THE MEANING OF SATIPAṬṬHĀNA

Sayadaw U Paṇḍitābhivaṁsa

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Introduction

The Ven. Sayadaw U Pandita talks frequently about the meaning of *satipatthana*. He uses etymology to explain the proper way to note and observe the arising physical and mental objects in the practice of meditation

This detailed and practical exposition of the term *satipatthana* goes to the Sayadaw's credit. It is a formula or recipe for success in meditation. If applied meticulously to one's practice, the dhamma will unfold in no time.

The seven benefits of mindfulness

The practice of satipatthana meditation leads to the purification of the mind, the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, the complete destruction of physical pain and mental distress, the entering of the right path and the attainment of nibbana

The etymology of *satipatthana*

The Pali term *satipatthana* is generally rendered as the 'Four foundations of mindfulness'. However, its full meaning can be revealed by breaking up the compound word into its parts and examining these elements both individually and in combination.

sati + patthana

or

sati + pa + (t)thana

The word *sati* derives from the root meaning 'to remember' *(sam sarati)*, but as a mental factor it signifies 'presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, awareness, wakefulness and heedfulness', rather than the faculty of memory of the past

Patthana means 'close, firm and steadfast establishment, application, setting up'.

Combining these two elements, the meaning of the compound becomes 'close, firm and steadfast establishment of awareness on the object of observation'. This kind of awareness is also called *suppatitthita sati*, 'steadfast mindfulness'.

The four foundations of mindfulness

The four foundations of mindfulness have a single essence - mindful contemplation of natural phenomena. They are differentiated insofar as this mindful contemplation is applied to four objects: 1. the body (*kaya*); 2. the feelings (*vedana*); 3. states of consciousness (*citta*); and 4. mental objects (*dhamma*). The latter comprise such factors as the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the six sense bases and six sense objects (general activities), the seven factors of enlightenment and the four noble truths.

Sati

'Mindfulness' has come to be the accepted English translation of the term *sati*. However, this is an incomplete rendering. 'Observing power' is a more adequate translation. The full scope of its meaning will be explained by examining its various aspects, such as characteristic, function, manifestation, proximate cause and the further distinguishing factors of mindfulness.

Non-superficiality

Sati has the *characteristic* of not wobbling; that is, of not floating away from the object (*apilapana lakkhana*). The commentators have give the simile of a dried, hollow pumpkin thrown into water. The cork or pumpkin will pop up and down on the surface of the water. In the same way, the noting and observing mind should not skim over the object in a superficial manner. Instead, the mind should sink or plunge into the object of observation, just as when a stone is thrown into water it will sink or plunge to the bottom.

Suppose you are watching your abdomen as the object of your satipatthana practice. You try to be very firm, focusing your attention on the main object so that the mind will not skip off. Instead, the mind will sink deeply into the process of rising and falling. As the mind penetrates this process, you can comprehend its true nature: tension, pressure, movement and so on

Keeping the object in view

The *function* of sati is the absence of confusion, or non-forgetfulness (*asammosa rasa*). This means that the noting and observing mind should neither lose sight of, nor miss, nor forget, nor allow the object of observation to disappear. To express this aspect positively, the function of sati is to keep the object always in view. Just as a footballer never loses sight of the football, a badminton player the shuttlecock and a boxer his opponent's movements, so too the yogi never loses sight of the object of mindfulness.

Confrontation and protection

There are two *manifestations* of sati, namely coming face-to-face with the object, and protection

- **Face-to-face with the object**

The chief manifestation of sati is confrontation - it sets the mind directly, face-to-face, with the object of observation (*visayabhimukha bhava paccupatthana*). Sati manifests as the mind in a state (*bhava*) of confronting, face-to-face (*abhimukha*) with an object or objective field (*visaya*)

It is said that the human face is the index of character. Therefore, if you want to 'size up' a person, you have to be face-to-face with that person and examine his or her face carefully. Then your judgement will be correct. But if you stand at an angle, behind or far away from that other person, then you will not be able to distinguish the distinctive features of his face

Similarly, when you are observing the rising movement of your abdomen, if the mind is really face-to-face with the rising movement, you will notice different sensations in the rising such as tension, pressure, heat, coolness or movement.

