

Sunday Dharma talk

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September 20, 2026

Keywords: *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, *sati*, lucid awareness, *anupassanā*, *samādhi*, *vipassanā*, non-clinging, *Dharma* eye, wisdom eye, five faculties

Some days ago, I mentioned how the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* opens with the claim that this practice of the four establishments of awareness leads to the end of despair and lamentation, suffering and sadness. And then it doesn't talk about it anymore. Those, they're not mentioned.

Another thing that I found very odd when I looked for it: it opens up and says these four areas of *sati*—mindfulness or awareness—are the means for that freedom from suffering, to liberation. So that's exciting: mindfulness, *sati*. And then the text doesn't say anything more about it. It disappears, kind of.

I thought, I was all excited to finally read the text that's going to tell me all about mindfulness, and then it doesn't. And the reason for that, that I understand, is that what the Buddha calls *sati*—what the modern world calls mindfulness, often what I call awareness—is not presented as something that we do. Whereas people say they practice mindfulness, it kind of implies you do the mindfulness practice.

The way Thokserpa introduces the word mindfulness, or *sati*, in this introduction is, “one abides.” So, the four foundations of mindfulness, the four foundations of *sati*: what are they? It describes it as abiding, observing the body in and of itself, ardent, with clear comprehension, and with *sati*. One puts aside greed and distress for the world.

So here, it opens and says this: one abides, observing with ardency, clear comprehension, and *sati*—something you have, not something you do. And so, I think that the word awareness, in my vocabulary, works a lot better as something that we have, something we abide in. We abide in awareness.

And the rest of the *sutta*, the reason it doesn't talk about it again, hardly, is that it's talking about how you can use your capacity for attention to awaken a strong sense of awareness

that you can abide in, that you can live in. That can be a state that you have, that you have *sati*.

And it's a little bit like if you take the word faith, *saddhā*, maybe confidence, trust. We normally don't say that we do confidence. We might say we do courage, but confidence is something you have.

And if confidence is the first of the five faculties, and the third of the five faculties is *sati*, these are the capacities we have. That we live in, we awaken, we strengthen, but we don't do them. We can strengthen our confidence, but we don't do the confidence thing. It's not like an action, you know.

I tell you all, "Okay, today was a confidence day. Turn it on." I might tell you a story of the Buddha's awakening, and that might awaken confidence in you, inspire confidence. So *sati* is not something we do, but something in which we abide.

So we do these different kinds of things. At the beginning of the retreat, I talked about how the text calls on different attentional faculties we have. We have the capacity to know, and that's the most important faculty that's mentioned in this text: to know clearly what's happening. To know, to feel or experience, to sense, to have clear comprehension—a higher-order level of knowing.

To understand something well: what the context is, how it works, its influence, whether it's wholesome or unwholesome. It's not just a simple recognition. And sometimes that higher level of understanding really gathers us and helps us to stay present, to wake up the awareness.

Intentionality, to do something intentionally, like intentionally to have the posture, also kind of brings alive a certain kind of attention, a certain kind of awareness. So we have—it turns out that we humans have a lot of neurons, different neurons for different sensing. The Buddha just called all of them touch. But we know there are lots of different ways, different sense organs within us.

And to feel the whole body is a kind of simple way of being open. It makes space for all these different ways that the body can feel: different neurons for temperature, for pressure, for movement. Different neurons for balance, proprioception, where the body is in space, spatial mindfulness. It goes on and on.

All the ways in which the body reveals if we're hungry, thirsty, anxious, excited. The body tells us if we're safe. There are sensations in the body. So this idea of feeling the whole body is kind of making room to let all those show themselves to us, come alive and active.

And the more we allow the attentional faculties we have to come alive and be present, they gather themselves together, maybe in the neural pathways, in the insula maybe, and work together in harmony. And this harmonious working together of all these pieces of attention is constructed in the mind as what awareness is. So each person's construct will be a little different than someone else's. It's not like a singular thing we're talking about.

But one of the things they have in common is that it's not something we do; it's more something we are. And sometimes, if we do a lot of doing, we interfere with the being part—the being of awareness. And the art is, on one hand, the doing is what awakens and strengthens awareness, because we're starting to bring forth more and more of these capacities.

