

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Its Application to Modern Life

by

V. F. Gunaratna
Public Trustee (Ret'd)

Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

The Wheel Publication No. 60

Revised Edition of a Lecture Delivered to the Education Department Buddhist Society,
Colombo, Sri Lanka

First Printing: n.d.

Reprint: 1981

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Its Application to Modern Life

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and its application to modern life—this is the theme of my talk this evening, and it will be my endeavour, first, to give you some idea of what *satipaṭṭhāna* really is, and thereafter to show you that the special and peculiar conditions of the modern age are such that the doctrine of satipaṭṭhāna was never more urgently needed than it is today.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta,¹ as you know, deals with the fourfold development of a very great quality of the mind, viz. *sati* or “mindfulness.” Satipaṭṭhāna means the establishment of mindfulness or the practice of mindfulness. The four types of mindfulness dealt with in the Sutta are:

1. Mindfulness of the body (including mindfulness of the breath): *kāyānupassanā*,
2. Mindfulness of sensations: *vedanānupassanā*,
3. Mindfulness of thoughts: *cittānupassanā*, and
4. Mindfulness of mind-objects: *dhammānupassanā*.

Mindfulness is one of the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. It is one of the five *indriyas* or faculties and it is also the first of the seven *bojjhaṅgas* or factors of enlightenment.

You will thus see what an important place is assigned to mindfulness (*sati*) in Buddhism. Indeed, it has been called by the Buddha the one and only way (*ekāyano maggo*) for the purification of beings (*sattānaṃ visuddhiyā*), for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation (*soka-pariddavaṇaṃ samatikkamāya*), for destruction of suffering and grief (*dukkha domanassānaṃ atthaṅgamāya*), for entry into the Noble Path (*ñāyassa adhigamāya*), and for the realization of Nibbāna (*nibbānassa sacchikiriyāya*).

From the average man’s point of view also, mindfulness is a very desirable quality. Common sense will tell us that the practice of mindfulness makes us more precise and more alert, and minimizes the possibilities of errors, mistakes, lapses, and accidents. Common sense will also tell us that the habit of mindfulness will also induce a healthy balance, a sense of proportion, and a sense of mental alertness, keeping us constantly on our guard. But please remember that the Buddha tells us much more. He tells us in no uncertain terms (which I have just quoted) that mindfulness has the effect of purifying beings, overcoming sorrow, causing entry into the Noble Eightfold Path, and ultimately of realizing Nibbāna itself. Now how is it possible to obtain these greater and grander results?

These results are attainable if the mindfulness practised is not merely mundane (*lokiya*) or worldly mindfulness, but mindfulness of a very special spiritual or supramundane (*lokuttara*) nature. There is a very special and particular technique to be adopted in order to achieve this. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta mentions these special types of mindfulness and also the special procedure necessary. So when the special type of mindfulness is practised in the special way prescribed, all the promised results can be realized.

Mindfulness proper has this special feature about it, namely, that it involves a method of looking at things objectively and not subjectively. Not until mindfulness brings in this all-important element of looking at things objectively will it become mindfulness in the Buddhist sense, the real *sati*. It is necessary to grasp this distinction between objective and

¹ A translation of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, with Introduction and Notes, by Nyanasatta Thera, has appeared as No. 19 of The Wheel series, under the title The Foundations of Mindfulness.

subjective looking. When Pythagoras was asked to define who a philosopher is, he said something to this effect: When all are invited to the feast of life, some go there to enjoy, some go there to win name and fame, and there are yet others who go there just to look on. These others are the philosophers. What is meant thereby is that the philosopher does not identify himself with life. He looks at life standing as it were outside life. That is how the trainee in sati should look at things.