- **Protection**

If the noting and observing mind remains face-to-face with the object of observation for a significant period of time, the yogi can discover a great purity of mind due to the absence of *kilesas* (mental defilements). This purity is the result of the second manifestation of sati - guardianship or protection from attack by the kilesas (*arakkha paccupatthana*). With sati present, mental defilements have no chance to enter the stream of consciousness.

Sati is likened to a doorkeeper because it guards the six sense-doors. A doorkeeper dose not admit bad and destructive people; he admits only good and useful people. Sati does not admit unwholesomeness (*akusala*); it admits only wholesomeness (*kusala*). By not accepting akusala, the mind is protected.

The proximate causes of mindfulness

The *proximate causes* for the arising of sati are: strong perception (*thirasanna padatthana*); and the four foundations of mindfulness (*kayadi satipatthana padatthana*).

- **Strong perception**

In order to be mindful of an object, strong and firm (*thira*) perception of it is necessary. As much as perception (*sanna*) is firm, strong and steadfast, mindfulness will also be firm, strong and steadfast.

The two functions of perception are the recording and the recognition of formations (*sankhara*), irrespective of their wholesome or unwholesome nature. Sanna is compared to the recording of talks with the help of a tape or video recorder. The

recording takes place regardless of the content or quality of the talks. A clear, high quality recording, such as a state-of-the-art digital recording on CD of a classical concert or opera, is the cause for a clear, strong, impressive listening experience (mindfulness) when replaying the recording.

Similarly, in the meditation practice a strong, clear-cut perception (noting or labelling) of the arising objects of observation is very supportive of strong, clear-cut, steadfast mindfulness.

- **Four foundations of mindfulness**

Another proximate cause for the arising of sati is the four foundations of mindfulness (*kayadi satipatthana padatthana*) That is, mindfulness itself is the cause of mindfulness. In fact, the development of mindfulness is the result of continuous momentum, one moment of mindfulness causing the next

This can be compared to the process of acquiring an education, assuming that the student is studious and does his homework respectfully Lessons learnt in the lower grades are a cause for learning lessons in the higher grade. Primary school education is a cause for high school education, and this in turn serves as a cause for tertiary and university education

In a nutshell, mindfulness leads to ever greater and stronger mindfulness

Immediacy

Immediacy in the awareness of an object of observation is very important. Nothing should come between the presently arising object and the noting and observing. The arising object and the noting mind should not be separated in time. The observation of the presently arising object should happen at once, without any delay. It should be instant. As soon as the object of observation arises it should be noted and observed.

If one's noting and observing is delayed, then the object will have already passed by the time one's awareness turns to it. Objects of the past and future cannot be known correctly, and if the attention cannot remain with objects as they arise, then it is no longer vipassana practice. It is no longer dwelling in the reality.

Concurrence

When two or more processes occur at the same time, it is the phenomenon of 'concurrence'. Concurrence of the noting and observing mind and the object of observation is an important aspect of sati. For example, when an object arises, the mind falls on the object simultaneously with its arising, synchronically with it.

Extraordinary mindfulness

The particle *pa* of *sati-pa-(t)thana* specifies that the mindfulness should be of an extraordinary or outstanding nature (*visittha*); excessive, intensive and persistent (*bhusattha*). Ordinary mindfulness is out of place in intensive satipatthana meditation. It is this nature of the particle *pa*, and its practical aspects, which we shall now explore.

Rushing (*pakkhanditva pavattati*)

The particle *pa* of *sati-pa-(t)thana* can also be interpreted as *pa-(k)khandana*: rushing, leaping, plunging. As soon as the object of observation arises, the mind has to rush forward towards and into the object of observation with great force, with courage. It attacks

the object without hesitation, without thinking, reflecting, analysing, imagining, questioning, considering, speculating or fantasising. Thus, several aspects are involved in 'rushing':

- Sudden, impetuous, quick and swift movement with violence, speed or great force, strength and dynamism.

  Simile: like rushing somebody to the hospital.

