The Three Satipaṭṭhānas

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:18:37

We've been exploring different aspects of sati and satipaṭṭhāna, and tonight and tomorrow night we'll review the four satipaṭṭhānas listed in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: body, feeling, heart-mind, and phenomena. We'll examine how the Buddha presents this entire project as an overview.

First, let's begin with sati, which we've been discussing—usually translated as mindfulness, but literally meaning memory. It refers to the quality of presence or remembering the present.

We can understand what the Buddha is pointing to by examining distraction, because when the Buddha talks about the absence of mindfulness, we can recognize this in our experience of distraction. We can understand the meaning of presence by looking at our experience of absence and what it feels like.

When are we not present? When we are distracted. How does distraction begin? Suddenly we forget. This forgetting is the opposite of mindfulness. We forget the meditation object, or we forget to meditate—these are the two flavors. We have forgotten what is present, or we have forgotten to be present. Then suddenly we remember.

When we enter into distraction, the essence of distraction in this whole experience is that we don't know that we are distracted. The mind has slipped away from where we put it, and we don't know that it's slipped away. The universal experience of distraction is: I fall into it and I don't know that I've fallen into it. That not knowing is distraction.

Distraction is not the fact that attention has moved from one object to another—that's not distraction. The mind moves; that's what it does. Distraction is found in the movement of the mind when we don't know that the mind has moved. We don't catch the movement itself.

We come out of distraction at the moment we know we are distracted. As soon as I recognize, "Oh, I'm distracted," that very recognition is memory. I've suddenly remembered—I've remembered what is present (the distraction) or I've remembered to be present.

These two flavors are actually built into the word satipaṭṭhāna according to the mysteries of Pali sandhi—the rules governing the joining of words. The compound satipaṭṭhāna can be read in two ways: as sati-upaṭṭhāna and sati-paṭṭhāna.

If we read it as sati-upaṭṭhāna, it's the activity of being mindful—the activity of remembering to be present. The second way, sati-paṭṭhāna, is what is remembered as being present—what we remember.

You have the activity itself, sati-upaṭṭhāna, and you have what it is that we remember, which is sati-paṭṭhāna. The traditional Theravada favored this second reading, sati-paṭṭhāna. That's why in the old translations, satipaṭṭhāna is invariably translated as something like "the foundations of mindfulness."

If you've been around these circles for a long time, you would know satipaṭṭhāna as "the foundations of mindfulness." But you might notice that newer translations are appearing, like "the establishments of mindfulness" or "the applications of mindfulness." These newer translations come from taking satipaṭṭhāna as sati-upaṭṭhāna.

In fact, this is what the Mahayana tradition has always done. In Mahayana Buddhism, they've always taken it as sati-upaṭṭhāna. Modern scholars have decided that in this case, the Mahayana got it right and the Theravada got it wrong. Even the Theravadans are accepting this—people like Bhikkhu Bodhi now translate satipaṭṭhāna as "the establishments of mindfulness."

We've talked about how the basic activity here is anupassanā—tracking experience over time, creating this continuity of mindfulness which we can recognize as the felt continuity of awareness. It's something I can feel, that continuity, and it's quite a powerful experience if we can maintain it for any period of time.

So we have sati-upaṭṭhāna as the trackings, the doing of the tracking, and sati-paṭṭhāna as what it is that we are tracking.

Tonight we're going to look into this second aspect—what it is that we are tracking. There are four aspects of experience that we're tracking: body, feeling, heart-mind, and phenomena.

He's referring to our capacity to hear, our sensitivity to sound. Similarly, the body in the narrow sense refers to our sensitivity to touch, to pressure, temperature, movement, texture—all the countless physical sensations that arise and pass away moment by moment.

This is where mindfulness of body becomes incredibly intimate and precise. We're not thinking about the body or analyzing it; we're actually feeling into the direct, immediate sensations that make up our physical experience. The warmth of breath at the nostrils. The weight of the body sitting. The subtle vibrations and pulsations that we can feel when we really tune in.

And what's remarkable is that when we do this consistently, we begin to discover that what we call "body" is actually a constantly changing flow of sensations. There's no fixed, solid thing there. It's more like a river of sensation, always moving, always in flux. This begins to challenge our normal assumption that the body is this solid, permanent thing that I own or that I am.

The second foundation is feeling—vedanā in Pali. Now this is often mistranslated as "feelings" in the emotional sense, but that's not what the Buddha is pointing to here. Vedanā refers to the immediate affective quality of each moment of experience—whether it feels pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is something much more basic than emotions.