When you look at a thing subjectively, there is a mental affinity between yourself and the thing you are looking at. You bring yourself mentally very close to what you are looking at. You connect yourself with the object and if there is any relationship between yourself and the object, you make no effort to ignore that relationship. On the contrary, that relationship influences you a great deal and colours your observation. In short, you are an interested observer. On the other hand, if you look at a thing objectively, you keep yourself mentally far removed from the object, you disconnect yourself from the object and if there is any relationship between yourself and the object, you will not allow that relationship to influence your observation. In short, you are a *bare observer* as distinguished from an *interested observer*. A bare observer uninfluenced by extraneous considerations must necessarily see more clearly and better than an interested observer, since the interested observer's vision can be affected by the particular nature of his interest. A spectator sees more of the game than a player or a partisan. In the practice of mindfulness, one must therefore free oneself from all notions of self and self-interest and must try to fix the mind solely on the object without any assumptions and presumptions, bias and prejudice, and all other preconceived considerations. In short, one must strive to have the true picture of the object and that only. It is this special quality of mindfulness that one has to cultivate.

I have said that there are four objects of mindfulness: body, sensations, thoughts, and mind-objects. In regard to every one of these four, mindfulness must be practised in the objective way. Whatever the object of mindfulness, you have to see that object and that object only. This is the secret of successful satipaṭṭhāna and this secret the Buddha had clearly explained on many occasions. You can imagine how important this is when I tell you that, on one occasion, the Buddha while on his begging rounds, halted to explain this to a certain individual. The Buddha had a set time-table and worked according to a set routine, and never had he been known to have halted, while on his begging rounds, to do anything else. But here, in this particular instance, he halted to discourse to Bāhiya, a leader of a religious sect.

This Bāhiya had led a good life and had flattered himself with the belief that he may have reached the stage of an Arahant (a Saint), but a deity told him:

You are neither an Arahant nor have you reached the Arahant's path. You do not know the technique [*paṭipadā*] whereby you can become an Arahant. Go and enquire from the Buddha. He is an Arahant and teaches dhamma for teaching Arahantship. He lives in the far off town of Sāvattihī.

Then Bāhiya, greatly stirred by the words of the deity, lost no time in proceeding to Sāvattihī.

He was so keen to learn the technique of becoming an Arahant that, it is said, he stopped only one night throughout the long journey. When he came to the Jetavana in Sāvattihī, he heard that the Buddha had gone on his begging rounds. Greatly agitated, he followed the direction in which the Buddha went, met him, fell with his head at his feet and implored the Buddha to teach him this technique. Twice the request was made and twice the Buddha refused him, saying, "You come unseasonably, Bāhiya. We have entered in request of alms." When for a third time the request was made, the Buddha, perhaps seeing that Bāhiya was

destined to die that day, explained the technique in a few words, but they were sufficient for Bāhiya to understand.

‘Bāhiya,’ said the Buddha, ‘this way you should train yourself: “In the seen there will be to you just the seen. In the heard there will be to you just the heard. In the thought there will be to you just the thought. In the cognizing there will be to you just the cognizing.”’

*“Diṭṭhe diṭṭha-mattaṃ bhavissati, sute suta-mattaṃ bhavissati,
mute muta-mattaṃ bhavissati, viññāte viññāta-mattā bhavissati.”*

These are pregnant words with deep meaning, but from what I have told you before, you will, I am sure, not find it difficult to grasp their deep import. If you have to practice mindfulness of sight on any object, it should be the sight of it and nothing more. The thoughts and emotions that flow from the observation of the object in question, aroused by the particular interest you have in the object, should not mar your vision. When the object of mindfulness is any sound or hearing, it should be just that sound or hearing without the thoughts and emotions aroused by the particular interest in that sound or hearing. Similarly, this ideal should be kept in mind in regard to the other types of mindfulness.

Returning with his disciples from the collection of alms, the Buddha saw Bāhiya dead by the roadside attacked by a young calf. The Buddha asked his disciples to take the dead body and cremate it.

The Buddha then said, “Bāhiya has followed the instructions given by me. Bāhiya has attained to Arahantship.”