- Capturing, catching or arresting by sudden attack; to make a swift attack or assault; to charge.

  Simile: The soldiers capture and defeat the enemy troops in a sudden, forceful attack.

- An eager movement of many people to get to a particular place.

  Simile: The crowds rush the gates of the football stadium just before the game begins.

- To move urgently, with excessive speed, haste, or hurry.

  Simile: A person at work may say, 'I'm in a dreadful rush'; or, in accordance with the saying, 'Strike while the iron is hot', one notes and observes the object while it is 'fresh' or 'hot'.

Yogis should not be noting and observing in a stop-and-go manner. The awareness should not be slack, sluggish, casual; not lagging behind or late; not gazing. It should be without wandering mind, with no room for thoughts. The noting and observing should not be in a cool and hesitating manner; instead, it must be rushing in a systematic and orderly manner.

Firmly grasping or seizing the object (*upagganhitva pavattati*)
A rice farmer when harvesting paddy needs to firmly grasp or seize a bushel of rice. Only then will he be able to cut it with a sickle. Similarly, a meditator has to firmly grasp the object of observation so that the mind will neither slip off nor lose the object under observation.

As mindfulness becomes steadfast, the yogi will be able to firmly seize coarse objects. With more practice, attention can hold on to more refined objects and eventually even very subtle objects can be firmly grasped by the mind. Therefore, a yogi should first try to grasp physical objects before attempting to seize the more subtle type of mental objects like intentions, thoughts, etc.

Covering the object completely (*pattharitva pavattati*)
The noting and observing mind must cover the object of observation completely, spreading over the entire object, enveloping it, grasping it in its entirety. Not just a part of the object must be observed, but the object should be noted and observed from the beginning, through its middle, to its end.

Unbroken continuity (*pavattati*)
In the practical sense, this aspect means that the noting and observing of the arising objects of observation should be continuous; that is, one moment of mindfulness connected to the next moment of mindfulness, moment after moment. The preceding moment of mindfulness should be connected with the succeeding moment of mindfulness. In brief, mindfulness should be sustained.

Similes:

- If there is a gap between two floor planks, dust and sand may enter. If there is no continuity of mindfulness and there is a gap, defilements may enter.

- In the past one had to start a fire by rubbing two sticks together. If one fails to rub continuously, but instead takes a rest and resumes rubbing later, no fire will start Similarly, if mindfulness is not continuous, the fire of wisdom will not ignite.

To reaffirm this aspect negatively, the noting and observing, or mindfulness, of the objects should not have gaps but be continuous; it should not proceed in a stop-and-go manner. People who practise in fits and starts, resting occasionally and then starting again, being mindful for a stretch and then stopping to daydream, are known as 'chameleon yogis'.

Non-manipulating

The universal characteristic of 'not-self' (*anatta*) can be applied to the process of noting and observing the arising physical and mental objects.

A meditator must take great care to watch the objects of observation without manipulating, controlling or governing them. He should simply observe what is there - not what he expects or wants to be there.

Conclusion

What can we now say satipatthana is? *Satipatthana is mindfulness of any noted object by rushing to, entering into and spreading over it, so that the mind stays closely and firmly with it.* When noting 'rising', the mind enters the noted object; that is, the rising movement of the abdomen. The mindfulness rushes into it and spreads over it so that the mind stays closely and firmly on this object or phenomenon. The process is then repeated when noting 'falling', and so on for all other objects that arise in the body and mind.

Therefore in conclusion, sati or mindfulness must be dynamic and confrontational. Mindfulness should leap forward onto the object, covering it completely, penetrating into it and not missing any part of it.

If your mindfulness has these qualities, then swift progress in meditation is guaranteed and, with the fulfilment of the practice, seeing nibbana is assured.

Satipatthana at a glance

- close and firm establishment;
- non-superficiality;
- keeping the object in view;
- face-to-face with the object;
- protection of the mind from attack by kilesas;
- strong perception;
- mindfulness is the cause of mindfulness;
- rushing and plunging;
- firmly grasping the object;
- completely covering, or spreading over, the object;
- immediacy;
- continuity;
- concurrence;
- non-manipulating.

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