



Dharma Gathering 2008

Establishing mindfulness

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Introduction

In our first essay we looked at the nature of mindfulness and its relationship with both memory and wisdom. Here we will focus on the nature of mindfulness through the activity of “establishing” it. We will also look at mindfulness by examining its opposite, the absence of mindfulness, and the implications this absence has for wisdom. And finally, we will get a sense of satipaṭṭhāna, the establishments of mindfulness, as a way of life.

Face-to-face with experience

To get a sense of the nature of mindfulness we can look at the the language the Buddha uses to describe how we create it in the first place. In several suttas the practitioner is described as beginning formal meditation practice in this way:

[The meditator] sits down, crosses her legs, straightens her back and establishes her mindfulness directly [*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*].

Mindfulness is something that needs to be “set up, established.” This word comes from the verb *upaṭṭhahati*, from *upa* (denoting nearness or close touch) + $\sqrt{sthā}$ (“stand,” “station”). *Upaṭṭhahati* means “to stand near,” “to be present,” and therefore “to serve.” Rupert Gethin comments:

The regular Nikāya expression *satim upaṭṭhapetvā* means, then, “causing mindfulness to stand near,” “causing mindfulness to be present” or even “causing mindfulness to come into service.” ... What is meant ... is that *sati* is understood as a quality of mind that “stands near” or “serves” the mind; it watches over the mind. One might say that it is a form of “presence of mind.”¹

The use of the root $\sqrt{sthā}$ implies a firm grounding or stationing of the mind. Awareness is firmly fixed — on something, something *definite*. This is emphasised in our passage when the meditator is described as “establishing her mindfulness *directly*,” using the adverb *parimukham*, from *pari* (“around,” “completely”) + *mukha* (“mouth,” “face,” “entrance”). In *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (*The establishments of mindfulness* M10) and *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (*Mindfulness through breathing* M118) this expression comes just before instructions on using breathing as the object of mindfulness, and *parimukham* is often taken literally as establishing mindfulness “around (*pari*) the mouth (*mukha*)” — in other words, placing mindfulness at the point where air enters and leaves the body. But *parimukham* is an idiom, not to be read literally, and does

¹ R. M. L. Gethin. *The Buddhist path to awakening: a study of the bodhi-pakkhiyā-dhammā*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001: 32.

not refer to where mindfulness is established (“around the face,” so following breathing at the nostrils or mouth), but qualifies the action of establishing.

Here, *parimukham* should be read as something like “completely (*pari*) facing (*mukha*)” the object of experience, indicating the establishment of a “face-to-face” encounter with the object of experience. It conveys a firmness and directness in the engagement with experience, whatever it may be. This fits with the *Abhidhamma* understanding, where mindfulness appears as the state of confronting or being face-to-face with an object.²

Let’s say I’m working on breathing as my meditation object, but my mind is preoccupied by some thought-stream and I’m feeling discontented with the state of my meditation. Clearly there’s awareness here. If asked later, I could describe this situation. But mindfulness is weak, because the mind is wobbling between at least four fields of experience, and not directly confronting any of them. The mind is not fixed, established. Not face-to-face with the situation, but floating around it.

Mindfulness is concerned with establishing a firm contact with what’s really happening. For example, I might realise that what’s governing this situation is my attitude of discontent and resistance. This is why I’m half-hearted about the breathing, easily distracted and generally restless. So I turn towards my discontent, face it fully, and place awareness right on it. Or I might renew my determination to place awareness on the breathing, directly engaging with it. Or I might make the thought-stream my meditation object. I could even make the whole package, the complete experience of sitting there and mentally wobbling, my meditation object. But in any case I need to fix awareness, firmly, on something. Only then can mindfulness emerge.

The strong pillar

In *Dantabhūmi Sutta* (*The grade of the tamed* M125) the Buddha explains how people can be tamed from their normal, everyday wildness to living with a heart which is unified, cooled and at peace. The Buddha uses an extended metaphor of taming a wild elephant, during which he compares mindfulness to a large post firmly planted in the earth.

