

# Satipatthana Sutta

## Introduction

Known formally in English as The Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness and, less formally as The Mindfulness Sutra, the *Satipatthāna Sutta* (in Pali) is an important Theravada Buddhist text and a widely studied foundational discourse of the Buddha on meditative practice.<sup>1</sup> According to the Buddha, “This is the direct way, monks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the extinguishing of suffering and grief, for the walking on the path of truth, for the realization of nibbana [nirvana] ....”<sup>2</sup> That is, by itself, diligent *Satipatthāna* practice can lead to the realization of nirvana. It is the base text for the mindfulness movement in the world today, and of importance in Soto Zen, whose introductory meditations involve a focus on the breath and on walking meditation. At roughly 5,300 words in English, the short Pali version is short enough to read through in one sitting.

This primer reviews the history and development of the sutra, its structure and practices, and issues that arise when reading the sutra.

## History and Development

The Buddha delivered the discourse to an assembly of monks at Kammassadhama, a market town of the Kuru people in northwest India near modern Delhi. It seems likely that he discussed practices mentioned in the sutra many times in other places during his forty-five year teaching career.<sup>3</sup> Three early versions are known.<sup>4</sup> What is considered the primary sutra is the Pali *Satipatthana Sutta* (number 10 in the Majjhiman Nikaya) and *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* (number 20 in the Digha Nikaya), which are exactly the same, except the latter has added text at the end on the Four Noble Truths (these are the short and long Pali forms). Either one or the other of these texts is considered Version One of the three available versions and possibly the discourse delivered by the Buddha at Kammassadhama; it is said to have been first written down on palm leaves in Sri Lanka in c.100 BCE.<sup>5</sup>

The second and third versions are in the Chinese Canon. The Second Version, the *Sutra on the Four Grounds of Mindfulness*, is a translation into Chinese of the Nian Chu Jing (number 98 in the Madhyama Agama and number 26 in the Taisho Revised Tripitaka of the Sarvastivada school). It was translated by Gautama Sanghadeva from the Sanskrit *Smṛti-upasthāna Sutra* in the late fourth century CE. The Third Version, *The One Way In Sutra*, is a translation by the Khotanese monk Dharmanandi of the Yi Ru Dao Jing (Ekottara Agama, sutra number 125 in the Taisho Revised Tripitaka) in the late fourth century as well. It is derived from the Makasamghika school, but has a decidedly later Mahayana influence, so is less close to the teaching of the Buddha in Version One.

Since the sutra provides only a general format for insight (*sati*) meditation, numerous commentaries over the years have suggested specific ways of practicing the meditations it describes. With the spread of meditation as a practice to lay people in modern times, many additional, simpler practices have been proposed, especially by Burmese masters like Mahasi

Sayadaw, Ledi Sayadaw, and Pa Auk Sayadaw, whose meditation centers have spread worldwide. These more recent practices are generally identified as forms of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation.

## **The Structure and Practices of the Sutra**

In the sutra, the Buddha identifies four areas of establishing mindfulness that are direct paths to nirvana: the body, feelings, the mind, and objects of mind. The text contains six sections: (1) an introduction that lists the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, describes the setting in which the sutra was delivered, and stresses the importance of its teaching as a direct path to realization; descriptions of the method of mindfulness of the body (2), of feelings (3), of the mind (4), and of objects of mind (5); and (6) a review of the results of the practice and of the length of time it takes to realize those results. Altogether the sutra contains twenty-one general ways to establish mindfulness: fourteen ways to contemplate the body, a way each to contemplate the feelings and the mind, and five ways to contemplate the objects of mind. Each of these general ways is broken down further, if not in the sutra, then in commentaries. A “definition” section at the beginning of the sutra mentions the four foundations and the mental qualities useful in the practice (diligence, clearly knowing, being mindful, and free from desire and discontent).