We can now see the importance of looking objectively at what comes our way. When anything comes our way, we must not readily succumb to its influence. We must watch it objectively. What comes our way may be a sight, a sound, a taste, a smell, a touch, or even a thought. There is no suitable English word to express the idea of “what comes our way.” The Pali word is *ārammaṇa*, usually rendered by “object”. These are the things that come our way in life, and if we instead of being dominated by them, look at them objectively, we are going through life in the correct attitude. Today, the world is suffering from an imperfect observation of these “encounters”. To that observation are added the memory of our previous reactions to them. and our present tendencies in regard to them. Then we rush into action. This is folly.

Let the picture impress itself fully on our mind. Today, we do not wait to catch the full import of such an encounter. Influenced by its superficial features we just rush to action.

Look, for instance, at anything which is considered evil. Look at it objectively instead of permitting the habitual reactions of thought that are likely to arise hereby. Try to get the full import of the sight. Look at it fairly and calmly. Look at it long, undisturbed by the desires, emotions and considerations which such a sight may arouse in you. Do not draw conclusions and deductions.

Just keep on looking, looking objectively, and the superficial gloss surrounding that evil will shed itself and you will not be deluded by that sight. The external comely appearance which characterizes and allures many an unsuspecting weak mind will fade away before the steadfast gaze of the bare observer and he will see things in their true light. He will see things as they are (*yathābhūtañāḍassana*). When you see things as they truly are, you are no more a victim of delusion. This is the great message of satipaṭṭhāna. I have just spoken about the special meaning attached to mindfulness.

Now let us proceed to the special procedure attached to the practice of mindfulness. At the outset it must be stated that this special procedure refers to the practice of the first object

of mindfulness, namely, mindfulness of the body, and more especially to that special type of mindfulness of the body known as *ānāpānasati* or mindfulness of in-breathing and out-breathing. This type of mindfulness needs a special time and a special posture. The other types of mindfulness can be practised anywhere, at any time, as the occasion arises.

Now what is the type of place that has been recommended for the practice of *ānāpānasati* or mindfulness of breath? The Sutta says, *araññagato va rukkhamūlagato va suññāgāragato va*: “In a forest, at the foot of a tree or in an empty house.” The three types of places given connote a place of quiet, a place to which one can retire secure from the din, turmoil and bustle of a busy life. This is something that the modern world badly needs. As for forests, they are fast decreasing in number. In towns you find very few gardens with large shady trees. In the village you do find gardens and trees, but villages are fast being converted into towns and they are no more the isolated places of silence and quiet they once were. Those living in busy towns and busy villages are therefore left with only the third type of place: *suññāgāra*, an empty house. Even this is not easy to find and one must therefore look for an empty room. Modern housing problems are such that even an empty room is not available to many. Overcrowding in houses and the system of living in flats make it still more difficult to secure an empty room. The next best thing is to select a quiet corner in a room, or better still, this practice of mindfulness can be done on your bed at night or in the early hours of the morning when silence reigns supreme.

Having found a place, you must stick to it. You lose much if you keep on shifting the place of practice. You must also have a special time and rigidly adhere to it. Remember the practice of *ānāpānasati* is a meditation. It must be regular, and you must, realising its importance, not allow anything to interfere with its regular practice. It must be the same place every day and it must be the same time every day. These are important psychological factors that make for the efficacy and success of the meditation. The make-up of the human system is such that it easily responds to the rhythm of regularity. If you are accustomed to have a particular place and a particular time for your meditation, and if you are regular and sincere, when the meditating time approaches, you will not feel like doing anything else at that time, and you will be very greatly disappointed if something unavoidable prevents your meditation. Furthermore, as the time for meditation approaches, you will be pleased to see yourself getting into the meditative frame of mind. You will be surprised to see how bad thoughts will cease to enter your mind at that sacred hour, and even as you approach that habitual place of meditation, that place which should be sacred to you, you will again be surprised to see how easily the mind will respond to the discipline to which you have subjected it and how bad thoughts will cease to enter your mind. Even if they do, they will give way to good thoughts with great ease. So you must have a particular time and a particular place for this meditation.

