



# EVAM ME SUTTAṀ

## This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

### Week five: Satipaṭṭhāna and the body

#### Introduction

Last week we looked at Ānāpānasati Sutta and some of its readings. Ānāpānasati Sutta is one of two basic texts on meditation in early Buddhism, and for many communities functions as the foundational text on the practice. Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is another foundational text. Here again we will examine the text, and look at how it is read by different communities. We will again begin with the Theravāda orthodoxy, in particular the work of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa in the fifth century AD, contained in Soma Thera's *The way of mindfulness: The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and its commentary*. From there we will examine a reading by Venerable U Silānanda, a Burmese monk in the tradition of the late Mahāsī Sayādaw of Burma, in his *The four foundations of mindfulness*. Then we will look at someone from outside the Theravāda tradition, Thich Nhat Hanh and his *Transformation & healing: Sutra on the four establishments of mindfulness*. Because of the size and density of the *sutta*, we will confine our reading to the first two sections, the introduction and the contemplation of body.

We shall begin with the oral structure of the *sutta*, characterised by verses and chorus. You will remember how in week three we compared a *sutta* to a song, characterised by a series of verses punctuated by a chorus. The verses provide a narrative, a series of events that unfold over time. The chorus, however, remains the same, apparently untouched by this progression. So we may find a diachronic aspect of the *sutta* - some kind of progression over time - indicated by the verses, and a synchronic aspect - that which occurs simultaneously and immediately - which remains the same regardless of its place within the verses. And since the chorus, being the most repeated, is the part of the *sutta* that is most likely to be remembered, it is a good candidate for the role of the *sutta's* essential message.

In Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta we are presented with twenty-one verses divided into four "domains," "foundations," "establishments," or "arousings." The first three of these four words are possible translations of *paṭṭhāna*; the fourth is a possible translation of *upaṭṭhāna*. These four domains are: *kāya* (usually translated as "body"); *vedanā* (usually translated as "feelings"); *citta* (usually translated as "mind"); and *dhammas* (usually translated as "mental objects," but here translated as "phenomena.") You can see that we are immediately presented with problems of translation, and since translation is inseparable from interpretation, this means we are immediately presented with problems of interpretation.

The twenty-one verses present twenty-one aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. In the domain of body, these are: breathing; four postures; clear understanding; unattractiveness; four elements; and nine charnel ground contemplations. The domains of feelings and mind each have just one aspect or verse each. The verse on feelings is subdivided into pleasant, painful and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feelings. The verse on mind is subdivided into wanting and free from wanting mind; angry and free from anger mind; confused and free from confusion mind; contracted mind; restless mind; exalted and unexalted mind; surpassed and unsurpassed mind; concentrated and unconcentrated mind; and liberated and unliberated mind. Finally, the domain of phenomena contains contemplations on five hindrances, five aggregates, six sense spheres, seven factors of awakening, and four noble truths. Each of these verses are separated by a single chorus concerned

specifically with the insight aspect of the practice, which all readers agree is the essence of the *sutta*.

This week we will look at the first domain, the contemplation of body, and at the chorus. Next week we will look at the rest of the *sutta*, focusing especially on the last domain, that of the contemplation of phenomena. Here is the text:

## **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (M10)** **The domains of attention**

### **Introduction**

This is how I heard it (*evaṃ me suttam*). Once the Blessed One was living among the Kurus, near the market town of Kammāsadamma. The Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus: “Bhikkhus.” “Bhante,” they replied. The Blessed One said:

“This way, the four domains of attention (*cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*), is for the one purpose (*ekāyano ayaṃ maggo*) of purifying beings, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, destroying pain and grief, attaining the right path, and realising *nibbāna*.

“What are the four?”

“Here a bhikkhu, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, lives contemplating body (*kāya*) as body, ardent (*ātāpi*), clearly understanding (*sampajāno*) and attentive (*satimā*).

“Surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating feelings (*vedanā*) as feelings, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive.

“Surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating mind (*citta*) as mind, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive.

“Surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating phenomena (*dhammā*) as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive.”

### **Contemplating body**

#### **Attention to breathing**

“Here a bhikkhu goes into a forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty place, sits down, crosses his legs, straightens his back, and establishes his attention. Attentively he breathes in, attentively he breathes out.