We can do the practice of knowing what's here. We can do the practice of staying present to sense what's here. But more and more, we're growing this kind of harmony, this unification, that gives birth to something different.

And when that awareness gets strong, this is one place where *sati* appears in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. It becomes something that has a prefix, so you can argue it's a different word. It becomes *paṭisati*, and *paṭisati* is what I like to translate as lucid awareness. We don't just simply know we're aware; the awareness becomes lucid, becomes really clear.

It becomes almost like a thing in itself, but it's no more a thing than a rainbow is. Because it's the gathering of all these different factors that come together. Maybe it's one of the most important resources, treasures, we have. But it's not a thing.

Though it can feel like, “Wow, this is like really strong, to be aware, lucid awareness.” But there's one more faculty of attention that is called upon in doing *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice, and that's observing: *anupassanā*, *anupassati*—to observe.

And this turns out—in the early years that I was practicing and teaching *vipassanā* here in the United States in the 1990s, listening, you know, being with Jack Kornfield a lot—he had a very strong orientation to avoid using the language of seeing when talking about mindfulness. Like, you know, “Watch your breath. See what's happening in your belly when you're anxious. Observe your experience.”

And the reason for that: he found that that language, for beginners, tends to put them too far away, at a distance from themselves. It was too abstract. They were almost like, “We're not going to feel. We're not going to be present really carefully with experience.” Maybe it put them in their head.

Some people would start—I'd be with them with their eyes closed—and they would strain with their eyes. They were kind of with their mind's eye trying to see, but they would engage

their eyes. So he avoided using the language of seeing. So it seemed like sensible things, so I did too.

But when I started studying the *suttas* carefully, it turns out the Buddha uses this a lot. But he uses it very contextually, in a very particular way. Observing or seeing clearly is only used in the *suttas* for very deep practice, only when the practice is really strong. There's a switch to a time when now we just settle back and observe.

Before that, he talks about the primary one, which is knowing and feeling. And feeling is a really useful thing to do because it allows us to encompass, to include, so much data about who we are. So much of our experience comes through feeling the body. And so, to be able to hold it all, gather it all, let it all kind of function properly, and to be able to really feel your body well.

It isn't just your conscious mind that is processing all that. Your deep mind, your unconscious mind, is also processing and integrating and coordinating the whole symphony of your inner life through the vehicle of these sensations, through the communication. So there's a lot of value to feeling fully.

For meditators, feeling or sensing the body is one of the primary supports or means for *samādhi*, for entering into deep concentration. It's not just simply a mental act of staring at a candle flame, you know, or just kind of hooking yourself on some spot of your breathing and just not leaving it. That can create a lot of strain and tension. And that's when concentration practice goes kind of haywire, when people strain to do it or have a lot of tension.

But to have the support of feeling the body really well, opening and feeling the body, relaxing the body so it can feel even better, gives a feedback loop between good sensations that come alive as we get concentrated, as we get relaxed and open. And that feedback loop, that biofeedback system, teaches us and shows us how to get absorbed. It makes the mind want to get absorbed in experience because it feels so good.

So it's helpful for getting concentrated or established or settled. But since the time of the Buddha, it's understood that concentration is not enough to become free. And for that, the Buddha emphasized seeing and knowing.

And knowing is like recognizing what something is. It is a little bit of active activity of the mind. And as the mind gets quieter and quieter, stiller and stiller, it becomes less and less inclined, perhaps, to know in conventional ways, and more and more inclined to observe, to settle back and just see.

And what's nice about seeing—there are a number of things that's nice about seeing. One is

that when you sit back and observe something, you're normally not interfering with it. You're not. You can't.

You can change things with your hands. You can, you know, with your will or different ways. But observing by itself just watches, just sees. And that's it.

You might add things to the seeing. You might add judgments and ideas and all that. But in and of itself, seeing doesn't interfere. It just allows something to be what it is.

And that's a very big gift we give to our experience at some point. Just let it be seen. Just let it be there. Give it room in your sight to be, to be, to be what it is.

And seeing doesn't require words. The words of knowing don't have to operate. And seeing doesn't require feeling in the body, which might be a little bit too—not too intimate, but it might be too limiting.