I must also remind you that it is necessary, at available moments during the day, to hearken back to this meditation that you have practised at night or early morning. At odd moments during the day you should be able to retire to the silence of your mind, be restful amid the restless, and practise this meditation (even if only for a few minutes). At such moments the requirements of special time, special place and special posture must necessarily be dispensed with. You may feel prompted to ask me “When can I, in this busy world, find the time during the day to practise any meditation at all?” My answer is, “You certainly have the time.”

This is no doubt a busy age, an age of speed and tension. A quick moving vehicle brings you to a place. Maybe you have to wait a little before you get into the next vehicle, which takes you to your destination. It is an impatient waiting for you. It is all tension. Here is one

place where you can practise a little mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*). You come to a railway station to buy a ticket. It is a long queue. You wait impatiently for your turn. Here is another place where you can practice *ānāpānasati*. You board a train and detrain at a railway junction, where you are impatiently walking up and down the platform waiting for the connecting train. It is tension for you.

Here is yet another place where you can practise *ānāpānasati*. You come tearing down in your car and as you approach a junction, the green colour of the traffic lights has just given place to amber. You curse, and come to a halt. It is all tension for you as you impatiently wait a seeming eternity until the red colour gives way to amber, and another seeming eternity until amber gives way to green. In those two seeming eternities you can practise a little *ānāpānasati*. Your tension will go, you will be all the calmer and better equipped to face whatever problems are awaiting your attention. In the waiting room of a railway station, in the waiting room of a professional consultant, in train, in car or bus, you can practice a little *ānāpānasati*. You will see that in the daily life of the busy, modern world there are opportunities to retire into the silence of your mind and practise mindfulness for a few moments.

We shall now proceed from consideration of place and time to considerations of the posture necessary for the practice of *ānāpānasati*. The Sutta says, *Nisīdati pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā ujuṃ kāyaṃ panidhāya*: "He sits down cross-legged, keeping his body erect." This is a posture in which we should be able to remain motionless for quite a long time. Some people find it very difficult to remain still even in a comfortable chair for at least half an hour without shifting the position of the hands or legs. It is necessary however to learn to adopt the cross-legged position and to remain motionless. This is especially necessary for the modern age which is essentially an age of motion.

Look around you and it is all motion, motion, motion; and motion leads to commotion. All sense of calm is completely destroyed, and with disappearance of calm, the mind loses its healthy balance. Calm is the first step towards mental purity and mental strength, and this calm is distinctly lacking in the modern man. Once in a while, break away from this motion and commotion. Go to some quiet spot and remain motionless. This can have a remarkably soothing effect on the agitated mind of the modern man. The very act of remaining still will not only make you calm, but give you mental strength. It has a tonic effect on the mind, and even for that one moment of quiet and restfulness you will have a vague feeling that you are awakening to a sense of security and strength. By reason of the multiplicity of motions we have to perform in the modern world, by reason of the multiplicity of hurried actions, tense moments and anxious situations, there is great waste of mental energy. Therefore, once in a while, if you can, just sit still for some time. You are conserving mental energy. The cross-legged position, the *padmāsana* posture, is best able to help you maintain sustained motionlessness.

By the fact that your legs are interlocked and your hands are brought together, there will not be any escape of the mental energies that are conserved by your meditative processes. It is also a physically well balanced position, the body weight being equally distributed, and so you will find it easy to remain motionless in this position longer than in any other. By reason of keeping the upper part of body erect, there is perfect control of your breath. You can breathe more freely. Besides, there is an intimate connection between the spinal cord and the emotions. When you are in that position you can have easier control of your emotions. Those who find this posture difficult may sit on a straight-backed chair, keeping the body erect. The legs should rest on the ground without strain.

