mindfulness, since in the *Salāyatanavibhaṅga Sutta* the Buddha spoke of three other *satipaṭṭhānas*, none of which corresponds to the four *satipaṭṭhānas* usually mentioned.<sup>50</sup> The three *satipaṭṭhānas* described by the Buddha on this occasion were his maintenance of mindfulness and equanimity as a teacher in regard to three different situations: none of the pupils paid attention, some paid attention and some not, and all paid attention. The fact that the Buddha nevertheless defined these three as *satipaṭṭhānas* shows that to speak of “*satipaṭṭhāna*” is less a question of the nature of the object that is chosen than of “attending” to whatever situation with a balanced attitude and with mindfulness being “present”.

## II

### THE “DEFINITION” PART OF THE *SATIPAṬṬHĀNA SUTTA*

This chapter and the next two are devoted to an examination of the “definition” part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. This “definition”, which occurs also in other discourses as the standard way of defining right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), describes essential aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice and therefore forms a key to understanding how the meditation techniques listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* are to be undertaken. The passage in question reads:

**Here, monks, in regard to the body a monk abides contemplating the body, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.**

**In regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.**

**In regard to the mind he abides contemplating the mind, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.**

**In regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas*, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and**

**discontent in regard to the world.**<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I will first take a look at the expression “contemplating” (*anupassī*) and consider why the objects of this contemplation are mentioned twice (for example, in regard to the body, one is to contemplate the body). I will then explore the significance of the first two qualities mentioned in the “definition”: “diligent” (*ātāpī*) and “clearly knowing” (*sampajāna*). The remaining qualities, mindfulness and the absence of desires and discontent, will be the subjects of Chapters III and IV.

## II.1 CONTEMPLATION

The “definition” of right mindfulness is concerned with “contemplating”. The corresponding Pāli verb *anupassati* can be derived from the verb “to see”, *passati*, and the emphatic prefix *anu*, so that *anupassati* means “to repeatedly look at”, that is, “to contemplate” or “to closely observe”.<sup>2</sup> The discourses often speak of contemplation in order to describe a particular way of meditation, an examination of the observed object from a particular viewpoint. In the case of the body, for example, such observation can involve contemplating the body as impermanent (*aniccānupassī*, *vayānupassī*), and therefore as something which does not yield lasting satisfaction (*dukkhānupassī*); or as unattractive (*asubhānupassī*) and not-self (*anattānupassī*), and therefore as something to let go of (*paṭinissaggānupassī*).<sup>3</sup>

These various forms of contemplation emphasize how

the object is to be perceived. That is, as used in the discourses “contemplation” implies that particular features of the object are to be given prominence, such as its impermanence, or its selfless nature. In the present context, however, the feature to be contemplated appears to be the same as the object of contemplation. Literally translated, one “contemplates body in body”, or “feelings in feelings”, etc.<sup>4</sup> This slightly peculiar expression requires further consideration.

Taking the first *satipaṭṭhāna* as an example, the instructions are: “in regard to the body abide contemplating the body”. Here, the first instance of “body” can be understood in the light of the *satipaṭṭhāna* “refrain”. The “refrain” explains that to contemplate the body applies to internal and external bodies.<sup>5</sup> According to the commentaries, “internal” and “external” here represent one’s own and another person’s body.<sup>6</sup> On this understanding, the first instance of “body” (in the locative case) could be translated as “where one’s own or another’s body is concerned”, or “in regard to one’s own or another’s body”, delineating the compass of this *satipaṭṭhāna*.

For the second instance of “body”, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* offers detailed specifications: to contemplate “body” can be undertaken by contemplating the breath, or the postures of the body, or activities of the body, or the anatomical constitution of the body, or the four elementary qualities of the body, or the decomposition of the body after death. Thus the second occurrence of “body” stands for a particular aspect from the general area

of contemplation, a “sub-body” in the “overall body”, so to speak.<sup>7</sup>

The *satipaṭṭhāna* “refrain” also contains additional information about the significance of “contemplation” in the present context. The same term is used, with the specification that the “arising” and the “passing away” of phenomena is the focus of contemplation.<sup>8</sup> That is, to speak of contemplation in the present context refers to directing awareness to the body and in particular to a specific feature of it, namely its impermanent nature.

In drawing from other parts of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, one can thus expand the somewhat puzzling instruction: “in the body abide contemplating the body” to read: “in regard to your own body or the bodies of others, direct awareness to its (or their) impermanent nature evident in different aspects of the body, such as the process of breathing, or its postures and activities, or its anatomical constitution, or its elementary qualities, or its decay at death.”

According to the commentaries, the repetition of the object of contemplation also indicates emphasis, implying that the object of contemplation should be considered simply as perceived by the senses, and in particular without taking it to be “I” or “mine”.<sup>9</sup> In this way the repetition – body in body – underlines the importance of direct experience, as opposed to mere intellectual reflection.<sup>10</sup> One should let the body speak for itself, so to say, disclosing its true nature to the scrutiny of the meditator.

## II.2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEING DILIGENT (*ĀTĀPĪ*)

According to the “definition”, the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* requires the establishment of four particular mental qualities (cf. Fig. 2.1 below), which can be taken to represent the mental faculties of energy, wisdom, mindfulness, and concentration.<sup>11</sup>

diligent <i>ātāpī</i>
clearly knowing <i>sampajāna</i>
mindful ( <i>sati</i> )
free from desires and discontent ( <i>vineyya abhijjhādomanassa</i> )

Fig. 2.1: Key characteristics of *satipaṭṭhāna*

The first of these four is the quality of diligence. The term diligent (*ātāpī*) is related to the word *tapas*, which connotes self-mortification and ascetic practices. The use of such vocabulary is surprising, since the Buddha did not consider self-mortification to be conducive to the realization of *Nibbāna*.<sup>12</sup> To better understand the Buddha’s position, the historical context should be considered.

A substantial number of wandering ascetics in ancient India regarded self-mortification as the model path to purification. Jain and Ājīvikā ascetics considered death by ritual suicide to be the ideal expression of successful



realization.<sup>13</sup> Commonly accepted means for spiritual development were prolonged fasting, exposure to extremes of temperature, and the adoption of particularly painful postures.<sup>14</sup> Although the Buddha did not categorically reject such practices in their entirety,<sup>15</sup> he openly criticized the belief that self-mortification was necessary for realization.<sup>16</sup>

Before his awakening, the Buddha himself had been influenced by the belief that spiritual purification requires self-mortification.<sup>17</sup> Based on this mistaken belief, he had pursued ascetic practices to considerable extremes, without being able to realize awakening in this way.<sup>18</sup> He found ultimately that awakening does not depend on mere asceticism, but requires mental development, in particular the development of *sati*.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, the form of “asceticism” the Buddha later taught was predominantly a mental one, characterized by a firm opposition to unwholesome thoughts and tendencies.<sup>20</sup> In an intriguing statement found in the discourses, the cultivation of the awakening factors is referred to as the highest form of exertion.<sup>21</sup> Such subtler forms of “austerity” did not easily receive recognition by contemporary ascetics, and on several occasions the Buddha and his followers were ridiculed for their seemingly easy-going attitude.<sup>22</sup>

Another point worth considering is that in ancient India there were a variety of deterministic and fatalistic teachings.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the Buddha emphasized commitment and effort as essential requirements for

achieving realization. According to him, only by way of desire, effort, and personal commitment can desirelessness be realized.<sup>24</sup> Effort, as an expression of wholesome desire, leads along the path until with full realization all desire will be abandoned.<sup>25</sup> In this context, the Buddha at times reinterpreted expressions commonly used within ascetic circles to express his own position.<sup>26</sup> The quality of being diligent (*ātāpī*) in the *satipaṭṭhāna* context appears to be one such instance.

A different example of rather forceful vocabulary can be found in those passages in which the Buddha described his firm resolution prior to awakening: “let my flesh and blood dry up, I will not give up”,<sup>27</sup> or “I will not change my posture unless realization has been gained”.<sup>28</sup> Concerning the resolve to refrain from changing posture, it needs to be kept in mind that the Buddha was able to achieve deep meditative absorption, so he could sit for long periods of time in the same posture without pain.<sup>29</sup> Thus what these expressions point to is not so much the endurance of a painful sitting posture as a strong and unwavering commitment.<sup>30</sup> Similar expressions are used by some of his disciples on the brink of realization.<sup>31</sup> Since the breakthrough to realization can only take place in a balanced state of mind, it might be best not to take these expressions too literally.

In a similar way, the expression “diligent” (*ātāpī*) might not have carried the same literal connotations for the Buddha as it did for his more ascetically-inclined contemporaries. In fact, in the *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* diligent (*ātāpī*) comes up in relation to experiencing the bliss of

absorption.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in a passage from the *Indriya Samyutta* the quality of diligence is combined with pleasant feelings, mental and physical.<sup>33</sup> In these instances, “diligent” has clearly lost any relation to self-mortification and its concomitant physical pain.

Since both deficiency of effort and excessive tension can obstruct one’s progress,<sup>34</sup> the quality of “diligence” is best understood as a balanced but sustained application of energy.<sup>35</sup> Such balanced endeavour avoids, on the one hand, passive submission to “destiny”, a higher will, or personal idiosyncrasies, and on the other, excessive effort, self-assertive striving, and self-inflicted suffering in the name of a higher goal.

