

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta - The Direct Path

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 11/10/13.

I thought today I'd begin a periodic series of talks on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the one discourse of the Buddha that describes, more than any other, our meditation practice. One author has described it as "the heart of Buddhist meditation."¹

My comments today will be a little more academic, but as we get into the teachings and exercises I think you will find a lot of practical value.

It is said that this discourse was only given once. But it appears in two locations in the Pāli discourses: In the Middle Length Discourses and in the Long Discourses. The only difference is that the version in the Long Discourses is (surprise!) a little longer, offering a little more detail on the Four Noble Truths.

So the sutta begins:

*Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living in the Kuru country at a town of the Kurus named Kammāsadhamma. There he addressed the bhikkhus thus: "Bhikkhus." "Venerable sir," they replied.*²

Most of the Pāli discourses begin with the sentence "Thus have I heard." It is a way of asserting the legitimacy and accuracy of what follows.

The story behind this phrase is that shortly after the Buddha's final unbinding, a meeting was held by all of his fully awakened disciples to collect his teachings. The bhikkhu Ānanda had been the Buddha's attendant for the last 20+ years of the Buddha's life, about half of the Buddha's teaching career. Ānanda was also said to have perfect memory for things that he had heard. So Ānanda was asked to recite the teachings and then there would be a discussion about the accuracy until an agreement was reached. Ānanda began each recitation by saying "Thus have I heard," implying that what he was reciting was a direct transmission from the Buddha.

Having said all of this, I also have to say that the scholars seem to agree that some aspects of this sutta were added later in the development of Early Buddhism. One of my sources, Anālayo Bhikkhu, is attempting to resolve the questions about this by comparing the Pāli version of the discourse with that found in the Chinese Āgama collection. His new book on that will be published next Spring. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a core that has some historical accuracy and the whole sutta is still a very useful teaching for our practices and our mental development.

One of the interesting things about many of the suttas, especially in the Middle Length and Long Discourse collections, is that they give a location where the teaching was offered. So one has a sense of the teaching being offered at a specific time and place and at a specific point in the development of Early Buddhism.

Kammāsadhamma, in the Kuru country, is regarded by a number of scholars as having been near modern Delhi -- some distance from where the Buddha first began teaching. For this and

other reasons this sutta is regarded as an expression of the later years of the Buddha's teaching career, and because of the content of the sutta, it is felt that it was offered to a group of practitioners who were somewhat advanced in the practice.

The next paragraph in the sutta reads:

The Blessed One said this: Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of dukkha and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of Nibbāna, namely the four satipaṭṭhānas.

So the Buddha begins by telling us he is going to describe the "direct path" ... to freedom from dukkha and discontent and for the realization of Nibbāna. The Pāli word is *ekāyano*. It has been translated in a number of different ways over the years. Several earlier translations use the phrase "only way"³ or "sole way"⁴, implying that Buddhism has the only way to awaken. In more recent translations we find "direct path" used most frequently⁵, though Bhikkhu Bodhi has more recently used "one-way path."⁶ Whichever translation we use, and I like both "direct path" and "one-way path," the gist seems to be that the exercises in this discourse will lead us directly, and inevitably, to the goal of freedom from dukkha and discontent.

The Buddha then speaks of this direct path being "for the purification of beings." This word "purification" at one time was troubling to me. I felt it implied a mind-set that was way more ascetic than I was interested in being. But what the Buddha is talking about is freeing, or "purifying," our minds and hearts from the tendencies to respond to life out of greed, hatred or delusion, all of which lead to "suffering and lamentation, dukkha and discontent". So this process of purification is what our practice is about from the very first moment we begin to apply ourselves.

And the Pāli word dukkha, of course, refers to a range of experiences that at their core involve a sense of unsatisfactoriness, but include stress, unhappiness and suffering.