Every moment of sense contact has this quality. Every sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental formation comes with this immediate felt sense of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. It's like the emotional coloring of raw experience before we elaborate it into full emotions or stories.

This is actually a crucial foundation because vedanā is where craving gets its foothold. We feel something pleasant and immediately want more of it. We feel something unpleasant and want to get away from it. We feel something neutral and often become bored or distracted, seeking something more stimulating.

But when we can track vedanā with mindfulness, we start to see this mechanical process happening. We begin to see how our reactivity is conditioned by these basic pleasant and unpleasant feelings. And in seeing this clearly, we create the possibility of not being so automatically driven by our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant experience.

He's referring to sensitivity to sound. And this sensitivity is located in a particular part of the body. But he's not talking about the ear in a third-person sense. He's talking about the fact of sensitivity to sound.

A lot of meditation methods emphasize the body, but in particular the fifth sense field, sensitivity to touch. That's of particular importance because as a meditation object, sensitivity to touch has two major advantages, and both of them are linked to the clarity of contact.

First of all, body—which of course is actually all the five physical senses but particularly the fifth body—is now. It's just bleeding obvious that physical sensation is in the present. Thoughts and fantasies, where we usually live, they exist in time. It makes sense to remember the past. It makes sense to plan for the future in the mind. The body does not remember the past. It does not anticipate the future. It is now. A sensation, which is the only expression, the only language of the body, is always now.

So I can be completely caught up in some incredibly important reflection on past or future, and I'm so caught up in it that I don't notice the rock in front of me. My foot hits the rock, I come crashing to the earth. And when this happens, do I lie there, continuing to fantasize about past and future? No. I'm right here, right now. And of course this is why the sadhus love it when meditators report pain. When does pain occur? It always happens now.

So the body is radically simple and radically present. Every time I ground my awareness in body, I'm grounding it in the present, automatically, just by doing that.

And secondly, the body, this fifth physical sensitivity, is clear. We talked about contact and sensing. When we talked about the senses as faculties—remember restraining the senses—we saw how the senses will go out to engage in the world; they're active. This is the sense as an indriya, as a leading out.

But there's also a way in which we can look at the senses in terms of a receptivity. Something strikes the sensitivity. So sound strikes the hearing sensitivity. Light strikes the seeing sensitivity, and so on. And this impact is phassa, contact, literally touch. So we are touched by the sense contact.

And the later tradition says the touch of seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting upon their respective sensitivities is like cotton striking cotton. The touch of a tactile sensation striking the body sensitivity is like a hammer hitting an anvil. Whammo! It's strong and it's clear.

So if I want to develop mindfulness, and the tradition says one of the things which encourages the arising of mindfulness is a clear perception, where would I go looking for a clear perception? Here. It's the obvious place. So this is why the body is so important in meditation practices.

First we have body, then we have feeling, vedanā, which we've spoken about a great deal, so we've just got to have a brief look at it. As we said, it's the affective or hedonic aspect of experience, and we can compare it to the flavor of the sense object. But its characteristic is what moves us; vedanā is what provokes a response.

So we are struck by sense data and in that impact, in that contact, there is a response. The citta is moved in some way. That movement, what stimulates that movement, is the vedanā, is the feeling. So this is the whole realm of affect.

And the three basic movements of the mind, as we've talked about: attraction, the movement of the mind towards the sense object, to hold on to it—"I like this." Aversion, the movement of the mind away from the sense object—"I don't want this," or even "I'm going to hit it over the head to get rid of it."

And the third one, the third flavor is, "I haven't even noticed it." Indifference. Or, if I notice it, I'm confused—I don't know what to do about it. Should I hold on to it? Should I reject it? Should I hold, reject, hold, reject? This is the realm of doubt and confusion.

So this second Satipatthana expands the practice to tracking our response to the experience. It's not just the experience itself. It now includes how we respond to the experience. What does the mind, the citta, do in response? This is all about seeing that we are moved and how we are moved.

And this takes us into the realm of ethics—in other words, how we live. Here, for these purposes, ethics can be seen as our response to the universal human question: how should I live? Each of us is faced with this question. What do I do with my life? How do I live? And over the years each of us has produced an answer to that question, which is how we in fact live, and all the choices we've made to create that construct.

This whole project begins with vedana, because vedana is the realm of that movement, that determination, this inevitability of reaching out: "Yes, I'll definitely hold that one." "No, I'll definitely reject this other one." "I'll just ignore this other stuff because it's not worth paying attention to."