Just as the elephant trainer plants a large post in the earth and binds the forest elephant to it by the neck in order to subdue his forest habits ... these four establishments of mindfulness [*satipaṭṭhāna*] are bindings for the cultivated student’s heart in order to subdue her habits [*sīla*], her memories and intentions [*sara-saṅkappa*], and her distress, fatigue, and fever based on the household life, and so she may attain the true way and realise *nibbāna*.

We want the clarity of mind and unification of the heart spoken of by the Buddha but when we begin to practise find ourselves hindered by our restlessness, our

² Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed). *Abhidhammattha Sangaha. A comprehensive manual of abhidhamma*. Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Edition, 2000: 86.

obsessions, and by our determination to live in past and future rather than being fully centred in the present. The practice of establishing mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) is designed to ground us in this present reality. This is the post planted firmly in the earth. Mindfulness has a firm, face-to-face quality that allows us to clearly confront our hindrances in order to see through them. It enables us to live in such a way that we are always directly facing our experience, regardless of what it is or what we want it to be.

The cultivated student's "memories and intentions" are subdued by mindfulness. Here, ordinary, everyday memories are meant, rather than memory in the Buddha's sense of "remembering our own good and the good of others" (*Saṅgārava Sutta*, *Bojjhaṅga Saṃyutta*). These memories are of the fevers and concerns of our everyday lives, that threaten to drag us away from our engagement with the present into our habitual dreams and fantasies. Intentions based on the household life refer to the ordinary movements of the heart, restlessly seeking a satisfaction based on the stimulation of the senses. Mindfulness counters this restlessness through the firmness of its stability, found in our continuing relationship with our meditation object.

In *The simile of the six animals* the Buddha gives an example of how mindfulness works within the realm of the six sense fields (*saḷāyatana*) of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and "minding." He says:

Suppose a man caught six animals — with different domains and feeding grounds — and tied each with a strong rope. He caught a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal and a monkey, tied each with a strong rope, tied the ropes together and then released them. Those six animals, with their different domains and feeding grounds, would each pull in the direction of its own domain and feeding ground. ...

When those six animals became worn out and exhausted they would be dominated by the strongest among them, submitting to it and coming under its control. (*Chappānakopama Sutta*, *Saḷāyatana Saṃyutta*)

Our sense experiences continually rush in upon us through the six doors of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Like six disparate animals tied together and lacking any firm, central point of stability and direction, we are tossed about by our different obsessions. We find ourselves pushed or pulled according to our strongest aversion or desire of the moment. This is our situation when mindfulness is absent. The Buddha goes on to explain what happens when mindfulness is present. Here, instead of tying the animals together, the man ties them to "a strong post or pillar."

When these six animals became worn out and exhausted, they would sit or lie down right there.

The "strong post or pillar," the Buddha explains, represents "mindfulness directed to the body" (*kāyagati sati*). Mindfulness represents a central point of stability and balance, a place where we are at home and can face our normal human drives of impulse, desire and aggression. Without mindfulness we lack stability of the heart.

The Buddha sees the normal state of the human heart to be like a fish caught and thrown up on to land. It thrashes about in a blind panic, never still for a moment. If the heart is to be trained, tamed, cooled, it must be led into stillness, and mindfulness is central to this. Mindfulness, in other words, plays a fundamental role in the practice of meditation.

The aspect of meditation emphasised here is mindfulness of the body, which the Buddha sees as fundamental to the practice. Most of the modern meditation techniques use the body as their central reference point, their anchor, to hold the heart and mind firmly so that the practitioner can calm down. For the Buddha, our relationship to the body is central to our practice.

Losing mindfulness

We have looked at how the Buddha speaks of establishing mindfulness. But of course, many times we are not mindful, we lose mindfulness. How does the Buddha speak of this? And what does it tell us about mindfulness?

Sati, mindfulness, literally means “memory,” so the loss of mindfulness is forgetfulness. When the Buddha speaks of lapses in mindfulness, one term he uses is *muṭṭha-sati*, from *muṭṭha* (“forgotten”) + *sati* (“mindfulness”). *Muṭṭha* is derived from the verb *mussati*, “to forget, to pass into oblivion.” So the opposite of mindfulness is oblivion, and specifically the oblivion that comes from forgetting. Which has its own peculiar characteristic. Something is there; suddenly it isn’t; and that moment of loss is a total absence.

