Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: First Foundation of Mindfulness

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We're entering familiar territory, because I'm going to talk about Satipaṭṭhāna. I've been having another go at looking at it, and what we'll explore is mindfulness itself and the first two foundations of mindfulness.

We're practicing mindfulness meditation, which is these days very famous. This is the practice that the Buddha calls Satipaṭṭhāna, and there are four of these Satipaṭṭhānas. One way of translating Satipaṭṭhāna is as the foundations of mindfulness or the domains of mindfulness—in other words, what we are mindful of when we are mindful. The Buddha says there are four of these foundations: body, feeling, heart-mind, and dharma. If we had a number of talks, we could get through all of these, but this evening we're just going to look at mindfulness itself and then examine body and feeling, the first two foundations.

So we start with mindfulness. This is the translation of the Pāli word sati, and sati literally means memory. It was in the nineteenth century that T.W. Rhys Davids fixed upon "mindfulness" as the translation for sati. Different translators have tried different terms. You can imagine these nineteenth-century British people—Rhys Davids was Welsh—struggling to put into English what the Buddha was talking about in Pāli when they knew absolutely nothing about Buddhism. It was quite a difficult project. Rhys Davids created most of our basic vocabulary. The basic English vocabulary we use when we talk about Buddhism was actually developed by T.W. Rhys Davids, and it includes this word mindfulness.

Now, up until then, mindfulness was very unusual in English. The adjective "mindful" was reasonably common, but very few people used the noun "mindfulness." It became popular in English through this meaning.

Mindfulness is the translation of memory. Sati literally means memory. But what distinguishes it from ordinary memory is that sati, or mindfulness, is remembering the present, not the past. Normally when we think of memory, we're thinking about the past. We don't remember what's happening now. But mindfulness is exactly that—remembering what's happening now.

For example, we meditated for about twenty-five minutes, and at one point I asked if anybody was thinking. Just out of curiosity, was there anyone? I can see a few hands. And when you realized you were thinking—well, first of all, when you started to think, when your awareness slipped away from your meditation object, from the body into thought world, did you know this was happening? Or did you have the experience that you're meditating, quote unquote, and you suddenly realize, "Oh, I'm thinking. And in

fact, I've been thinking for a while." How many people had that experience? A few hands going up there.

In other words, what had happened was you forgot. You forgot that you were meditating, or alternatively, you forgot your meditation object. That's when the awareness slipped away unseen into thinking. And suddenly you remembered: "Oh, that's right, I'm supposed to be meditating." Or you remembered: "Oh, I'm thinking."

So mindfulness is memory. It's remembering what's happening in the present. The opposite of mindfulness is forgetfulness. When the Buddha talks about the absence of mindfulness or the loss of mindfulness, the term he uses is muṭṭha sati—forgotten mindfulness.

When we talk about the present, what we're remembering is the experienced present, not the present of clock time, not the concept. In contemporary dharma discourse, when people talk about the present, usually they add the word "moment." They say "the present moment." Sometimes they'll even say "the moment" when what they mean is the present. The implication, pretty inescapable, is that the present apparently is a moment. But what is a moment? It's a very, very brief period of time. Blink and you miss it. So apparently the present is really, really small, while the past is enormous and the future is huge. We're kind of squeezed in on this tiny, tiny little point, which is so easily missed.

That's not the way the Buddha or his students thought about the present. We think about the present that way, I believe, because of our technology. We measure time very accurately, so we can say, "Okay, we're going to have a Zoom meeting. The hall opens at 7:15, the sit begins at 7:30, don't be late." And if someone turns up at 7:31, you can frown and grimace at them.

And if you're the one who's turned up late, you know exactly why they're frowning and grimacing. One minute late. And that's real to us.

But of course, for the Buddha and his students, this would be completely incoherent. They wouldn't even know what you were talking about. A minute late? What's that? The moon's reasonably high—that was when we were going to gather, wasn't it. What are you talking about? They had a completely different relationship to time.

And so it was obvious—probably clearer to them than to us—that the present actually is very big. It's big because everything happens in the present. There's nothing that doesn't happen in the present. Everything happens in the present. When I anticipate the future, when do I anticipate the future? Now, in the present. When I remember the past, when do I remember the past? Now, in the present.

You might try, as a meditation experiment, to see if you can find the border where the present becomes the future, or where the past becomes the present. I've looked for these borders. I've never found them. All I've ever found is the present.

And when we meditate, when the heart and the mind really start to settle, we do have this sense of the

expansion of the present. It's this expanded present that we're remembering—the extended present, the experienced present. So mindfulness remembers an extended present that flows through time, and what it's remembering is how the present flows.

For example, let's say when all restrictions end and you can finally meet at a physical location. You're going to go to the Wednesday night meeting, but you've only ever attended the online meeting, so you actually don't know how to get there. Not to worry, because a friend says, "Look, I go there every week and you're on my way. I can just pick you up and drive you. Don't worry about it—I'll take you there."