So in vedana we enter into what we could call the realm of ethical sensitivity. We start to become sensitive to the things that create the way that we live. And this is something that we do not find in the first Satipatthana, in body. There's no ethical sensitivity in the first Satipatthana.

If you have any doubts about this, just study the sports pages—particularly rugby league players—and the constant series of entertaining scandals that sports stars manage to get themselves into. Often you're reading about someone whose body intelligence is very, very highly developed. Especially in team sports, because in team sports the people who are really admired are not just the ones who have this particular set of skills required for that game, but the people who know how to read a game.

In the chaos, they seem to have this intuitive sense of what the other team is doing—not simply what they're doing now, but what they will be doing in the near future. The ability to anticipate that the ball, which is currently over there, will be over here within three seconds, and therefore right now I should be heading in this direction. If you follow a team sport and watch these sorts of things, these are the magic moments when suddenly it all comes together—this group intelligence. It's just amazing.

So people can develop a great deal of intelligence relating to the body, but ethically be completely stupid. Totally.

And you see also—perhaps for this audience this is a bit more controversial; it's one thing to put the boot into rugby league, it's another thing entirely to mention—that you see the same thing in the world of yoga. We find people who have an acute physical sensitivity and can put their body in any position and move any little bit of it, and yet in their ordinary lives they're ethically as thick as two short planks.

From a meditator's point of view, you can develop an acute sensitivity to such things as the rising and falling of the abdomen, if you're a classical Mahasi meditator, and again make absolutely no difference whatsoever in the way that you live. Or I should say, we. We can master a meditation technique based upon body, and it might have zero effect on the way that we live.

Where that happens is in vedana. That's where this begins. Seeing that we are moved. And how we are moved. And what is it that moves us? And what's the result of that movement?

So something happens and I reach out and I hold. And I don't even notice until I'm already holding. But to see that movement—ah, when I hold like this, I usually end up regretting it sometime down the track. So maybe I should think about some alternative strategy here. And then we start to see changes in how we live.

So this brings us...

to the third Satipatthana: citta.

Usually translated as mind, but that easily gives the wrong idea. I find the word mind way too cognitive. One of the things that attracted me to Buddhism and Buddhist practice is that it was all about the mind. And being, when I was young, very miserable and very intellectual, I could find refuge in mind. So I would find refuge in reading books—esoteric books. They could take me out of the world of my problems. I could hide away.

And I could hide away in nice books about Buddhism. Because it's all up here. But that's good because Buddha says we're developing mind. And where is mind? Well, mind is up here. Isn't it? And what do we do with mind? Well, we think. Isn't that what we do with mind?

So I find mind is inadequate as a translation. Citta covers the realm of what we would call the heart. So the realm of feeling. Emotion, mood.

One—I think personally the best translation for citta would be soul. Soul. S-O-U-L. You're looking at me very dubiously. Okay. Not in the Christian theological sense, but in the original sense, in Aristotle's sense, the soul. Like the ancient Greek philosophers would debate about the anima. That's Latin, isn't it? I don't know what the Greek word was. But it gets translated into English as the soul. That, I think, would be the equivalent of citta.

But with Christianity, you get—for the ancients, the human being was made up of essentially body and soul. And then the Christians came along and they added a third dimension, spirit, that they put on top. So you get this tripartite thing where spirit becomes most important and spirit is completely non-physical. And it has to do with God and not much to do with tacky things like the body.

But for the Buddha, citta and body are intimately entwined. In fact you can't have one without the other. If you have one, you've got to have the other. If there's a mind, it has to have a body—it's necessarily part of a body. If there's a body—in other words, remember we're talking about experience—if there's the experience of body, there has to be mind because what's doing the experiencing? It's mind. And if there's mind, there has to be body. So I'm thinking about something and the thinking is definitely mind.

But where is the thinking taking place? Remember we played around with this. It's connected clearly in some way to body. If this body wouldn't be here, those thoughts would not be arising. So for the Buddha, body and mind are intimately intertwined.

Patrick, you're not happy with the term heart-mind? Yeah, that's the usual one. I go for the compromised heart-mind. And sometimes I'll translate it as heart, because sometimes that seems to be the best context. And I guess sometimes it's mind.

Soul—the problem with soul is you've got to explain it to everybody. And some people wouldn't be convinced. It's becoming accepted, but I think we're learning it from the Buddha. I think this is part of the cultural interactions that's going on.

