



# EVAM ME SUTTAM This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

## Week two: The four satipaṭṭhānas

Last week we examined Ṭhānissaro’s general interpretative framework, to get a sense of how he approaches the interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings. This week we will focus on his approach to the cultivation of “insight” (*vipassanā*), leading to “discernment” (*paññā*). This is the practice of the “frames of reference” (*satipaṭṭhāna*), through which “the principle of skilful action” is learned and applied by means of a “radical phenomenology.” Practice is meant to bring the mind to an “attentive non-intention” which presents as an awareness that projects nothing onto present experience. This is the “entry into emptiness” (*suññatā avakam*) or “non-fashioning” (*atammayatā*), which allows the mind to balance on the edge of “Unbinding” (*nibbāna*).

### Yoniso manasikāra

We don’t find our familiar modern meditation methods mentioned in the *suttas*. The Buddha does not generally speak of the details of meditation “technique” in our sense of the term. Ṭhānissaro sees his detailed instructions on the 16 steps of *ānāpānasati*, contained in *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, as the exception to this general reticence. But the Buddha *does* speak of *yoniso manasikāra*, “systematic attention,” “wise attention,” or, as Ṭhānissaro translates the term, “appropriate attention.” Appropriate attention has both conceptual and non-conceptual aspects. In either case it presents as the ability to focus on and ask the right questions.

As the Buddha pointed out, the attitude of “appropriate attention” (*yoniso manasikāra*), the ability to focus on the right questions, is one of the most important skills to develop in the course of the practice. This skill is much more fruitful than an attitude that tries to come to the practice armed with all the right answers in advance.<sup>1</sup>

*Yoniso manasikāra* (appropriate attention) relates to the questions one asks, either verbalised (thinking about the issue) or not (the conceptual but non-verbal shifts in attention-strategy that take place over a meditation session or a meditation career). It indicates how we conceptualise a situation. The Buddha saw this as so important that he sometimes refused to answer a particular question if it was framed inappropriately. “The question is not relevant,” he would say, or “The question is not appropriate.”

Once, for example, when teaching dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) culminating in the suffering of ageing-&-death, the Buddha was asked, “Whose

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<sup>1</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff). *The wings to awakening: An anthology from the Pali canon*. Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana, 1996: iv.

ageing-&-death is this?” In other words, “Who ages? Who dies?” “The question is not appropriate,” he replied.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, when the *samaṇa* Vacchagotta asked him whether the mind of a liberated person appears after death, or does not appear, or both appears and does not appear, or neither appears nor does not appear after death, he responded, “The term [appear/ does not appear/ both appears and does not appear/ neither appears nor does not appear] does not apply.”<sup>3</sup>

We habitually ask certain questions and do not think to ask others, and these questions frame our actions. Without asking appropriate questions we cannot discover useful answers. If we respond to our suffering by asking “Why does this happen to me?,” we are unlikely to find an answer that might lead to the cessation of our suffering. But if we ask “How does suffering arise? What causes it? What brings it to cease?,” then we might be able to frame an investigation that could bring us to a way out of our suffering.

But more is involved than just asking the right questions; even being able to see certain things requires an appropriate way of attending. Caught up in our habitual ways of viewing, we fail to see what is directly in front of us. Insight, when we stumble into it, is always fresh, unexpected, and strangely obvious – when we see it. But it is always entirely obscure, when we don’t. For example, insight into impermanence. We already know that things are impermanent; but we fail to see how we project permanence, and therefore self, into everything, including our sense of impermanence – “I am realising impermanence.” Insight is difficult, and the form of appropriate attention that allows insight to arise is called “the frames of reference” (*satipaṭṭhāna*).

### The frames of reference

[§30] There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body [*kāya*] in & of itself – ardent, alert, & mindful – putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world.

There is the case where a monk remains focused on feelings [*vedanā*] in & of themselves – ardent, alert, & mindful – putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world.

There is the case where a monk remains focused on the mind [*citta*] in & of itself – ardent, alert, & mindful – putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world.