Each major meditation has introductory instructions and a concluding refrain, which are structured identically except for subject matter.<sup>6</sup> As an example, in the five hindrances section of the objects of mind meditations, the introductory instructions are: “When sensual desire (anger, etc.) is present in him, he is aware, ‘Sensual desire is present in me.’ Or when sensual desire is not present in him, he is aware, ‘Sensual desire is not present in me.’ When sensual desire begins to arise, he is aware of it. When already arisen sensual desire is abandoned, he is aware of it. When sensual desire already abandoned will not arise again in the future, he is aware of it.” The refrain is: “This is how the practitioner remains established in the observation of the objects of mind in the objects of mind: observation of the objects of mind from within or from without, or observation of the objects of mind from both within and without. He remains established in the observation of the process of coming-to-be in the objects of mind or the process of dissolution in the objects of mind or both the process of coming-to-be and the process of dissolution. Or he is mindful of the fact, ‘There is an object of mind here,’ until understanding and full awareness come about. He remains established in the observation, free, not caught up in any worldly consideration. That is how to practice observation of the objects of mind in the objects of mind with regard to the Five Hindrances, O bhikkhus.”<sup>7</sup>

Following are a few comments on the core of each of the four mindfulness categories:

**Mindfulness of the body.** This first area for establishing mindfulness includes fourteen ways to contemplate the physical body: mindfulness of breathing (“breathing long, breathing short, comprehending clearly the entire breathe body, and calming the gross breath”<sup>8</sup>), the postures of the body (walking, standing, sitting, and lying down), mindfulness with clear comprehension, reflection on the repulsiveness of the body parts, reflection on the body’s material elements (as earth, water, fire, or air), and nine cemetery contemplations. Note that the awareness of the breath becomes subtler from the first to the last meditation. As with all meditations in the sutra, each meditation on the body is carried out within the context of the refrain.<sup>9</sup> Given the extended length

of meditations on the body in the sutra, it is recognized that contemplations of the body, especially the breath, establish a base for the contemplations on the other three areas on feelings, mind, and contents of the mind. Even advanced meditators like the Buddha return to contemplation of the breath meditations at times

**Mindfulness of Feelings.** In this meditation one becomes aware through practice of one's gut reactions to everything that arises in one's life. According to the sutra, we feel these largely unconscious reactions as something pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. They are a cause of our disease as humans, for they can result in suffering, attachment, and confusion. In the sutra, feelings are divided into worldly and unworldly feelings, with the first category involving more intense reactions than the latter. In practice the goal is to bring our feelings to the surface, to become aware that "I want," "I don't want," or "I am indifferent." In the process we learn to let our gut reactions go. The practice takes courage to work with, for our feelings are an integral component of the patterns and habits we live in. Eventually, we see that with time pleasant worldly feelings become unpleasant worldly feelings (for everything changes), how gut reactions cause suffering, and the extent of the conditioning of the world.<sup>10</sup>

**Mindfulness of the Mind.** The third of the four meditation categories focuses on the general mood of our mind. Is my mind happy or angry, distracted, or bored? The practice involves naming the general feeling or mood. Say, "I know this is a mind that is happy" or "happy, happy, happy," and observe how your mood changes. Don't search for causes or make judgments. Just name. This is again an important practice, for our mood shapes our world.

**Mindfulness of the Objects of Mind.** In the sutra, the contents of the mind are considered the Five Hindrances that cloud the clarity of the mind (desire, ill will, sloth or torpor, restlessness, and doubt), the Five Aggregates of Clinging (form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness), the Six Internal and Six External (organ-object pairs of) Sense-bases (eye and visible object, ear and sound, nose and odor, tongue and taste, body and touch, and mind and mental objects), the Seven Factors of Enlightenment (mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity), and the Four Noble Truths (of suffering, of the origins of suffering, of the cessation of suffering, and the Eightfold Path). Notice again that there is a progression in the contents of the mind meditations from qualities that cloud the mind to qualities that enlighten the mind.