So your friend turns up at the appropriate time. You get into the front passenger seat. Off you go. As you're being driven to the hall, you're aware—seeing, hearing, and so on.

But let's say that before your friend started driving, he turned to you and said, "I can take you this week, but I'm going away and I won't be able to take you next week. Next week you're on your own." And then off you go. Again, you're aware—seeing, hearing, and so forth.

Would there be any difference in the quality of your awareness if you knew that next week you have to find your own way there, compared to if you were confident your friend would always drive you? I would suggest yes, there would be a difference. There'd be an edge of energy, of engagement, that maybe wouldn't have been there otherwise. And there would be a tracking of the flow of the journey, so that you can remember it, so you can repeat it.

That's mindfulness. That's the difference between mindfulness and awareness.

Mindfulness is all about—well, if we ask ourselves the question, how do I know if I'm being mindful? The answer is: it's the felt continuity of awareness over time. That's the experience of mindfulness—the felt continuity of awareness. And if the awareness is continuous and you feel it, it's an experience, then you can go back and track: oh, that's what happened, that's how I got here.

So this is mindfulness. Is that clear? Any questions so far?

Okay, we shall plow bravely on.

When the Buddha talks about mindfulness, he talks about these four foundations. The first one is body. He lists them always with body first. This is not an accident, and it's not because this is the alphabetical order in Pali. It's because body is foundational to this practice.

First of all, when the Buddha is talking about body, he means our experience of the body.

So he's always talking about the nature of human experience. Body means our experience of the body, the felt body. And when he uses this term, he can mean one of two things—he can have a broad meaning or a narrow meaning.

The broad meaning: body refers to all the sense data received by the five physical senses. Seeing, hearing,

smelling, tasting, touching—that's body. So when we cultivate sensitivity to posture, for example, this is body. When we use seeing or hearing as a meditation object, this is body.

In its narrow meaning, body refers to the fifth of these five physical senses, which is essentially touch sensitivity, or sensitivity to tactile sensation. So, for example, when we sit, we feel the sensations of pressing against our cushion, our bench, our chair. That's body in this narrow sense. Touch sensation, or the sensations involved in the experience of breathing, or any stiffness or tension in the body—all of these are the fifth sense sensitivity, sensitivity to tactile sensation.

Now, body is foundational. As a meditation object, it has two major advantages.

First of all, body is now. The experience of body is always in the present. Thoughts and fantasies are in time—in our thoughts and fantasies, our minds can travel through past and through future. And we actually spend a lot of our lives doing that. For many of us, our relationship to the present is rather like it's a transit lounge on an endless airplane journey. We touch down, get out of the plane, take a breather, get back in, fly off again. The mind, as it were, is always going somewhere. But the body is always present. It's going nowhere and it's going no-when.

When we return our awareness from mind to body, we're returning from time to the present. In fact, we could say that to the degree that we are embodied, to that degree we are present. So if we want to live in the present, then we need to cultivate a felt intimacy with the body. And of course, if we're meditating, we definitely want to learn to live in the present, because it's the present where all meditation practice takes place. We really need to be grounded in it. And this means we ground awareness in body. So it's very important for that reason.

The other thing about body—and this is in particular the fifth sensitivity, sensitivity to tactile sensation or sensitivity to touch—is that it's clear. For the Buddha, all sense experience comes about through some kind of sense object striking its respective sensitivity. Light strikes the eyes, sound waves strike the ears. Bang. And there's a sensitivity there. So there's an impact and something happens.

That impact, that something happening, is what the Buddha calls contact, which is actually literally touch. We are touched by sensation. We are touched by light, we are touched by sound, we are touched by smells, tastes, and so on. We are touched by thoughts.

The later tradition—this is not the Buddha, but in the later tradition—they compare seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting, that impact, to cotton wool striking cotton wool. It's quite soft. But the impact of tactile sensation in the fifth sensitivity, that impact is compared to an iron hammer striking an anvil. Bang. It's loud and clear. And this makes it very good as a meditation object.

Has anybody ever experienced physical pain while sitting in meditation? Has that ever happened? And wasn't your experience that it was really, really, really easy to ignore because it was so soft and obscure? Or did awareness go right there? That's it. This is why in Burma they regard physical pain as a wonderful

meditation object. It can be, under certain circumstances. I've never liked it though. But it's clear. So this is why body is really, really important.

We use body to ground our awareness. In the beginning of sitting, we set the posture up, basically feel the body. We're grounding our awareness in the body and therefore in the present.

But while the body is very clear and very obvious, it can be very difficult to stay with. We've all experienced how easy it is to forget our body and to slip away into the mind, and how difficult it can be to persuade ourselves—enough of that, back to the body.

Now, why is that? Why is it that the body is very strong and clear, and yet we are so willing to get away from it, to go somewhere else? Understanding that relationship is really important for a meditator, because we can start to see what's going on.