Just to feel good is not the point of Buddhist practice. Just to have wonderful feelings and think that's the end result is actually very limiting. To use feeling as the measure for what is right and wrong, and the point of practice, is very limiting.

How we feel is important. There's a lot of guidance and support for how to live and practice through the feelings we have in our body, but it's limited. But there's something unlimited about the capacity to observe, to settle back and just make room and see in the clarity of the mind what's here.

And in this regard, I think of some time you've been in a beautiful place, maybe on a hilltop or mountaintop, maybe by the ocean, some beautiful natural place in a park, where clearly the seeing was kind of like maybe more like, "Wow." You know, you go—I've sometimes been driving someplace, and we drive around a bend and, like, "Wow," the vista just opens up. And, you know, I don't have to try to look. It's like, "Wow."

Or hiking in the mountains, suddenly coming around to a vista to see, and, "Wow, look at all that great space." The sky, the mountains that keep moving in the distance, rolling in the distance. And that does the eyes a lot of good, to gaze upon the sunset over the ocean, or the clouds drifting over a beautiful mountaintop.

There's a—it's just, it's not a doing, it's not work. It's the opposite of work. There's something about how to see certain things that's very settling and helpful. And sometimes seeing, and seeing in certain ways, helps us to feel safe.

And so seeing is a very integral, important part of human life for those people who have physical eyes that can see. In the *Dharma*, we're seeing with the mind's eye. Sometimes it's called

the *Dhamma* eye, the eye of the *Dharma*. Sometimes it's called the wisdom eye, the eye of wisdom.

The *Dharma* eye is usually limited to the time when our eyesight gets into focus, like turning a lens, and the world gets into a certain focus. And we see so clearly that suddenly we see freedom. “Wow, that's the *Dharma* eye. Wow.”

The wisdom eye is one that understands that freedom, and understands what gets in the way of that freedom. It understands delusion when it arises. When we live in delusion and we're making up stories and projecting onto the world our ideas, it's possible to see that deluded mind arise. To see the projections we make.

And we can see the possibility of not doing that. We can see the possibility of not clinging. And that's one of the reasons why seeing is so useful. Because I think because knowing there's no clinging is nice, but it's a little bit distant, it's a little bit abstract.

Seeing there's no clinging, it's right there in front of the eyes. It's right here now. There it is, I see it. It's kind of like almost looking at a beautiful, vast, safe space.

There are places we go and just feel so safe, something relaxes in us. And to look at non-clinging and see there's no clinging here, and kind of see it—but there's nothing to see, right? It's the absence of something. So there's nothing to see, so it doesn't count, right?

It counts a lot. And so the mind's eye sees it, and so recognizes this thing. So somehow, I don't know if it's true for everyone, but somehow this is more like the inner eye that's seeing the spaciousness, the openness, the lucidity, the clarity of the space that has no clinging in it.

That's something. And the more we see that clarity of freedom, non-clinging, the more that we're prone to see delusion arise. “Oops, that just muddied the waters. That just put a veil in front of it. Things suddenly went dark with that kind of preoccupation and thought, and I'm no longer open and available for that world of non-clinging.”

So we come now to my favorite little section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you this the first day. So this is in what's called the refrain. Kind of punctuating each of the thirteen exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is this passage. It's the same for each one.

And what it is, is if you do each of these, any of these exercises, and get concentrated and clear and strong in mindfulness, then it moves into these next steps of the practice, the stages of practice. And one of them is awareness, *sati*.

“Awareness that there is a body is established to the extent necessary, only for knowledge

and remembrance.” I love this. That awareness is established only to the extent necessary. Not so clear what that is.

What is necessary? I'm not sure. It's just enough so you can become free. But we're not looking to have perfect awareness. We're not trying to have the pinnacle, the highest possible perfection of awareness here.

Perfection is not needed. Just to the extent necessary. I just love it. To the extent necessary for there to be knowledge and remembrance.

Knowledge of what? Something very, very simple, and this is kind of very special. It kind of inspires me that it doesn't require a lot of great, sophisticated knowledge. You don't have to have the ability, you don't have to develop the ability, you don't have to go to *Dharma* school for a long time so you can get this ability.

For this, and this is the ability: there is a body here. This is my body. This is a body. Pretty sophisticated. Pretty complicated.