“Breathing in a long breath, he knows (*pajānati*) he is breathing in a long breath; breathing out a long breath, he knows he is breathing out a long breath. Breathing in a short breath, he knows he is breathing in a short breath; breathing out a short breath, he knows he is breathing out a short breath. He trains himself to breathe in experiencing (*paṭisaṃvedī*) the whole body (*sabba-kāya*); he trains himself to breathe out experiencing the whole body. He trains himself to breathe in calming the body formation (*kāya-saṅkhāra*); he trains himself to breathe out calming the body formation.

“Just as a skilled turner or his apprentice, when making a long turn, knows he is making a long turn, or when making a short turn knows he is making a short turn, so too a bhikkhu, breathing in a long breath knows he is breathing in a long breath, and breathing out a long breath he knows he is breathing out a long breath. Breathing in a short breath, he knows he is breathing in a short

breath; breathing out a short breath, he knows he is breathing out a short breath. He trains himself to breathe in experiencing the whole body; he trains himself to breathe out experiencing the whole body. He trains himself to breathe in calming the body formation; he trains himself to breathe out calming the body formation.

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body (*samudayadhammānupassī kāyasmimh*); or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body (*vayadhammānupassī kāyasmimh*); or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body” (*atthi kāyo*), to the extent necessary for understanding (*ñāṇa*) and reflexive attention (*paṭisati*). And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

### Four postures

“Again, bhikkhus, when going, a bhikkhu knows (*pajānāti*) he is going, when standing he knows he is standing, when sitting he knows he is sitting, and when lying down he knows he is lying down. Whatever way his body is placed, he knows that is how it is.

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

### Clear understanding

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu is one who acts with clear understanding (*sampajānāpkārī*) when going forward and coming back; who acts with clear understanding when looking forward and looking back; who acts with clear understanding when flexing and extending his limbs; who acts with clear understanding when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl; who acts with clear understanding when eating, drinking, chewing and tasting; who acts with clear understanding when defecating and urinating; who acts with clear understanding when going, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking and keeping silent.

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

### Unattractiveness

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, bounded by skin, as full of many kinds of impurity in this way: ‘In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints and urine.’ Just as though there were a bag with an opening at both ends full of many sorts of grain, such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice, and a man with good eyes were to open it and

review it in this way: ‘This is hill rice, this is red rice, these are beans, these are peas, this is millet, this is white rice;’ so too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, bounded by skin, as full of many kinds of impurity in this way: ‘In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints and urine.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

## Elements

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu reviews this same body, however it is placed or disposed, as consisting of elements in this way: ‘In this body there are earth element, water element, fire element and air element.’ Just as though a skilled butcher or his apprentice had killed a cow and was seated at the crossroads with it cut up into pieces; so too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body, however it is placed or disposed, as consisting of elements in this way: ‘In this body there are earth element, water element, fire element and air element.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

## Charnel ground contemplations

[1] “Again, bhikkhus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it in this way: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

[2] “Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it in this way: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives

contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

[3] “Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it in this way: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

[4] “Again, as though he were to see a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it in this way: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

[5] “Again, as though he were to see a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together with sinews, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it in this way: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

[6] “Again, as though he were to see disconnected bones scattered in all directions - here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a shin-bone, there a thigh-bone, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here a rib-bone, there a breast-bone, here an arm-bone, there a shoulder-bone, here a neck-bone, there a jaw-bone, here a tooth, there the skull - a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

[7] “Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, bones bleached white, the colour of shells, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it in this way: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

[8] “Again, as though he were to see bones heaped up, more than a year old, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it in this way: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

[9] “Again, as though he were to see bones rotted and crumbled to dust, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it in this way: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

**[Insight]** “So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body; or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding and reflexive attention. And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

### Mūlapariyāyavagga, Majjhima Nikāya

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications 1995: 145-55. (Translation modified.)

