

Satipaṭṭhāna (20) Beauty in Mindful Activity

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

full awareness, attention, activities, action, mindfulness, third exercise, daily life, *sampajāna*, infuse, clear recognition, *kalyāṇa*, beautiful, beauty, holistic, wholesome pleasure, dharmic pleasure, bell

Gil Fronsdal

Hello everyone. We are continuing to go through the discourse on the four foundations for mindfulness, for awareness. These exercises are ways of developing a heightened sense of attention in four different areas of our life. We bring attention to these areas so that our capacity to be awake and aware becomes stronger, clearer, and simpler all at the same time.

We are doing the third exercise in the set of thirteen. It reads like this:

A practitioner is one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning; who acts in full awareness when looking ahead and looking away; who acts in full awareness when flexing and extending the limbs; who acts in full awareness when wearing their robes or carrying their outer robe and bowl.

This last description is for monastics. But for laypeople, it would mean to give full awareness when wearing clothes, carrying food, plates and silverware, and eating.

The description continues that a practitioner is one:

who acts in full awareness when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; who acts in full awareness when defecating and urinating; who acts in full awareness when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

This is mindfulness in activities.

When I was first studying the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, I was strongly influenced by the Zen training I had done. So I read the text selectively for the passages that emphasized not doing anything more than just being aware. I thought that just being aware was enough – to be present for what is, without any attempt to change it, do anything with it, or judge it. It was a kind of receptive or passive awareness.

But as I studied this text and the teachings of the Buddha more, I saw that the Buddha's teachings are very centrally rooted and grounded in action – the actions of body, speech, and mind. And without understanding the role of action in our practice, we might not really find our way to freedom or realize its full potential.

The first three exercises of the text include a lot of action. The first exercise begins with breathing. It says, "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in." It does not say, "I know breathing is happening." Breathing is not seen as a passive thing going on. Instead, it says, "I know / am breathing."

Then the text says, "experiencing one's whole body." That is a little receptive and open, but it implies a choice to use the mind to receive and experience the body – to really feel the full body. Then it says to relax the body. That clearly is an activity.

The second exercise begins with focusing on walking – knowing you are walking when you're walking, standing when you're standing, sitting when you're sitting, and lying down when you're lying down. These are called "postures," but they are also activities. We put ourselves in these postures.

The third exercise is all about activities – what we are doing. I like to think that the text begins this way because we are starting to get the hang of how to pay attention to the actions we do and the way we act. This practice is about more than the mindfulness of sitting quietly in meditation with our eyes closed and later learning how to practice in daily life. The practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* begins with our daily life activities. We infuse all that we do with mindfulness and attention.

It is not a distraction to do this. It distracts us from our distractions. So if you prefer to be distracted, do not practice mindfulness. But in a funny way, to practice mindfulness is to do something different from being distracted. It is to be present for our activities while we do them and be present from the inside out.

We not only know that we are doing activities, but we also infuse our actions with awareness of sensations. For example, if I reach for the bell next to me, I can do it mindlessly. I reach for the bell while I talk, not paying attention to what I am doing. Or I can slow down, put my attention in my arm, and infuse my actions with feeling sensations. I feel my arm stretching out. I feel the weight of the bell. I feel my hand gripping the bell and lifting it.

Initially, this kind of attention might seem like a distraction from living your life. But over time, we can live our lives and be infused with this kind of attention. We are infusing ourselves with embodied awareness, which gives us access to a much wider range of who we are. Embodied awareness offers a wider range of intelligence, perception, sensitivity, and wisdom than if we are only in our heads thinking, planning, reacting, and reviewing.

When we start dropping into and allowing the body to be the foundation from which we engage, our awareness becomes more holistic. Our whole being with all our different capacities and functions can begin to be martialed together for the purpose of being present and wise.

The text talks about practicing “full awareness.” I like this expression quite a bit. But I think the Pali word *sampajāna* means “with clear recognition” – to really recognize what we are doing when we are doing it. And what do we recognize? Certainly, we recognize the activity in and of itself. But “full recognition” includes our intentions and purpose in doing something, and the context we are in.

This wider intelligence and sensitivity can arise from the body because we are really present for our experience as we do it. That is not at the exclusion of everything else, but because we are more attentive and sensitive to what goes on around us.

With this full awareness and clear recognition, we also pay attention to the effect or influence our actions have on us. If I quickly grab my bell out of greed and hold it tight – “this is mine” – there is tension and tightness in holding it that way. I can notice the influence this has on me is not very good. It brings more tension. But instead, I could reach for the bell in a relaxed way – respecting the bell, feeling the bell when I first touch it. I can hold the bell just tightly enough to lift it without gripping. I can feel the coolness of the metal against my hand. It feels nice to do that action. Reaching for the bell and holding it can be a simple pleasure.

A hugely important part of mindfulness practice is that we can become mindful of the influence our actions have on ourselves and on the world. Is what I am doing nourishing me? Is it benefiting me? Is it pleasant? Is it enjoyable? The concept that is most important here is: “Is it wholesome? Is it helpful for us?”

The Buddha’s teachings on action encourage us to do actions that are beautiful. Infusing attention into all our activities can also mean doing activities in a beautiful way. What that beauty means for any individual is very personal. What would you do? How would you reach for something if you wanted to do it beautifully? What if you chewed and tasted food in a beautiful way in order to experience this as beauty or a wholesome pleasure?

I love the word “beauty” because it is different from “pleasure.” Many people associate pleasure with physical pleasure that is skin deep, like something that tastes good or feels good physically. But beauty is a deep pleasure. It is like dharmic pleasure. Beauty resonates deeply with what feels right, good, wonderful, clean, and ethical within ourselves.

The Pali word for beauty here is *kalyāṇa*. Some of you know the word *kalyāṇamitta*, often translated as a “good spiritual friend.” But the first definition of *kalyāṇa* is “beautiful.” So *kalyāṇamitta* literally means “beautiful friend.”

We can infuse our actions with awareness and attention. But there is an even more wonderful possibility. We can be present for our experience – really know it – in such a way that we are sensitive to the influence it has on us. We can be sensitive to the quality that comes with doing the activity. It is possible to do things beautifully.

One acts in full awareness when going forward beautifully; returning beautifully; looking ahead beautifully; looking away beautifully; flexing and extending one’s limbs beautifully; wearing one’s clothes beautifully; eating, drinking, and tasting beautifully; defecating and urinating beautifully; walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent beautifully.

Exactly what beauty is, is personal. But it has a feeling of goodness or deep pleasure – dharmic pleasure. Beauty feels like: “This is worthwhile to do with all my being. This is a healthy thing to do.” It requires being attentive to the present moment.

I hope you will begin to see your life flower and blossom around this kind of attention. It does not take you away from your life. Rather, it infuses your life with a great sense of purpose and value. This kind of awareness lays the foundation for living a full life in the world in a way that is beautiful – in a way that is peaceful and moves you towards awakening and appreciation. You see beauty as a foundation for the path to awakening. The Buddha’s teachings on action have an emphasis on beauty – *kalyāṇa*.

May you explore the everyday activities you engage in. May you take a heightened interest in them today and see what you can learn. But even more: is it possible to do activities in a way that influences you positively? In a way that feels good? Maybe beautiful?

Thank you very much.