

Monday Dharma talk

Gil Fronsdal

September 01, 2025

Keywords: satipaṭṭhāna, ekāyana, vedanā, sati, bhāvanā, ānāpānasati sutta, kāyagatā-sati sutta, jhāna, seven factors of awakening, saṅgha

As we begin this retreat, it's quite meaningful for me, and maybe it'll be for some of you, that we're not doing this retreat in isolation. That we're doing it and stepping into a river, a long current, a long lineage of people who have sat down to practice *satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishment of awareness, as I like to translate it. And I think of my Asian teachers that I sat with in Thailand and Burma and their delight and faith and commitment to the practice itself, for themselves, for what they wanted to teach, and that they were continuing a lineage that had all kinds of twists and turns down through history. But still, it goes back a long way. It goes back to a long way of people who cherish this particular sutta, this particular teaching and the four establishments, four ways of establishing awareness. And as every generation does, people will interpret it differently.

And kind of as most generations do, as those people who interpret it become older, they say this is the true way, this is the orthodoxy, and then the next generation will come along and then, you know, kind of have a little revolution. So that happened to me when I was in Burma in a sense where the tradition at the Mahāsi Center that I studied this practice with presented itself as being the orthodoxy. This is how it is. But some 50 years before, they were the radical reformers of meditation of Theravāda Buddhism in their time with tremendous amount of conflict. That a lot of criticism, a lot of strife around exactly what Mahāsi Sayādaw was teaching, it was so radically different, and you know, this was a young fire, a young kind of radical reformer who was coming up. And then 30 years later it became kind of a certain kind of status quo, with some like 500 meditation centers in Burma doing it.

It's quite impressive. And one of the great sights of my experience of practicing in Burma was every morning there were more women practicing there than men. And every morning there was a long file of the men, first the monastics and then the laymen. It was kind of a single file

to the dining hall to have breakfast. But we had to always walk by this wide rope. It was kind of like a community college campus, the Mahāsi Center.

And it was this wide road and these buildings. And to our left walking in was the women's meditation hall. And it was really large. And it had these swinging doors somehow. The one whole side, two whole sides, the two long sides, were like door after door after door, big doors. And whenever we walked by, they were wide open and you could see all the way through to their side.

And there were 500 women meditating there. And that was like a power spot. And then... For particular reasons, women in Burma, when they meditate, they sit straight. They sit upright with dignity and power. It was quite inspiring for me every day to see this amazing model of practicing *satipaṭṭhāna*, the row after row of these women's upright, with nobility, with dignity sitting there quietly, peacefully, not moving.

It was very inspiring for me. For the men, they had to, I don't know why, for the men, maybe because there were so few, much fewer lay men who came there to practice. The men's meditation hall was kind of scruffy, and almost like an afterthought. And I don't know what it was. And a couple of the foreign people who came to practice there had a fist fight once about adjusting the fan and the ceiling in the meditation hall. So it's going to be dangerous to practice *satipaṭṭhāna*.

And the men in Burma, you usually sit kind of collapsed over. I mean, from a Zen point of view, it's a disaster. You know, just like, oh. And they get enlightened, so it works that way. So just, you know, you don't have to sit straight. But it didn't have the same inspiration that it did.

So that inspiration, I bring that to you because it's an inspiring practice, it's a profound practice. It can be understood in many ways, but maybe all the ways lead to a single place. They lead to a profound form of very simple, very powerful way of being aware. Being clearly present with a clarity of awareness that is liberating, a clarity of awareness that both leads to the end of clinging, grasping, but also is the consequence of letting go of grasping, that deep letting go. And it's something that's very, very simple. One of the ways it's described is, I just love this in their refrain.

Kind of, it says, with just enough, awareness and understanding that this is a body. You probably figured out you have a body yet. So that's not such a big thing. But there's something that very powerful happens when that knowledge happens in this field of pristine simplicity. And so there's something that freeing in that state. So, whatever way we're practicing *sati-*

paṭṭhāna, it meant to lead to the same place, to letting go deep freedom, deep letting go of clinging, grasping attachments of all sorts.