## Comment

### Translation, interpretation and meaning

If we want to interpret a *sutta* as a guide for our practice, we must first translate it. But translation already contains interpretation. Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta provides us with a number of examples where differences in translation create differences in interpretation. For example, in the *sutta* the Buddha begins his discourse by saying:

*Ekāyano ayaṃ bhikkhave maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā sokapariddavānaṃ samatikkamāya dukkhadomanassānaṃ atthagamāya ñāyassa adhigamāya nibbānassa sacchikiriyāya yadidaṃ cattāro satipaṭṭhānā.*

*Ekāyano ayaṃ bhikkhave maggo* means “this (*ayaṃ*) way (*maggo*), bhikkhus, is *ekāyano*.” *Ekāyano* means “one (*eka*) going (*āyano*).” Both Soma Thera (1) and Venerable U Silānanda (177) translate this phrase as “This is the only way.” Nyanaponika Thera (117) translates it as “This is the sole way,” Bhikkhu Bodhi (145) translates it as “this is the direct path,” while Thich Nhat Hanh (3)

translates it as “There is a most wonderful way.” The first three translators are reading the *sutta* within Theravāda orthodoxy. They agree with the tradition that liberation is possible only within Buddhism, and Buddhism means Theravāda Buddhism. Bhikkhu Bodhi, while also located within the orthodoxy, shows a greater flexibility within it. Unlike Soma, Sīlānanda and Nyanaponika, for example, Bodhi will occasionally question the appropriateness of the commentary when translating or explaining a *sutta*. Nhat Hanh, meanwhile, is reading from outside Theravāda Buddhism, but is trying to interest his fellow Mahāyāna practitioners to practice in the way taught by both Ānāpānasati Sutta and Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, and to this end is creating his own interpretation. Meanwhile, in my translation I have “This way ... is for the one purpose of purifying beings ... ” What’s happening here?

To return to the text. After “*ekāyano ayaṃ bhikkhave maggo*” you will notice a series of words ending in *-iyā* or *-āya*. This ending indicates the dative of purpose, so we are presented here with an ascending series of purposes for which *satipaṭṭhāna* is practised: the purification of beings; the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation; the destruction of pain and grief; the attainment of the right path; and the realisation of *nibbāna*. All translators agree that this way has these purposes. Orthodox Theravāda practitioners prefer to translate “one-going way” in a manner that emphasises there is no other way of achieving these purposes. I prefer to translate it in a manner that emphasises this is the one purpose for which this particular practice is engaged. Who is right? Is there one right translation? Even the Theravāda commentary offers five apparently alternative meanings for *ekāyano maggo*, which Sīlānanda (18) lists as: the “single way” that does not branch off; the way that must be trodden “alone;” the “way of the One” - i.e., of the Excellent One, the Buddha; the “only way” because it leads to only one destination - *nibbāna*; and this is the “only way to reach *nibbāna*” - there is no other way. Multiple meanings for this term, it would appear, are built into the tradition, and one can, even within the orthodox Theravāda, reach in and pick a meaning.

Even the translation of *satipaṭṭhāna* itself is ambiguous, probably deliberately so. *Satipaṭṭhāna* is a compound word which, under the rules of Pāli word formation, can be broken up into either *sati* and *pa-(ṭ)thāna*, or *sati* and *upa-(ṭ)thāna*. *Sati* literally means “memory,” and here refers to the act of remembering the object of meditation, being continuously and deliberately aware of the object. *Paṭṭhāna* is a compound consisting of the prefix *pa* and the stem *(ṭ)thāna*. A *thāna* is a place, where one “stands,” and we are familiar with it in its Sanskrit form of *sthāna* in words like Pak(i)stan, “the place of the pure,” or Afghan(i)stan, “the place of the Afghans.” *Pa* functions as an intensifier, so a *paṭṭhāna* is a place, foundation, or domain where *sati* is established. *Sati-paṭṭhāna* refers to the objects of *sati*, the mind-body experience of which we are aware when practising *satipaṭṭhāna*. Meanwhile, the prefix *upa* denotes nearness or close touch, and *sati-upaṭṭhāna* refers to the “setting up,” or “establishing” of *sati*. *Sati-upaṭṭhāna* refers to the action of setting up or establishing *sati*. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (72) says that *sati-paṭṭhāna* shows the “where” of the practice, the object that is examined by *sati*, while *sati-upaṭṭhāna* shows the “how” of the practice, the approach of examining something. Either way it works, and translators can take their pick. Ambiguity goes deep.