Well, in Asian cultures, they have no problems about this mind being here. No, that's not like the Western European culture. It's not the same degree of separation. It seems to be uniquely European that made this separation.

Chitta is a key technical term in Buddhist teaching and in subsequent Buddhist philosophy. Depending on context, it receives various definitions. In the Satipatthana Sutta, it's not given a precise definition. The

meaning is more general. It's basically used in a broad sense to indicate our general state—how one is at this particular time. So it's close to what we would call mood, though not quite mood, but quite close to that.

It's like our routine greeting where we meet someone and say, "How are you?" You could say that what we're asking about is the state of your citta. Usually we say, "I'm good." Are we doing that to reassure the person that we're not evil? Or are we doing it to reassure them that we're not about to tell them the tragedy of our life—because actually we feel really awful—and ask, "Do you want to hear all about it?" In other words, we basically evade the question.

But if somebody asked you, "How are you?" and you actually, as a meditator, went into your citta, felt your general state, how you are at this time, and then told them, you would be presenting your citta.

Citta is very similar to vedana. You could say that citta is how one is at this time, while vedana is how one feels at this time. They're very, very close. In fact, for practical purposes, you wouldn't even distinguish them.

It's important with these technical terms—they are precise, but their precision is the precision of poetry, not the precision of science. So there's always room for disagreement, particularly from the meditator's point of view. I'm experiencing something. Is this vedana or is it chitta? It basically doesn't matter which one it is. What matters is that we can make sense of the experience—that we can first of all develop the sensitivity so we experience at a degree of intimacy that we normally miss, and that we understand, have some understanding of what this is and how it flows, how it works. Whether we label this particular experience as "Oh, this is vedana" or "This is chitta" really doesn't matter.

"Patrick, my understanding of vedana is specifically about, as you said, the hedonic dimension—the liking, not liking aspect. Whereas to me emotion is much broader and more varied. If I feel anger, for example, it somehow partakes of not liking, but it's a very particular kind of not liking. It's much more complex. It's a particular flavor that isn't about either liking or not liking."

There's actually no word in Pali that translates as emotion. It's not part of the Buddha's vocabulary. In one of those Mind Life Institute books that came out of those meetings about destructive emotions—somewhere around page 300 and something—the Dalai Lama actually says, "By the way, there is no word in Tibetan that translates as emotion." As far as he knows, there is no what he calls "Buddhist language" that has such a term. Certainly you don't find it in Pali.

"Why do you think that is? Is that because maybe the emotions are on the dimension of faith?"

What these concepts do is divide the world up in certain ways so that we can understand what's going on. They're very culturally specific. If we go back to the ancient Greeks, they asked the question: What is it that distinguishes human beings from all other species? In particular, what is it that makes us superior? The answer they came up with was reason. Reason is the distinctively human characteristic of what we

would call the citta. Now if you ask, "What's the enemy of reason? What could sabotage reason?" The answer is emotion.

So you have this reason versus emotion categorization, which becomes very important in European culture. Whereas the Buddha is looking at things from a different angle. First of all, he's very precise in his language. Emotion is too general. If I can recognize an emotion, if I can recognize, "Oh, I am in the grip of emotion X," in order to do that I need a number of different things. I need, for a start, some kind of narrative in the mind, a story I'm telling myself and believing. Let's say I am angry and I can recognize that.

I have to have a narrative in which someone did something, or didn't do something, is doing something, or will do something that they should not.

"Do you think you would just recognize the constellation of body sensations from past experiences that equate to anger, for example?"

Then that would just be a series of body sensations. There wouldn't be anger. It feels like anger. And you might then—actually if you say, "Oh this feels like anger"—watch the mind go into overdrive, heading for the filing cabinet, pulling out nasty things people have done, riffling through: "Ah, this one. This is it."

So you've got that. It's also in the body. If there's any emotion, the body is being stirred up, as you point out. It's being stirred up in some way. So you have narrative, citta, body, and of course you have vedanā. And the vedanā will either be pleasant or painful.

To me it makes no sense to talk about an emotion which, in the vedanā—the affective feel of it—is neither painful nor pleasant. It's either painful or it's pleasant, and usually strongly so. Or even both, going boom, boom, boom, boom between them. As I've been assured by one crotchety old bachelor: love. It can also be painful and pleasant at the same time.

And also with emotion, I don't think it makes sense to say that we are always in the grip of emotion. But we are always experiencing vedanā. So I think partly the Buddha avoids this term because it's too general. He divides things up into their component parts.