And it's a remarkable how thoroughly and completely this is possible. And the path of *satipaṭṭhāna* is a journey of deepening the understanding of how much we could probably most of us grasp more than we realize. And so it's, even if you think you grasp a lot, you don't really know. And so to really get quiet and still and really begin to see some of the deep, kind of the deeper operating system of how grasping works. And to find that that can be let go in a very thorough way is really inspiring, really meaningful, transformative. So many of you know that this discourse begins with the word *ekāyana*, *ekāyana*, and that there's all kinds of discussion of what it means.

Lately people have appreciated the translating it as the direct path, but we don't really know what the Pāli means, because the Pāli grammar, the way words are put together can have multiple meanings. The *eka* means one, and *āyana* means going, going in a direction. It could also mean a path. But that *eka*, what does *eka* here mean? And there's many compound words with *eka* at the beginning. And sometimes it means alone.

So it could be this is the path one has to do for oneself, the individual path. That there's something about sitting down to really do this practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, that in and of itself is something only you can do for yourself. It would be nice if you could call the meditation equivalent of Uber and arrange for someone to do it for you, and it saves you a lot of time, but it doesn't do you any good. It might do a lot of good to the person you've contracted out to, but it doesn't really help you. You have to do this for yourself. As much as this is done in community, as important as *saṅgha* is, and our interpersonal relationships in Buddhism, sooner or later for this deep work, it's a way of going individually for yourself.

So that's one possible meaning of this *ekāyana*. Another one that I like a lot is that word, *ekāyana* is used sometimes in India to refer to the confluence of two rivers, where two rivers come together to become one, to going to one. It's also used sometimes when some things are joined together to make one whole thing, making one. And so the idea of kind of coming into one, into unifying, coming together, there's also, I think, so I call it sometimes the unifying path, the unifying practice. And what is it unifying? It's unifying all of ourselves, all of our different attentional capacities, the ways we can know, what we can know, that are important to really bring it all together as a unified practice.

It seems like in the ancient world there was also the idea that you, sometimes you only had to practice one of the *satipaṭṭhānas*, body, the feeling tones or mind or the *dharmā*. But this is unifying all three, bring all four together. And I like to think of it as the whole thing

as a path that's progressively deepening, and that's the premise in which I'm offering this retreat. That is a path that starts with the body, and then with centered in the body, we start becoming aware of sensations. My translations of *vedanā* now, usually translated as feeling or feeling tones. And with that, there's a whole turning, a turning over a transformation that happens in the second foundation that moves us in the direction, a deep appreciation, deep understanding of the mind.

And then with understanding the mind, then there's understanding of the deep operating systems of the mind, the processes of the mind, the activities of the mind. And all four of these areas work together, and they get kind of unified in this field of awareness. So hopefully you'll understand this as we go through this deepening and deepening. And the idea that it's a unifying path is supported by the two other mindfulness discourses, *ānāpānasati sutta*, and the *kāyagatā-sati sutta*. Anyway, the mindfulness directed to the body sutta. So there's mindfulness of the breathing, mindfulness directed to the body, and then there's the *satipaṭṭhāna* of the four foundations.

And all three of them are bringing together a variety of practices and bringing them into unity and harmony. So they're working together. The mindfulness of the body one, what it brings together is mindfulness of the body with the *jhānas*, with deep concentration. The *ānāpānasati sutta* brings together mindfulness of breathing with the four foundations of mindfulness and the seven factors of awakening. And *satipaṭṭhāna* brings their own set together. So you don't have to remember all this, but it's the idea of unifying, unification, gathering together.

Another way of saying that in modern English is becoming whole, becoming whole, healing all the divisions we have, healing all the ways we're divided from ourselves, all the ways we're distracted from ourselves, cut off from ourselves, healing all the ways that we have a selective attention, where we prioritize certain things that the whole can't work harmoniously together. And the movement here is towards certain kind of wholeness, unification, bringing together. And that process involves two things. One is shedding, letting go of, quieting, calming, the constructing, fabricating, concocting, making things up activities of the mind, in favor of allowing the growing of natural capacities we have with inside. And those natural capacities that are growing through this practice are usually translated or described in English translations as wholesome qualities. I love the word wholesome because it kind of, in English means belonging to the whole.