We have a further problem with one of the domains. Looking at available translations, there seems little problem with the notion that the first domain is “body” (*kāya*), the second “feelings” (*vedanā*), and the third “mind” (*citta*) - although Sīlānanda prefers “consciousness.” But the fourth domain, *dhammā*, is a problem. Soma Thera prefers “mental objects,” Nyanaponika and Bodhi have “mind objects,” Thich Nhat Hanh has “objects of mind,” while Sīlānanda uses both “Dhamma” and “dhammas.” I prefer “phenomena.” How can we practice a domain of attention if we are not even sure what it is?

There are two problems here: the meaning of *dhamma* (Sanskrit: *dharma*) and the use of the plural form, *dhammā* (= *dhammas*). If you look up *dhamma* in the Pāli Text Society’s Pāli-English Dictionary you will find an entry of almost four pages of small print. *Dhamma* is a key term in all Indian contemplative and philosophical traditions, and in Buddhism has many layers of meaning - Bodhi (54) suggests the commentaries give at least ten different meanings to this word as it appears in the Pāli canon. Here, we can consider two possibilities.

The Buddha's teaching is concerned with the nature of experience, and all experience appears via one or more of the six senses - eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Here "mind" (*mano*) is mind as a sense organ, and this sixth sense is perfectly mundane. For example, I see with my eyes, but what happens when I see something in a dream? Here, it is the mind that is doing the seeing. But in addition, if I look out and recognise a room full of people, what do I see? I "see" (with my eyes) patterns of colour and light/dark; this particular pattern I "recognise" or "perceive" as people seated on chairs. This recognition or perception occurs through the mind. So the mind is a sense organ - the most important sense organ - and every sense organ has its corresponding sense object, that to which it is sensitive. For the eyes, it is forms (*rūpa*); for the mind, it is *dhammas*. So *dhammas* may mean anything at all, when that thing is an object of experience through the medium of the mind.

*Dhamma* can also mean "reality," and by extension the teaching that points to or reveals reality - hence the *buddha-dhamma*, the Buddha's teaching (on the nature of reality). *Dhamma* as "reality" or "nature" can also mean "the nature of" something, or that something is naturally "subject to" something. So *vipariṇāma-dhamma*, literally "change-*dhamma*," means "subject to change." Here, of course, *dhamma* is singular, and when it is in the plural - *dhammas*, which in Pāli is *dhammā* - it is more likely to mean an object of sense experience, since there are many such objects.

The word showing the fourth domain is *dhammānupassī*. *Anupassī* is derived from *anupassanā*, which means "seeing (*passanā*) along (*anu*)," or "contemplating." One who contemplates is an *anupassī*, so a bhikkhu who contemplates *dhamma* is a *dhamma-anupassī*. Unfortunately, what we have in the text is a compound, *dhammānupassī*, and this could be *either dhamma-anupassī or dhammā-anupassī*. If *dhamma-anupassī* we have one who "contemplates *dhamma*;" if *dhammā-anupassī* we have "one who contemplates *dhammas*." Soma, Nyanaponika, Bodhi and Nhat Hanh all see the practitioner here as someone who contemplates *dhammas*. Silānanda sees the practitioner as someone who contemplates "Dhamma in the *dhammas*," preferring to leave *dhamma* untranslated and bringing out the ambiguity of the term.

Then why do I translate *dhammas* as "phenomena?" The term "mental object" or "mind object" conveys what I agree is the meaning of the text here - the practitioner contemplates experience as simply experience. But there is an implication in the English that a mental or mind object is an object made of mind - something that is not material. But a "mental object," as a sense object of the mind, may be physical or non-physical, and as we shall see next week, some of the *dhammas* included in the section on contemplation of *dhammas* are certainly physical. Further, the commentary states that *dhammas* are to be contemplated as not-self, as neither "I" nor "mine," and this means they (meaning all objects of experience) are to be seen as events in a process, not as forming any kind of fixed identity. So they are to be contemplated as *paṭiccasamuppanna dhammas*, "dependently arisen phenomena," or simply the "dependently arisen."

The point, again, is that one's choice of translation already has interpretation bound up within it. Multiple meanings are available, and there is no universal agreement about exactly how key terms are to be translated. Or rather, there appears to be agreement that different translations are always possible, and therefore that different interpretations are always possible. The *sutta* appears designed to accommodate multiple readings, which would suggest that the practice being taught is designed to accommodate multiple "techniques" to embody it.

