The Fourth Satipaṭṭhāna

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:09:06

Last night we looked at the first three satipaṭṭhānas, and tonight we're going to examine the fourth. As we explored them, we pointed out that the first three—which cover body, citta (heart/mind), and in the middle, vedanā—encompass the entirety of human experience. This naturally raises the question: what is the fourth one doing?

If you look at translations, the first three typically receive consistent translations with little controversy over their meaning. The fourth one, however, appears with different renderings. For example, while the third one, citta, is sometimes translated as mind, you'll sometimes see the fourth one translated as "mind objects"—though I always wondered what a mind object actually is. Sometimes it's translated simply as "the dharma," and Bhikkhu Bodhi renders it as "phenomena." These different possibilities point to something significant about this fourth foundation.

Essentially, the fourth one is called dhamma-nupasanā in Pali. According to Pali grammar rules, this can be divided as either *dhamma* anupasanā or *dhammā* anupasanā. The second word is definitely anupasanā, which means tracking. The first word can be either dhamma or dhammā—the difference being whether it's singular or plural, dharma or dharmas.

I use the term "dharma" because it has entered the English dictionary as a borrowed word. This difference between singular and plural is crucial because it gives quite different spins on the meaning. I believe this ambiguity is deliberate, which is why it's impossible to translate adequately—it encompasses both the tracking of the Dharma (singular) and tracking the dharmas (plural). But you can't capture that in English, so translators usually choose one or the other. As I mentioned, Bhikkhu Bodhi chooses the second interpretation, dharmas, which he translates as phenomena. I usually follow him in that regard.

So there are two aspects here: dharma and dharmas. Let's examine the first one—dharma.

Dharma is a key technical term; the Pali word is dhamma. If you look up dhamma in the old Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary—a rather large volume with very small print—the entry for dhamma takes several pages. It's extensive, complicated, with multiple meanings.

Dharma can mean the way things are—reality itself. Dharma can also mean the teaching that points to the way things are, hence the Buddha Dharma—the Buddha's version of dharma as opposed to other dharmas. You might speak of the Christ dharma or the Krishna dharma. Dharma also encompasses, given that this is what's happening, what should I do about it? Here you encounter dharma as duty, as what one should do. "What is my dharma in this regard? What should I do about this?"

In the context of the fourth satipaṭṭhāna, dharma refers more to the second meaning—the teaching or the meaning one puts upon experience within the framework of the Buddha's teaching.

When we engage in these practices, we're cultivating intimacy with present experience. We do this consistently, but we do it for a reason. One of those reasons is so that some kind of meaning emerges from it—some kind of understanding arises from all this attention.

I'd like to compare this practice to having a big sheet of white paper and a pen or brush with black ink. Each time we note an object, each time we're deliberately aware of something, it's like taking that brush and making a dot on the big sheet of paper. Then we note something else—another dot. Then something else—another dot. We keep doing this, and at some point, if we step back, we can see that some kind of pattern is emerging from all these dots.

In English we have the expression "to join the dots." This happens, then this, then this, then this, then this. At some point it means something. Some kind of meaning can be extracted from the experience. This is dharma in the first sense.

We've been discussing mindfulness and clear understanding—sati sampajañña. Mindfulness is remembering the experience, remembering the present. Sampajañña is clear understanding.

As we track experience over time, we start to understand what it is, how it works, what it flows into. Sometimes we speak of this in terms of what feeds this, what does this feed. We are cultivating an understanding. This is why mindfulness is associated with wisdom, as we've been discussing.

This understanding involves a movement in the practice from the particular to the universal. We begin with the particular—just this, just this. From there we arrive at the universal: the whole universe is this. We explored this yesterday through the perception of impermanence. This is changing. At some point we realize everything changes, including the person who's looking at change. This is a movement from the particular to the universal, and insight belongs to this realm of the universal.

We spoke yesterday of the growing ethical sensitivity that develops in the course of this practice. This ethical sensitivity can also be seen as a development of understanding. We start to understand the Dharma—the way things are, the way life moves. We begin to understand the Buddha's Dharma, his teaching about this and how it applies.

In the Fourth Satipaṭṭhāna, you encounter a number of doctrinal lists. In this discourse, in this section, doctrines are what get spoken about. In previous sections it was simply mind-body process, but suddenly in the Fourth Satipaṭṭhāna, doctrinal lists begin to appear. Two of them are the five hindrances and the seven factors of awakening. Some scholars think that in the earliest version of this sutta there were probably only those two, and that other lists were added over time. Of course we don't know this—it's pure speculation. But it's interesting speculation, and it certainly points to the importance of these two lists.