One way of looking at it is that what the mind does, one of its basic jobs, is that mind creates meaning. It builds a world. And it does so through language. In other words, our mind is telling us stories all of the time.

And we have learned to believe those stories. We've even learned to live inside them, to the point where I actually believe that I am the central character of my internal dramas. That's who I am. That's where my identity fixes.

This makes mind really, really attractive, seductive—even our painful stories. It's strange to think that the really painful stories we tell ourselves about how completely terrible our life is, these stories are deeply attractive. Because if they weren't, I could easily let them go. But I find that I can't, which means they are deeply, deeply attractive. And this is quite perverse. So it's very interesting to watch that relationship, to make that relationship part of your meditation practice.

Now, what we want to do is learn to stay with the body. A question arises: does the body have a language? Well, one way of looking at it is we could say it does, but its language does not tell stories. The body doesn't tell stories. The language of the body is sensation. So the body is actually speaking to us all of the time, but it's not telling us stories.

If you look at the difference between these two languages, first of all, stories are always about something. They have what in philosophy is called intentionality. They point toward something. They're about something. They point to something else, often somewhere else, often some*when* else. So they take us away to what they're pointing towards.

Sensations are not about anything. Now, we can make them to be about something when we start telling ourselves stories about the sensation. A sensation arises, my awareness goes to it because it's clear, it's sharp. And then I start telling myself stories about it: "Oh my God, I'm damaging myself. I'm going to die if I keep doing this. If I don't move in the next ten seconds, my leg will fall off. And that's not going to help

me, is it? So I better move." But this is not the sensation. This is a story we're telling ourselves about the sensation. Sensations are not about anything at all. They are just what they are. That's it.

So we tend not to listen to sensation, and we do not study the body's language. We don't bother with that. We're busy studying stories. Some people do pay attention to the body's language in certain specialized forms of body work—in sports, for example, there's a deliberate effort to listen to the body. But these are very specialized activities, and often they don't flow across into ordinary life.

Consider people who like rock climbing, for example—which I myself cannot comprehend, but people do. And I gather that what makes it interesting is that it is impossible to live through that experience if you're thinking about something else. You have to be present. And the present, the physical present, is really, really interesting. You're paying attention to what the body's telling you from moment to moment to moment. And people really enjoy it. But it's a pretty extreme way of getting into it.

Most of us, especially if we're eggheads, working with the mind, have trained ourselves to catapult out of our body into think, think, think, think—stare at screens, think, think, think, think. So we tend to be very ignorant about the language of the body. And if we go into meditation practice, we need to start to study it. That's one of the reasons why we did that little exercise: Are you thinking? If you are thinking, is there any tension in the body? In other words, is there an associated sensation? See if you can find it.

I once heard a physicist who writes popular science books say that thinking generates heat, and so it adds to the entropy of the universe. It's a very interesting concept, I thought. Thinking generates heat.

Does it? Can we feel it? As meditators, what we're interested in is the experience. So what's the physical correlate of thinking? When I'm thinking, what's the body doing? That becomes interesting. There is a connection, there is a relationship there. And it's a way of seducing yourself away from the thinking back into the body—to listen to the body rather than to the story.

One image the Buddha used to talk about mindfulness of body: Imagine a man carrying on his head a bowl of oil filled to the brim. This is Indian style—a turban with a bowl on top, and the bowl is filled to the very brim with oil. His job is to weave his way through an enthusiastic crowd, an audience watching a beautiful woman sing and dance on a stage, accompanied by a band. Behind him is a guard with a sharp sword, and the guard has orders to cut this man's head off if he spills a single drop.

Now imagine you're that person, weaving your way through this crowd. Everybody is looking in that direction because that's where the show is, that's where the music is coming from. People are pushing and shoving to get a good view. Imagine the intensity of focus involved. But notice that the focus is extended throughout the entire body. This person cannot—well, has to be—aware of every part of the body as it's moving through space. And so the awareness is expanding into the experience surrounding him, into the senses of seeing, hearing especially. Because that way, he can weave his way through. So not just intensity of focus, but grace and ease in movement as well. Basically, to get through this, this man is dancing. And

notice that there is no room for any story about anything in this practice.

Being absorbed in the physical world with ease, with grace, with focus—this is mindfulness of the body. This is what the Buddha is getting at when he places the body first.

And that's what we have time for tonight. We'll move on to the next foundation next time. But I would recommend playing around with mindfulness of body. In particular, when you're practicing, see if what we explored today is helpful. Notice any tension and relax it. Notice the relationship between balance and tension—when the body is out of balance, there will be tension. To relax the tension means to come back into balance. When the mind is out of balance, there will be tension. Relax the tension, come back into balance.

Also, start to be interested in the relationship between what the mind is doing and what the body is doing, because there is a relationship, there is a connection. Mind and body are not separate parallel universes—they're interconnected.

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