The Buddha once compared the balanced effort needed for proper progress to the tuning of a lute, whose strings should be neither too tight nor too loose.<sup>36</sup> This comparison of mental cultivation to the tuning of a musical instrument illustrates the well-adjusted effort and sensitivity required for the development of the mind.<sup>37</sup> The notion of a “middle path” of wise balance, avoiding the extremes of excessive and insufficient effort, has of course been one of the Buddha’s central teachings since the time of his first discourse.<sup>38</sup> It was this balanced “middle path” approach, avoiding the two extremes of stagnation and excessive striving, which had enabled him to gain awakening.<sup>39</sup>

The practical implications of being “diligent” can best be illustrated with two maxims from the discourses, both of which use the word diligent (*ātāpi*): “right now is the time to practise diligently”, and “you yourself have to

practise with diligence.”<sup>40</sup> Similar connotations underlie the occurrence of the quality of “diligence” in those passages that describe the serious commitment of a monk who retires into seclusion for intensive practice after having received a brief instruction from the Buddha.<sup>41</sup>

Applying these nuances to *satipaṭṭhāna*, to be “diligent” then amounts to keeping up one’s contemplation with balanced but dedicated continuity, returning to the object of meditation as soon as it is lost.<sup>42</sup>

### II.3 CLEARLY KNOWING (*SAMPAJĀNA*)

The second of the four mental qualities mentioned in the “definition” is *sampajāna*, a present participle of the verb *sampajānāti*. *Sampajānāti* can be divided into *pajānāti* (he or she knows) and the prefix *saṃ* (together), which often serves an intensifying function in Pāli compounds.<sup>43</sup> Thus *saṃ-pajānāti* stands for an intensified form of knowing, for “clearly knowing”.<sup>44</sup>

The range of meaning of “clearly knowing” (*sampajāna*) can be conveniently illustrated by briefly surveying some of its occurrences in the discourses. In a discourse found in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, clearly knowing stands for consciously experiencing one’s own life as an embryo in a womb, including the event of being born.<sup>45</sup> In the *Majjhima Nikāya* one finds clearly knowing representing the presence of deliberateness, when one “deliberately” speaks a falsehood.<sup>46</sup> In a passage from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, clearly knowing refers to awareness of the

impermanent nature of feelings and thoughts.<sup>47</sup> A discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* recommends clear knowledge (*sampajañña*) for overcoming unwholesomeness and establishing wholesomeness.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the *Itivuttaka* relates clearly knowing to following the advice of a good friend.<sup>49</sup>

A common denominator suggested by these examples selected from all five *Nikāyas* is the ability to fully grasp or comprehend what is taking place. Such clear knowledge can in turn lead to the development of wisdom (*paññā*). According to the *Abhidhamma*, clear knowledge does in fact already represent the presence of wisdom.<sup>50</sup> Considered from an etymological viewpoint, this suggestion is convincing, since *paññā* and (*sam-*)*pajānāti* are closely related. But a close examination of the above examples suggests that clearly knowing (*sampajāna*) does not necessarily imply the presence of wisdom (*paññā*). When one utters a falsehood, for example, one might clearly know one's speech to be a lie, but one does not speak the falsehood "with wisdom". Similarly, while it is remarkable enough to be clearly aware of one's embryonic development in the womb, to do so does not require wisdom. Thus, though clear knowing might lead to the development of wisdom, in itself it only connotes "to clearly know" what is happening.

In the *satipaṭṭhāna* instructions, the presence of such clear knowledge is alluded to by the frequently recurring expression "he knows" (*pajānāti*), which is found in most of the practical instructions. Similar to clearly knowing, the expression "he knows" (*pajānāti*) at times refers to

rather basic forms of knowing, while in other instances it connotes more sophisticated types of understanding. In the context of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the range of what a meditator “knows” includes, for example, identifying a long breath as long, or recognizing one’s physical posture.<sup>51</sup> But with the later *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations, the meditator’s task of knowing evolves until it comes to include the presence of discriminative understanding, such as when one is to understand the arising of a fetter in dependence on a sense door and its respective object.<sup>52</sup> This evolution culminates in knowing the four noble truths “as they actually are”, a penetrative type of deep understanding for which again the expression “he knows” is used.<sup>53</sup> Thus both the expression “he knows” (*pajānāti*) and the quality of “clearly knowing” (*sampajāna*) can range from basic forms of knowing to deep discriminative understanding.

#### II.4 MINDFULNESS AND CLEAR KNOWLEDGE

Clearly knowing, apart from being listed in the “definition” part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, is mentioned again under the first *satipaṭṭhāna*, with regard to a set of bodily activities.<sup>54</sup> Expositions of the gradual path of training usually refer to such clear knowing in regard to bodily activities with the compound *satisampajañña*, “mindfulness and clear knowledge”.<sup>55</sup> On further perusing the discourses one finds that this combination of mindfulness with clear knowledge (or clearly knowing) is employed in a wide variety of contexts, paralleling the above documented flexible usage of clearly knowing on its

own.

The Buddha, for instance, taught his disciples, went to sleep, endured an illness, relinquished his life-principle, and prepared for death – each time endowed with mindfulness and clear knowledge.<sup>56</sup> Even in his previous life he was already in possession of mindfulness and clear knowledge when he arose in heaven, stayed there, passed away from there, and entered his mother’s womb.<sup>57</sup>

Mindfulness and clear knowledge also contribute towards improving one’s ethical conduct and overcoming sensuality.<sup>58</sup> In the context of meditation, mindfulness and clear knowledge can refer to contemplating feelings and thoughts; they can mark a high level of equanimity in the context of perceptual training; or they can take part in overcoming sloth-and-torpor.<sup>59</sup> Mindfulness and clear knowledge become particularly prominent during the third meditative absorption (*jhāna*), where the presence of both is required to avoid a relapse into the intense joy (*pīti*) experienced during the second absorption.<sup>60</sup>

This broad variety of occurrences demonstrates that the combination of mindfulness with clear knowledge is often used in a general manner to refer to awareness and knowledge, without being restricted to its specific use as clearly knowing bodily activities in the gradual path scheme or in the *satipaṭṭhāna* context of body contemplation.

Such cooperation of mindfulness with clear knowledge, which according to the “definition” is required for all *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations, points to the need to combine mindful observation of phenomena with an intelligent

processing of the observed data. Thus “to clearly know” can be taken to represent the “illuminating” or “awakening” aspect of contemplation. Understood in this way, clear knowledge has the task of processing the input gathered by mindful observation, and thereby leads to the arising of wisdom.<sup>61</sup>

These qualities of clear knowledge and mindfulness thus remind one of the development of “knowledge” and “vision” of reality (*yathābhūtañāḍassana*). According to the Buddha, to both “know” and “see” are necessary conditions for the realization of *Nibbāna*.<sup>62</sup> It might not be too far-fetched to relate such growth of knowledge (*ñāḍa*) to the quality of clearly knowing (*sampajāna*), and the accompanying aspect of “vision” (*dassana*) to the activity of watching represented by mindfulness (*sati*).

More remains to be said about this quality of clear knowledge.<sup>63</sup> In order to do this, however, some additional ground has to be covered, such as examining in more detail the implications of *sati*, which I will do in Chapter III.



## III

### *SATI*

In this chapter I continue to investigate the “definition” part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. As a way of providing some background for *sati*, the third quality mentioned in the “definition”, I briefly survey the general approach to knowledge in early Buddhism. In order to evaluate *sati* as a mental quality, the main task of the present chapter, I go on to explore its typical characteristics from different angles, and also contrast it with concentration (*samādhi*).

#### III.1 THE EARLY BUDDHIST APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE

The philosophical setting of ancient India was influenced by three main approaches to the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The Brahmins relied mainly on ancient sayings, handed down by oral transmission, as authoritative sources of knowledge; while in the *Upaniṣads* one finds philosophical reasoning used as a central tool for developing knowledge. In addition to these two, a substantial number of the wandering ascetics and contemplatives of that time considered extrasensory perception and intuitive knowledge, gained through meditative experiences, as important means for the acquisition of knowledge. These three approaches can be summarized as:

oral tradition, logical reasoning, and direct intuition.

When questioned on his own epistemological position, the Buddha placed himself in the third category, i.e. among those who emphasized the development of direct, personal knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Although he did not completely reject oral tradition or logical reasoning as ways of acquiring knowledge, he was keenly aware of their limitations. The problem with oral tradition is that material committed to memory might be wrongly remembered. Moreover, even material that has been well remembered might be false and misleading. Similarly, logical reasoning might seem convincing, but then turn out to be unsound. Moreover, even sound reasoning might prove false and misleading if it is based on false premises. On the other hand, what has not been well remembered or what does not appear to be perfectly well reasoned might turn out to be true.<sup>3</sup>

Similar reservations hold true for direct knowledge gained in meditation. In fact, according to the Buddha's penetrating analysis in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, sole reliance on direct extrasensory knowledge had caused a considerable number of mistaken views among contemporary practitioners.<sup>4</sup> The Buddha once illustrated the dangers of relying entirely on one's own direct experience with the help of a parable. In this parable, a king had several blind men each touch a different part of an elephant.<sup>5</sup> When questioned on the nature of the elephant, each blind man gave an entirely different account as the only right and true description of an elephant. Although what was experienced by each of the blind men was empirically true, yet their personal direct experience had revealed only part of the picture. The mistake each made was to wrongly conclude that his direct knowledge gained through personal experience was the only truth, so that anyone

disagreeing must be mistaken.<sup>6</sup>

This parable goes to show that even direct personal experience might reveal only a part of the picture and therefore should not be grasped dogmatically as an absolute ground for knowledge. That is, emphasis on direct experience need not entail a complete rejection of oral tradition and reasoning as auxiliary sources of knowledge. Nevertheless, direct experience constitutes the central epistemological tool in early Buddhism. According to a passage in the *Salāyatana Saṃyutta*, it is in particular the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* that can lead to an undistorted direct experience of things as they truly are, independent of oral tradition and reasoning.<sup>7</sup> Thus, clearly, *satipaṭṭhāna* is an empirical tool of central importance in the pragmatic theory of knowledge in early Buddhism.

Applying the epistemological position of early Buddhism to actual practice, oral tradition and reasoning, in the sense of some degree of knowledge and reflection about the *Dhamma*, form the supporting conditions for a direct experience of reality through the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>8</sup>

### III.2 SATI

The noun *sati* is related to the verb *sarati*, to remember.<sup>9</sup> *Sati* in the sense of “memory” occurs on several occasions in the discourses,<sup>10</sup> and also in the standard definitions of *sati* given in the *Abhidhamma* and the commentaries.<sup>11</sup> This remembrance aspect of *sati* is personified by the Buddha’s disciple most eminent in *sati*, Ānanda, who is credited with the almost incredible feat of recalling all the discourses spoken by the Buddha.<sup>12</sup>

The connotation of *sati* as memory becomes particularly

prominent with the recollections (*anussati*). The discourses often list a set of six recollections: recollection of the Buddha, of the *Dhamma*, of the *Saṅgha*, of one's ethical conduct, of one's liberality, and of heavenly beings (*devas*).<sup>13</sup> Another kind of recollection, usually occurring in the context of the "higher knowledges" gained through deep concentration, is the recollection of one's past lives (*pubbenivāsānussati*). In regard to all these, it is *sati* that fulfils the function of recollecting.<sup>14</sup> This recollective function of *sati* can even lead to awakening, documented in the *Theragāthā* with the case of a monk who gained realization based on recollecting the qualities of the Buddha.<sup>15</sup>

This connotation of *sati* as memory appears also in its formal definition in the discourses, which relates *sati* to the ability of calling to mind what has been done or said long ago.<sup>16</sup> A closer examination of this definition, however, reveals that *sati* is not really defined as memory, but as that which facilitates and enables memory. What this definition of *sati* points to is that, if *sati* is present, memory will be able to function well.<sup>17</sup>

Understanding *sati* in this way facilitates relating it to the context of *satipaṭṭhāna*, where it is not concerned with recalling past events, but functions as awareness of the present moment.<sup>18</sup> In the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, it is due to the presence of *sati* that one is able to remember what is otherwise only too easily forgotten: the present moment.