What these lists address is the sutta's expansion on this whole notion of ethical sensitivity. It's saying: not just be sensitive to what's happening in the citta, but look for these events in particular. Check these out. These are important.

The first list is the five hindrances, drawing attention to our obstacles. What gets in the way of this practice? This is what we need to study, and we've been talking about this throughout the retreat in terms of working with distraction. Here that general principle is being formalized with this official list of the hindrances.

The flip side is: what are we cultivating? The hindrances represent what we should be sensitive to and able to understand so that we can drop them. The counterpart is what we need to be sensitive to in order to cultivate skillful qualities. What helps us along the path? This is the classical list of the factors of awakening—five hindrances, seven factors of awakening.

Let's quickly go through these two lists. Each one could merit at least one dharma talk, so tonight we're simply going to survey them for an overview.

The five hindrances, which you probably all know: sense desire; malice or hatred or ill will; stiffness and dullness, or classically translated as sloth and torpor—which you must admit has a certain ring to it; restlessness and worry; and finally, paralytic doubt.

Regarding these, the Buddha says: "How does a practitioner live tracking Dharma as Dharma? Here a practitioner lives tracking Dharma as Dharma in terms of the five hindrances." How? Here he gives instructions—practical instructions in how to work with obstacles.

There are five things he says you should look for. We'll go through the first one, which is sense desire. The five aspects are: First, the practitioner understands that there is sense desire in her. When it's present, you understand it.

When there is no sense desire in her, she understands there is no sense desire in her. She understands the arising of unarisen sense desire. She understands the abandoning of arisen sense desire. And she understands the non-arising in the future of abandoned sense desire. He goes through the same pattern for the other hindrances.

You notice, first of all, that the job is to understand. This is a wisdom aspect, showing that the practice is maturing. The first thing we have to understand is the presence or absence of the hindrance. When there's an obstacle, we have to understand that it's present—that this is what's happening.

This is sometimes obvious when I'm completely overwhelmed by something. But it can be quite subtle, particularly in the realm of vedanā. If there's some kind of unidentified feeling deep in the citta that's just coloring everything, I don't really notice it because the mind is going out to the sense object. I notice that today is particularly difficult—the sense objects are really painful, quite messy, and I don't like it. What to

do? I've got to slog away. Then I decide, no I won't. I think I'll take a break. I'll go for a walk. That sounds much more sensible.

So we're preoccupied with what it is that we are noting, and we tend not to notice what's underneath that—what's in the citta of the practitioner who's doing the noting. It might be, in this case, aversion or ill will, or it might be desire for something else to be happening. But because it's just underneath the surface, I might not necessarily even notice that it's there. Then as soon as I notice it and deliberately send the awareness into the citta—ah, that's what's going on—everything can then settle.

With these five hindrances, you've got the first two: desire and aversion or ill will, hatred, malice. These are disorders in affect—they're both about vedanā. Then you get stiffness and dullness versus restlessness and worry—these are disturbances in energy. Then you get paralytic doubt, which is a disturbance of the will. The hindrances cover a range of types of experience. They can be obvious, they can be quite subtle. Sometimes it's what's coloring the whole thing further up, but we just don't notice it.

So the first thing to do is to notice when it's present—what is present, what obstacle is present, what's getting in the way. What exactly is getting in the way here? To be able to identify that.

The Buddha also says to notice the absence of the hindrance. This is even more subtle. It's relatively straightforward to notice when something is present; it's harder to notice when something is absent. If I go to a social gathering, for example, it doesn't take me long to notice who's here, who's present. But it can take a while before I twig who didn't come. That's harder to recognize.

So noticing absence is harder to recognize than presence. I think this is particularly useful if you have a habitual obstacle. When that happens we tend to get upset about it: "Oh God, it's back again. Will this never leave me?" Then when it's not there we tend to take it for granted and just forget about it, instead of actually noting the absence of this obstacle and what it's like to be without it.

It's rather like in body work—there's tension in the body. You put the awareness there, breathe, relax, and release the tension. What is it like to release tension? What is it like to be without the tension? It's just as important to notice that as it is to notice the tension. They're two sides of the coin.