And partly he doesn't come from this European heritage. For the Buddha, if he's looking at the human being, his major dichotomy that he's interested in is not "Is this reason or emotion?" but "Is this kusala or akusala?" Is it wholesome or unwholesome? Does it lead towards the cessation of dukkha, or does it lead towards the cultivation of dukkha? That's what he's interested in. So that's the basic binary that you find.

"I can't speak Latin, but I believe the Latin that emotion comes from refers to emovere, which means to bring into action, to make move, which is similar to what we're talking about. What moves us. But the Buddha does talk about will, for example, but that could manifest in a number of the emotions we categorize, such as jealousy as well as anger and resentment."

So the basic movement of attraction—the movement of the mind towards an object—could be addictive lust at one end of the spectrum and the highest ideals for humanity on the other, and everything in between. So the whole range of things, some of which are emotions and some of which are not, would be covered. And similarly with aversion. A whole range of moods and emotions and so on would be covered, would emerge out of that elemental movement. So they're in a way more general—general in the sense of elemental. It's like getting into the elemental quality of these things.

I think to the Greeks, emotion was also just like a category of non-reason. It's a big category of things that aren't reason. It's not so refined.

And this is one of the things when we read the Buddha: we've got to accept the fact that he's coming from a different culture and he's reading things differently from the way that we do. And our tendency is just to read him in terms of our familiar cultural categories, but when we do that, we get him wrong. We misunderstand what he's actually saying.

"Another thing to think about is that Western culture doesn't have clear definitions of emotion in science. But when it comes to states of mind such as peace or even compassion, there are arguments about whether that could be called an emotional state, saying, 'Well, it's not really emotional because it doesn't have this quality and so on.' So it's interesting variations in the way we understand what it means."

Even in Western language, we're not clear about it. And you can see that in contemporary psychology, the incorporation of mindfulness and grappling with this whole new vocabulary. People trying to work out how to talk about it.

I think English is a pretty poor language in terms of trying to actually describe nuanced states of mind. It just doesn't have very many words. It's quite poor compared to Pali and Sanskrit.

Anyway, citta. The essence of citta is awareness, vijnana. And the Buddha compares this to clear, transparent water. So the mind that is purified is compared to a mountain lake where the water is quite clear, limpid and undisturbed. This is the kind of citta that we're trying to cultivate when we do the practice.

And the Buddha says someone standing on the bank of such a lake could look into it and see the bottom of the lake, along with the plants, rocks and pebbles at the bottom, and the fish all swimming about. So the transparency of the citta is something that we're cultivating. And the essence of the citta is that transparency, which here is compared to water that is clear and still.

The Buddha also describes this essence of citta as luminous, pabassara. So he'll talk about the luminosity of the citta. And we talked about this in terms of it's like walking into a dark room and then switching on the lights—everything is luminous. It appears in the light. So this is the essence of citta, this awareness, this clear awareness.

But this essence is disguised from us by the disturbances that enter into the citta, the kilesas. Kilesa is usually translated as defilement. That's the traditional translation. Kilesa comes from—and except in... You notice in Mahayana Buddhism they'll talk about it as afflictive emotions. Have you come across that one? Now they're coming based on the Sanskrit klesha. And klesha can be kind of backtracked to kilesa, or it can be taken to a different root meaning "to afflict."

I've often seen "afflictive emotions" in English translations of particularly Tibetan works, but what they're doing is first of all they're adding the word "emotion" to make it culturally familiar. So if you drop that, kilesas are the afflictions. That's what afflicts, what pains the citta.

In the Pali, it's kilesa, and the tradition derives this word from the verb kilesati, "to stick, to adhere." So the image is, let's say you have white cloth—you've got a new white shirt and you're having a nice dinner and you're a messy eater. Then at the end of the meal, as you're wiping the food from your face, you look down and you realize, "Whoops, I need to change this shirt." The shirt is defiled, it is dirtied, because something from outside the shirt—bits of food—are sticking to it.

So kilesati is to stick, to adhere. So kilesa, usually translated as defilement, could also actually be translated as stuckness. It's quite interesting. Stuckness. Basically, you could say that one of the fundamental values of the Buddha is freedom. What gets in the way of freedom is when we get stuck. When I'm stuck, I'm not free. And this stuckness is kilesa.