*Sati* as present moment awareness is similarly reflected in the presentations of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and the *Visuddhimagga*, according to which the characteristic quality of *sati* is "presence" (*upaṭṭhāna*), whether as a faculty (*indriya*), as an awakening factor (*bojjhaṅga*), as a factor of the noble eightfold path, or at the moment of realization.<sup>19</sup>

Thus mindfulness being present (*upaṭṭhitasati*) can be

understood to imply presence of mind, in so far as it is directly opposed to absent-mindedness (*mutṭhassati*); presence of mind in the sense that, endowed with *sati*, one is wide awake in regard to the present moment.<sup>20</sup> Owing to such presence of mind, whatever one does or says will be clearly apprehended by the mind, and thus can be more easily remembered later on.<sup>21</sup>

*Sati* is required not only to fully take in the moment to be remembered, but also to bring this moment back to mind at a later time. To “re-collect”, then, becomes just a particular instance of a state of mind characterized by “collectedness” and the absence of distraction.<sup>22</sup> This twofold character of *sati* can also be found in some verses in the *Sutta Nipāta*, which instruct the listener to set out with *sati*, subsequent to an instruction given by the Buddha.<sup>23</sup> In these instances *sati* seems to combine both present moment awareness and remembering what the Buddha had taught.

The kind of mental state in which memory functions well can be characterized by a certain degree of breadth, in contrast to a narrow focus. It is this breadth that enables the mind to make the necessary connections between information received in the present moment and information to be remembered from the past. This quality becomes evident on those occasions when one tries to recall a particular instance or fact, but where the more one applies one’s mind, the less one is able to remember it. But if the issue in question is laid aside for a while and the mind is in a state of relaxed receptivity, the information one was trying to remember will suddenly spring to mind.

The suggestion that the mental state in which *sati* is well-established can be characterized as having “breadth” instead of a narrow focus finds support in some discourses which

relate the absence of *sati* to a narrow state of mind (*parittacetasa*), while its presence leads to a broad and even “boundless” state of mind (*appamāṇacetasa*).<sup>24</sup> Based on this nuance of “breadth of mind”, *sati* can be understood to represent the ability to simultaneously maintain in one’s mind the various elements and facets of a particular situation.<sup>25</sup> This can be applied to both the faculty of memory and to awareness of the present moment.

### III.3 THE ROLE AND POSITION OF *SATI*

More understanding about *sati* can be gained by considering its role and position among some of the central categories of early Buddhism (cf. Fig. 3.1 below). *Sati* not only forms part of the noble eightfold path – as right mindfulness (*sammā sati*) – but also occupies a central position among the faculties (*indriya*) and powers (*bala*), and constitutes the first member of the awakening factors (*bojjhaṅga*). In these contexts, the functions of *sati* cover both present moment awareness and memory.<sup>26</sup>

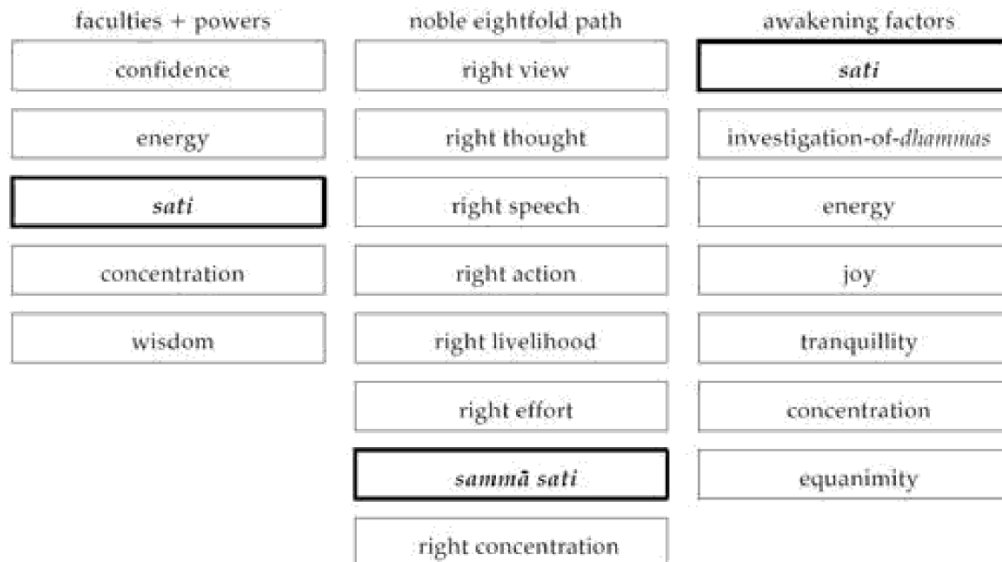


Fig. 3.1 The position of *sati* among important categories

Among the faculties (*indriya*) and powers (*bala*), *sati* occupies the middle position. Here *sati* has the function of balancing and monitoring the other faculties and powers, by becoming aware of excesses or deficiencies. A monitoring function similar to its position among the faculties and powers can be found in the noble eightfold path, where *sati* occupies the middle position in the three-factored path section directly concerned with mental training. The monitoring quality of *sati* is however not restricted to right effort and right concentration only, since according to the *Mahācattārisaka Sutta* the presence of right mindfulness is also a requirement for the other path factors.<sup>27</sup>

In regard to its two neighbours in the noble eightfold path, *sati* performs additional functions. In support of right effort *sati* performs a protective role by preventing the arising of unwholesome states of mind in the context of sense-restraint, which in fact constitutes an aspect of right effort. In relation to

right concentration, well-established *sati* acts as an important foundation for the development of deeper levels of mental calm, a topic to which I will return later on.

This position of *sati* in between the two mental qualities of energy (or effort) and concentration recurs also among the faculties and powers. The “definition” part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* also combines *sati* with these two qualities, which are here represented by being diligent (*ātāpi*) and by the absence of desires and discontent (*abhijjhādomanassa*). The placement of *sati* between energy and concentration in all these contexts mirrors a natural progression in the development of *sati*, since in the early stages of practice a considerable degree of energy is required to counter distraction, while well-established *sati* in turn leads to an increasingly concentrated and calm state of mind.

In contrast to its middle position among the faculties and powers, and in the final section of the noble eightfold path, in the list of the awakening factors *sati* assumes the starting position. Here *sati* constitutes the foundation for those factors that bring about realization.

Since in relation to the faculties, powers, and factors of the noble eightfold path *sati* is clearly distinguished from associated factors like energy, wisdom, and concentration, *sati* has to be something clearly different from them in order to merit separate listing.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, since *sati* is differentiated from the awakening factor “investigation-of-*dhammas*”, the task of investigating *dhammas* cannot be identical with the activity of awareness, otherwise there would have been no need to introduce it as a separate term. In this case, however, the activity of *sati* is closely related to “investigation-of-*dhammas*”, since according to the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* the awakening factors arise sequentially, with “investigation-of-



*dhammas*” arising consequent on the presence of *sati*.<sup>29</sup>

Coming back to right mindfulness as a factor of the noble eightfold path, it is noteworthy that the term *sati* is repeated within the definition of right mindfulness (*sammā sati*).<sup>30</sup> This repetition is not merely accidental, but rather points to a qualitative distinction between “right” mindfulness (*sammā sati*) as a path factor and mindfulness as a general mental factor. In fact, numerous discourses mention “wrong” mindfulness (*micchā sati*), which suggests that certain forms of *sati* can be quite different from right mindfulness.<sup>31</sup> According to this definition, *sati* requires the support of being diligent (*ātāpī*) and of clearly knowing (*sampajāna*). It is this combination of mental qualities, supported by a state of mind free from desires and discontent, and directed towards the body, feelings, the mind, and *dhammas*, which becomes the path factor of right mindfulness.

In the *Maṇibhadda Sutta* the Buddha pointed out that *sati* on its own, despite its manifold advantages, might not suffice for eradicating ill will.<sup>32</sup> This passage indicates that additional factors are needed in combination with *sati*, such as being diligent and clearly knowing in the case of developing *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Thus, in order to constitute “right mindfulness”, *sati* has to cooperate with various other mental qualities. However, for the purpose of clearly defining *sati*, which is my present task, I will consider *sati* in isolation from these other mental factors in order to discern its most essential features.

#### III.4 SATI IMAGERY

The significance and various nuances of the term *sati* are

illustrated by a considerable number of images and similes in the discourses. If these images and similes are examined and their implications drawn out, additional insights can be gained into how the Buddha and his contemporaries understood the term *sati*.

A simile in the *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta* describes a cowherd who had to watch closely over his cows to prevent them straying into fields where the crop was ripe. But once the crop was harvested, he was able to relax, sit under a tree, and watch over them from a distance. To express this comparatively relaxed and distant manner of observation, *sati* is used.<sup>33</sup> The disposition suggested by this simile is a calm and detached type of observation.

Another simile supporting this quality of detached observation occurs in a verse in the *Theragāthā*, which compares the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* to climbing an elevated platform or tower.<sup>34</sup> Connotations of aloofness and uninvolved detachment are confirmed by the context of this passage, which contrasts the tower image to being carried away by the stream of desire. Detachment comes up again in the *Dantabhūmi Sutta*, which compares *satipaṭṭhāna* to the taming of a wild elephant. Just as a recently captured elephant has to be gradually weaned of his forest habits, so too *satipaṭṭhāna* can gradually wean a monk from memories and intentions related to the household life.<sup>35</sup>

Another simile compares *sati* to the probe of a surgeon.<sup>36</sup> Like the surgeon's probe, whose function is to provide information about the wound for subsequent treatment, so too the "probe" *sati* can be used to carefully gather information, thereby preparing the ground for subsequent action. This ground-preparing quality is conveyed again by another simile, relating *sati* to the goad and the ploughshare of a farmer.<sup>37</sup>

Just as a farmer has first to plough the ground in order to be able to sow, so too *sati* fulfils an important preparatory role for the arising of wisdom.<sup>38</sup>

This role of *sati* in support of the arising of wisdom occurs again in another simile, which associates the parts of an elephant's body with mental qualities and factors. Here *sati* is compared to the elephant's neck, the natural support for its head, which in the same simile represents wisdom.<sup>39</sup> The choice of the elephant's neck is of additional significance, since it is a characteristic of both elephants and Buddhas to look around by turning with the whole body instead of only with the head.<sup>40</sup> The elephant's neck, then, represents the quality of giving full attention to a matter at hand as a feature of *sati*.