So we've got presence and absence of the obstacle. Then the third one is how the obstacle arises—in other words, what feeds this? Here we enter into an aspect of dependent arising. Presence and absence is dependent arising—things come and go. But things come and go because of something else. So this is broadening the investigation. Something happened and this hindrance arose. What is that? What feeds that?

Then you get the flip side: how the hindrance can be abandoned. This happens and the hindrance arises. Something else happens, and it drops away. So what's that one? How do I abandon it?

What conditions do I cultivate so that it goes away? When we look at how the hindrance can be

abandoned, it's easy to take this as "how will I abandon the hindrance?" But sometimes it's not that at all. Sometimes it's just that I change the conditions and the hindrance falls away. It's not me—it's more like what I did was try something out and change the circumstances, and then oh, okay, it fades now. So I've discovered something.

And the last one: she understands the non-arising in the future of the abandoned hindrance. I think this means how this particular aspect of the hindrance can be outgrown so that we mature beyond it. So we feel confident that this isn't going to come back again. I've outgrown this. I can feel free from this now. Something will come up, some difficulty will come up, but not this. This is something that I've managed to outgrow.

Notice that all of this is more than simply being aware of it. Remember we talked about mindfulness of breathing and how the Buddha uses the verb *sikkhati*—training the mind to achieve something. Training the mind to become sensitive to the whole body, training the mind to calm the bodily formations. Here, the use of this verb *sikkhati*—to train—implies not simply witnessing, not simply being present to something, but actually taking the experience and steering it in a certain direction. I need to go here with this.

So with the hindrance, I recognize the hindrance, I need to abandon this. It's not just "I need to be mindful of it"—that helps to abandon it—but the project is to let it go, to drop this. So I set a direction in which there are certain things I'm deliberately trying to let go of, because they are *akusala* and they lead to harm and suffering.

Does that make sense? So this is all about abandoning the unwholesome, which summarizes a great deal of the path. Much of the rest of the path can be summarized as cultivating the wholesome, the *kusala*. And this is represented by the seven factors of awakening.

A practitioner lives tracking dhamma as dhamma in terms of the seven factors of awakening. How? And then he goes through all seven of them, and these are mindfulness, investigation of phenomena, energy, rapture, tranquility, equanimity, and concentration. Again, we could spend all night on these, but we're not going to. We're going to skip over them and just look at the structure, how the Buddha talks about them.

So the first one is mindfulness. The Buddha says: When the mindfulness factor of awakening is present in her, a practitioner understands the mindfulness factor of awakening is present in her. When the mindfulness factor of awakening is not present in her, she understands the mindfulness factor of awakening is not present in her. She understands the arising of the unarisen mindfulness factor of awakening. She understands how the arisen mindfulness factor of awakening matures by development.

So again, it's all about understanding. And the Buddha again begins with presence and absence. Is it here? Is it not here? Can I learn to recognize it? Can I recognize when I'm being mindful? Can I recognize when

I'm not being mindful? So this is one of the reasons why getting clear on the basic concepts is important, because then I can actually start to tell what's going on. We spoke about the presence of mindfulness as being revealed by the felt continuity of awareness as being a key indicator. But if I'm working with presence and absence, it's like, well, I have to get to know it. How do I recognize it, whatever its characteristics?

And again, as with the hindrances, noticing its absence is harder than noticing its presence. But that too is part of the training. So, presence and absence.

And then, the arising of the unarisen mindfulness factor of awakening. This is "how can I encourage this?" So again, what feeds this? What can I do to encourage mindfulness? The two obvious ways that the tradition talks about, which we've mentioned, are first of all continuity. If I have a continuity of mindfulness, the mindfulness will tend to become stronger. And secondly, a clear perception. I look for something obvious and clear.

And then understanding how the arisen mindfulness factor of awakening matures by development. In other words, having found it, how do I cultivate it? How do I make it stronger? How can I learn to live in it and make it habitual? And this is cultivating the wholesome.

So these are two of the fundamental aspects or categories in this Satipatthana. You can sum them up by saying: learning how to abandon the unwholesome, learning how to cultivate the wholesome. First of all by recognizing them—when they're there, when they're not there. And then in the case of the unwholesome, learning how to let it go. In the case of the wholesome, learning how to cultivate it.