How does forgetting work? We are cruising along, without a worry in the world. We reach for our wallet, say ... but it’s not there! A moment of confusion — that’s odd! It should be there. Then, panic — it *definitely* should be there! Panic is joined by realisation — I left it in that shop! Suddenly, a clear understanding of the whole situation arises. I have a problem, and I am acutely aware of all its dimensions.

Let’s look closely at this process. At the moment we forgot our wallet, did we have a problem? No. Nothing the matter. Why not? There’s no problem that can be discerned within the total absence which is *muṭṭha-sati*, forgotten mindfulness. Forgotten mindfulness is a state of oblivion, of delusion, in which there is no problem because there is no awareness of any problem or even the possibility of a problem. We don’t know, and we don’t know *that* we don’t know. This is the very essence of delusion. So the movement from mindfulness into loss of mindfulness is a movement from memory into forgetting, clarity into delusion, wisdom into ignorance.

Conversely, the movement from forgetting into mindfulness — of remembering — is a movement from delusion into understanding. Suddenly, I know the whole situation. “Yes, I put the wallet down to pick up the box, and, thinking I was done, sped off without it!” In that moment, everything is clear. So mindfulness begins with the movement out of oblivion, and is, in a sense, complete in that moment, for in that

very movement oblivion ceases and understanding arises. Yet while already complete, mindfulness, as we have seen, implies movement through time, and so continuity. Mindfulness is threatened by the discontinuity which comes from forgetting, and is cultivated by the continuity of remembering. Which brings us to the *practice* of mindfulness, satipaṭṭhāna.

Satipaṭṭhāna

Satipaṭṭhāna, the establishments of mindfulness, is the practice generally known in English as “insight meditation.” We can see now why mindfulness is associated with wisdom, and so it comes as no surprise to learn that satipaṭṭhāna is regarded in the tradition as a wisdom practice. It is concerned primarily with changing our view (*diṭṭhi*) of ourselves and our world, and does so through cultivating mindfulness. Satipaṭṭhāna practice has a discourse dedicated to it, and here we will look at part of the opening section to get a general sense of what it involves.

The Blessed One said: “This way, the four establishments of mindfulness, is for the one purpose of purifying beings, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, destroying pain and grief, attaining the right path, and realising nibbāna.

“What are the four?

“Here a bhikkhu, surrendering desire and grief for the world, lives contemplating body as body, ardent, mindful and clearly understanding.

“Surrendering desire and grief for the world he lives contemplating feeling as feeling, ardent, mindful and clearly understanding.

“Surrendering desire and grief for the world he lives contemplating mind as mind, ardent, mindful and clearly understanding.

“Surrendering desire and grief for the world he lives contemplating phenomena as phenomena, ardent, mindful and clearly understanding.” (Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta M10; D22)

The first thing we notice about this discourse is that it does not recommend a specific meditation object, such as the breathing, nor does it specify a particular meditation technique. Satipaṭṭhāna does not represent a meditation technique, as such. Rather, it refers to a way of living characterised by being awake rather than asleep, of remembering rather than forgetting.

The central *activity* of satipaṭṭhāna is “contemplation,” *anupassanā*. *Anupassanā* is a compound word, derived from *anu* (= “along”) + *passanā* (= “seeing”). *Anupassanā* is “seeing along,” and so tracking something over time. This implies a deliberate directing of the mind toward something, and so *establishing* one’s awareness with a direct face-to-face encounter with the object of experience. It also implies *continuity over time*, conveyed by the prefix *anu*, making this relationship with experience a habit, our normal dwelling place. This is suggested by saying the practitioner “*lives* (*viharati*) contemplating body as body ...” Such a way of life is based on cultivating a

habitual state of mind in which three mental factors are predominant: energy, mindfulness and clear understanding.

The role of sati

Satipaṭṭhāna is the upaṭṭhāna of sati, mindfulness “standing near,” “staying present to,” and “serving” the mind. The four satipaṭṭhānas are the activities of bringing mindfulness into service, where it watches over or guards the mind.