## Contemplating breathing

The first verse concerns attending to breathing, and we have seen this verse before - it is the first tetrad from *Ānāpānasati Sutta*. We saw how there the Theravāda orthodox tradition reads the first tetrad as the practice of serenity (*samatha*), not insight (*vipassanā*), while Nhat Hanh disagrees. In *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* we also find this section on breathing read by the commentary as serenity meditation, not insight, despite the fact that *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is universally agreed to be about insight, not serenity. And again, Nhat Hanh disagrees.



How can we reconcile the tradition's determination to read this first section as serenity, when the concern of the *sutta* is with insight? Because all our readers agree that insight requires a foundation of serenity. There must be a measure of concentration before the mind can penetrate surface appearances sufficiently to gain insight. The question is: how much? The division is between those who argue that one must first attain *samatha jhāna* before one can practice insight, and those who argue that *samatha jhāna* is not necessary. The commentary seems to follow the first line of interpretation. It introduces *vipassanā* proper when the practitioner, after attaining *jhāna* then emerges from it to contemplate the body (*rūpa*), which is the basis of breathing, and the mental factors (*nāma*) which know the body; or, the practitioner makes the factors of *jhāna* themselves - the mind which is in *jhāna* - the meditation object. (Soma: 49-51)

Sīlānanda is located firmly within the orthodoxy, but he is also a student of Mahāsi Sayādaw. This presents a problem, as the Mahāsi approach to *vipassanā* does not follow the commentary. In this lineage, one does not first attain *samatha jhāna* and then practice *vipassanā*; one practises *vipassanā* from the beginning. Sīlānanda's reading of the *sutta* therefore seeks to reconcile the commentary with Mahāsi Sayādaw. He agrees that this section is about developing serenity, and that the point of attention in the contemplation of breathing is at the entrance to the nostrils. (Sīlānanda: 28) This appears to conflict with Mahāsi Sayādaw, who teaches students to use the movements within the abdomen as the primary object of meditation. The lineage resolves the conflict by explaining that following the breath at the abdomen does not fit in this section of the *sutta* at all. Following the breath at the abdomen can be classified as part of the contemplation of elements (in particular air element, or *vāyo dhātu*), or of the postures ("Whatever way his body is placed, he knows that is how it is"), or of the six sense spheres. (For a discussion of this issue, see Nyanaponika: 102-07.) We can see how members of the Mahāsi lineage consciously identify themselves with the Theravāda orthodoxy, and therefore must somehow reconcile their approach to meditation with that orthodoxy. Sīlānanda wants to fit Mahāsi Sayādaw's approach into a space provided by the commentary. It is essential for him to read Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta through the orthodox commentarial tradition.

Located outside the Theravāda, Nhat Hanh has no such need and can afford to ignore or reject the Theravāda, and he wants to read Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta through Ānāpānasati Sutta. Nhat Hanh also wants to reconcile his approach with his own Mahāyāna authorities, and to read the *sutta* in a way that is relevant to lay people today.

What is most important is to understand the fundamental basis of the practice and then apply it during our everyday lives, even if our lives are different from the way the Buddha and his monks and nuns lived twenty-five centuries ago. When reading *The Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*, we have to read with the eyes of a person of today and discover appropriate ways to practice based on the teachings of the sutra. (38)

Nhat Hanh's reading is designed specifically for a contemporary lay practice community, and he is looking for relevant ways to apply the text to this community, so he can and must be more creative in his approach. As with his reading of Ānāpānasati Sutta, he insists that the attention does not have to be located at the nose tip, nor is there any need to develop *jhānas*, nor is there any indication that "whole body" means anything but the entire body of the practitioner (Nhat Hanh: 42-43).

Here we can see how different readers will approach this section of the *sutta* in different ways, depending on which interpretative community they identify with. Further, their reading of the *sutta* influences the way they will approach their practice of attention to breathing. Interpretation influences practice. Meditation practice does not spring out of a vacuum, but emerges from a tradition of interpretation of texts. While meditation is all about an individual's experience, the method which gives rise to this experience emerges from a textual tradition, and the experience is read against the tradition, validated by the tradition.

## Insight

Now we arrive at the chorus, the insight section of the *sutta*. The first appearance of this chorus reads:

So he lives contemplating body as body internally, or he lives contemplating body as body externally, or he lives contemplating body as body both internally and externally. Or he lives contemplating the nature of arising as body (*samudayadhammānupassī kāyasmīṇ*); or he lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body (*vayadhammānupassī kāyasmīṇ*); or he lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or his attention is established on “there is body” (*atthi kāyo*), to the extent necessary for understanding (*ñāṇa*) and reflexive attention (*paṭisati*). And he lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body.