This perfectly aligns with the ethical sensitivity we explored yesterday evening. What this entire endeavor highlights is our fundamental need for a conceptual framework through which we can understand what's unfolding in our experience.

This is crucial. While I haven't heard it as much in recent years, I vividly remember in my early meditation days a common refrain from practitioners: "I'm just interested in the meditation, I'm not interested in the theory. Don't burden me with all this theoretical stuff—I just want to practice."

Of course, this attitude is complete nonsense, because there is no practice without theory.

"I just want to practice." Fine. Practice what, exactly? "Well, I want to sit down and follow my breathing." Why? Why not sit down at a sports ground and follow a game of football? You're sitting down. You're following something. So why follow this one and not that one? Because there's a theory that says this is beneficial and explains why it's beneficial.

There is no such thing as meditation practice without theory. There are meditators who are deeply confused about their theory. There are meditators who remain only dimly aware of what it is. There are meditators who grasp after any floating, fashionable notion and stick it onto their practice to frame it. But

there is no such thing as a meditator who has a practice and does not have a theory. Such a person simply does not exist.

So if we're going to have a theory, let's have a good one—one that actually works.

I'll be controversial and say something that will please Mal. One of the most successful meditation and mindfulness interventions in the contemporary secular world is, of course, MBSR—Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. There, if you read Jon Kabat-Zinn, you encounter the practice package, the course structure they follow, and what he calls in his earlier writings "the paradigm"—the theoretical framework surrounding it.

The practice package is genuinely excellent, but the paradigm is rubbish. I shouldn't say this while being recorded, but frankly, it's completely confused and is causing all sorts of difficulties throughout the research world studying mindfulness. When conducting scientific research, you need a crystal-clear conceptual framework. Yet there are endless fascinating debates and controversies precisely because his framework simply doesn't match up. Trying to found any kind of scientific endeavor on his theoretical framework is like marching into mud, marsh, and quicksand.

What's interesting is that it works—the practice package works remarkably well despite the inadequacies of the framework. But he does have a framework. You must have a framework.

The Dharma is the framework the Buddha provides. It's about how we can create meaning in our lives.

I might have a strange experience during a meditation retreat, but it doesn't necessarily mean anything at all. There was a time when I was teaching here—this must have been fashionable then—when every retreat included at least one person who had come explicitly to have a good catharsis. People would express disappointment at retreat's end that they hadn't had a proper weeping session, because they were there to undergo some kind of emotional catharsis. A friend of theirs had done a retreat here, experienced this incredible emotional catharsis, so naturally they wanted one too. Strangely, every retreat would include at least one person quite explicit about this motivation. For years I haven't encountered a single one, so it must have been a passing fashion. Perhaps they felt my disapproval radiating.

But one of the peculiar aspects of this practice is that sometimes people have spectacular experiences. That's lovely. Yet later they have very subtle experiences, and it turns out the subtle ones are far more important. It's not the power of the experience that matters—it's the meaning of the experience that matters. That's what transforms a life.

The purpose of practice is to change how we live. An experience accomplishes this through the meaning we assign to it.

Someone could have an intense experience of pain, distress, fear, panic—whatever—during meditation practice, decide they've uncovered some mental disorder, take themselves to the appropriate clinician,

receive the appropriate medications, and stay away from meditation for the rest of their lives because it's obviously not beneficial for them. Given the meaning they've placed on that experience, life heads off in a particular direction.

Or they could have exactly the same experience, be told that what they're encountering is a particular glimpse into the emptiness of phenomena, the groundlessness of experience, and that yes, all this fear and horror they're experiencing is a completely appropriate response to the situation. However, it's only half the view. What they must do is continue forward to reach the other half.

But you've got to go through this one. Then you'll more fully understand what the Buddha is talking about. You're getting a very clear sense of dukkha. Congratulations, that's great progress. Now you need to move on to the next bit.

Is it the teacher's duty to translate that? Yes, that's part of the job of the teacher. And then, if the person takes that on board, life goes off in another direction. And I'm biased, but I would suggest that direction is a lot healthier than the first one.

It's all about the meaning of the experience—how it's read, how it's interpreted. And yes, it's the job of the teacher to do that interpretation for the student. You notice that in the interviews, that's a lot of what we're discussing. We're actually reading the experience. What does it mean? Where does it fit within the system? And of course these dharma talks, step by step, outline a conceptual framework within which we can place experiences. This is what it means.