So there are ways, there's things inside that can grow and develop that belong to the whole, that make us whole. Or as make us into a unified field where all our different sense faculties

are working in harmony, working together, to make space, to give sunlight to the growing of these wonderful plants, wholesome plants inside. Growing the wholesome. And some of this I've taught quite a bit lately. But in Pāli, what we're doing here is called *bhāvanā*. And *bhāvanā* is sometimes translated as practice, sometimes as meditation.

But it literally means growing, cultivating. Like a farmer cultivates a plant or the growing of something. And if we ask, if you're asked, which in a way I... If I ask, you know, what's your practice? Many people answer with a technique. But if people ask you instead, which I'll ask you now, you can think about this.

Here you are at IRC, spend a month engaging in *satipaṭṭhāna*. What are you growing? What are you hoping to grow while you're here? Some of you, like, that's an odd question. You never thought about it, maybe. But that's the alternative to asking, what is your practice in getting a technique?

Growing, when you ask, what are you growing? I think for many of us, we become reflective. We kind of look inside. We maybe feel inside. What is there in there? What wants to grow?

What can I grow? Where do I look for what needs to grow? Growing is a biological event. It's not an engineering feat. This practice we're doing is not, we're not engineering something. We're cultivating, we're like gardeners, creating the conditions with which something can grow.

And what can grow? Awareness can grow. Awareness can stand out and highlight and develop. What can grow is a lot of wholesome qualities. And the wholesome qualities that are most represented and is growing in the *satipaṭṭhāna sutta* are the seven factors of awakening. The way that they're described, when we get to them, is the instructions are to bring the seven factors of awakening to fulfillment.

The five hindrances are to be abandoned. And some people then will kind of then somehow take that word, abandon, let go, and think that's what that's what Buddhism is all about. Just abandon, just let go deeply and fully, just let go on all occasions. The Buddha didn't say that. For the seven factors of awakening, the instructions is to bring them to fullness. And this word fullness, so in the language family, I associate with wholeness.

Becoming whole, becoming full, letting them fill us. But for these wonderful qualities to fill us, we have to make space in us. We have to open up, we have to turn on the light of awareness. Just like if you want to grow plants in the greenhouse, you could turn on the light, the growing lights, if it's marijuana. But if it's other plants, you just have to maybe pull apart the blackout curtains so the sunlight can come in. Then something can grow.

And there's something about awareness, a certain way of being aware, a certain way of knowing, a certain way of sensing and feeling that is kind of like light, that allows something to grow, makes room for something to happen. There's something about the light of awareness that when it shines on what is unwholesome, shines on what is artificial, what is made up in the mind, what comes along with, you know, this made-up world of stories and complicated kind of attachments we have, that it begins to dry it out. It's kind of like in the dark, moist greenhouse mold grows. But when the sunlight comes, the mold dries out. So in the absence of light, our unconscious or subconscious, or the activities inside, can go a little bit awry. All kinds of unwholesome things can arise.

But as we shine light on the unwholesome, it tends to shift and change our relationship to them. We tend not to feed anymore. They tend to soften and relax. And when we shine the light on what's wholesome, it helps it to grow and develop. But when sunlight, when the sun makes sunlight, it's not thinking about the plants. It's not kind of like so excited about zapping those plants with electrons so that they can photosynthesize.

That just offers it freely without any expectation in return. So we offer the light of our awareness to make space, to make room, to turn on the light, to see what's here in a fuller and fuller way. And how do we do that in *satipaṭṭhāna*? All three mindfulness discourses begin exactly the same way. They begin by highlighting, I'm going to highlight from there, three important practices. And you should memorize these three, because we'll come back to this over and over again as we go through *satipaṭṭhāna*.

The practice of knowing, recognition, what's happening, knowing what's happening. The practice of sensing, sensing sensations. And the practice of relaxing, calming, becoming tranquil. And these make a wonderful triad to know, to feel, and to relax. And in the middle of that is breathing. Breathing in and breathing out, where breathing is a medium for some people to really allow this knowing and sensing to be very intimate.

