

# Satipaṭṭhāna (3) The Journey of Mindfulness

January 5, 2022

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

awareness, direct, path, observe, know, easy chair, ardent, freedom, *bhāvanā*, exercise, refrain, onward leading, slide, movement, attention, lucid, simplicity, Swiss Army knife, *ānāpānasati*, breathing

Gil Fronsdal

This is probably the last introductory talk on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourse on the four foundations for awareness. These are the foundations upon which we can grow a particularly valuable form of awareness.

The text begins with a confident statement that there is a direct path, way, or journey – maybe more like a “going” – to freedom and liberation. The text asks, “What is this direct way?” and the Buddha then describes it.

In shorthand, he first says to observe the body in its own terms – the body in terms of a body; to know feelings in terms of feelings; to know mental states in terms of mental states; to know mental processes in terms of mental processes.

If we translated the expression “in terms of” literally, it would be: “the body in the body, feelings in feelings, mind states in mind states, and mental processes in mental processes.” The word or grammatical form “in” can also mean “in terms of,” “in regard to,” and “in respect to.” The usual interpretation for this is that the observation is meant to be very simple.

“Observe” is such an important word here. It describes our ability to settle back – like in a nice, comfortable easy chair – and just see what is happening without judging, fixing, or doing anything with it. It is a very spacious and peaceful way of just watching or seeing.

Seeing the body in terms of the body means not in terms of our judgments, memories, mind states, or mental processes. It is a radical simplicity – just being with the body. So, to observe it – that is the way to do it.

I use the reference point of sitting in an easy chair and just watching. But the text says to do it ardently. I love the word “ardent” – to do it with a kind of engagement, really being there. And do it with awareness. Do it with clear comprehension, clear recognition of what’s happening, having put aside covetousness and distress for the world.

Suddenly, it now becomes kind of a tall order. To observe without judging, interfering, thinking about things, or reacting – let alone being in the present moment – is not easy. It is not easy to apply a healthy, peacemaking ardency. Maintaining continuity of awareness and clear comprehension is not easy. It is also not easy to put aside our greed, covetousness, wanting, or distress.

But the text says there is a path to freedom. This is the way to go to freedom – but perhaps recognizing that is not easy to do. Then the text goes on, offering thirteen exercises for how to get there. The first exercise is the first tetrad of *ānāpānasati* – being attentive to breathing. We will go through the first exercise over the next few days.

As a person learns this exercise, the exercise becomes onward leading. Things move, and you are part of the journey – the going, the movement. The Buddha’s teachings are full of movement. It is not only about going nowhere, being no one, and doing nothing – which is a wonderful teaching in a limited way of understanding it. But it is not the full teaching. The Buddha’s teachings have an ongoing quality.

Imagine you saw a child on top of a playground slide, and you said to the child: “Let me give you some profound spiritual teaching. There is nowhere to go, nothing to do, and no one to be. Just sit and do nothing.” The child would be perplexed. The child knows what they are there for. They are there for the fun of going down the slide. They are up there to do that. They are probably not greedy for it. They are not trying to prove themselves to anyone. They are not trying to accomplish something great, like being the world’s best slider. The child is just there for the fun of going down the slide.

I use that as a reference point. There is kind of a leaning into – into the slide or onto the slope of mindfulness – this practice. It is not only about staying exactly where you are and nothing ever changes. The language of change, though, that the Buddha uses is *bhāvanā*. As I understand it, *bhāvanā* means “to cultivate” or “to develop.” It is like a farmer cultivating a plant or a parent supporting the growth of a child. The parent feeds and treats the child well so that they develop physically and psychologically in a healthy way. The parent is not stretching the child so that they grow faster. They are allowing a natural process to unfold.

It is the same with mindfulness practice. There is a radical simplicity. To be aware of the body in and of itself. To be aware of breathing – just the simplicity of breathing, knowing it. To allow for the possibility that you are on a slide or there is growth that goes on here.

The text begins with what some people call a promise: that there is a direct way to freedom. The way we do it is by observing. With strong, mature mindfulness, we observe the body in and of itself – and the same with feelings, mental states, and mental processes. But the heart of the text is the thirteen exercises, which we will go through.

After each exercise, there is what is usually called the refrain. The refrain repeats over and over again. On Monday, I read my synopsis of the whole process. The expression “observing change in the body, abiding, not clinging to anything in the world” represents the refrain.

The refrain itself continues a journey. It is a three- or four-part journey. The refrain describes an unfolding that goes through observing change in a way that awareness gets more and more clarified, purified, and simplified – until awareness becomes lucid.

The awareness is so lucid that we can then relax into it. It is like relaxing into a long, wonderful, comfortable slide down a hill. Then the process of deepening meditation takes over, and this leads to non-clinging, to freedom.

It is important not to hurry while going through all this. It is important not to get discouraged. I find it phenomenally inspiring that the Buddha describes a process of growth and unfolding. We are not expected to quickly become free like, “Okay, instant enlightenment” (as some people would like to have it).

There is something very mature and maturing about settling down for the long term. We are steadily putting the pieces in place to develop, cultivate, and grow awareness. We are developing our ability to be more and more present – in the present moment – with awareness, with attention. We are learning the art of resting here and opening to it – so that it is peaceful, inspiring, produces happiness, and has a sense of goodness. That is what we are opening up to as we cultivate and develop the simple capacity to be aware.

As we go through the text, different faculties of attention are called into play at different times. I think of attention as the Swiss Army knife of the mind. It has different tools that can be used. We learn these tools and apply them at different times. Each tool is useful in different circumstances to help us be present with our experience.

Our attention helps us not only to be present – but also to have the kind of awareness that is onward leading, and that has space and peacefulness. It is not complicated by our expectations, pushing, and wanting. It is like making space for the organic cultivation, development, and maturation that leads to freedom.

Today, the emphasis was on discovering more and more the qualities of knowing and recognition – in a way that knowing and recognizing things has power, beauty, and peacefulness.

Sometimes naming something makes space in the heart and mind: “Oh, it has been named. It’s like that. Yes, that’s how it is.” A person might say, “There’s a lot of tension in the group.” And then: “Oh! Someone named it finally. Oh, yes, that’s what’s happening.” Then everyone relaxes a little bit.

So we do that with breathing. We establish attention – awareness – with breathing and then know the breathing. As we know it, we begin discovering some of the qualities of knowing. We discover how to know so that knowing is unburdened of all the baggage we carry with us.

It is so simple to feel the delight, peace, freedom, or disentanglement of that simple knowing. At first, it might seem like nothing – like, “What’s the big deal?” But it is a big deal to develop this capacity to know – a beautiful thing to do. So thank you. Or *mange takk* in Norwegian. *Molto grazie*. I look forward to our time tomorrow.