One example that always occurs to me when I'm giving this talk involves a friend of mine when I was at Mahasi Center—a monk from the US, still quite a young man at the time. He had started meditation perhaps ten years or more earlier, quite young. He was attending a retreat in the US and threw himself into his first retreat with great intensity.

Somewhere during this retreat he had a quite profound experience in which basically everything crumbled. His whole sense of who he was just dissolved. Naturally, he was somewhat alarmed. So he went to the teacher and explained the experience. This is what I remember of what he was telling me, if my memory serves correctly.

He said it was like the teacher just did this quick double take and muttered something like, "No, it couldn't be." And then reassured him: "There, there, it's okay. Don't worry about it. It'll be all right." And sent him off.

It was fine as long as he was in that retreat. But when he left, he completely fell apart. Fortunately, he had the determination to keep going. Ten, twelve years later, he's telling me this story.

So I asked him, "Venerable Sir, why are you telling me this story now?"

And he said, "Because in the last sitting, it happened again. Only this time, my response was, 'Ah, that's

where it fits. Tick that box. Time to move on.'"

The same experience, but different meanings. The first time, he had no framework to put it into. The second time—ah, of course, tick. He had the framework set up, he'd been doing the practice. It was less than a problem. It was another piece of the jigsaw puzzle, everything falling into place. This is what's going on.

So the framework is really important, and this fourth satipatthana is all about the dharma—the framework. This is what it means. This is how you read the experience.

And then we come to dharmas. Here I'm using these to illustrate this point. Actually, all of these lists can be read either as the dharma or the dharmas, but rather than go through all of them twice, I'm just picking the first two as illustrative of the dharma—the wholesome, the unwholesome, the kusala, the akusala—and I'm picking the next two as illustrative of the dharmas, plural.

Does this make it plural in Pali as well? It's long *a* in Pali. So if you have two words and you join them in a compound, let's say your first word ends in *a*, short *a*, and the second word ends in *a*, short *a*, then they join together and it becomes long *a*.

So Dhamma Anupasana becomes Dhamma Anupasana. If you have the first word ending in long A, and the second word beginning with short A, then long A plus short A equals long A: Dhamma Anupasana.

That's why it's ambiguous. The plural is the long A—Dhamma. In English it would be "dhammas." So it's plural.

Here the Buddha talks about the five aggregates and the six sense fields, which we'll be exploring more later. When the Buddha analyzes the nature of the human being, his two favorite frameworks are the five aggregates and the six sense fields.

The five aggregates, or five bundles, are body, feeling, perception, constructions, and awareness. You'll notice the first two of them are also the first two satipatthanas. The Buddha's instruction for practicing with these is beautifully simple: Such is body, such is arising, such is disappearance. Such is feeling, such is arising, such is disappearance, and so on.

It's this coming and going—the impermanence of the aggregates that he emphasizes. The job here is to directly experience the arising and disappearance of each aggregate, and therefore to perceive their emptiness, that there's no one there in the midst of them. We'll explore this more deeply in another dharma talk.

Then you have the six sense fields—the six sense sensitivities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding, along with their corresponding sense objects, which we've already discussed.

A practitioner lives tracking dharmas as dharmas in terms of the six subjective and objective sense fields.

How? The Buddha goes through each one in the same way. We'll start with seeing.

A practitioner understands eye sensitivity, or seeing sensitivity. She understands forms. She understands the fetter that arises dependent on both. She understands the arising of the unarisen fetter. She understands the abandoning of the arisen fetter. And she understands the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter. And so on with the rest of them.

Here you have the sensitivity, the sense object, and the meeting of both, which is contact. This whole process must be understood. Then you have the fetter that arises dependent on both. "Fetter" here is samyojana—as in yoga, it's the same word. Yoga comes from the root yuj, meaning to yoke or bind. The English word "yoke" comes from the same root.

Yoga is a joining or binding. In the yoga traditions, yoga is seen as joining or binding with the divine, the unconstructed, or whatever. Sam indicates "with," so samyojana means to join with or be bound with—and here it's in a negative sense, something that ties us up to something. We're bound, we're fettered.

When the Buddha discusses sense perception, remember we talked about vedana. When he talks about contact—you have the sensitivity, the sense object, the corresponding awareness—the meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling, an affective response. Feeling conditions craving. Craving conditions clinging. That teaching is all about how we get entangled with sense objects.