All readers agree that this constitutes the insight aspect of the practice. This is the summing up of *vipassanā* meditation contained in Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Let us proceed to the heart of this passage: the meditator who *samudayadhammānupassī kāyasmīṇ* and *vayadhammānupassī kāyasmīṇ*, or the meditator who contemplates impermanence in or as the body.

Again we have the ambiguity contained in the word *dhamma* and the compounds it forms. We are reminded here of the fourth domain, *dhammānupassanā*, the contemplation of phenomena. Indeed, there is a sense in which this passage *is* the fourth domain, that the fourth domain covers or completes all other domains. We have seen that one who contemplates *dhammas* is a *dhammā-anupassī*, just as one who contemplates the *dhamma* is a *dhamma-anupassī*. But here *dhamma* is contained in a compound. We have *samudayadhammānupassī* and *vayadhammānupassī*. What are we to make of this?

*Samudaya* means “arising” or “origination,” the beginnings of things. *Vaya* means “ceasing,” “disappearance,” or “dissolution,” the ends of things. As we have seen, *dhamma* here may be read either as singular or plural. If singular, then we have “arising-nature-one who contemplates;” if plural, we have “arising-phenomena-one who contemplates.” So the object of meditation here is either the nature of arising (*samudaya-dhamma*) or the phenomena that arise (*samudaya-dhammā*). Similarly with the nature of ceasing (*vaya-dhamma*) or the phenomena that cease (*vaya-dhammā*).

Soma (52) translates this as “He lives contemplating origination-things in the body,” so he prefers the second reading. Sīlānanda (178) has “He dwells contemplating the origination factors in the breath body,” so he also prefers the second reading, and he reads *kāya* as “(breath)-body,” keeping strictly to the commentary in this regard. Nyanaponika (118) has “origination-factors,” and Bodhi (146) has “arising factors.” All the Theravāda translators prefer the second reading. Why?

This is the commentary’s reading. Remember that the commentary assumes that the practice leading to this point is the contemplation of breath *as serenity practice*, with the object being the point where air enters and leaves the body at the nostrils and upper lip. Further, since the meditation object is the breath and only the breath, then if the practitioner is seeing impermanence, he must be seeing impermanence in the breath and only in the breath. Here is the commentary’s explanation of this section:

*Samudayadhammānupassī vā kāyasmīṇ viharati* = “He lives contemplating origination-things in the body.” Just as the air moves back and forth depending on the smith’s bellows’ skin, the bellows’ spout, and appropriate effort, so, depending on the coarse body, nasal aperture, and the mind of the bhikkhu, the respiration-body moves back and forth. The things beginning with the (coarse) body are origination (*kāyādayo dhammā samudayo*). The person who sees thus, is he who lives contemplating origination-things in the body.

*Vayadhammānupassī vā kāyasmīṇ viharati* = “Or he lives contemplating dissolution-things in the body.” In whatever way, the air does not proceed when the bellows’ skin is taken off, the bellows’ spout is broken, and the appropriate exertion is absent, even in that same way, when the body breaks up, the nasal aperture is destroyed, and the mind has ceased to function, the

respiration-body does not go on. Thus through the ending of the coarse body, the nasal aperture and the mind there comes to be the ending of the respiration (*kāyādi-nirodhā assāsa-passāsa-nirodho*). The person who sees in this way, is he who lives contemplating dissolution-things in the body. (Soma: 52)

The commentary is drawing attention to the conditionality of the process of breathing. Breathing through the nostrils, like any other physical activity, requires the coming together of certain conditions for it to arise. Here these are listed as the physical body, the nasal aperture and the mental effort to breathe. When these cease, breathing ceases, and of course they cease at death. This explanation, which does not occur in the Nikāyas but only in the later commentarial tradition, fits neatly into the Buddha's way of seeing "things" as "events" within processes, events which are conditioned by other events, and which are no more than a bundle of conditions. However, the explanation here seems unduly forced for a meditator. How many meditators spontaneously have this thought when they practice attention to breathing? This seems more like a medieval scholar's academic illustration of the conditionality of the (breath)-body, rather than a practitioner's experience.