There's the Wallace translation—I think it's the Sanskrit translation of klesha from the word "to distort." Kles means to distort. I think sometimes some people take on klesh and some people from klish. You've got to have klesh or klish. This is the thing about Sanskrit—you can play with it. You've got a word and you can say, "Well, I can derive this from this root or that root or the other root and make something out of it."

And we don't know whether for some of these terms the Buddha would have started at the root and then created a technical term. But in other cases, there would have been this term, and then the commentator goes back to the root. But depending on what meaning he or she wants to put on it, they just choose different roots. "Yeah, I can derive this from this root. It gives it a much more interesting meaning."

There is this creativity with language in the Indian traditions. They play with language. And I think the commentaries—the set of other commentaries—I would guess the same is in the Sanskrit. So Buddhagosa would say, "What does this mean?" and he'd give a list of different meanings, playing with the word in different ways. "Well, you can take it as coming from this, in which case it means that. Or you could take it as coming from this and then you get this other meaning. Or you could take it this way and get this other one." And it just goes down the list. And the thing is, it means all of them. And if you want to play with it some more, you can have more meanings. You play with it. This is part of the poetry of it.

If the citta is disturbed, this is compared to water that's mixed up with color, with dye, for example—so it's not transparent, you can't see into it—or heated until it's boiling. Anybody had a boiling citta? Or covered

with algae, clogged, sticky, or stirred up by the wind, or muddy. And these are, of course, all images for the hindrances. So the natural transparency of the water is lost. But you notice that the natural state of the water is transparent.

And this is the basic insight from which you get in East Asian Buddhism the idea of Buddha nature—where this comes from. So the investigation of citta is fundamental to this practice. And tracking the citta develops a sensitivity to the state of our heart, of our heart-mind. We become present to our inner state, whatever that is.

This understanding entails knowing how we feel—vedana—and therefore how we are moved to respond, to act, the choices that we make—cetanā, the sankhāras or constructions we talked about before. When we're talking about what we do, how we are moved to act, then we're talking about karma—action—and vipāka, its ripening, the results of that. This takes us into how we create the way that we live. And all of this is accessible through citta. So citta is the key.

When the Buddha talks about bondage, what is it that is bound? It's the citta. When he talks about liberation, what is it that is liberated? It's the citta. So the tracking of the citta is, you could say, the fundamental aspect of the practice.

Part of it—a really important part—is becoming aware of the difference between the kusala and the akusala, the wholesome and the unwholesome. The wholesome is a response, an action, which is pleasant within itself and leads to a good result—good in the sense of lessening of dukkha, leading away from dukkha. Something which is unwholesome, akusala, is painful within itself, in its nature, and it leads to a painful result. Learning to distinguish those is really central.

And of course it's not at all obvious. If you look at the human condition today and realize that this is the result of tens of thousands of years of people trying to make the world a better place—this is what we've got. So delusion is very powerful. We can pursue something our life long, convinced this is what's going to make me happy, only to discover that it doesn't. And of course in terms of the pursuit of economic growth, consumerism, and so forth, this is both very obvious but somehow everybody who has any kind of power in this society seems to be totally blind to it.

So we can't take for granted that we know the difference between the wholesome and the unwholesome, the skillful and the unskillful. You notice you get these two different translations. Kusala, sometimes translated wholesome, sometimes skillful. Akusala, sometimes translated unwholesome, sometimes unskillful. Wholesome and unwholesome points to the quality of that phenomenon itself. Skillful and unskillful points to the results of it. So it's two different sides, but they include both.

Another aspect of tracking the citta is seeing how we construct ourselves. We're constantly selfing, constructing a self. When we become sensitive to the movements of the citta, we can see just how relentless this is. And then we can get a sense of: is this kusala or is this akusala? Does it lead to greater

freedom and ease, or does it lead to greater bondage and pain? Once we see that, then we can start to make different choices.

Now if we ask, "Well, how do we gain access into the citta?" We cannot think our way in. No amount of reading books is going to help. And we cannot force our way in. A heroic effort does not necessarily help us. We feel our way in.

But equally, with the first satipaṭṭhāna, the body—how do we get the awareness right into the body? How do we become fully embodied? We can't think our way in. We can't force our way in. We feel our way in.

So when we look at these three satipaṭṭhānas, first of all they cover the entirety of human experience. And you can see them laid out in terms of gross to subtle. The most obvious one is the body. More subtle than that is this quality of feeling, of affect. And more subtle still are the movements of the citta, the heart-mind. So it's a movement from the gross to the subtle.