The vedana gets out of whack and we find ourselves completely lost, being blown about by our relationship to sense objects. Here he's talking about the same process, but in terms of the samyojana, the fetters, the bonds. It's like we're bound to these sense objects—completely entangled with them. They're sticky and we can't get away from them. They dominate us.

Understanding this process—and the samyojanas, the binds and fetters—these are of course akusala. You get the same relationship as with the hindrances: She understands the arising of the unarisen, the abandoning of the arisen, and the non-arising in the future of the abandoned. It's the same process: What feeds it? How can I let it go? And how can I outgrow it, so this particular instance won't happen in the future?

But it's all about our relationship to sense objects—how the senses cling to their corresponding objects and how we get emotionally entangled with them in a very negative way.

Negative in the sense that it leads to pain for ourselves and for others.

Finally, at the end, you encounter the four truths. There are two versions of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—one in the Majjhima Nikāya and the other in the Dīgha Nikāya. The Dīgha Nikāya version is slightly longer and includes the four truths, which indicates the culmination of the practice. Understanding the four truths is code for awakening itself.

A practitioner lives tracking dhammas as dhammas in terms of the four truths of the Noble Ones. How? A practitioner understands realistically: this is dukkha. She understands realistically: this is the arising of dukkha. She understands realistically: this is the cessation of dukkha. She understands realistically: this is the way leading to the cessation of dukkha.

Seeing the four truths represents awakening. We'll probably talk about the four truths again in a separate talk later in the retreat.

Throughout this section, we're speaking of experience in terms of dhammas—learning to experience things in terms of dhammas and the interrelationships between dhammas. This takes us to emptiness and to not-self.

Our normal relationship to what we take to be real involves looking out at the world and seeing beings and things, then noticing what relationship we find ourselves in to these beings and things. I'm sitting here and I see beings and I see this room, and from that I work out my relationship to these beings and this place. These beings are meditators who have come to Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center to do a meditation retreat, and I'm the teacher. So first I have things and people, beings, and from that I work out the relationships.

The awakened one has the complete reverse relationship. An awakened one looks out at the world and sees a network of relationships, and from that infers beings and things. What's real for the noble ones are the relationships, not the beings and not the things. What's happening here is a network of relationships expressed as this particular group of beings and this particular series of things.

We have two different ways of relating to the world: one is what Buddha would call the world of self, and the other is the world of emptiness, of not-self, of dhammas.

The example I like to give, because I'm usually in this particular circumstance when talking about this: as the teacher, I not only get my own throne where I sit above you so you can look up at me—except those of you sitting on chairs, especially tall people on chairs—but I have my special equipment here, all of which indicates my status. One of them is this glass of water.

What is this glass of water? From the world of self, which we talked about before as the third-person world, this is a glass partially filled with water. What is water? H2O. Glass is a certain kind of substance. This glass of water can be studied; the physics of it can be studied and appreciated. But the thing about it that's most obvious to me is that it exists completely independently of me.

When I came in earlier, that glass of water was here. It was the same glass. I'm pretty sure it was the same glass that was here yesterday and the day before. I'm pretty sure nobody went out and washed it and got me a new one. When I leave at the end of the talk, it will remain here because it's a glass of water just sitting here. All of this is blindingly obvious, isn't it? Does it need to be explained to you? You already know this. This is the way we relate to the world in terms of self, not emptiness, not dhammas.

Or I could view this glass of water as dhammas. If it's dhammas—notice again, plural—then what is it? It's this. That's what it is. That's its nature. That's its very existence.

Wanting is a dharma. Turning is a dharma. Seeing is a dharma. Reaching is a dharma. Touching is a dharma. Lifting is a dharma. Tilting is a dharma. Tasting is a dharma. Wet is a dharma. Swallowing is a dharma. Satisfaction is a dharma. Placing is a dharma. Hearing is a dharma. All these are dharmas.

Does that sound familiar to you? Have you been doing something like this?

In this practice, what we're doing is training ourselves to live in this world of dharmas—to actually start to perceive the world as a whole series of dharmas. A dharma is an experienced event. It's the experience of something. It's not the something. It's the experience of something. It's first-person experience.

For example, some people have commented, "Yes, I've been doing this practice and now I step outside and it's like a whole different world." Has anybody had any experience like that? Do you seriously believe it's a different world? Should I call the mental health team? They're probably useless.