And as we sense, the instructions are to sense the whole body, which happens kind of naturally when we start getting centered here in the present moment. So the text begins, I mean, when it starts giving its specific instructions, having gone to the wilderness, a foot of a tree or an empty building, a practitioner sits down with legs crossed and body erect. Having established awareness to the forefront, always one breathes in with awareness and breathes out with awareness. The word awareness to the forefront, the word can also mean 360 degrees all around. Kind of your attention is just radiating in a sense, or it's open and all around. And then establishing awareness.

Nowhere in the suttas does the Buddha tell people to do *sati*. *Sati* is never presented as a

practice a person does, a verb, an activity that we do. But rather we establish it. We abide in it. We enter it. Those are the verbs that the Buddha uses for how we relate to this thing called *sati*.

To develop that awareness that we can enter into, to make that awareness strong, then he offers a set of practices in the *satipaṭṭhāna sutta* with verbs of what you do, none of which have *sati* in it. *Sati* is a result of a practice you do. *Sati* is not the practice we do. And the result is clear awareness, to a point of becoming a lucid awareness. And how do we practice so that we become established here, so that you're just, you're living in awareness, the land of awareness, the awareness is just here. Some of you have gone to a place that was very special, maybe sometimes a place in nature, well, you weren't planning to be lucidly aware, undistractively aware, but the place was so significant, so beautiful, so powerful, so significant, that you couldn't help with being aware.

It was almost like you're entering into a field of awareness of being here, and it's just quite natural to be. Your senses are open, your attention is here, you don't have to work at it. You don't have to remember. It's just the whole location is so strong. There were certain circumstances. I don't know if you've ever had this occasion, but to be with someone soon after they died.

That was quite sacred. And at least for me, I didn't have to work at being aware. That wasn't a job to do. I didn't have to remember to be aware. It was like the whole situation was a field of lucid awareness. It didn't even feel like it was my awareness in that setting.

It was just something in the room. And I wasn't, my attention was not getting distracted from this powerful field of awareness that was there. So we're kind of coming and dropping in, opening up here. And how is the means for that? Breathing in and breathing out is the centering practice. Breathing in happens always in the present moment.

Breathing out is always here and now. And breathing is this amazing nexus of so many different aspects of our life. The whole ecology of our life kind of meets in the center of breathing. Our emotional life is strongly connected to breathing. Our physiological life is connected to breathing. Our mental life is connected to breathing.

Our perception of the environment is connected to breathing. Breathing sits at the center of so many different things. And so to be able to find a way to lovingly stay close to breathing, lovingly make room for breathing to breathe you, to lovingly feel that wonderful way that breathing is caring for you all the time, breath after breath. Be massaged by it, be in the rhythm of breathing. Because if you do that, it puts you very close to the center of all these

different areas of your life that somehow begin getting unified around this wonderful experience of breathing. Come together, get gathered, work together, this gathering of the family of our inner life here and now.

So there's this breathing. And then as we breathe, to know. And knowing, as I said yesterday, is a family of different knowing capacities we have. It's not just one thing. And it doesn't have to happen so consciously or intentionally or deliberately. Some knowing we do deliberately, and some knowing happens naturally, automatically.

There is non-verbal knowing in the mind. You know without even know that you know. If you go downstairs to get some utensils to eat your miso soup, you don't have to think about, analyze situation carefully, measure, make measurements, to know that you don't really able to drink miso soup with a fork. That, you didn't even think about it. There was no conscious effort to know that, but you knew it. You pulled the spoon out, not the fork.

That was kind of non-conscious knowing operating, undeliberate knowing. That's an amazing feat. That's a pretty sophisticated thing to know. Congratulations. Thank you. But it happens naturally and easily, and kind of in a deliberate knowing, and there's a whole field of less deliberate knowing.

As we relax into knowing, as we center here and allow knowing, allow awareness, what we're doing is beginning to make space for this deep capacity to know, and all these different forms, to start coming to the forefront in a nice way, that they can't do if we're distracted. We can't do if we're lost in thought. Being caught up in thoughts and stories and past and futures kind of fills the space, kind of blocks the light, dominates the, it's kind of fills all the empty space so that knowing can't come forth. There's no room for it. One of the reasons to quiet the mind is so there's more room in the mind, more space, more quiet, more silence for the deeper knowing to know. And for us to begin to appreciate and be amazed by and value the simplest ways that we can know what's happening in the present moment, to know the breathing.