Just to the extent: no, there's a body here. Just to the extent necessary for knowledge and remembrance. Start to remember there is here this body. And then the knowledge part is the knowledge of not clinging.

To know somehow you can know that this is a body. That's nothing more sophisticated than that. But accept that now you know you have a body, but you can feel and see and know that there's nothing extra. There's no attachment to the body. There's no clinging to it.

There's no resistance to it. There's no judgments of it. There's no projections onto it. It's just the body. It's just a cup. Just a teacup. It's just this. Just this.

And you can feel the freedom in that. You can feel the absence of clinging, the absence of aversion, absence of greed or hatred. “Wow. Just this.” So this is, I believe, a little bit of a protection from thinking that this is some esoteric insight that we're supposed to go deep and really find something, you know, mysterious. All fifty-two types of emptiness. Only then can you be free.

So then it goes on and says in this paragraph that I like, “And one then abides.” There's the word abides again. “One abides independent.” It's possible that the word is better translated as not dependent, rather than independent.

Independent in the United States kind of just means that you can go out and do whatever you want. But this is the word here in Pāli: you're no longer dependent on anything. Your happiness, your well-being, is not dependent on the world providing you just the right things.

So, one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how one abides, observing the body in the body, observing the body in and of itself. And now we get a richer sense of this expression, “observing the body in the body,” observing the body in relationship to itself, in regard to itself.

We're just seeing the body very simply, without the clinging, without the projections, without the resistance, without the judgments, without all this extra that the poor body has to live with, that we pile onto this body. And this is something we see. We see the non-clinging. We see that absence.

And this is also counterintuitive to people who kind of think that everything that's important has to be a thing, an object. You know, an absence of something shouldn't count. Especially in *vipassanā* practice, where you're always supposed to notice something that is. Seeing things as they are means you're supposed to see things, and so you're always looking for things.

I remember when, in the beginning of my time in Burma practicing, I started to have some significant kind of letting go and freedom, this absence of clinging. And I didn't kind of really notice it much in the beginning because I'd been practicing so many months of mindfulness, you know, all day long. I was habituated to just go on to the next thing, find a thing to be mindful of.

The idea that the very thing to be mindful of was the absence, the absence of clinging. Standing on the beautiful top of a hilltop, looking out across the ocean or the rolling hills, the forests, and going, “Wow.” Taking time to observe non-clinging, non-attachment, non-craving, non-delusion, non-hatred.

To observe that, to see it as an absence, to see it there, in the spatial awareness of the mind, the vast way in which the mind can imagine space. There's nothing: no clinging, no grasping. Wow.

Sometimes I've thought that that vista, that view of non-clinging and non-grasping, is the most beautiful thing you can see in your life. The first time I saw it, I went, “Wow!” I've been to many places around the world, seen many sights. When I saw that, I said, “I don't think I've ever seen anything this beautiful.” Wow!

So, in this regard, the *sati* that can really see that—what I call lucid awareness, which the translation I just read didn't say—or else, “Lucid awareness that there is a body is established to the extent necessary, only for knowledge and remembrance.” So this lucid awareness, this clear awareness, this awareness of this freedom there, and it's possible.

For each of you, there is much more non-clinging for you to notice than you give yourself a chance to notice. Sometimes we're too afraid, and we're always on the lookout for something. We can't stop and look. We're looking for the danger, or trying to figure it out, or do something.

Sometimes we're so eager to have some attainment to prove ourselves, and so we're looking for that thing that's going to be the thing that gets us liberated, free. Or we're just such diligent practitioners. We think, like I did, that you have to just always be mindful of something. Or you just have a lot of important things to think about.

I mean, after all, you've been mostly just thinking for a few decades. Might as well continue. Sooner or later, it'll work out, provide the answer to everything. And so all the thinking and the proliferation—so many ways that we're too busy to see our non-clinging.

It turns out, believe it or not, the amount of things you cling to is infinitely less than the amount of things you don't cling to. Isn't that a fantastic ratio? Most of the things in the existence universe you don't cling to. It's actually very, very small.

So you might begin seeing, looking, feeling how often you're not clinging, if you gave yourself a chance. Before you choose a fork in the dining room for your meal, and a fork is sitting in that silver container, chances are you're not clinging to it. Look at the container. “Wow, yep, I'm not clinging to any of those forks.”