The sutra ends in the sixth section with a brief review of the results of the practices and of the length of time it takes to realize those results.<sup>11</sup>

## **Issues That Arise When Reading the Sutra**

Numerous issues arise when reading the sutra.<sup>12</sup> Here are five:

**What does "mindfulness" (*sati*) mean?** Although referred to as the mindfulness sutra, the sutra provides only hints at what "being mindful" means and how it differs from other forms of meditation like zazen, dzogchen, and mahamudra. The issue is confused further by the variety of

descriptions of mindfulness in the literature. In review the process can be divided into two phases.<sup>13</sup> In the first preparatory phase awareness is focused on the subject, and the body and mind are calmed (*samatha* meditation). The second phase involves a focused analytical examination of experiences that arise within the context of the meditation subject that is carried out within the context of Buddhist doctrine. The purpose is to directly experience the objects as conditioned by the three marks of impermanence, suffering, and absence of self, and “come to see the arising and disappearance of all phenomena, both the mental and physical ones.”<sup>14</sup> It is this phase that is commonly known as insight (*vipassana*) meditation. Both phases involve a penetration into the object rather than observation by an outside observer or from the perspective of another category. Thus, it is mindfulness of the body in the body, of the feelings in the feelings, and so on. In this manner a person is able to eradicate mental defilements just by naming what arises in experience.<sup>15</sup>

**Is the intended meaning of other terms in the sutra equally unclear?** Practitioners should be aware that the precise meaning of many other terms in the sutra continues to be debated by commentators. Two examples are, what is the relation between deep, meditative concentration and wisdom (correct understanding), and what is the relation between *sati* and the *jhānas*? Without extensive training in Buddhist doctrine, these problems often lead to confusion and misdirection in one’s practice.

**How was/is Sati practiced in a monastic setting?** The twenty-one ways the Buddha taught mindfulness meditation range over a variety of contexts, most of which can be practiced continuously throughout the day, both on and off the mat. The ideal for a monk was to maintain a state of mindfulness throughout the day, not just during retreats. Some meditation sequences are quite involved. For example, in the contemplation of the thirty-two body parts, the parts in sets are recited or imagined in forward order and in backward order for about 165 days.<sup>16</sup> Thus, one begins by orally reciting “Head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin; head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin” for five days. Then forward and backward for five days. And so on. In monastic settings the practice of meditation is usually much more involved than the simple descriptions given here.<sup>17</sup>

**Are the meditations in the sutra to be practiced in sequence?** In practice the meditations identified in the sutra are practiced either individually, such as mindfulness of the breath, in succession, in tandem, or in a personality-dependent manner, among other combinations. In personality-dependent practices, individuals are separated into one of four groups depending on whether they are extroverted or introverted, and slower or quicker to react to experiences that arise. Thus, an extrovert who is a slow reactor is assigned contemplation of the body meditations, while an introvert who is also a slow reactor is assigned contemplation of the mind meditation.<sup>18</sup>

**How have the meditation practices been simplified in modern times?** Given the complexity of the many meditations practiced in monastic settings and the depth of knowledge of Buddhist doctrine required to beneficially carry out the meditations, it is not surprising that insight meditations have been greatly simplified as lay people have become the focus of many teachers.<sup>19</sup>

**Does *sati* really lead to an undisturbed vision of reality “as it is”?**

It is common in Buddhist literature to encounter statements like “Buddhist meditation leads to an undisturbed vision of reality ‘as it is’.”<sup>20</sup> But is this really possible? Modern perception theory and consciousness studies affirm that we do not and cannot see the world as it really is in all its complexity because of limitations in the physical structure of our sense organs. Rather we use simplifying “stories” about a “world out there” to get through the day.<sup>21</sup> It seems what sati meditators “see” is the Buddhist doctrine that they have learned in monastery, such as the items of the Five Hindrances, the Five Aggregates of Clinging, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