And there's, as we do this, all kinds of new dimensions of knowing begin to come out. It might say, it's very simplistic if we think knowing is just the mental noting that we're making, just noting things. That's just kind of like, that's just like the pointer to be here. And if you do use mental noting as part of mindfulness practice, the way to do it, I think, that really helps allow this unification, this gathering together, this creating openness, creating space for deeper knowing and sensing to occur, is to say the mental note has the start of a short journey. You're like opening the door and stepping through something. And then now in the wake of that note, what is this now? What's this?

When I was introduced to the mindfulness practice and noting, noting was the end of the journey. I noted I'd done my job, a checklist approach, waited for the next opportunity to note something. And then I learned, no, no. Note and be amazed. Note and just kind of open. What's here? Let me know with this fully. Let it register more. Let me feel it more. So, I mean, some things are not ah, but I have an itch. Okay, itch. Feel the itch. There's an inhale. Know the inhale. Feel the inhale. Allow it to do its magic of being known. It's amazing, sacred thing for this mind to be involved in attention and recognition and knowing. And it's amazing. It does this.

So it says in the suttas to know, to know your breathing in, to know your breathing in long, to know your breathing in short, to know qualities and characteristics of your breathing. The text is very specific and simple. I like to understand it. It's just as you dip into the whole experience of breathing, you'll get to know it. Almost naturally you'll know it in more and more ways. You don't have to analyze it. This is not a research project. It's not an engineering feat to know and recognize all the details. It's more like be there to allow it to be known. Be a good listener to the friend who only wants you to listen to them. Be with your breath just to know it. On its terms, not your terms, enter into that world to know.

And then that text goes on and say, as you're breathing in and breathing out, feel or experience, or I like to translate it as sense, sense the whole body. That just thinks fantastic. So there's some people are more sense-based, some people are more cognitive-based. But they're both, both are needed and both have to work together. And whichever is your specialty of your mind, use it as the entry point. So if you're a sensing experience, feeling your body as more pulls you in more, feel.

If the cognitive functioning of knowing pulls you into the present more, do it. But then as you get closer and you make space and allow this kind of door to open to feel and register it, part of that field will be the sensing, the experience. And there's so many different sense capacities we have. You can't, we don't even know probably all the ways in which this whole system is sensing the world around and within. You don't have to know everything. You just have to know to make room for the sensing to operate.

And that's why feeling the whole body, the kind of a global open awareness of the body, I think it allows our human capacities for sensing to operate more fully, and to sense. And I'll offer you a little exercise around sensing that I find very meaningful for me. If you put your hands together like an *añjali*, so the palms are touching, is your right hand touching your left? Is that what's happening? Or is it really that the left hand is touching the right? Well, hopefully you don't have to choose between those two options. They're touching each other. The

touching happens. The sensations of touch are happening in the place where they're sensing the touch. Just like the two hands, the contact between two hands, you need both hands, and you can't exactly separate the feeling of contact between them. But the sensing of contact happens in... And the sensation happens where the sensing occurs. The nerve endings that are there that allows us to sense. Sensation and sensing are one and the same, or can't be separated. They're non-dual. There's an intimacy between a sensation, that is kind of like an object, and the subjective sensing of it. And to be right there to feel that inseparability of sensing and sensation, and to feel the sensing and sensations in a careful, loving way and open way. Let it be felt, make room for it. There's probably many times no clear boundary between the edge of the sensation. And sometimes in some sensations that happen, and the sensing of them, there's an influence that spreads out beyond the very point of sensation. Happens particularly with breathing. There are sensations associated with breathing. And this Mahāsi practice that I practice in Burma, it was a sensation practice. It was a practice to feel the sensations carefully that came into play in all situations, but it's always referring back to the sensations, which meant referring the experience back into the body, letting the body be the reference point for how we know what's happening. So with the breathing, it's the sensations of breathing. And those sensations are happening in the same place that we're sensing them, those sensations. They can't be in a different place. They can't have sensations in your body, you know, of breathing and... Well, those sensations are my left chest, less... But I'm sensing it on my right lung. They're happening in the same place. So this intimacy and this opening to feel as we're breathing, the whole body, in whatever way the body shows itself, the sensations arise. Sensations are always happening in the present moment. We're beginning to find ourselves entering into this rich world, multifaceted world of knowing and sensing by dropping into the body and being here as we breathe. And I want to emphasize this multifaceted, we don't even know all the things that are coming into play, all the things that are growing and developing as we kind of trust ourselves here and now, to this body, to these feelings, to this very simple knowing.