Although the "elephant look" is a specific characteristic of the Buddha, to give continuous and full attention to a matter at hand is a characteristic common to all *arahants*.<sup>41</sup> This is illustrated in another simile, which compares *sati* to the single spoke of a chariot.<sup>42</sup> In this simile, the rolling chariot represents the bodily activities of an *arahant*, all of which take place with the support of a single spoke – *sati*.

The supportive role of *sati* in the development of wisdom comes up again in a verse from the *Sutta Nipāta*, where *sati* keeps the streams in this world in check, so that the faculty of wisdom can cut them off.<sup>43</sup> This verse points in particular to the role of *sati* in relation to restraint at the sense doors (*indriya saṁvara*) as a basis for the development of wisdom.

What the similes of the "surgeon's probe", the "ploughshare", the "elephant's neck", and "keeping the streams in check" have in common is that they illustrate the preparatory role of *sati* for insight. According to these similes, *sati* is the mental quality that enables wisdom to arise.<sup>44</sup>

Another simile, found in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, compares *sati* to a careful charioteer.<sup>45</sup> This brings to mind the monitoring and steering quality of *sati* in relation to other mental factors, such as the faculties and the powers. The qualities evoked by this simile are careful and balanced supervision. A similar nuance can be found in another simile, which compares mindfulness in relation to the body to carrying a bowl full of oil on one's head, vividly illustrating the balancing quality of *sati*.<sup>46</sup>

The quality of careful supervision occurs again in yet another simile, in which *sati* is personified by the gatekeeper of a town.<sup>47</sup> The simile portrays messengers arriving at the town gate with an urgent message to be delivered to the king. The function of the gatekeeper is to inform them of the shortest route to the king. The gatekeeper image occurs again elsewhere in relation to the defence of a town. This town has energy (*virīya*) as its troops and wisdom (*paññā*) as its fortification, while the function of the gatekeeper *sati* is to recognize the genuine citizens of the town and to allow them to enter the gates.<sup>48</sup> Both of these similes associate *sati* with having a clear overview of the situation.<sup>49</sup>

The second simile moreover brings out the restraining function of bare *sati*, a function which is of particular relevance in relation to restraint at the sense doors (*indriya samvara*). This brings to mind the above-mentioned passage where *sati* was to keep the streams in this world in check. Just as the presence of the gatekeeper prevents those not entitled from entering the town, so too the presence of well-established *sati* prevents the arising of unwholesome associations and reactions at the sense doors. The same protective role of *sati* also underlies other passages, which introduce *sati* as the one factor that guards the mind,<sup>50</sup> or as a mental quality able to

exert a controlling influence on thoughts and intentions.<sup>51</sup>

A discourse in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* compares the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* to a cowherd's skill in knowing the proper pasture for his cows.<sup>52</sup> The image of a proper pasture occurs again in the *Mahāgopālaka Sutta*, throwing into relief the importance of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation for growth and development on the path to deliverance.<sup>53</sup> Another discourse employs the same image to describe the situation of a monkey who has to avoid straying into regions visited by hunters.<sup>54</sup> Just as the monkey, wishing to be safe, has to keep to its proper pasture, so too practitioners of the path should keep to their proper pasture, which is *satipaṭṭhāna*. Since one of the above passages explains sensual pleasures to be an improper "pasture", this set of images depicting *satipaṭṭhāna* as one's proper pasture points to the restraining role of bare awareness in regard to sense-input.<sup>55</sup>

This stabilizing function of established mindfulness in regard to distraction by way of the six sense doors is exemplified in another simile by a strong post, to which six different wild animals are bound.<sup>56</sup> No matter how much each animal might struggle to get off on its own, the "strong post" *sati* will remain stable and unshaken. Such a stabilizing function of *sati* is of particular relevance during the initial stages of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, given that without a firm foundation in balanced awareness one only too easily succumbs to sensual distraction. This danger is illustrated in the *Cātumā Sutta*, which describes a monk who goes begging alms without having established *sati* and therefore without restraint at the sense doors. Encountering a scantily clad woman on his tour causes sensual desire to arise in his mind, so that he eventually decides to give up his practice and to

disrobe.<sup>57</sup>

### III.5 CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS OF SATI

A close examination of the instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* reveals that the meditator is never instructed to interfere actively with what happens in the mind. If a mental hindrance arises, for example, the task of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation is to know that the hindrance is present, to know what has led to its arising, and to know what will lead to its disappearance. A more active intervention is no longer the domain of *satipaṭṭhāna*, but belongs rather to the province of right effort (*sammā vāyāma*).

The need to distinguish clearly between a first stage of observation and a second stage of taking action is, according to the Buddha, an essential feature of his way of teaching.<sup>58</sup> The simple reason for this approach is that only the preliminary step of calmly assessing a situation without immediately reacting enables one to undertake the appropriate action.

Thus, although *sati* furnishes the necessary information for a wise deployment of right effort, and will monitor the countermeasures by noting if these are excessive or deficient, *sati* nevertheless remains an aloof quality of uninvolved, detached observation. *Sati* can interact with other, much more active factors of the mind, yet by itself it does not interfere.<sup>59</sup>

Uninvolved and detached receptivity as one of the crucial characteristics of *sati* forms an important aspect in the teachings of several modern meditation teachers and scholars.<sup>60</sup> They emphasize that the purpose of *sati* is solely to make things conscious, not to eliminate them. *Sati* silently

observes, like a spectator at a play, without in any way interfering. Some refer to this non-reactive feature of *sati* as “choiceless” awareness.<sup>61</sup> “Choiceless” in the sense that with such awareness one remains impartially aware, without reacting with likes or dislikes. Such silent and non-reactive observation can at times suffice to curb unwholesomeness, so that an application of *sati* can have quite active consequences. Yet *sati*’s activity is confined to detached observation. That is, *sati* does not change experience, it deepens it.

This non-interfering quality of *sati* is required to enable one clearly to observe the building up of reactions and their underlying motives. As soon as one becomes in any way involved in a reaction, the detached observational vantage point is immediately lost. The detached receptivity of *sati* enables one to step back from the situation at hand and thereby to become an unbiased observer of one’s subjective involvement and of the entire situation.<sup>62</sup> This detached distance allows for a more objective perspective, a characteristic illustrated in the above-mentioned simile of climbing a tower.

This detached but receptive stance of *satipatthāna* constitutes a “middle path”, since it avoids the two extremes of suppression and reaction.<sup>63</sup> The receptivity of *sati*, in the absence of both suppression and reaction, allows personal shortcomings and unjustified reactions to unfold before the watchful stance of the meditator, without being suppressed by the affective investment inherent in one’s self-image. Maintaining the presence of *sati* in this way is closely related to the ability to tolerate a high degree of “cognitive dissonance”, since the witnessing of one’s own shortcomings ordinarily leads to unconscious attempts at reducing the resulting feeling of discomfort by avoiding or even altering the

perceived information.<sup>64</sup>

This shift towards a more objective and uninvolved perspective introduces an important element of sobriety into self-observation. The element of “sobriety” inherent in the presence of *sati* comes up in an entertaining canonical description of a particular celestial realm, whose divine inhabitants get so “intoxicated” with sensual indulgence that they lose all *sati*. As a consequence of being without *sati*, they fall from their elevated celestial position and are reborn in a lower realm.<sup>65</sup> The reverse case is also documented in another discourse, in which negligent monks, reborn in an inferior celestial realm, on regaining their *sati* are at once able to ascend to a higher realm.<sup>66</sup> Both these instances point to the edifying power of *sati* and its wholesome repercussions.

*Sati* as a mental quality is closely related to attention (*manasikāra*), a basic function which, according to the *Abhidhammic* analysis, is present in any kind of mental state.<sup>67</sup> This basic faculty of ordinary attention characterizes the initial split seconds of bare cognizing of an object, before one begins to recognize, identify, and conceptualize. *Sati* can be understood as a further development and temporal extension of this type of attention, thereby adding clarity and depth to the usually much too short fraction of time occupied by bare attention in the perceptual process.<sup>68</sup> The resemblance in function between *sati* and attention is also reflected in the fact that wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) parallels several aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, such as directing attention to antidotes for the hindrances, becoming aware of the impermanent nature of the aggregates or of the sense-spheres, establishing the awakening factors, and contemplating the four noble truths.<sup>69</sup>

This “bare attention” aspect of *sati* has an intriguing



potential, since it is capable of leading to a “de-automatization” of mental mechanisms.<sup>70</sup> Through bare *sati* one is able to see things just as they are, unadulterated by habitual reactions and projections. By bringing the perceptual process into the full light of awareness, one becomes conscious of automatic and habitual responses to perceptual data. Full awareness of these automatic responses is the necessary preliminary step to changing detrimental mental habits.

*Sati* as bare attention is particularly relevant to restraint at the sense doors (*indriya saṃvara*).<sup>71</sup> In this aspect of the gradual path, the practitioner is encouraged to retain bare *sati* in regard to all sense-input. Through the simple presence of uninterrupted and bare mindfulness, the mind is “restrained” from amplifying and proliferating the received information in various ways. This guardianship role of *sati* in relation to sense-input is alluded to in those similes that declare *satipaṭṭhāna* to be the proper “pasture” for a meditator and which compare *sati* to the gatekeeper of a town.

According to the discourses, the purpose of restraining the senses is to avoid the arising of desires (*abhijjhā*) and discontent (*domanassa*). Such freedom from desires and discontent is also an aspect of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, mentioned in the “definition” part of the discourse.<sup>72</sup> Thus the absence of reactions under the influence of desires and discontent is a common feature of both *satipaṭṭhāna* and sense-restraint. This goes to show that there is a considerable degree of overlap between these two activities.