Mindfulness, in other words, implies not just awareness, but *reflexive* awareness, awareness bending back to itself. Normally, we are aware. We don’t have to make any special effort to *be* aware; we are *already* aware. We see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. Technically, we can say that it is the nature of mind to contact an object; to be aware of something. So far, so good. We are already aware. But are we aware *that* we are aware? And of *what* we are aware?

Let’s consider the process of distraction during meditation. As I meditate, I become lost in thought. There is certainly awareness here, images flowing through the mind, capturing attention. Then suddenly, I *know* I am thinking. What’s the difference between this new experience — knowing I am thinking — and what was going on just a second before — thinking? Previously, there was awareness; now, there is awareness *of* awareness. Here, within in this quality of reflexivity, is where we find mindfulness.

Mindfulness translates sati, which literally means “memory” and is classically defined as “remembering the object.” When we are meditating, tracking our meditation object, and then suddenly slide into distraction, what happens? We forget. We forget the object of meditation; or, we forget we are meditating. So we are distracted, and *don’t know that we are distracted*. We are in fantasy, and don’t know that we are in fantasy. We are aware of our fantasy; later, we may be able to recall what it was about. But when we are fully immersed in distraction we don’t know we are fully immersed in distraction, and this “not knowing” is the essence of distraction and, of course, of delusion.

Suddenly, we *know* we are distracted. It’s an interesting experience. A moment ago we were distracted, and didn’t know; now, we know. What happened? We remember. We remember the object of meditation; or, we remember we are meditating. And what’s the difference between our distracted awareness now that we know we are distracted, and our distracted awareness back then, before we knew? The difference is mindfulness, which always contains a quality of reflexivity, of knowing itself.

So mindfulness remembers awareness, or the object of awareness. The work of being mindful, of *practising* mindfulness, is the work of reminding ourselves *that* we are (already) aware, or reminding ourselves *to be* aware — of this. Mindfulness, then, is always associated with energy. Awareness itself can be passive, purely receptive.

Right now I am seeing, and am making no particular effort to see. But mindfulness is active. Right now, I am reminding myself *that* I am seeing, or *what* I am seeing. This quality of energy, activity, seems essential to mindfulness, and I find it suggestive that in Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the practitioner is described as “ardent” (āṭāpī), and so energetic, committed; and in the eightfold path, mindfulness is listed next to vāyāma, “energy/effort.”

Two aspects of the practice

We said that mindfulness remembers awareness or the object of awareness. These two possibilities are found within the single word satipaṭṭhāna.

Satipaṭṭhāna is a compound word that can be read in two ways. Firstly, sati + upa-(t)ṭhāna is an activity, that of remembering awareness or the object of awareness. This is how we have been using the term so far, translating it as the establishment of mindfulness. Secondly, sati + pa-(t)ṭhāna is what is remembered as present to awareness. These are the objects of mindfulness, what we are mindful of.

Satipaṭṭhāna read in this way is usually translated as the foundations of mindfulness.

The four satipaṭṭhānas in terms of our first meaning, sati-upa-(t)ṭhāna, are the four activities that bring sati, mindfulness, into service, establishing mindfulness. These are the contemplations, tracking experience over time. The four satipaṭṭhānas in terms of our second meaning, sati-pa-(t)ṭhāna, indicate what we tracking, the objects of our awareness. These are body (kāya), feeling (vedanā), heart/mind (citta) and the dharma/phenomena (dhamma/dhammā). Without going into details, we can simply say that these four foundations of mindfulness represent the entirety of human experience. We have already mentioned that the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta does not recommend any one specific meditation object. This is because satipaṭṭhāna practice uses *every* aspect of experience as its object.

Satipaṭṭhāna as way of life

The universality of the foundations of mindfulness shows us that practising satipaṭṭhāna involves more than performing a meditation technique. It is a way of life. The Buddha spoke of this using the term *gocara*, which literally means a cow’s (go) grazing area/activity (*cara*). Gocara carries a complex range of meanings that refer to the totality of our way of life. Gocara includes how we make a living, our life habits and our social relationships. All these are relevant to the practice of satipaṭṭhāna.

The Buddha spoke of satipaṭṭhāna as the gocara of his students, illustrating his message with the story of the hawk and the quail. A hawk seized a quail, and as he was being carried off the quail lamented, “We were so unlucky ... ! We strayed out of our own territory [*gocara*] into the domain of others. If we had stayed in our own

territory, in our own ancestral domain, this hawk would not have had a chance against me in a fight!”