1. For general introductions to the sutra and its practices, see Gunaratana (2012), Nhat Hanh (2005), Myanaponika Thera (1996), Soma Thera (2003), and U Silananda (2002). For a seven-part introductory oral lecture series on “The Mindfulness Sutra” by Norman Fischer, see the Everyday Zen Center Web site. For a valuable in-depth but dense academic study of the text, see Anālayo (2003). According to Thich Hnat Hahn (2005:13), the *Satipatthāna Sutta* “is one of the sutras you keep under your pillow, always with you.”
2. See Silananda (2002:8-10) for a discussion of the segments of the sentence.
3. U Silananda (2002:169).
4. For a history and comparison of the three versions, and the three versions themselves, see Anālayo (2014) and Nhat Hanh (2005, pp. 15-31, 125-157). The *Smṛti-upasthāna Sutra* is a Sanskrit version of the Pali *Satipatthana Sutta*.
5. For the problematic nature of dating Early Buddhist texts, see Wynne (2005). According to Wynne (p. 36), “the internal evidence of the Pāli canon cannot be verified by any external evidence, inscriptional or otherwise.” Shulman (2010:398) notes a different but still severe obstacle in reading Early Buddhist literature: “Early Buddhist literature is notorious for having been reworked through the centuries, so we are normally presented with ‘archeological’ strata in need of philological excavation.”
6. For discussions of the “definition” and “refrain” of the meditations, see Anālayo (2003: 31-43, 92-116).
7. U Silanada (2002:56-65),
8. U Silanada (2002:29).
9. Pages 17 and 25, respectively, in Nhat Hahn (2006). Being aware when meditating of whether awareness is within or without, coming-to-be or in dissolution, is on an object, and that one is not caught up in worldly concerns is a characteristic of *vipassana* meditation in which “you keep your awareness on the breath and also everything that comes to you through the six sense doors at the present moment. When you see something, you become aware of it,” you say “desire, desire, desire”; in *samatha* meditation awareness remains focused on the object of meditation (U Silananda 2002:30, 2xxxx). The refrain is repeated fourteen times in the sutra: once each after meditations on the breath, postures of the body, impurities of the body, elements of the body, feelings, the mind, and each of the five objects of mind; the refrain appears three times in corpse meditations. These breaks provide insight into the structure of the sutra. Many of these practices, which were intended for monks, are based on lists of terms in the *Abhidharma* Pitaka of early Buddhism, as seen in the meditations on the contents of the mind (the Five Hindrances, the Four Noble Truths, etc.). As always in the Buddha’s discourses examples of practices are intended as skillful means to help practitioners along The Path. The meditations mentioned in the sutra are not meant to have an exalted status in the cosmos that separates them from other practices.
10. Feelings in this sense are a link in the 12-fold chain of causation.

11. According to commentaries, the length of time it takes to realize the results of the practice depends on how keen one's intelligence is, whether one has been taught by the Buddha himself or another, and the extent to which one practiced *sati* meditation in past lives (U Silananda 2002:167-168).
12. For starters, see Anālayo (2003, 2014).
13. Nhat Hahn (2006:9), Gunaratana (2011:143-150).
14. U Silananda (2002:27).
15. U Silananda (2002:93).
16. U Silananda (2002:58-59).
17. For numerous examples, see U Silananda (2002).
18. Anālayo (2003:24-26).
19. For examples of overviews of insight meditation intended for lay people, see Gunaratana (2011), Nhat Hanh (2006), Goldstein (1987, 2016), and Weisman and Smith (2010). Nhat Hanh (2006:35-108) reviews 20 mindfulness exercises based on the four foundations that can be practiced by laypeople. This has mainly involved a concentration on the physical process of meditation without reliance on Buddhist doctrine as a metaphysical background.
20. Anālayo (2003:267).
21. Loy (2010).
22. For the argument, see Shulman (2010).

## References

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