To sum up, *sati* entails an alert but receptive equanimous observation.<sup>73</sup> Viewed from the context of actual practice, a predominantly receptive *sati* is then enlivened by the quality of being diligent (*ātāpī*), and supported by a foundation in concentration (*samādhi*). To the interrelation of *sati* with

concentration I will now turn in more detail.

### III.6 SATI AND CONCENTRATION (SAMĀDHI)

The continuous presence of well-established *sati* is a requirement for absorption (*jhāna*).<sup>74</sup> Without the support of *sati*, as the *Visuddhimagga* points out, concentration cannot reach the level of absorption.<sup>75</sup> Even on emerging from an experience of deep concentration *sati* is required when one reviews the constituent factors of one's experience.<sup>76</sup> Thus *sati* is relevant for attaining, for remaining in, and for emerging from deep concentration.<sup>77</sup>

*Sati* becomes particularly prominent when the third level of absorption (*jhāna*) is reached.<sup>78</sup> With the attainment of the fourth absorption, when the mind has reached such a degree of proficiency that it can be directed towards the development of supernormal powers, *sati* also reaches a high degree of purity, because of its association with deep equanimity.<sup>79</sup>

Several discourses testify to the important role of *satipaṭṭhāna* as a basis for the development of absorption and for the subsequent attainment of supernormal powers.<sup>80</sup> The role of *satipaṭṭhāna* in supporting the development of concentration is also reflected in the standard expositions of the gradual path, where the preliminary steps that lead up to the attainment of absorption include mindfulness and clear knowledge (*satisampajañña*) in relation to bodily activities, and the task of recognizing the hindrances and supervising their removal, an aspect of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of *dhammas*.

The progression from *satipaṭṭhāna* to absorption is described in the *Dantabhūmi Sutta* with an intermediate step. In this

intermediate step, contemplation of the body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas* continues with the specific qualification that one should avoid having any thoughts.<sup>81</sup> In the instruction for this transitional stage, the mental qualities of diligence and clear knowledge are conspicuously absent. Their absence suggests that at this point the contemplation is no longer *satipaṭṭhāna* proper, but only a transitional stage. This thought-free transitional stage still partakes of the same receptive observational quality and of the same object as *satipaṭṭhāna*, but at the same time it marks a clear shift from insight to calm. It is subsequent to this shift of emphasis from *satipaṭṭhāna* proper to a state of calm awareness that the development of absorption can take place.

On considering these instances it is indubitably clear that *sati* has a crucial role to fulfil in the realm of *samatha*. This might be why the *Cūlavédalla Sutta* speaks of *satipaṭṭhāna* as the “cause” of concentration (*samādhinimitta*).<sup>82</sup> The relation between *satipaṭṭhāna* and the development of deep concentration is exemplified by the monk Anuruddha, foremost among the Buddha’s disciples in the supernormal ability of seeing beings in other realms of existence,<sup>83</sup> an ability based on a high degree of proficiency in concentration. Whenever asked about his abilities, Anuruddha invariably explained that his skills were the outcome of his practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>84</sup>

On the other hand, however, to consider *satipaṭṭhāna* purely as a concentration exercise goes too far and misses the important difference between what can become a basis for the development of concentration and what belongs to the realm of calmness meditation proper.<sup>85</sup> In fact, the characteristic functions of *sati* and concentration (*samādhi*) are quite distinct. While concentration corresponds to an enhancement

of the selective function of the mind, by way of restricting the breadth of attention, *sati* on its own represents an enhancement of the recollective function, by way of expanding the breadth of attention.<sup>86</sup> These two modes of mental functioning correspond to two different cortical control mechanisms in the brain.<sup>87</sup> This difference, however, does not imply that the two are incompatible, since during absorption attainment both are present. But during absorption *sati* becomes mainly presence of the mind, when it to some extent loses its natural breadth owing to the strong focusing power of concentration.

The difference between these two becomes evident from the vocabulary employed in a passage from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta*. In this passage the Buddha recommended that, if one is being distracted or sluggish while practising *satipaṭṭhāna*, one should temporarily change one's practice and develop a calm (*samatha*) object of meditation, in order to cultivate internal joy and serenity.<sup>88</sup>

This he termed a “directed” form of meditation (*pañīdhāya bhāvanā*). Once, however, the mind has been calmed, one can return to an “undirected” mode of meditation (*appañīdhāya bhāvanā*), namely the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The distinction drawn in this discourse between “directed” and “undirected” forms of meditation suggests that, considered on their own, these two modes of meditation are clearly different. At the same time, however, the whole discourse is concerned with their skilful interrelation, clearly demonstrating that whatever the degree of their difference, the two can be interrelated and support each other.<sup>89</sup>

The characteristic quality of concentration is to “direct” and apply the mind, focusing on a single object to the exclusion of everything else. Thus the development of concentration

promotes a shift from the common structure of experience as a subject-object duality towards an experience of unity.<sup>90</sup>

Concentration, however, thereby excludes a broader awareness of circumstances and of their interrelations.<sup>91</sup> This awareness of circumstances and interrelations is, however, essential in order to become aware of those characteristics of experience whose understanding leads to awakening. In this context, the broadly receptive quality of *sati* is particularly important.

These two rather distinct qualities of concentration and mindfulness are combined to some extent in the descriptions of insight meditation by those meditation teachers who emphasize the “dry insight” approach, dispensing with the formal development of mental calm. They sometimes describe *sati* as “attacking” its object in a way that is comparable to a stone hitting a wall.<sup>92</sup> These forceful terms probably represent the need for a considerable degree of effort during contemplation, such prodigious effort being required to compensate for the comparatively low degree of concentration developed when following the “dry insight” approach to awakening. In fact, some of these same meditation teachers consider the bare and equanimous qualities of *sati* as a more evolved stage of practice, presumably when the more forceful stage of “attacking” an object has fulfilled its role and has provided a basis of mental stability.<sup>93</sup>

The above way of considering *sati* may be related to the commentarial definition of *sati* as “non-floating” and therefore as “plunging into its object”.<sup>94</sup> Certainly the absence of “floating”, in the sense of distraction, is a characteristic of *sati*. However “to plunge” into an object appears to be more characteristic of concentration, particularly during the progress towards absorption. According to modern

scholarship, it seems that this aspect of the commentarial understanding of *sati* arose because of a misreading or misinterpretation of a particular term.<sup>95</sup> In fact, “attacking” an object or “plunging into” an object do not correspond to the characteristic features of *sati* in itself, but represent *sati* in a secondary role, acting in combination with effort or concentration.

Thus although it plays an important part in the development of absorption, considered on its own *sati* is a mental quality distinct from concentration. Indeed, the reason even the attainment of high levels of absorption by itself is insufficient for liberating insight is quite probably related to the inhibition of the passive observational qualities of awareness by the strong focusing power of absorption concentration. This, however, does not detract from the fact that the development of concentration fulfils an important role in the context of insight meditation, a topic I will discuss in more detail in Chapter IV.

## IV

### THE RELEVANCE OF CONCENTRATION

This chapter is devoted to the expression “free from desires and discontent in regard to the world” and its implications. Since the freedom from desires and discontent envisaged in this final part of the “definition” points to the development of mental composure when practising *satipaṭṭhāna*, in this chapter I investigate the role of concentration in the context of insight meditation, and try to ascertain the degree of concentration needed for realization. Thereafter I examine the general contribution of concentration to the development of insight and their interrelatedness.

#### IV.1 FREEDOM FROM DESIRES AND DISCONTENT

The “definition” part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* concludes with the expression “free from desires and discontent in regard to the world”.<sup>1</sup> According to the *Nettipakaraṇa*, to be “free from desires and discontent” represents the faculty of concentration.<sup>2</sup> This suggestion finds support in some discourses, which slightly vary the “definition”, replacing “free from desires and discontent” with

references to a concentrated mind or to experiencing happiness.<sup>3</sup> These passages indicate that freedom from desires and discontent represents mental calm and contentment.

The commentaries go further and identify this part of the “definition” with the removal of the five hindrances.<sup>4</sup> This is sometimes understood to imply that the five hindrances have to be removed prior to embarking on *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation.<sup>5</sup> Therefore this expression requires a detailed examination in order to see how far such a stipulation is justified.

The Pāli term rendered “free” is *vineyya*, from the verb *vineti* (to remove). Although *vineyya* is best translated as “having removed”, this does not necessarily imply that desires and discontent must be removed before undertaking the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*; it can also mean that this activity takes place simultaneously with the practice.<sup>6</sup>

This way of understanding concurs with the general picture provided in the discourses. In a passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, for example, the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* does not require, but rather results in, overcoming the hindrances.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, according to a discourse in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta*, lack of skill in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* prevents the practitioner from developing concentration and overcoming mental defilements.<sup>8</sup> This statement would be meaningless if the development of concentration and the absence of mental defilements were prerequisites for the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Desires (*abhijjhā*) and discontent (*domanassa*), the two



mental qualities whose removal is stipulated in the “definition”, occur again in relation to the last four steps in the sixteen-step scheme for mindfulness of breathing described in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*. According to the Buddha’s explanation, by this stage of practice freedom from desires and discontent has been achieved.<sup>9</sup> This explanation suggests that the same was not yet the case for the previous twelve steps, which the Buddha nevertheless described as corresponding to the first three *satipaṭṭhānas*.<sup>10</sup> The disappearance of discontent on its own occurs also in the “direct path” passage of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, where its removal is a goal of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.<sup>11</sup> All these passages clearly demonstrate that a complete “removal” of desires and discontent is not a prerequisite for *satipaṭṭhāna*, but comes about as a result of successful practice.<sup>12</sup>

The mental qualities to be removed are desires (*abhijjhā*) and discontent (*domanassa*). The commentaries identify these with the entire set of the five hindrances.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, in several discourses “desires” (*abhijjhā*) do replace the more usual sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*) as the first of the hindrances.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to understand, however, why discontent (*domanassa*) should correspond to the hindrance of aversion (*byāpāda*). In the discourses, discontent (*domanassa*) stands for any kind of mental dejection, which would not necessarily be related to aversion, and certainly not be synonymous with it.<sup>15</sup> Besides, even if one were to accept the questionable equating of discontent with aversion, one would still have to account

for the remaining three hindrances.<sup>16</sup>

If it really were essential to remove the five hindrances before undertaking the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, several of the meditation practices described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* would be rendered superfluous. These are the contemplation of unwholesome feelings and of unwholesome states of mind (worldly feelings, mind affected by lust or anger), and in particular awareness of the presence of just these five hindrances as the first contemplation of *dhammas*. These *satipaṭṭhāna* instructions clearly suggest that unwholesome states of mind, whether they be desires, discontent, or any of the hindrances, need not prevent one from practising *satipaṭṭhāna*, since they can profitably be turned into objects of mindful contemplation.