Certainly Sīlānanda seems somewhat discomfited by this explanation, although as an adherent of the orthodoxy he will not oppose it. Applying this explanation to the actual practice, he says:

When you are practicing meditation on the breath, sometimes the thought may come to you, "because there is a body, because there is a nasal aperture, and there is a mind, there is this breath." When you are contemplating this, you are said to contemplate on the "origination factors of your breath." (34)

However, he later admits that meditators are more likely to see the arising and ceasing of the breath itself, rather than the factors that condition its arising, and adds Mahāsi Sayādaw's explanation to that of the commentary:

He said that the observing of the arising and disappearing of the breath is also meant in this passage. The Pāli word for "origination factors" is *samudaya dhammas*. It can mean "factors by which something arises," but it can also mean "the state or nature of arising" or just "arising." ... Therefore, in the Venerable's opinion, meditators who closely observe the arising of breath, bit by bit, at every moment and at any place (such as the breath touching the tip of the nose) are said to be contemplating the *samudaya dhammas* of the breath or the arising of the breath. Also, meditators who closely observe the disappearance, bit by bit, at every moment and at any place (such as the breath touching the tip of the nose) can be said to be contemplating the *vaya dhammas* of the breath or the dissolution of the breath. (34-35)

Sīlānanda wants to remain faithful to the commentary, even when this does not fit the meditation method he is teaching. He does this, for example, by talking about watching the breath at the nose tip when in his tradition one does not. Clearly, the commentarial explanation of *samudayadhammānupassī kāyasmīṃ* and *vayadhammānupassī kāyasmīṃ* has no connection with Sīlānanda's meditation method, but he faithfully explains it - before giving the explanation which is actually relevant to him and his lineage. And the relevant explanation is described as belonging to Mahāsi Sayādaw himself, not the tradition. So for Sīlānanda, one can venture outside of the commentary, but only after allowing it to provide the basic meaning, and then giving the non-commentarial explanation as a personal view of one's teacher. Both meanings must be reconciled, because both are part of the canon, and the canon must be internally consistent, speaking in a single voice, that of the Buddha. Sīlānanda himself, as a dutiful student, does not allow his own voice to intrude on that of the tradition and the lineage. This teaching is not personal.

Nhat Hanh, from outside the tradition, gives this translation:

This is how a practitioner observes the body in the body. He observes the inside of the body or the outside of the body, or both the inside and the outside of the body. He observes the process of coming-to-be in the body or the process of dissolution in the body or both the process of

coming-to-be and the process of dissolution. Or he is mindful of the fact, 'There is a body here,' until understanding and full awareness come about. He maintains the observation, free, not caught up in any worldly consideration. That is how to practice observation of the body in the body, O bhikkhus. [5]

Nhat Hanh favours our first reading, seeing this passage as essentially about seeing impermanence within the body - anywhere within the body. And he links impermanence with selflessness, and interdependent origination, seeing these as the three fundamental insights of Buddhism.

## Conclusion

We have seen how different approaches to translation provide different approaches to the meditation practice itself. Translation, interpretation and practice all take place within communities. One's choices in translation is also an expression of one's identity. If I identify with a specific tradition, I will translate in a way that fits with that tradition's view of the teaching and the practice. If I refuse to identify with a tradition, preferring to go my own way or be part of the creation of a new tradition, this choice also will condition translation and interpretation. And interpretation conditions practice. The practice is defined by its texts, and the texts are formed by translation and interpretation.

Further, when we look at both the *suttas* and the commentaries we find ambiguity built within them. The early texts, the *suttas* themselves, are most deeply ambiguous. The product of a sophisticated culture, it is hard to imagine that this ambiguity is accidental. They seem designed to accommodate multiple readings. The commentaries seek to shut down alternatives in interpretation, to reduce the possibilities in reading. It is the job of a commentary to show that *this* is the right interpretation here, and *that* is the wrong one. But ambiguity survives even in the commentaries. When ambiguity goes so deep, do we have any choice but to be creative? And creativity in interpretation, where text guides practice, implies creativity in our practice. Which further implies that there is no one single "technique" that would exhaust the meaning of Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta in particular, and the *suttas* in general, but rather the *suttas* are designed to accommodate multiple techniques within a broad pattern or structure of *dhamma*.

## Readings

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