One thing to keep in mind is that, in describing this as the direct path, there is an assumption that anyone who would take up these teachings already has a sound foundation in generosity and ethical living, and a basic understanding that our actions -- whether in thought, word or deed -- have consequences, both in the inner world of our minds and hearts and in the outer world of our relations with others. So when the Buddha talks about this as the direct path for purification, he is assuming that the practitioners have already begun to work on letting go of what is unskillful or unwholesome -- the actions that lead to stress, unsatisfactoriness, suffering and discontent -- and the importance of cultivating the skillful or wholesome -- the actions that lead to happiness, contentment and an ability to live with ease no matter what ups and downs one encounters in life.

Then we come to this word "Nibbāna", or "Nirvana" in Sanskrit. The word "nibbāna" literally refers to a cooling of something that has been hot, and apparently can still be found in some languages in Asia referring to things like "the rice needs to nibbāna" or something like that. In Early Buddhism we find that nibbāna refers, quite consistently, to being freed from the delusion of having a separate, distinct and enduring self or soul; and to being freed from the habitual reactions of greed and hatred; while manifesting the qualities of wisdom, goodwill,

compassion, joy for the good fortune of others and equanimity. In later forms of Buddhism there seems to have been an increasing emphasis on a kind of mystical sense of one-ness, but the Pāli suttas are quite clear that the Buddha was not teaching that. So we have this sense of the fires of greed and hatred being cooled down or blown out.

In the Dhammapada, another image is used to suggest this same quality of freedom:

*If, like a broken bell,
You do not reverberate,
Then you have attained Nibbāna
And no hostility is found in you.⁷*

This paragraph ends by naming the direct path. Anālayo Bhikkhu leaves it in the Pāli "the *satipaṭṭhānas*." He argues that the meaning of the word "satipaṭṭhāna" can best be understood as coming from the combination of two words: "*sati*" -- which we commonly translate as mindfulness -- and "*upaṭṭhāna*" which "literally means 'placing near.'" In the context of this sutta, and of our practices, satipaṭṭhāna can be understood as "'being present' or 'attending' to something with mindfulness."⁸

The most commonly used translation for satipaṭṭhāna is "foundations of mindfulness." While more recent translations have used "the establishments of mindfulness." Yet both of these are emphasizing the object of mindfulness (body, feeling, mind-states and categories of experience) rather than the process of being mindful. Joseph Goldstein has suggested "ways of establishing mindfulness" and this seems closer to the mark.⁹

So in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha is telling us that there are ways of relating to aspects of our experience with mindfulness and that if we do so they will lead us directly, inevitably to freedom from unsatisfactoriness, discontent and suffering. That is a pretty enticing beginning, don't you think?

Next week we'll begin to explore the four qualities of mind that the Buddha recommends that we bring to each of these fields for establishing mindfulness. And then we'll begin exploring the practice exercises, connecting what is in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta with some of the other discourses as well.

Notes

1. Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1962/1988
2. All quotes from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta use the translation by Anālayo Bhikkhu from *satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham, England, 2003, pp. 3-13, unless otherwise noted.
I have replaced the term "monks" with the original Pāli "bhikkhus" throughout this talk. Joseph Goldstein states that the commentaries indicate that the term can be taken as referring to anyone who is seriously working with these practices, not just monastics. (Goldstein, Joseph. *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2013, p. xv-xvi)
3. Soma Thera, *The Way of Mindfulness*, 1941/1981; U Sīlānanda, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, 1990; Nyanasatta Thera, "The Foundations of Mindfulness," 1994
4. Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 1962/1988

5. Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 1995; Anālayo Bhikkhu, 2003; Thānissaro Bhikkhu, 2008
6. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA; Wisdom Publications, 2005
7. Gil Fronsdal, *The Dhammapada: A New Translation*, Boston: Shambhala, 2005, p. 36
8. Anālayo Bhikkhu, *satipaṭṭhāna*, p. 29
9. Goldstein, Joseph. *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2013, p.

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