In the light of these considerations, it seems quite probable that the Buddha did not envisage the removal of the five hindrances as a necessary precondition for the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. In fact, if he intended to stipulate their removal as a requirement for undertaking *satipaṭṭhāna*, one might wonder why he did not explicitly mention the hindrances, as he invariably did when describing the development of absorption (*jhāna*).

The two mental qualities of desires and discontent, which the Buddha did mention in the *satipaṭṭhāna* “definition”, often occur in the discourses in relation to sense-restraint, a stage in the gradual path scheme prior to formal meditation.<sup>17</sup> At this stage, the meditator guards the sense doors in order to prevent sense impressions from leading to desires and discontent. Judging from these

contexts, the expression “desires and discontent” refers in a general way to “likes” and “dislikes” in regard to what has been perceived.

According to the presentation in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, the absence of such desires and discontent constitutes an important factor in carrying out the comparatively subtle and sophisticated meditations listed for contemplation of *dhammas*. This relates the absence of desires and discontent to an advanced stage of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Thus, *vineyya* as the completed action of “having removed” desires and discontent represents more advanced levels of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The discourses often refer to such advanced stages of *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation as “well-established” (*supatitṭhita*).<sup>18</sup> At these more advanced stages of *satipaṭṭhāna*, impartial awareness is so firmly established (*supatitṭhita*) that one is effortlessly able to maintain dispassionate observation, without reacting with desires and discontent.

Conversely, *vineyya* as a simultaneous action, as the act of “removing” taking place in the present, indicates a purpose of the initial stages of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. During these initial stages the task is to build up a degree of inner equipoise within which desires and discontent are held at bay. These initial stages of *satipaṭṭhāna* parallel sense-restraint, which combines bare *sati* with deliberate effort in order to avoid or counterbalance desires and discontent. Although sense-restraint precedes proper meditation practice in the gradual path scheme, this does not imply that sense-restraint is completed at an exact point in time, only after which one moves on to formal

practice.<sup>19</sup> In actual practice the two overlap to a considerable degree, so that sense-restraint can be considered part of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, particularly at those stages when desires and discontent have not yet been completely removed.

Although the initial stages of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice may not require the prior establishment of a high level of concentration, or the complete removal of unwholesome states of mind, these are necessary for the advanced stages of the practice that are to lead up to realization. This necessity will occupy me during most of the remainder of this chapter, in which I will investigate in more detail the relationship of concentration to the progress towards realization. As a preparation for this investigation, I will first attempt to clarify the implications of the relevant terms: concentration (*samādhi*), right concentration (*sammā samādhi*), and absorption (*jhāna*).

#### IV.2 CONCENTRATION, RIGHT CONCENTRATION, AND ABSORPTION

The noun *samādhi* is related to the verb *samādahati*, “to put together” or “to collect”, such as when one collects wood to kindle a fire.<sup>20</sup> *Samādhi* thus stands for “collecting” oneself, in the sense of composure or unification of the mind.<sup>21</sup>

The discourses use the term “concentration” (*samādhi*) in a surprisingly broad manner, relating it to walking meditation, for example, or to observing the arising and passing away of feelings and cognitions, or to contemplating the arising and passing away of the five

aggregates.<sup>22</sup> In a passage from the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, even the four *satipaṭṭhānas* are treated as a form of concentration.<sup>23</sup> These occurrences demonstrate that, as used in the discourses, the term “concentration” (*samādhi*) is not restricted to the development of calm (*samatha*) only, but can also refer to the realm of insight meditation (*vipassanā*).

Turning to “right concentration” (*sammā samādhi*), here one finds time and again that the discourses equate right concentration with the four absorptions (*jhānas*).<sup>24</sup> This is of considerable importance, since “right” concentration is a prerequisite for awakening. Taking this definition literally, the development of “right” concentration requires the ability to attain all four absorptions. However, several discourses allow for full awakening based “only” on the ability to attain the first absorption.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that even the first absorption may be sufficient, in terms of concentrative ability, to enable the breakthrough to full awakening.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, in the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* and several other discourses another definition of right concentration can be found that does not mention the absorptions at all.<sup>27</sup> The importance of the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* to the present discussion is further highlighted in the preamble to this discourse, which states the topic to be a teaching on right concentration.<sup>28</sup> The definition of right concentration given here speaks of unification of the mind (*cittassekaggatā*) in interdependence with the other seven path factors.<sup>29</sup> That is, in order for unification of the mind to become “right” concentration it needs to be

contextualized within the noble eightfold path scheme.<sup>30</sup> Definitions of right concentration that do not mention absorption attainment can also be found in the *Abhidhamma* and the commentaries.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the decisive factor that qualifies concentration as “right” is not just a question of the depth of concentration achieved, but is concerned with the purpose for which concentration is employed. In particular, the presence of the path factor right view is indispensable.<sup>32</sup> By way of contrast, the Buddha’s former teachers, Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, despite their deep concentration attainments, were not endowed with “right” concentration because of the absence of right view.<sup>33</sup> This goes to show that the ability to attain absorption in itself does not yet constitute the fulfilment of the path factor of right concentration.

A similar nuance underlies the qualification *sammā*, “right”, which literally means “togetherness”, or “to be connected in one”.<sup>34</sup> Thus to speak of the four absorptions or of unification of the mind as “right” concentration does not simply mean that these are “right” and all else is “wrong”, but points to the need to incorporate the development of concentration into the noble eightfold path.

Such a stipulation is not without practical relevance, since although the experience of absorption is a powerful tool to diminish craving and attachment in regard to the five senses, it all too easily lends itself to stimulating craving for and attachment to these sublime “mind door” experiences. But only concentration untainted by craving

can act as a full-fledged path factor of the noble eightfold path leading to the eradication of *dukkha*. It is this quality, and not just the depth of concentration achieved, that turns a concentrative attainment into right concentration.

To sum up: to speak of “right” concentration is not simply a question of being able to attain absorption, since the decisive criterion for describing concentration as “right” is whether it is developed in conjunction with the other factors of the noble eightfold path.

The word *jhāna* (absorption) is derived from the verb *jhāyati* “to meditate”.<sup>35</sup> Although *jhāna* usually refers to the attainment of deep absorption, the word occasionally retains its original meaning of meditation. The *Gopakamoggallāna Sutta*, for example, mentions a form of *jhāna* in which the hindrances still obsess the mind.<sup>36</sup> Such “*jhāna*” does not qualify as a meditative absorption, since it is the absence of the hindrances that characterizes true absorption.

In order to assess the practical implications of such a true state of absorption, a brief examination of the first absorption is required at this point. The problem with understanding the first absorption is that two of its mental factors, initial mental application (*vitakka*) and sustained mental application (*vicāra*),<sup>37</sup> have been differently interpreted. As *vitakka*, initial mental application, is etymologically related to *takka*, which denotes thought and logical reasoning, several scholars conclude that conceptual thought continues in the first stage of absorption.<sup>38</sup> Some discourses appear at first sight to

support this, since they refer to the second absorption as the “cessation of wholesome intentions”, or as a state of “noble silence”.<sup>39</sup>

This point is of considerable relevance to an understanding of the nature of absorption. The issue at stake, simply stated, is whether the first absorption is a deep state of concentration, achieved only after a prolonged period of practice and seclusion, or a stage of relaxed happy reflection within easy reach of anyone and without much need for meditative proficiency.

The latter assumption stands in contradiction to the commentarial presentation, which describes in detail the stages of development prior to absorption.<sup>40</sup> These sources indicate that to attain the first absorption a considerable amount of meditative development is required. Although references to this preliminary development appear only obliquely in the discourses, in one instance at least, the *Upakkilesa Sutta*, the Buddha gave a detailed account of his own struggle to attain the first absorption.<sup>41</sup> This passage leaves no doubt that the Buddha himself encountered considerable difficulty when he attempted to attain the first absorption, even though in his early youth he had already once experienced it.<sup>42</sup>

The *Upakkilesa Sutta* is addressed to Anuruddha and a group of monks who were evidently in similar difficulties. On another occasion the Buddha also had to assist Moggallāna to attain the first absorption.<sup>43</sup> It is noteworthy that Anuruddha and Moggallāna, who both later excelled all other disciples with their concentrative powers,<sup>44</sup> needed the Buddha’s personal intervention to



attain “merely” the first absorption. These examples suggest that the attainment of the first absorption requires a considerable degree of meditative proficiency.

According to the discourses, one who has entered the first absorption is no longer able to speak.<sup>45</sup> This would not apply if the first absorption were merely a state of calm mental reflection. Not only speech, but also hearing does not occur during the deeper stages of absorption; in fact, sound is a major obstacle to attaining the first absorption.<sup>46</sup> The experience of the first absorption is an “unworldly” experience;<sup>47</sup> it constitutes another world in the psychological and the cosmological sense.<sup>48</sup> To attain the first absorption is to reach a “superbly extraordinary state”.<sup>49</sup> Already the first absorption “blindfolds” Māra, since on entering this state one goes beyond the range of Māra’s vision.<sup>50</sup>

These passages support an understanding of the first absorption as a deeply absorbed state of mind, beyond mere reflection and conceptual thought. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that, as absorption-factors, initial mental application (*vitakka*) and sustained mental application (*vicāra*) do not imply full-fledged thinking activity. Rather, they refer to the initial and sustained application of attention. Such application of attention can also take place in the domain of thought or verbal communication, when initial mental application directs the mind towards what is to be thought or said, while sustained mental application maintains the coherence of a particular sequence of thoughts or words. In the context of absorption, however, this same activity is nothing more

than an intentional deployment of attention, directed towards the object of concentration.