Once you choose one and put it down on your plate, you know where you're going to sit, and then you go get tea, you go back, it's gone. Then you realize you're clinging. “Wait, that was mine. Who took it? How could that be?”

But earlier there was no clinging. And maybe they took your fork, maybe by accident, probably. But still, you know, that's not right. We better do something. Write to the president of IMC and talk about the injustice.

But the fork that was yours will eventually end up back in that silver container. And chances are you won't even know it's your fork anymore. And then you're back to non-clinging. Look at that.

It's a silly example, so please don't dismiss what I'm saying just because it's silly. You're welcome to make examples that work for yourself better. Maybe you don't cling to the trees, the leaves. Maybe you don't cling to the clouds. Maybe you don't cling to the lizard that skips by.

Maybe the reason you like to have tea on the deck, looking out across the garden or some-

thing, is because you can just gaze upon it without it being anything that you're going to do anything with or want or not want. There's some ease and freedom, safety there, just to be there and look without clinging, without wanting, desiring.

It's possible that just beyond the edges of your clinging, there's a lot of non-clinging. There's a way in which clinging grabs our attention, holds our attention. All the things we cling to, we cling because we're afraid. We cling because we have desires. We cling because we want to belong.

We cling because we want to be heard and known, be approved of. Many reasons, and we should respect all the reasons. We shouldn't be dismissive that this is easy, not to cling, or that the source within us is just an easy thing to deal with. But still, is there a way to look beyond the edges of it?

And this is where looking again is useful. Can you sense or look or see in your mind's eye, in your imaginary eye, imagination, what's beyond the edges of your clinging? Is there clinging beyond it? Is there some clinging below it? Is there clinging about non-clinging above it?

And I offer you this exercise—not this is another exercise—but maybe there's a way that your ability to see non-clinging is a support for your awareness, for abiding in awareness, for resting here, for what's here in a simple way. It's almost like non-clinging itself becomes what you can rest in, what you abide in: non-clinging, even if you're clinging.

Also remember the idea that this is a mind with greed. This is a mind with ill will. This is a mind with delusion. The same way, this is a mind with clinging, but clinging isn't the whole mind.

So, can you see that part of your mind which is not clinging? Can you hold your clinging with what doesn't cling? It may be a little bit easier to relax around your clinging. If you like, you don't have to get rid of it necessarily, but can you hold it with what doesn't cling?

You have access to a place in the mind, a way of knowing, a way of feeling, a way of seeing that somehow has space, or recognizes the space in which things don't cling. So that a time might come where it feels natural, or feels easy, it feels appropriate to observe your experience, to see what's happening, to see the present moment. To settle back and not so much focus on knowing, not focus so much on feeling, but have this panoramic open view of seeing, seeing what's there.

So that we can become free of trying to feel better, trying to live our life based on what we're feeling. We can live our life in a whole other way, a simple way of seeing, seeing clearly. And

when that time comes, when you can just settle back and allow yourself just to see the experience, see what's there. See the non-clinging. See the space around everything. See the lucidity of awareness. See the clarity in the mind's eye.

When that time should happen, remember to allow your gaze to be soft. Don't stare at anything. Don't let the eyes become tense, constricted. Allow the eyes, the physical eyes even, but the inner eye, to rest.

And one of the nicest ways to see with the eyes is to let the eyes float, gently roam freely. Can it be that your very gaze, your inner eye that sees what's here, is a soft gaze, a floating gaze, a relaxed gaze? A way of seeing that has no needs in and of itself?

Seeing without a need, seeing without a want, seeing just as happy to see in a relaxed, soft, kind way—a gentle seeing that reassures the mind that it can quiet its thinking. The whole inner life can become quieter, more peaceful, and safe here and now.

Okay. Oh. So, to allow for space and time and openness for discovering non-clinging, or clinging as it is, as it works for you.

Tomorrow there won't be any practice discussions, so in that sense it'll be another silent day to really stay. Yeah, online there will be practice discussions, and so we'll still do the instructional sitting and the *Dharma* talk. So may you see non-clinging in the extra space that's given tomorrow.