There is the case where a monk remains focused on mental qualities [*dhammā*] in & of themselves – ardent, alert, & mindful – putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world.<sup>4</sup>  
[Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. M10]

What is Ṭhānissaro saying in using “frames of reference” to translate *satipaṭṭhāna* instead of the standard “foundations of mindfulness”? “To refer” is to point beyond to something else, and therefore to be in relationship to that something else. Reference, in other words, entails context, and both reference and context provide *meaning*. A sign, for example, *means* what it points to – what it refers to, its “frame of reference.” *Satipaṭṭhāna* is about meaning, the meaning provided by context. *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice changes the context of experience, and therefore the

<sup>2</sup> Nidāna Saṃyutta. S 2.60-63.

<sup>3</sup> Aggivacchagotta Sutta. M72.

<sup>4</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 84-90.

meaning of experience. It changes the meaning of our lives, who we think we are and what we think this world is.

The proper objects that act as frames of reference are four: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, and mental qualities in and of themselves. The “in and of itself” here is important. To take the body as a frame of reference in this way, for instance, means that one views it not in terms of its function in the world – for then the world would be the frame of reference – but simply on its own terms, as it is directly experienced. In other words, one is not concerned with its relative worth or utility in terms of the values of the world – its beauty, strength, agility, etc. – but simply what it is when regarded in and of itself.<sup>5</sup>

How do we normally experience the body? We experience it in reference to “the world,” the context within which the body is experienced, and which gives it its meaning. Within a patriarchal society I experience my body as male, and this give “maleness” a particular meaning. Within a European settler society I experience my body as “white,” and this gives “whiteness” a particular meaning. I experience my body as handsome or ugly; useful or useless; good enough or inadequate. Body, feelings, mind and mental qualities are all experienced as meaningful in terms of something beyond body, feelings, mind and mental qualities. As we suggested last week, the context, or frame of reference, within which we normally experience body, feelings, mind and mental qualities is “What is this *to me*?” or what the Buddha calls “self” (*attā*). And we take this frame of reference as the only possible one, and so experience it as “normality” or even “reality.” We fail to notice that what we take for granted as normal or real is nothing more than a collection of our own habitual projections.

Focusing on something “in & of itself” implies the experience of “body” without reference to anything other than itself. Just “body,” as it is. But this is not so easy, because reference implies context, and therefore relationship, and both context and relationship are inescapable – except in *nibbāna*. So focusing on experience “in & of itself” implies *path*, a movement in a direction leading away from our normal relationship to experience, that which we cling to as “real,” as “I” and “mine,” to some other, perhaps more lightly held relationship, and finally to the transcendence of relationship altogether. Or, as Ṭhānissaro quotes the Buddha: “First there is the knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma, after which there is the knowledge of Unbinding.” (S.XII.70)<sup>6</sup>

## The where/what and the how

The four frames of reference (*satipatthana*) are a set of teachings that show where a meditator should focus attention and how.<sup>7</sup>

The Pāli word *satipaṭṭhāna* conveys both the “what” and the “how” of the practice, in what appears to be a deliberate play with words.

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<sup>5</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 73.

<sup>6</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 5.

<sup>7</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 72.

- *Sati-pa-(t)thāna*: “*Sati*” is “mindfulness, reference, the ability to keep something in mind.” “*Paṭṭhāna*” (from *pa*, which functions as an intensifier, and *thāna*, a “place” or “station”) is usually translated as “foundation.” So *sati-pa-(t)thāna* means the “foundations of mindfulness,” indicating *where or on what* mindfulness should be placed to provide a “frame of reference” for giving context to experience.
- *Sati-upa-(t)thāna*: “*Upaṭṭhāna*” (from *upa*, denoting nearness or close touch, and *thāna*, “being settled or established”) means “establishing near,” “setting near.” *Sati-upa-(t)thāna* is the activity, the practice itself, *how* to keep something closely in mind, or to maintain a “solid frame of reference.”<sup>8</sup>

For Ṭhānissaro, the crucial aspect of this ambiguity is that as practice matures, the “what” increasingly becomes the “how.” The “how” of the practice is the investigation into experience itself, and as *satipaṭṭhāna* develops, this very investigation becomes the object of investigation, as the “qualities of mind” (*dhammas*) developed in the course of the practice become the object of the practice.<sup>9</sup>

This shift in the practice is linked to specific frames of reference. The first three frames, body, feelings and mind, are for Ṭhānissaro the content of experience; what is “given” to the practitioner as meditation object.