The hawk was intrigued, and on being told that the quail’s territory was “a freshly ploughed field covered with lumps of soil” she released him, boasting that he would not escape her there. Once the quail was released and the hawk flew up, the quail climbed onto a large lump of soil and shouted defiantly, “Come and get me now, hawk!”

The hawk dropped from the sky, aiming straight for the quail. But at the last possible moment the quail stepped aside and slipped under the lump of soil, and the hawk shattered herself against the earth. The Buddha warned his students that, like the quail, they should not move beyond their home territory, for then they could become victims of Māra, the god of death and of limits.

And what is a bhikkhu’s territory [*gocara*], his own ancestral domain? The four establishments of mindfulness. (Sakuṇagghi Sutta, Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta)

Here, satipaṭṭhāna, the establishments of mindfulness, is not limited to a meditation “technique.” Satipaṭṭhāna is *both* an approach to meditation, centred on cultivating mindfulness, *and* an approach to life itself — a commitment to a continuous remembering of what is happening, now. The Buddha seems to be suggesting that these two aspects of satipaṭṭhāna are not meant to be separated, although we tend to do so, because we think of “meditation” as some kind of special activity that we indulge in occasionally.

The difference between satipaṭṭhāna as way of life and satipaṭṭhāna as occasional activity is highlighted in Kandaraka Sutta (*To Kandaraka* M51), where the Buddha is approached by Pessa, the elephant driver’s son, and Kandaraka, the wanderer. Kandaraka marvels at the silence and discipline of the saṅgha, from which he infers the excellence of the Buddha as a teacher. The Buddha agrees, and says:

Kandaraka, in this saṅgha of bhikkhus there are arahants with taints exhausted, who have lived the highest life, done what had to be done, released the burden, reached the true goal, destroyed the fetters of becoming, and who are completely liberated through higher knowledge.

In this saṅgha of bhikkhus there are bhikkhus in higher training, of continual virtue [*santata-sīlā*], living a life of continual virtue, discerning, living a life of continual discernment [*santata-nipakā*]. They live with their hearts well grounded in the four establishments of mindfulness.

Pessa, a lay follower of the Buddha, then responds, saying:

It is wonderful, bhante, it is marvellous how well the four establishments of mindfulness have been made known by the Blessed One ... From time to time [*kālena kālaṃ*], bhante, we white-clothed lay people also live with our hearts well grounded in these four establishments of mindfulness.

The silence and stillness of the assembly shows they have been well trained by their teacher. The bhikkhus are either graduates or mature students. Their course of training can be summarised as the four establishments of mindfulness. The laity, too, have been trained in the establishments of mindfulness. The practice, the training, is the same for ordained and lay students of the Buddha. The only difference is time. The bhikkhus live within these establishments as part of a “continual” or “constant” (santata) training. The laity live within them “from time to time” (kālena kālam).

Satipaṭṭhāna is a practice accessible to the laity, not just the ordained saṅgha. The laity’s problem is time. They have busy lives and cannot devote themselves entirely to the training, while the bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs can be full time specialists. This comes out later in the sutta when the Buddha gives Pessa a summary teaching of “four kinds of persons to be found existing in the world,” but he has to leave before hearing the full exposition. The Buddha comments on the loss to Pessa:

Soon after he had left, the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus: “Bhikkhus, Pessa, the elephant driver’s son, is wise, he has great wisdom. If he had sat a while longer until I had taught him in detail these four kinds of persons, he would have greatly benefited.

“Still, he has already greatly benefited even as it is.”

Pessa illustrates the lay person’s dilemma. There are no barriers to lay practice, and no reason to believe that lay people are any less capable of awakening than bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs. The differences are purely practical — but real, nevertheless. People ordain precisely because they want to create an environment within which they are make the establishments of mindfulness their habitual territory, their ancestral domain. Lay people necessarily live a much more difficult environment. But regardless of social situation, the Buddha clearly means mindfulness to be integral to our daily life, the foundation of our path to awakening. We will explore this path further in our next essay.