To translate *vitakka* as “initial mental application” finds support in the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta*, which includes “application of the mind” (*cetaso abhiniropānā*) in a list of synonyms for “right thought” along with *vitakka*.<sup>51</sup> To understand *vitakka* as initial application of the mind can moreover claim support from the *Abhidhamma* and the commentaries, and from numerous modern meditation teachers and scholars.<sup>52</sup>

This way of understanding can also be applied to the above-mentioned passages, which at first sight seemed to suggest that conceptual thought continues in the first stage of absorption, since they spoke of the “cessation of wholesome intentions” on attaining the second absorption, a state of “noble silence”. Although initial mental application as a factor of the first absorption is different from discursive thought, initial mental application is nonetheless in this context a kind of “intention” and thereby involves a very subtle degree of deliberate mental activity. Only on entering the second absorption, when this last vestige of mental activity is abandoned and concentration has become fully stable,<sup>53</sup> does the mind reach a state of complete inner stillness (“noble silence”), leaving behind even these subtle “wholesome intentions”.

Based on the passages considered so far, it seems reasonable to suppose that “absorption” (*jhāna*) refers to profound experiences of deep concentration achieved after having developed a considerable degree of meditative

proficiency.

#### IV.3 ABSORPTION AND REALIZATION

Countless discourses recommend the development of concentration as an essential factor for “knowing things as they really are”.<sup>54</sup> Concentration is a requirement for full awakening,<sup>55</sup> and this concentration has to be “right” concentration.<sup>56</sup> These specifications recommend absorption concentration as a requisite for full awakening. However, the question might be asked if the same is also required for stream-entry. Although, owing to the powerful impact of experiencing *Nibbāna* at stream-entry, the concentrative unification of one’s mind (*cittassekaggatā*) will momentarily reach a level comparable to absorption, how far does this require the previous development of absorption with a calmness object of meditation?<sup>57</sup>

The qualities listed in the discourses as essential for the realization of stream-entry do not stipulate the ability to attain absorption.<sup>58</sup> Nor are such abilities mentioned in the descriptions of the qualities that are characteristic of a stream-enterer subsequent to realization.<sup>59</sup>

According to the discourses, what is a necessary condition for being able to gain stream-entry is a state of mind completely free from the five hindrances.<sup>60</sup> Although a convenient way to remove the hindrances is the development of absorption, this is not the only way to do so. According to a discourse in the *Itivuttaka*, the hindrances can also be removed and the mind become

concentrated even during walking meditation, a posture not suitable for attaining absorption.<sup>61</sup> In fact, another passage shows that the hindrances can be temporarily absent even outside the context of formal meditation, such as when one is listening to the *Dhamma*.<sup>62</sup>

This alternative is corroborated by a fair number of the attainments of stream-entry recorded in the discourses where the person in question might not even have meditated regularly in this life, much less be able to attain absorption.<sup>63</sup> Yet these reports invariably mention the removal of the hindrances previous to the arising of insight.<sup>64</sup> In all these instances, the hindrances were removed as a result of attentively listening to the gradual instructions given by the Buddha.

In fact, a substantial number of well-known modern meditation teachers base their teachings on the dispensability of absorption abilities for the realization of stream-entry.<sup>65</sup> According to them, for the mind to become momentarily “absorbed” in the experience of *Nibbāna* at stream-entry, the ability to attain mundane absorption is not a necessary requirement.

The issue at question becomes even clearer when the next stage of awakening is considered, that of once-returning. Once-returners are so called because they will be reborn only once again in “this world” (i.e. the *kāmaloka*).<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, those who have developed the ability to attain absorption at will, and have not lost this ability, are not going to return to “this world” in their next life.<sup>67</sup> They will be reborn in a higher heavenly sphere (i.e. the *rūpaloka* or the *arūpaloka*). This

certainly does not imply that a stream-enterer or a once-returner cannot have absorption attainments. But if they were all absorption attainers, the very concept of a “once-returner” would be superfluous, since not a single once-returner would ever return to “this world”.

According to the discourses, the difference between the realizations of “once-returning” and “non-returning” is related to differing levels of concentrative ability. Several passages point out that the once-returner, in contrast to the non-returner, has not yet fulfilled the development of concentration.<sup>68</sup> Judging from this, the attainment of absorption might be of relevance for the realization of non-returning. In fact, several discourses relate progress towards the higher two stages of the path, non-returning and arahantship, to having had the experience of the first or higher absorptions.<sup>69</sup> The reason for this could be that the insightful contemplation of meditative absorption fulfils an important role in overcoming and completely eradicating the last traces of desire, and thereby facilitates the breakthrough to non-returning or full awakening.<sup>70</sup>

The concluding passage of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the “prediction”, appears at first sight to contradict this, since it predicts the realization of full awakening or non-returning for successful *satipaṭṭhāna* practice without making any additional stipulations.<sup>71</sup> This could be taken to imply that absorption abilities can be dispensed with even for the higher stages of awakening. However, such assumptions need to be weighed against other evidence in the discourses, where the need for at least the first absorption is clearly and explicitly stated.<sup>72</sup> Although

absorption abilities are not directly mentioned in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the general picture provided by the discourses suggests that the ability to attain at least the first absorption is required for the higher two stages of awakening. Otherwise it would be difficult to understand why the Buddha mentioned absorption in the standard expositions of the noble eightfold path leading to full awakening.

When considering the concluding passage of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, one needs to take into account that this passage is concerned with the fruits of the practice, not with the need for a particular level of concentration as a prerequisite for realization. The fact that it mentions only the higher two fruits of realization highlights the potential of proper practice. The same holds true for a group of twenty discourses in the *Bojjhaṅga Saṃyutta*, which relate a broad range of meditation practices to these two higher realizations.<sup>73</sup> These instances, too, do not bear any relation to the presence or absence of absorption abilities, but rather call attention to the potential of the respective meditation practices. Moreover, the *Madhyama Āgama* and the *Ekottara Āgama* both mention absorption attainment as part of their expositions on *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>74</sup> This suggests that for *satipaṭṭhāna* to unfold its full potential of leading to non-returning or full awakening, the development of absorption is required.

Another term relevant to the present topic is “purification of mind” (*cittavisuddhi*). This expression occurs in the *Rathavināta Sutta*, which enumerates a series of seven successive stages of purification.<sup>75</sup> The discourse

compares each stage of purification to a single chariot in a relay of chariots connecting two locations. In this sequence, purification of mind occupies the second position between the preceding purification of ethical conduct and the subsequent purification of view. The fact that purification of mind precedes purification of view is sometimes taken to imply that absorption is a necessary basis for realization.<sup>76</sup>

In this discourse, however, the question leading to the chariot simile was not at all concerned with the conditions necessary for realization. Rather, the topic discussed in the *Rathavinīta Sutta* was the aim of living the life of a monk or nun in the early Buddhist monastic community. The point was that each purification, though a necessary step on the path, falls short of the final goal. To illustrate this, the chariot simile was introduced. The need to move beyond different stages of purification in order to reach the final goal is in fact a recurrent theme in the discourses.<sup>77</sup>

Although the chariot simile in the *Rathavinīta Sutta* does imply a conditional relationship between the various stages mentioned, to take this as stipulating that absorption must be attained before turning to the development of insight pushes this simile too far. Such a literal interpretation needs to regard the establishment of ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom as a matter of strict linear sequence, whereas in practical reality these three have a symbiotic character, each enhancing and supporting the other. This is illustrated in the *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta*, which compares the mutual interrelatedness of

ethical conduct and wisdom to two hands washing each other.<sup>78</sup>

Besides, according to two discourses in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* it is impossible to purify concentration (viz. purification of the mind) without having first purified right view (viz. purification of view).<sup>79</sup> This statement proposes exactly the reverse sequence to the *Rathavinīta Sutta*, where purification of the mind preceded purification of view.

On further perusing the discourses one finds that they depict a variety of approaches to final realization. Two passages in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, for example, describe a practitioner who is able to gain deep wisdom, though lacking proficiency in concentration.<sup>80</sup> Another discourse in the same *Nikāya* speaks of two alternative approaches to full realization: the pleasant approach by way of absorption, and the much less pleasant approach by way of contemplating the repulsiveness of the body.<sup>81</sup> In addition, the *Yuganaddha Sutta* (in the same *Aṅguttara Nikāya*) states that realization can be gained by developing either concentration or insight first and then developing the other, or both can be developed together.<sup>82</sup> This discourse clearly shows that although some practitioners will build up concentration first and then turn to insight, others can follow the reverse procedure. It would do little justice to these passages if one were to limit the approach to realization to only one of these sequences, presuming that the development of concentration invariably has to precede the development of insight.



#### IV.4 THE CONTRIBUTION OF ABSORPTION TO THE PROGRESS OF INSIGHT

Nevertheless, in many discourses the Buddha pointed out that the cultivation of absorption is particularly conducive to realization.<sup>83</sup> The development of deep concentration leads to a high degree of mastery over the mind.<sup>84</sup> Not only does absorption attainment entail the temporary removal of the hindrances, it also makes it much more difficult for them to invade the mind on later occasions.<sup>85</sup> On emerging from deep concentration the mind is “malleable”, “workable”, and “steady”,<sup>86</sup> so that one can easily direct it to seeing things “as they truly are”. Not only that; when things are seen as they truly are by a calm and malleable mind, this vision affects the deeper layers of the mind. Such a vision goes far beyond a superficial intellectual appreciation, because, owing to the receptivity and malleability of the mind, insights will be able to penetrate into the deeper regions of the mind and thereby bring about inner change.

