

Satipaṭṭhāna (15) Mindfulness of Posture

January 24, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

second exercise, know, awareness, standing, walking, sitting, lying, *pajānāti*, simple, simplicity, cold, coolness, horizontal, vertical dimension, foundations, form, clarity, Thich Nhat Hanh, knowing, simplicity, tease apart

Gil Fronsdal

Today we begin the next exercise in the discourse on the four foundations for mindfulness, for awareness. The second exercise follows the same pattern as the first one. It describes another way of observing the body in terms of the body,

ardent, aware, clearly comprehending, having put aside greed and distress for the world.

This is a relatively mature mindfulness state to be in – to observe the simplicity of the body in regard to the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, and aware, having put aside greed and distress for the world. Some people practice mindfulness so they may not be caught in greed and distress. But that can happen. When it happens, the practice can go from there. Not being caught in greed and distress is the goal, and the 13 exercises are the means.

I translate this text as the four foundations *for* mindfulness. Classically, it is called the four foundations *of* mindfulness. But its purpose is to develop clear awareness, which is what I call mindfulness. So how do we do that? We can also do this with the second exercise. If you do the second exercise well, that becomes a platform or foundation from which to go through the steps of the refrain: to have awareness that is open to both external and internal; to have the ability to see the inconstant nature of the experience; and with the help of clearly seeing inconstancy – the impermanent nature of phenomena – to abide in very simple, lucid awareness where there is no greed, no clinging to anything at all. That is the pattern.

The second exercise is very simple. It is just four or five lines long. Because it is so simple, it is easy to overlook. Understanding it immediately, you might feel ready to move on to the next thing. The text goes this way:

When standing, one knows one is standing. When walking, one knows one is walking. When sitting, one knows one is sitting. When lying down, one knows one is lying down. Whatever posture the body is in, one knows that.

The exercise is deceptively simple. Just to know you are standing when you are standing. You can do that in a moment and then be ready to do more important things. But here we are talking about really knowing. The word “to know” is *pajānāti* in Pali. It is an important verb or activity in many of the *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises. There are different instructions for what to do, which are indicated by the verbs. The most common one is “to know.”

A few things make this exercise really rich. One is the emphasis on knowing – clearly recognizing what is happening when it is happening, in its simplicity. The most simple aspect of our experience in the moment, independent of any relationship to anything else.

At the moment, I am feeling comfortable but a little cool. The windows of this room are open. It is a bit cool outside, so I feel cool. I know that I am cold. I could add on top of that: “Why is it cold in the room? Maybe the windows are too open. I wonder how long the windows have been open. How long should I sit here being cold? Maybe I will get chilled if I stay here too long.”

All that commentary, which might be reasonable in some circumstances, takes us away from the most simple, relaxed, present moment awareness of the simplicity of feeling a little cool. Feeling coolness as if it deserves to be respected for what it is, in and of itself. It can also be seen, in a sense, as a message to which I should pay attention if it were really cold. But it is worthy of being known for itself.

In mindfulness practice, we are going in a different direction than the mind usually goes. All the concerns I have (Why are the windows open? How long can I sit here?) – imagine those are the horizontal plane of life. In vipassana, mindfulness is the vertical dimension. It allows us to penetrate and go deep. The simplicity of just

knowing something like cold, in and of itself, is a doorway to a deeper entry into that experience. To really penetrate and see deeply into the experience until we start seeing something liberating or freeing there.

The idea is to really be there with that. When I use the phrase “really being there,” I can imagine some people steel themselves up and are going to try hard. But this is meant to be very trusting, simple, relaxed knowing. To know when you are walking that you are walking means that you are not distracted. You are not thinking about all kinds of issues in your life or wonderful things you can contemplate. The mind thinking is a fine thing to do. But there is also something wondrous when we are really simple and just know, “I am walking.”

That can get boring very quickly in the horizontal mind, which has many concerns and interests. But in the vertical mind, which can go deep, it can open up to something really special. The first time I experienced that in my life in a palpable, strong way, I was 20 or 21 and lived alone for a week on a farm. I had never been alone for that long. I did not talk to or see anyone for the week.

I was not meditating then. But as the days went along, everything started to glisten. Everything started to have clarity. I would see an object, and it seemed like it was shining. When I had a thought, it was a wonder to see the thought arise. There was clarity that I had never experienced before. It did not matter what I was thinking. It was just clear thinking. There was all this space, stillness, and quiet around which I could have a simple knowing of each thing.

That experience was life-changing for me. It is one of the conditions that probably led to me being here and teaching. Appreciating and valuing the intimacy, clarity, simplicity, brightness, and vibrancy of just being present in the moment for this little thing – and knowing it. That felt deep.

To know you are walking as you walk. To know you are standing as you stand. To know you are sitting when you are sitting. To know you are lying down when you are lying down. When coming out of meditation, you may be somewhat settled, and it could be almost second nature to stay that simple. It may not be second nature, but staying that simple is a way to continue living in the benefits of the practice of mindfulness. Before you automatically or quickly get back into the complexity of your life in your mind, you allow yourself to stay calm, centered, and simple.

We talked yesterday about Thich Nhat Hanh, who recently died. Many people remember him for doing walking meditation. Sometimes there would be long lines of people walking with him down a country road. He would go slowly and steadily. There is something compelling about, “When you walk, just walk.” When you walk, just know walking. When you sit, just know sitting.

I will talk more about the second exercise tomorrow. For today, I wanted to emphasize the knowing quality. I would recommend, if you can today, to experiment. You know things easily. It can be almost subconscious that you know something. Opening your front door, you do not have the conscious idea: “There is a door. There is a knob. This is opening the door.” It happens almost automatically. For things that are almost automatic, see if you can open up and be a bit more mindful of them. See if you can find a way of recognizing “door, handle, opening” in a rudimentary, simple, and easeful way.

You see that in the knowing itself, there is freedom. There is no entanglement with what is known. There is no being for or against. It is not automatic. But the for or against, the entanglement, can be so integral to the very act of knowing that we cannot tease it apart. See if you can begin teasing it apart – just know. Eating – just eating. Hearing a sound – just hearing a sound.

See if you can find times during the day where you discover something very precious and special about your human capacity to know, to recognize. If you start appreciating the freedom, ease, and peace that is found in knowing, mindfulness becomes a lot easier. And it is easier to receive some of the benefits that come from doing ongoing practice.

I see a note in the chat about wanting to see a copy of the sutta I am reading. I have not posted my translation because I want to redo it. [As of April 2022, there is an updated translation on the IMC website.] If you look in the Resources menu from the top bar, you will see the categories “Written Dharma” and then “Sutta Translations.” You will find there a link to my translation of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.

Thank you for being here and being part of this. As we go slowly and steadily through this text, I hope it will become more alive for you – and richer and more engaging for your practice. Thank you.