The meditator takes any one of these objects [body, feelings & mind] as a frame of reference, relating all of experience to his/her chosen frame. For example, although one will experience feelings and mind states in the course of taking the body as a frame of reference, one tries to relate them to the experience of the body as their primary frame. A feeling is viewed as it affects the body, or as the body affects it. The same holds for a mind state.<sup>10</sup>

If the body is functioning as a “frame of reference,” then anything else experienced at that time is experienced *as it relates to the body*; the other experience *is referred to* the experience of body, and vice versa. In other words, the practitioner is concerned with the relationship between the “primary frame” – here the body – and other objects. This sounds very similar to Mahāsī Sayādaw’s division between “primary object” and “secondary object.” Mahāsī Sayādaw, in his approach to *satipaṭṭhāna*, is trying to get the practitioner to develop a wider experience – or experienced context – than simply that of the primary object, as the movement of awareness to and fro between primary and secondary object opens up a wider field of conditioned relationship. Ṭhānissaro seems to be indicating a similar approach. And of course, in both methods, too much obsession with the primary object could prevent the recognition of it as a “frame of reference.”

The fourth frame of reference is that of “mental qualities” (*dhammas*), which for Ṭhānissaro are primarily “the qualities of mind that are developed and abandoned as one masters the meditation.”<sup>11</sup> These qualities refer especially to the seven

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<sup>8</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 72.

<sup>9</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 72.

<sup>10</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 73.

<sup>11</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 73.

factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅga*) and the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*). The factors of awakening, of course, constitute one of the seven sets of the 37 wings to awakening. As practice matures, the seven factors of awakening are developed, and the hindrances abandoned; and it is this process itself which becomes the meditation object. This is the project in which skilful *kamma* is cultivated to the point where even skilful *kamma* can be abandoned. This project takes place over three stages: the frame of reference; developing the frame of reference; and non-fashioning (*atammayatā*).

### Stage one: The frame of reference

There is the case where a monk remains focused [*anupassanā*] on the body in & of itself – ardent [*ātāpa*], alert [*sampajañña*], & mindful [*sati*] – putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world.

Thānissaro sees this first stage of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice as predominantly concerned with cultivating concentration (*samādhi*), but with “discernment,” or “wisdom” (*paññā*) being developed alongside. *Anupassanā* is “remaining focused” or “keeping track,” indicating the concentration aspect of the practice as the practitioner stays with a single theme. Mindfulness (*sati*) keeps concentration on track, as it remembers the task of staying with the phenomenology of experience in terms of a particular object (“remains focused on the body *in & of itself*”) without slipping into the narratives and views that constitute one’s normal experience (“putting aside greed & distress *with reference to the world*”). “Alertness” (*sampajañña*) (sometimes translated as “clear comprehension”) is a clear awareness of what is happening in the present.<sup>12</sup> [75]

Mindfulness keeps the theme of the meditation in mind, alertness observes the theme as it is present to awareness, and also is aware of when the mind has slipped from its theme. ... ardency tries to return the mind to its proper theme as quickly and skillfully as possible.<sup>13</sup> [75]

These mental qualities (*dhammas*) bring the mind to concentration, to at least first *jhāna* (see §33) and possibly second *jhāna* (see §72). But they also cultivate discernment, an understanding of the meditation object and its context. This first stage of *satipaṭṭhāna*, in other words, entails both concentration (*samādhi*) and discernment (*paññā*).

Concentration aspect	Discernment aspect
<p><i>Focus</i> – tracking the object.</p> <p><i>Ardency</i> – bringing the mind back to the object.</p> <p><i>Mindfulness</i> – keeping the object in mind.</p>	<p><i>Ardency</i> – includes the ability to distinguish between skilful and unskilful mental qualities.</p>

<sup>12</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 74-75.

<sup>13</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 75.