Objectively, it's the same world. But from the perspective of the dharmas, you're absolutely right—it's completely new. It's never been here before, and it never will be here again. This is the world of the dharmas, and this is the world that we're training ourselves to inhabit.

You notice that in this world, there's no room for me. There's no room for you. There's not even any room for the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre. There's just the dharmas coming and going according to conditions. Does that make sense?

This tracking of the dharmas indicates the maturity of satipaṭṭhāna—when we actually live in this world. When we abandon the world of self and what belongs to self, the world of beings and things, and we live in a world made up entirely of dharmas. This represents the maturity of the practice.

But you can see from the moment you begin the practice and learn to note rising, falling, in, out, lifting, pushing, placing, seeing, hearing, touching—from the moment we begin to do that, we are training ourselves to perceive ourselves and our world in terms of dharmas. This is the boot camp training that we're putting ourselves through.

Notice that what we're doing is deliberately changing our perceptions based on a theoretical framework—the Buddha-dharma, singular—which gives rise to a particular way of structuring attention, the meditation method, which is designed to lead perception in a certain direction, which is considered kusala, wholesome, in which we train ourselves to perceive the world as dharmas.

So you have the tracking of the dharma, and you have the tracking of the dharmas, and they intersect. They come together. This is the fourth satipaṭṭhāna.

If you think about a pie chart—draw a circle, and you've got four satipaṭṭhānas, and you wanted to

illustrate this—you'd be tempted to draw a vertical line and a horizontal line, and you've got four slices. But that is not the way it's structured. Actually, it's three slices, which are the first three satipaṭṭhānas. The fourth satipaṭṭhāna is the whole cake experienced from a certain angle. This is why it doesn't quite fit neatly and tightly. It's just taking the whole thing from a completely different angle.

Any questions or comments?

"I'm not sure if it's confusion, but the suggested activities of the fourth section of the time—like the deliberate cultivating and abandoning—seems slightly different from and more than just noticing arising and ceasing in the first thing."

The first three? The first three satipaṭṭhānas you mean?

So far we've just been observing and letting things be, which is very pleasant and actually quite helpful. But what attracted me to Buddhism was reading about the Five Hindrances as a list, and that suggests action—abandonment and cultivation—which doesn't seem the same as simply noting.

Actually, it is the noting and noticing. The noting and noticing gets you into the game. Part of the game is indeed just noting and noticing, but there's more to it than that. You have to get into the game first. What you discover is that you're already playing the game before you even notice it.

For example, you might say, "I'm just going to note and notice for the next thirty minutes." But how do you actually do that? You find yourself massaging your experience in order to be able to do that. You're already working with the hindrances and cultivating the factors of awakening. So this takes the game to a different level, and it's kind of assumed.

Why do people take up meditation practice in the first place? Because they think their lives will become better. They might not follow that thought through to its logical conclusion—yes, that means abandoning the akusala and cultivating the kusala—but in fact, that's how it's done.

This is something we learn over time. It takes time because it takes time just to learn to recognize what is kusala and what is akusala. We're deluded, so we don't know. We're confused about it. So it's not contradictory so much as it's just another part of the complex. It's not as simple as simply being aware—there's more to it than that.

That aspect of practice is also present in sīla, isn't it? In the tradition, sīla is taken as a pre-given foundation. It's assumed you might not even start without it, but certainly you wouldn't get very far without cultivating sīla. If that doesn't develop, then the practice gets bogged down.

This is why doing nothing is so hard—because you start with a purpose. Doing nothing opens up different aspects of doing. For example, doing nothing is often abandoning because I'm not doing the akusala. But also, in order to do nothing, I have to really develop and cultivate mindfulness, concentration, and so forth, which means I'm cultivating the wholesome.

But you chose the example of the unwholesome...

Actually, doing nothing is wholesome. Then I suppose you'd have to make sure you didn't start cleaning something. The wholesome thing allows for that.

So it's a moving feast. If I cling to the wholesome, that's unwholesome. It can get very complicated. Let's just go to bed!

I think sometimes there's the marketing of it. Somewhere—I don't know why—in our culture, the marketing somehow got reduced to "all it is is just be aware." It must have been watered down to that point. I remember seeing a book by Sayadaw Tejaniya: "Mindfulness Is Not Enough." Because if you look at the Dharma, it was never just about bare attention. The fourth satipaṭṭhāna has been there the whole time, and yet somehow we think it doesn't count or something.