Another way of looking at it, a non-linear way of looking at it, is it's like a triangle. The apex is vedanā—feeling. On one side is body and the other side is citta. Because how do I gain access into the body? How do I become intimate with body? Through vedanā. How do I become intimate with citta?

Through vedana. You could say that vedana represents intimacy itself. Because it's so close to contact, the immediacy of experience.

So that's another way of looking at the structure of the three satipaṭṭhānas.

In any event, these three satipaṭṭhānas cover everything, all aspects of human experience, which leads us wondering: why then is there a fourth, since we've already got every base covered? And we'll look at that tomorrow night.

Any questions or comments?

"How is thinking covered by citta?"

That's one of the activities of citta. This is a cognitive activity. So when you look at citta, you can see aspects of it are cognitive, aspects of it are affective. In the standard exercises in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, when talking about citta, it's like "with lust, without lust."

He doesn't specifically mention thinking in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which shouldn't come as a great surprise because, again, it's a template. I don't think it's meant to be absolutely exhaustive. It's kind of just setting up a basic template and saying, "Okay, have a look around here and have a look around there."

So we talked about emotions, which are certainly covered by citta. But once you look at emotion, you certainly come across thinking—it's part of the baggage. So it's not exhaustive in the sense that he's trying to cover every possible experience.

What I find interesting is that when the Buddha talks about thinking specifically—and in particular, for example, as a distraction—the term that he uses is vitakka vicāra. Now, when he's talking about the development of jhāna, of absorption, the first two jhāna factors are vitakka vicāra. Exactly the same words.

And you can get a sense of where he's coming from, because again, the Buddha is interested in process. He's always interested in the processes of body and mind.

If you think about the meditation process, what do we do with the awareness? We send it to the meditation object. Initial application—vitakka. Boom. Go there. Go there. Go there. Go there. When we get some momentum, we have vicāra, sustained application. We follow it.

If you think about the process of thinking, we've talked about the mind throwing up cognitions, like sparks from a fire. We send the awareness there—bang—vitakka, initial application. We grab one of those and we turn it into a story, a sustained application. It's actually the same process.

I've heard vitakka and vicāra described—Ṛūpī Ketan does this—you pick up some brass pot, vitakka, and then you polish it, you start polishing it. That's one of Buddhaghosa's images. Another one is like a flower that has pollen and the bee is attracted to it. The bee comes to the part of the flower—that's vitakka—and then he's hovering around. That's vicāra.

Another image is like an archer shooting at a target: aim, fire, aim, fire—that's vitakka. And then as he gets more and more skilled, it's just bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, hitting the target every time—that's vicāra.

You could say papañca is another way that people talk about thinking. A particular style of thinking.

"Yeah, like mental fabrication."

Yeah. Which you'll find, if you want to look at citta in vipassana, when you see driven by a desire for, it's covered in the territory even if it's not specifically mentioned. These days I translate papañca as "complication." Don't complicate it. Yeah, it's a great word.

Any other questions or comments?

"I have a question. It's not exactly clear what it is, but at the beginning of the talk you were talking about the different sense modalities and sensitivities, including the sensitivity of touch. And you were talking about the body as the experienced world, in some sense. What I'm wondering is whether, if I talk about a sense modality like seeing or hearing, I kind of think of it as the capacity for those activities, but not what is seen or what is heard. There was just something about the way you said it that made me wonder whether in the idea of—I suppose my experience, my world includes what is sensed, but does the body also sense? Is that also a part of the body? I mean, like the world that I experience?"

The entire experienced physical universe is kaya. This understanding has practical implications for our

meditation practice. Rather than shutting off the physical senses when we practice, we can treat them as integral aspects of the practice itself.

You often see people on retreat keeping their eyes down, avoiding any kind of visual contact. This is indeed an excellent strategy if your goal is to maximize concentration, as it reduces sensory stimulus. However, if you're working primarily on developing mindfulness, you can also practice with eyes up and visually engaged. The trade-off is that it becomes more challenging to develop concentration because you're increasing the sensory input.

Yet when mindfulness becomes very strong, this increased stimulus doesn't create agitation or excitement. There's a beautiful balance that emerges.

When I started practicing Zen in the late seventies, we were instructed to sit with eyes open, facing a wall. You would gaze at this neutral surface throughout your meditation. I found this approach incredibly beneficial because I had a strong tendency toward sloth and torpor when meditating. The visual engagement helped maintain alertness and presence.