*Alertness* – staying clearly aware of the object.

*Alertness* – contains an understanding of the object.

In the Mahāsī approach, “mindfulness is ... remembering to keep up the noting, alertness means seeing whatever phenomena arise to be noted, and ardency is a matter of sticking with the noting relentlessly and being ever more quick and precise in one’s alertness.”<sup>14</sup>

In the Goenka/U Ba Khin approach, “mindfulness means remembering to stick with the process of scanning the body, while alertness would mean seeing the subtle sensations of the body being scanned. Ardency would mean sticking with the scanning process, and trying to be ever more sensitive to the subtlest sensations.”<sup>15</sup>

In Ānāpānasati (“keeping the breath in mind”), “mindfulness means keeping the breath in mind as the theme of the meditation, alertness means being sensitive to the sensations of the breath. Ardency means sticking with the process relentlessly, as well as taking up the ‘stages of training’ [§31; III/E], in which one tries to be aware of the entire body with each in and out breath, and to let the breath sensations grow calm.”<sup>16</sup>

Ṭhānissaro’s analysis of these popular methods of *satipaṭṭhāna* indicates that his understanding of *satipaṭṭhāna* is inclusive. He seeks out the common factors in these different techniques, looking for the structure of “appropriate attention” (*yoniso manasikāra*) that underlies the modern methods. And he weaves together concentration (*samādhi*) and discernment (*paññā*), serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*), seeing them as intimately interrelated, rather than being quarantined in specific “techniques.”

## Stage two: Developing the frame of reference

One remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the body.

In this stage, while concentration continues to develop, the emphasis is on discernment, as the meditation “object” becomes the impermanence of whatever object is being focused upon.

The “phenomenon of origination and passing away” covers three sorts of events: [1] conditioned occurrences in the object that forms one’s frame of reference (in this case the body); [2] events in the other two “object” frames of reference (feelings and mind); or [3] events in the “approach” frame of reference, i.e., the mental qualities that are developed (or interfere with) the process of taking a frame of reference to begin with. For instance, [1] when focused on the body, one may notice the arising and passing away of breath sensations in the body. Or [2] one might notice the arising and passing away of feelings of pleasure or

<sup>14</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 76.

<sup>16</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 76.

mental states of irritation while one remains anchored in the body. Or [3] one might notice lapses of mindfulness in one's focus on the body.<sup>17</sup> [77]

Event	Example
(1) What happens with the meditation object itself.	Using the breath as object, we notice and come to understand its behaviour – for example, the impermanence of breath sensations.
(2) What happens with experiences beyond the formal meditation object in the other two frames of reference.	We might notice the arising and passing away of feelings (feels good; feels bad) or mental states (pleasure, irritation, and so on) while staying with the breath.
(3) What happens with the mental qualities that are developed in or interfere with the practice.	We might notice how mindfulness itself comes and goes, and so what we might do to strengthen it.

As practice develops, the “where/what” (“Where do we place our mindfulness?”) slides into the “how/approach” (“How do we cultivate mindfulness?”). The practice of a mature practitioner should show an increase of “how” over “what.” For example, we can be focused simply on body (“in & of itself”); or, while apparently focused on body, our real focus might be on our relationship *to* body, our ongoing response to physical experience, through developing the mental qualities that support our practice during the very act of focusing.

This move between the “what” and the “how” includes a growing sensitivity to the kind of meditation object we are working with. The object is either neutral for the purposes of the practice, or it is linked to the presence or absence of skilfulness. If neutral, such as the aggregates, we simply remain aware of them. If they are bound up with skilfulness, we learn to respond appropriately, actively engaging with them to cultivate skilful qualities and minimise unskilful qualities.<sup>18</sup> One example might be developing a sensitivity to the presence or absence of the hindrances and the factors of awakening. We adjust mindfulness to minimise the hindrances and maximise the factors of awakening, “cultivating” (*bhāvanā*) skilful qualities, and this becomes the central focus of the practice. It becomes the “frame of reference,” in this case the fourth frame of reference (*dhammā*). Here, the issue of skilfulness is central, and this defines the mature aspect of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

It is not enough to simply watch the meditation object. Eventually we reach the point where there is nothing further to do in relation to the meditation object, but until then just watching is only part of the process. We are also cultivating (*bhāvanā*) something, in the context of a deliberate strategy, for without this strategy the cultivation of skill can occur only in a haphazard way. Here we are reminded that what we translate as “meditation” is *bhāvanā* (“cultivation,”

<sup>17</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 77.