It seems to me a multi-layered and almost spiral practice. You go around and around and over and over again. But each time you go over the same ground, it's different.

And you've got another layer and another layer and another layer, and it opens up and opens up like an inverse onion or something—like you're in the middle of the onion and you get through another layer and it's bigger, and then you get through another layer and it's bigger and even more and more. It just opens up.

I think culturally what's happened is that what our culture has lacked for a long time—and some people say it used to exist long ago—is any practical understanding of how to pay attention to one's inner world in a systematic way. In other words, what in the Indian tradition is called meditation. It's just absent from our culture.

Partly, I think, this is because it was driven underground by various churches over the centuries, as they saw it as a threat. I can remember—I was raised Catholic—being very interested in contemplative prayer at a young age. I used to read these books about it, but I never found any book that actually said how to do it. It was all mystical theology, incredibly abstract, and I never found any clergy person who had anything useful to say about how to actually do it. No one knew.

And then along comes Buddhism, and suddenly these people know how to do it. What you find, for example, is a lot of Christians going to Buddhists to learn how to meditate. Then they bring it back to their own tradition, where it's immensely valuable.

In the secular world of psychology, you can look at the different psychological interventions that have taken up mindfulness. What each of them has is some kind of understanding of how the mind works and, using Buddha's language, what's kusala and what's akusala. But they have no way of getting people to actually look inside their own minds and figure this out. Then here comes Buddha's meditation. Bingo.

So it's all about the attention, the quality of attention, because that's the key—that's the missing link. That's

what people have seized upon, including this term "bare attention." Now gradually there's a dawning understanding that actually more is required, that there actually is more to it than this.

And then you get the debate: should we figure it all out for ourselves because we're scientific and psychological, or should we go and maybe ask the Buddha? Oh no, we're being religious there. We don't want to do that.

There's also this need for technology in our society—to look at technique and technology, apply the technology to the problem, and solve the problem with the scientific method. Science questions religion. So all of this stuff has to be sifted through the scientific sieve to be measurable and objective. We can get an app, a meditation app.

I wish I could write one. It would make a fortune. Mine would have an angry voice saying to you, "Just sit down and don't move. And don't bother me again."

I notice, in terms of my own experience, what I feel very strongly when I have these experiences is a desire to understand the experience, rather than to simply think, "Why is this happening? Where does it come from? Why am I doing this?" I do think, in terms of my practice, if I can hold whatever arises in a sufficiently strong attention, then it will transform into something else.

That's the first two aspects—the presence and the absence. These are not static. For the Buddha, they're always dynamic. So there's the arising and the disappearance. Arising and disappearance always presuppose dependent arising, which means if an understanding opens up—I'm seeing, "Ah, this arises because of this, and this arises because of this, and this arises because of this"—so it is understanding. We study it.

The Buddha, in the Four Truths, says that with the first truth, dukkha—which is what we're talking about—the job is to understand it, to fully understand it. So it's not suppression. And understanding sometimes leads to a spontaneous abandonment—"I just don't want this anymore." But sometimes perhaps something stronger is required. It depends on circumstances.

The desire to understand can indeed be a skillful approach. There's wisdom in recognizing that sometimes understanding naturally leads to the abandonment of what causes suffering, while other circumstances may call for a more direct letting go.

Your inclination toward understanding reminds me of something from my time at a study monastery in northern Thailand. This particular monastery taught the traditional medieval Burmese curriculum, which included extensive study of the Vinaya—the monastic rules. The abbot there had a fascinating perspective. He would say that it was absolutely crucial to understand the Vinaya thoroughly, but not necessarily so important to follow every detail precisely. His emphasis was always on understanding: What is this? What does it mean? Why does it exist?

As he would joke, "You've got to be a good lawyer if you're going to survive with all these rules!" But beneath his humor was a profound teaching principle—that genuine understanding often creates its own natural boundaries and appropriate responses.

This approach can be quite liberating when working with difficult mind states or patterns. Sometimes the very act of truly seeing and understanding what's happening is enough. The light of awareness itself becomes the agent of transformation, without the need for force or struggle.

Of course, we must be honest with ourselves about whether our interest in understanding is genuinely leading toward freedom, or whether we're sometimes using investigation as a subtle form of avoidance. Both the analytical mind and the surrendering heart have their place in practice, and wisdom lies in knowing when each is most skillful.

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