

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta #3 - Clearly Knowing

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 11/25/13.

Today I want to continue exploring the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's discourse on the ways of establishing mindfulness. But before I do that I want to offer a little bit of explanation about why I think this is so important.

First, the practices in this sutta are the core of our practice. They are the things that we apply to our experiences, both on and off the cushion, again and again and again as long as we do this practice. So having some intellectual understanding of the sutta gives us a framework for guiding our own practice.

But more importantly, as the Buddha stated in the opening to the sutta, this really is [the direct path](#) to awakening, to living with ease and contentment with our lives and with others. As we work our way through these practices, delving deeper and deeper into the nature of our own experience, the practice naturally unfolds. Insights build one upon another and each insight also helps the mind to settle more, to become more concentrated which then makes it possible to see more deeply and more clearly. This leads to more insights, until we have the experiential insight of seeing through this belief we have in our own individual enduring self; the insight that forever changes our lives.

So doing these practices is the key to what we are seeking, whether we are seeking a little bit of freedom or complete freedom. And it is easier and more effective doing these practices if we actually have some understanding of what we are trying to do, including an understanding that we are trying to do more than simply sit on our bums, get calm and feel pleasant, though that is an essential part of the practice too.

So, back to the sutta, the Buddha said:

*"... in regard to the body one abides contemplating the body, ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world."*¹

And then he repeats this phrase about the other three fields for mindfulness: feeling, the mind and certain categories of experience.

Last week we explored the first of the four qualities of mind and heart that the Buddha tells us to bring to each of the fields of mindfulness, the quality of [ardency](#) - a passionate yet continual and balanced effort. This week I'd like to explore the second of these qualities, which in the Pāli is *sampajāna*.

I like to survey as many of the translations as I can because it seems to me that we get more of a sense of the range of meanings, a sense of the different facets of what *sampajāna* actually means. So what I found was that:

- Thānissaro Bhikkhu, the contemporary American scholar who has been deeply influenced by the Thai Forest Tradition, and whose translations are so readily available on-line, translates *sampajāna* as "alert."²
- Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, a British scholar-monk who authored the first draft of the most popular contemporary English translation of the Middle Length Discourses, translated it as "fully aware."³
- Bhikkhu Bodhi, the premier translator of the Buddha's discourses into contemporary English, and four other scholars, translate *sampajāna* as "clearly comprehending."^{4,5,6,7,8}
- And Anālayo Bhikkhu, who has written the best, most extensive contemporary commentary on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, translates it as "clearly knowing", which seems to me to be a more succinct and simple version of "clear comprehension".

We seem to have quite a range of possible meanings, from simply being alert to in some way clearly knowing what is being encountered. But what does it mean to "clearly know" or to "clearly comprehend"? Anālayo Bhikkhu looked at the range of meanings for *sampajāna* as it is used in the suttas. He summarized what he found as "the ability to fully grasp or comprehend what is taking place." And he noted that when we clearly know what is taking place, it can "lead to the development of wisdom (*paññā*)."⁹

This really doesn't tell us much more than we might figure out from the words themselves, does it? Most of the discussions of clear knowing jump to another aspect of Clear Knowing that occurs later in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, Mindfulness and

Clear Knowledge, in order to offer an explanation of sampajāna. But I want to save that discussion for later. So I've tried to reflect from my own experience on what is involved in this "clearly knowing" that we are to bring to each of the fields for establishing mindfulness.

It seems to me that the mental factor of perception lies at the heart of clearly knowing. In Buddhist psychology, this factor of perception is the simple recognition of what is occurring or present right now based on a few "marks" or characteristics of it. These characteristics could be something like "It is solid and rough to the touch. It doesn't have a strong smell. It has a gray-brown color. Maybe this is 'bark'." Or, they could be something like "This is arising into awareness. But it isn't connected to the five physical sense doors. It has the quality of conceptualizing, so maybe this is 'a thought'." Of course this process of recognizing these marks happens in less than a second, most of the time, and is usually not conscious, though sometimes it can be.

So there's an experiential component to these marks -- the memory of some information from what we've actually experienced in the past. But there's also a cognitive component - we've learned to "label" a particular set of "marks" in a particular way, for instance as "bark" or "thought" or "mindfulness". In other words, we've learned to give these marks a certain meaning, and this helps us to recognize them, to re-cognize, or to re-know them, when we encounter the marks again.

One of the challenges of taking up this practice is that we have to develop a new set of perceptions. Slowly we begin to tie together certain experiences or marks with certain labels. So there is an "Oh, so this is what it feels like when mindfulness is present with joy." And "This is what it is like when joy is present without mindfulness." Or "This is what it is like when the body is contracted around an unpleasant sensation." And "This is what it is like when the body is relaxed around an unpleasant sensation." One reason it is so necessary to practice, and so helpful to practice every day, and throughout the day, is because it gives us greater opportunities to learn, greater opportunities to recognize in this new way that "this is what this is", "this is what is going on here."

So although a hallmark of the practice of mindfulness is said to be the ability to "be present" for what is occurring right now, there is also a learning process involved in this -- a learning to recognize or perceive, a learning of what to give attention to and what to not give attention to. The more we develop this ability to perceive, and combine it with passionate curiosity, the more we are inclined to "clearly know", to accurately perceive and know that this is what is being encountered in each moment of our lives. And when we do clearly know, then we are able to make choices in how to respond, choices that are more likely to lead us to peacefulness and equanimity rather than agitation and suffering.

Notes

1. Adapted from the translation by Anālayo Bhikkhu, *satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham, England: Windhorse Publications, 2003, p. 3. (Note: Following Bhikkhu Bodhi and others, I have substituted "ardent" for "diligent" as a translation of ātāpi.)
2. "Satipatthana Sutta: Frames of Reference" (MN 10), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight, 11 October 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.than.html> . Retrieved on 15 November 2013.
3. Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, MN 10.3, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 145
4. Bodhi, Bhikkhu, *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 281.
5. Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser Publishing, 1962/1988, p. 117.
6. Nyanasatta Thera, "The Foundations of Mindfulness," 1994, Access to Insight, 14 June 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.nysa.html> . Retrieved on 12 November 2013.
7. U Sīlānanda, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1990, p. 177.
8. Soma Thera, *The Way of Mindfulness*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1941/1981, p. 1.
9. Anālayo Bhikkhu, *satipaṭṭhāna*, p. 40.