<sup>18</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 77.

“development”), which implies a specific something which is to be developed (“what”); and therefore developed in a specific way (“how”). This is why technique is important. We must master a particular technique to become sensitive to this process of cultivation.

The technique gives shape to one’s present input into the present moment and makes one more sensitive to this aspect of this/that conditionality. It also provides an active context for appreciating mental qualities as they help or hinder one’s success in the technique. Eventually, when one’s sensitivity is sufficiently well developed, one can go beyond the technique to explore and master the process of causality as it functions in developing skillful qualities in the mind.<sup>19</sup>

“Technique” gives us something to do in a way that enables us to first appreciate what is going on, and then to shape it accordingly. For example, by staying with one central reference point, the primary object, we become more sensitive to the movements of that object, the movements of the surrounding or contextual phenomena, and to the workings of the mind as it gains and loses awareness of the primary object. The meditation “object” here becomes this entire field of experience. So we learn to appreciate or discern what is going on. Then we can direct the mind to specific aspects of experience in our own way, without bothering about an “off-the-shelf” technique, such that the skilful can be developed (*bhāvanā*), and the unskilful reduced and abandoned.

Thānissaro gives the example of how the skill entailed in working with equanimity (*upekkhā*) is spoken of in Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. At first the practitioner merely learns to recognise its presence or absence:

There is the case where, there being equanimity as a factor of Awakening present within, he discerns that “Equanimity as a factor of Awakening is present within me.” Or, there being no equanimity as a factor of Awakening present within, he discerns that “Equanimity as a factor of Awakening is not present within me.

Gradually we come to learn what does and does not work as a strategy for developing equanimity, and so learn to bring it about and strengthen it when it arrives:

He discerns how there is the arising of unarisen equanimity as a factor of Awakening. And he discerns how there is the culmination of the development of equanimity as a factor of Awakening once it has arisen.

This process refines our sensitivity to the fact that the grosser our participation in the process of arising/cessation, the grosser our *dukkha*. This has one of two results. Firstly, we develop more refined states of *concentration*, abandoning the mental qualities that block equanimity, or focusing our equanimity on more refined objects. And secondly we focus on *insight* in the form of the activity of refining equanimity, seeing that this too is a fabrication, an input into the present. [§182] This insight stimulates dispassion, or the “fading of passion” (*virāga*), and turning away from

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<sup>19</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 77-78.

equanimity we move beyond it to “non-fashioning” (*atammayatā*) [§179], the third stage of *satipaṭṭhāna*.<sup>20</sup>

### Stage three: Non-fashioning (*atammayatā*)

Or his mindfulness that “There is a body (feeling, mind, mental quality)” is maintained [simply] to the extent of knowledge and recollection. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world.

This is the “entry into emptiness,” (M.121) the state of non-fashioning (*atammayatā*).

Thus he regards it [this mode of perception] as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: “there is this.”<sup>21</sup>

Entry into emptiness/non-fashioning is “remaining independent,” not clinging to anything and not sustained by or feeding on anything. This indicates a mind of perfect balance, within which *nibbāna* can manifest at any time.

### Conclusion

For Ṭhānissaro, all meditation techniques share three phases in the development of appropriate attention. These are “[1] focusing on events in and of themselves in the present moment, [2] understanding their causal relationships with other events by learning to manipulate them skilfully, and then [3] arriving at a state of fully developed equipoise, transcending even one’s skill, free from any present input into the causal network.”<sup>22</sup>

This process is one of ever increasing skill, and next week we will look at the issue of skill through the practice of the four right exertions (*sammappadhāna*).

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<sup>20</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 78-79.

<sup>21</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 79.

<sup>22</sup> Thanissaro. *Wings*: 79.