The advantages of developing absorption concentration are not only that it provides a stable and receptive state of mind for the practice of insight meditation. The experience of absorption is one of intense pleasure and happiness, brought about by purely mental means, which thereby automatically eclipses any pleasure arising in dependence on material objects. Thus absorption functions as a powerful antidote to sensual desires by divesting them of their former attraction.<sup>87</sup> In fact, according to the *Cūḷadukkhakhandha Sutta* wisdom alone

does not suffice to overcome sensuality, but needs the powerful support available through the experience of absorption.<sup>88</sup> The Buddha himself, during his own quest for awakening, overcame the obstruction caused by sensual desires only by developing absorption.<sup>89</sup>

Deep concentration promotes inner stability and integration.<sup>90</sup> In this way, the experience of deep concentration fulfils an important role in fortifying the ability to withstand the destabilizing effect of those experiences that might be encountered during advanced stages of insight meditation.<sup>91</sup> Without a calm and integrated mind, able to withstand the impact of such experiences, a practitioner might lose the balanced stance of observation and become overwhelmed by fear, anxiety, or depression. The development of mental calm thus builds up a healthy degree of self-integration as a supportive basis for the development of insight.<sup>92</sup>

Clearly, there are substantial advantages to be gained when the development of insight is supported and counterbalanced by the development of *samatha*. The experience of higher forms of happiness and the concomitant degree of personal integration are benefits that show that the development of *samatha* makes its own substantial contribution to progress along the path. This importance is expressed vividly in the discourses with the statement that one who has respect for the Buddha and his teaching will automatically hold concentration in high regard.<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, one who looks down on the development of concentration thereby only approves of those who have an unsteady mind.<sup>94</sup>

Nevertheless, it needs to be said that the Buddha was also keenly aware of potential shortcomings of deep states of concentration. The attainment of absorption can turn into an obstacle on the path to realization if such attainment becomes a cause for pride or an object of attachment. The satisfaction and pleasure experienced during absorption, though facilitating the relinquishment of worldly pleasures, can make it more difficult to arouse the dissatisfaction and disenchantment required for the complete relinquishment of everything that leads up to realization.<sup>95</sup>

The *Māra Saṃyutta* even reports a casualty of concentration meditation: a monk committed suicide because he had several times failed to stabilize his concentrative attainment.<sup>96</sup> On another occasion, when a monk was mourning his loss of concentration owing to physical illness, the Buddha dryly commented that such a reaction is characteristic of those who consider concentration the essence of their life and practice.<sup>97</sup> He then instructed the monk to contemplate the impermanent nature of the five aggregates instead.

#### IV.5 CALM AND INSIGHT

The central point that emerges when considering the relationship between calm and insight is the need for balance. Since a concentrated mind supports the development of insight, and the presence of wisdom in turn facilitates the development of deeper levels of concentration, calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) are

at their best when developed in skilful cooperation.<sup>98</sup>

Considered from this perspective, the controversy over the necessity or dispensability of absorption abilities for gaining a particular level of realization is to some extent based on a misleading premise. This controversy takes for granted that the whole purpose of calmness meditation is to gain the ability to enter absorption as a stepping-stone for the development of insight, a sort of preliminary duty that either needs or does not need to be fulfilled. The discourses offer a different perspective. Here calm and insight are two complementary aspects of mental development. The question of practising only insight meditation does not arise, since the important function of calmness meditation, as a practice in its own right, is never reduced to its auxiliary role in relation to insight meditation.

This need for both calm and insight on the path to realization leads me on to another issue. Some scholars have understood these two aspects of meditation to represent two different paths, possibly even leading to two different goals. They assume that the path of *samatha* proceeds via the ascending series of absorptions to the attainment of the cessation of cognition and feeling (*saññāvedayitanirodha*) and thence to the cessation of passion. In contrast to this, the path of insight, at times mistakenly understood to be a process of pure intellectual reflection, supposedly leads to a qualitatively different goal, the cessation of ignorance.<sup>99</sup>

A passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* does indeed relate the practice of *samatha* to the destruction of passion and

the practice of *vipassanā* to the destruction of ignorance.<sup>100</sup> The distinction between the two is expressed by the expressions “freedom of the mind” (*cetovimutti*) and “freedom by wisdom” (*paññāvimutti*) respectively. However, these two expressions are not simply equivalent in value relative to realization. While “freedom by wisdom” (*paññāvimutti*) refers to the realization of *Nibbāna*, “freedom of the mind” (*cetovimutti*), unless further specified as “unshakeable” (*akuppa*), does not imply the same. “Freedom of the mind” can also connote temporary experiences of mental freedom, such as the attainment of the fourth absorption, or the development of the divine abodes (*brahmavihāra*).<sup>101</sup> Thus this passage is presenting not two different approaches to realization but two aspects of the meditative path, one of which is not sufficient by itself to bring realization.<sup>102</sup>

Another relevant discourse is the *Susīma Sutta*, which reports various monks declaring realization.<sup>103</sup> Since these monks at the same time denied having attained supernatural powers, this passage has sometimes been understood to imply that full awakening can be attained merely by intellectual reflection.<sup>104</sup> In reality, however, the monks’ declaration that they were only “freed by wisdom” indicates that they were not in possession of the immaterial meditative attainments. It does not mean that they gained realization without meditating at all, by a purely intellectual approach.<sup>105</sup>

A similar problem is sometimes seen in regard to the *Kosambi Sutta*, where a monk declared that he had

personal realization of dependent co-arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*), although he was not an *arahant*.<sup>106</sup> This passage becomes intelligible if one follows the commentarial explanation, according to which the monk in question was “only” a once-returner.<sup>107</sup> The point here is that personal realization of the principle of dependent co-arising is not a characteristic of full awakening only, but is already a feature of stream-entry.

Instead of perceiving these passages as expressing an “underlying tension” between two different paths to realization, they simply describe different aspects of what is basically one approach.<sup>108</sup> As a matter of fact, full awakening requires a purification of both the cognitive and the affective aspect of the mind. Although on theoretical examination these two aspects of the path might appear different, in actual practice they tend to converge and supplement each other.

This is neatly summarized in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, which emphasizes the importance of appreciating the essential similarity between calm and insight meditation in terms of their function.<sup>109</sup> A practitioner might develop one or the other aspect to a higher degree at different times, but in the final stages of practice both calm and insight need to be combined in order to reach the final aim – full awakening – the destruction of both passion and ignorance.

## V

### THE *SATIPATTHĀNA* “REFRAIN”

Having examined the “definition” of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* at some length, I shall now look at a part of the discourse which could be called the “modus operandi” of *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>1</sup> This part, which I refer to as the “refrain”, occurs after each of the meditation exercises described in the discourse and presents four key aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* (cf. Fig. 5.1 below).<sup>2</sup> The task of this “refrain” is to direct attention to those aspects that are essential for the proper practice of each exercise. Thus an understanding of the implications of the “refrain” forms a necessary background to the meditation techniques described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which I will begin to examine in Chapter VI. In the case of the first *satipaṭṭhāna*, the “refrain” reads:

**In this way, in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body internally, or he abides contemplating the body externally, or he abides contemplating the body both internally and externally.**

**He abides contemplating the nature of arising in the body, or he abides contemplating the nature of passing away in the body, or he abides contemplating the nature of both arising and passing away in the body.**

Mindfulness that “there is a body” is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.<sup>3</sup>

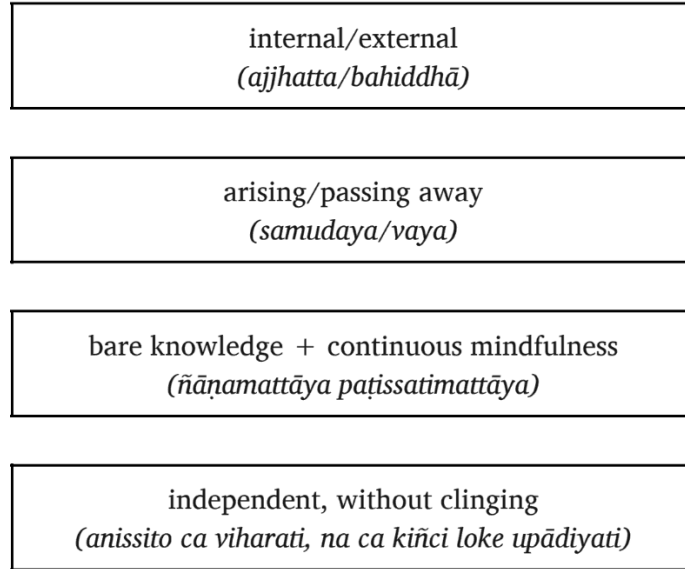


Fig. 5.1: Key aspects of the *satipaṭṭhāna* refrain

The “refrain” indicates that the scope of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice includes internal and external phenomena, and that it is in particular their nature to arise and pass away which should be given attention. By including both internal and external phenomena, the “refrain” broadens the contemplative perspective. By mentioning contemplation of their impermanent nature, the “refrain” moreover directs awareness to the temporal axis of experience, that is, to the passage of time. Thus, with these instructions, the “refrain” expands the scope of each *satipaṭṭhāna* exercise along its spatial and temporal axes. As the discourses explicitly point out, these two aspects



are required for a proper undertaking of *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>4</sup> The “refrain” also describes the proper attitude to be adopted during contemplation: observation should be undertaken merely for the purpose of establishing awareness and understanding, and should remain free from clinging.

With the “refrain”, the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* turns towards the general characteristics of the contemplated phenomena.<sup>5</sup> At this stage of practice, awareness of the specific content of experience gives way to an understanding of the general nature and character of the *satipaṭṭhāna* under contemplation.

This shift of awareness from the individual content of a particular experience to its general features is of central importance for the development of insight.<sup>6</sup> Here the task of *sati* is to penetrate beyond the surface appearance of the object under observation and to lay bare the characteristics it shares with all conditioned phenomena. This move of *sati* towards the more general characteristics of experience brings about insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of reality. Such a more panoramic kind of awareness emerges at an advanced stage of *satipaṭṭhāna*, once the meditator is able to maintain awareness effortlessly. At this stage, when *sati* has become well-established, whatever occurs at any sense door automatically becomes part of the contemplation.<sup>7</sup>

It is noteworthy that two of the most popular contemporary *vipassanā* schools of the Theravāda tradition both recognize the importance of developing such bare awareness of whatever arises at any sense door as an advanced stage of insight meditation. To judge from

and lastly with the help of mind reading.<sup>16</sup> Apart from mind reading, these means do not require psychic powers, only awareness and some degree of common sense. Understood in this way, an “external” application of awareness in relation to the various practices detailed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* becomes a practicable possibility.

Thus external *satipaṭṭhāna* could be undertaken by directing awareness towards another person’s posture, facial expression, and tone of voice, as indicators of their feelings or state of mind. Undertaking external awareness of another in this way would to some extent resemble the way a psychoanalyst observes a patient, closely examining behaviour and related symptoms in order to assess their state of mind. Thus an external application of awareness would be a practice particularly suitable in daily life, since most of the phenomena to be observed will probably not occur while one is seated in formal meditation.

Such “external” contemplation of the behaviour and mental reactions of others can then lead to an increasingly deeper appreciation of the character traits of the person in question. Helpful information for such appreciation can be found in the commentaries, which offer descriptions of different human character-types and their corresponding behaviour patterns.<sup>17</sup> According to these descriptions, characteristic mental dispositions of anger or greed can be inferred by observing, for example, a particular monk’s eating habits and way of wearing his robes. Differences in character even show up in the different ways a simple task such a sweeping is performed.

According to the instructions in the “refrain”, “internal”