My favorite meditation spot during that period was in a house in Sydney that housed the first meditation hall of what was then called the Sydney Zen Group, now known as the Sydney Zen Centre.

This approach of including rather than excluding the senses reflects a deeper understanding of what body truly means in the Buddha's teaching—not merely the physical form, but the entire field of embodied, tactile experience that connects us to the world.

And it was the living room, and at the front of the room there was some kind of fireplace arrangement. I used to sit on the right-hand side of that—this was my favorite spot in the corner—because just on the wall there was a light which aimed itself directly at that wall. So I would sit here, eyes open, the wall was painted a light color, and the light would go bang, wham, straight into my eyes. It kept me awake, and I loved it.

I really got into the habit of sitting with the eyes open. When I moved to Theravada, I brought that with me. I can remember doing things like, for example, sitting in the meditation hall at Chithurst Monastery—the men's hall up above. There's this enormous stage, like a theater, with this big image of the Buddha teaching the five ascetics the first discourse. You've got the five ascetics, the sun, the moon, the deer, the forest, and so on. On that top stage were the monks sitting there. The main doorway was over there, and people were constantly coming and going—going onto the stage, sitting there, arranging themselves, sitting for a while, then getting up and walking out. Laypeople coming in, sitting down, and so on.

I was sitting there with my eyes wide open, and all of this was taking place in my visual consciousness. What I was naming mentally was "seeing." But it suddenly hit me as being kind of meditationally ironic that what I was naming wasn't all this activity which I had no response to at all. It was my thinking. I was

having visual thoughts, and I was naming those as "seeing, seeing" because that's where my attention was. I could see every detail in front of me—movement, stuff going on—but there was no response to it, no reaction to it whatsoever. When I was noting "seeing, seeing" for the mind, for the thoughts, the mental images, that really struck me. It's quite powerful.

So is this partly what the Buddha is referring to when he talks about contemplating the body as body internally or externally? I can detect the difference between physical sensations that are internal and external. I get a sense of it, for example, if I'm doing a stretch. When I do my own retreat and do the stretches, I'm in no hurry whatsoever, so I can spend a long time in a single stretch. I keep noting the sensation, and the sense of the posture drops away. The sense that I'm in this particular posture doing the stretch goes, and all there is is sensation. That's all. When that happens, it gives way—it's just air element movement along with the sensation.

People who use hearing as their meditation object often say first they know what they're hearing: "That's the train, that's the bird, that's the highway." Then later on, they don't know what they're hearing. That perception just drops away. It's just sound—not the sound of anything at all, just sound. The perception has gone. It's just sound as sound. Then further on, it just becomes vibration. It's like deconstructing the physical world. The physicality is still happening, but the world that it normally creates is being deconstructed.

You mentioned remembering having that "sound as sound" idea presented to you, and it seemed that that's where you should be aiming, which led to great difficulty. But I'm saying you don't necessarily have to aim for the perception to drop away, although it is a construction. All you've got to do is listen. The perception will drop away—this is always a natural process.

Sometimes you do get mistaken. This mistake can creep in with the way the project is presented to you, where you think, "I've got to get to there." But no, really the project is: this is the direction I'm heading. That's a very different project. You notice that the second project—aim in that direction—is all about process. And again, the Buddha is all about process.

If you take care of the process, the result will take care of itself. If you nurture the plant, you will get the harvest. If you're growing apples, you don't go out there every day and shake the tree, demanding, "When the hell are you going to produce an apple?" You could, but it wouldn't help. You just look after the tree.

And the apple comes. As long as it's an apple tree. And as long as it's growing in an area where apple trees flourish.

So the project is being interested in the process that emerges. What is the process happening here? How does it work? And how does that fit in with this whole new thing that I'm trying not to do of open awareness? How do you be interested in the process of open awareness without doing interested in the process?

Probably you just don't worry about that as being altogether too complicated. And just be interested in whenever you find yourself doing something with the process. So there I go interfering with it again. Just relax. Or there I go doing something. Just relax. Or there I go trying not to do something. Just relax.

The process is very fascinating. It's driven my whole practice for years—the actual interest in the process, whatever process I might be looking at. So yeah, I'm back to planting, I guess. Just being attuned to the quality of effort. Trying, trying. Don't try, just let it happen.

It's the world—the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world. Doesn't the whole world change with the citta? When the citta changes, my world changes. It's a completely different world. The trees are different, the sky is different.

So the world is a lot more malleable than we take it to be. It's one thing we discover.

Thank you very much.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.