And then the third practice is to relax. As we're feeling our whole body, it's relatively common as people are getting more present, more connected to themselves, to notice that they're tense, where they're tense, where their bodies are held in some way and tight. And so I was surprised when I read this, learned this, that we're actually allowed to relax. I never got that lesson in Zen. In Zen I got a lesson, you're not supposed to do anything except just be present. But you're allowed to relax, really?

But yes, you're allowed to calm. But if you're really sensitive, really... There's so many won-

derful things arise and are made known. The deeper you can sense, the deeper you can know. But if you really sense carefully with a very quiet mind, you can feel that any tension you have wants to relax. Any tension you have has within it the very movement towards relaxing, releasing.

And the reason it's not is because the mind is gripped to something. But the tension itself wants to soften. And to feel that desire, to feel that movement, that potential, then the letting go can be allowing the system to relax. Not a directing, not being the director in the control tower, saying, okay, let's relax. Let's make this a project. Let's do the left shoulder first, then we'll do the right. No, we have to do with more time on the right than left. You know, that's, you know, it's not an engineering job. It just feel deeply. Feel deeply where the relaxing wants to happen and then allow it to happen.

But you can also calm yourself intentionally. And then over time, you won't need to calm or relax so much anymore. And then you're left more with sensing and knowing. Right. And as this goes on, the *satipaṭṭhāna*, the role of sensing and knowing becomes deeper and deeper, more and more valuable, more richer and full of possibilities. But in the beginning, we're just kind of using the most obvious capacities we have for sensing and knowing what is happening here and now in the present moment, in a way that connects us to something quite profound over time. Maybe not at first. At first it might seem boring. But then we stay and stay and it kind of begins to open up.

And then I want to end with maybe with a metaphor that might shift a little bit some of your whole orientation in a certain kind of way, that maybe will help with this. Allowing and opening and trusting. I think for the most part in Western culture, the metaphor for time, past, present, and future is the future is in head of us, kind of in a direct line. And the past is behind us in a direct line. There are other cultures where it's the opposite, where it's the past that's in front of us, because we can see the past kind of in our memory. But the future we can't see, so that's behind us. So it's kind of sneaking up at us. So those are metaphors, right? Another metaphor is that... It's not a flat line. Maybe the past is behind us, but it's uphill. And the future is in front of us downhill.

It's a lot of work to climb up the past, to get involved in the past and think about it, remember, and it's tiring. But there's something about opening, relaxing, taking off the breaks to awareness, breaking off the breaks of knowing and sensing better here, that the whole movement is to flow downhill, where awareness is like water. And water will flow downhill, and water will go around, and water always finds a way to flow downhill. The future is downhill, and we'll come across many things as the water awareness flows on and on. And sometimes it

comes into a place where it has to build up a dam. It takes a while for it to kind of spill over the top. But it'll always keep going. You can't stop water from flowing. So maybe if awareness is like water, if you're like water, and you're rolling, flowing fluidly to whatever comes arise in front of you as your... coasting, rolling, surfing down that wonderful hill, the wave into the future. Maybe that shifts how you understand what we're doing here. Maybe there's a... this contributes to a way of, you know, not flowing with the parking brake on, which is kind of what happens if you spend too much time thinking and analyzing and criticizing and planning and And then please don't think too much about the past. It's a lot of work. It's a big hill. And it's like Mont Everest. You can't even see the top. So once you get started on that hill, trust the movement forward. Trust the onward leading nature of this path. Let your awareness be present, be open, be available. Let it flow, let it grow. Trust it. And trust that as you know what's here, as you sense and feel what's here, the awareness will grow. Awareness comes with knowing and sensing. And that is my appreciation of how the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice begins. And so we begin a journey. Thank you for being with me on this journey.