Now we shall proceed to explain the method of practising mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*). Having chosen a special place, and time, and having adopted the special posture prescribed, you must now commence the practice of conscious breathing. Breathe calmly and while breathing, be fully aware of your breath, but avoid strain. Do not breathe forcefully. Breathe naturally and calmly, observing your breath all the while. *Dīghaṃ va assasanto dīghaṃ assasāmīti pajānāti; dīghaṃ va passasanto dīghaṃ passasāmīti pajānāti*: “Breathing deeply in, he knows he is breathing deeply in. Breathing deeply out, he knows he is breathing deeply out. Similarly, taking a short breath in, he knows he is taking a short breath in, and taking a short breath out, he knows he is taking a short breath out.”

The disciple must not identify himself with his breathing. He must view the breathing objectively and not subjectively. He must not dwell on the fact that it is he who is breathing. He must contemplate this bare act of breathing and nothing else. He must maintain awareness of this breath at all costs. All that is needed is this quiet awareness of the inflow and outflow of the breath. Remember this is not a breathing exercise. This is an exercise in mindfulness of breath. No retention of the breath is needed, as is required by the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjalī and other Hindu books. Perseverance in this mode of observation of breath will result in a deepening of the breath rhythm, and the first noticeable effect will be a growing sense of calm and tranquillity. There will also be better aeration of the lungs and a sense of physical well being, but this is a by-product. Continued practice of *ānāpānasati* leads one on to the higher levels of tranquillity-meditation (*samatha-bhāvanā*), bringing in their wake those exalted ecstasies known as the *jhānas*. The disciple can, however, instead of pursuing the *jhānas*, elect to pursue the path of *vipassanā-bhāvanā* (meditation on higher insight) and obtain *vipassanā* (higher insight).

That the observation of the rise and fall of the breath can lead to all these great results is difficult for the modern man to appreciate. The Venerable Nyanaponika Thera in his book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*² says that “breath stands on the threshold between the voluntary and the involuntary bodily functions, and thus offers a good opening to extend the scope of conscious control over the body”. We can therefore understand the great possibilities underlying systematic mindfulness of breath. He goes on to say that by reason of the continued observation of the rise and fall of the breath, “the heaving of the Ocean of Impermanence, its continuous rise and fall can be observed well.” The rise and fall of all beings and all things will be clearly perceptible to the disciple. This is not an intellectual understanding but a deep spiritual experience of a higher plane which comes with the realization of the rise and fall of the breath. Henceforth the disciple ceases to act unwisely with regard to the body. He ceases to be the body’s slave. Rising beyond the physical plane, he finds that there is no basis within the body which could logically support any notion of “I” or “mine.” It is no more a case of “I am breathing.” The disciple will thus find that there is no permanent principle within this body to which it is desirable or profitable to cling. *Anissito ca viharati na ca kiñci loke upādiyati*: “He depends on nothing and clings to nothing in this world.” Realizing the impermanence of the body, he realizes the impermanence of all things. He comes to understand things as they are. He touches a higher plane. That way lies Nibbāna.

There are yet other types of mindfulness of the body. There is mindfulness of the various parts of the body. The Sutta enumerates a list of 31 parts which are often heard repeated by pious devotees when they are observing the eight precepts. *Atthi imasmiṃ kāye kesa-lomanakha-danta-taco maṃsaṃ nahāru aṭṭhi*, etc.: “There are in this body: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, etc.” The Sutta continues thus:

² Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka.

Just as if, O monks, there were a basket with two openings, full of various kinds of grain, namely hill paddy, paddy, green gram, cow-pea, sesame, rice; and a man with sound eyes, having opened it, should reflect thus: 'This is hill-paddy, this is paddy, this is green gram, etc.' In the same way a monk reflects on this body enveloped by the skin and full of manifold impurities, from the soles up and from the top of the hair down, thinking thus: 'There are in this body hair of head, hair of body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, etc.'

Another method of meditation on the body is to take each part separately, think of its location, its colour and shape, and consider how loathsome and repulsive each part is. This minute dissection of the body into its various component parts will help to remove the illusion of "the body beautiful" and reveal its inherent impurity. The Commentary states:

No one who searches earnestly throughout the whole of this fathom-long carcass, starting from the soles of the feet upwards, starting from the top of the hair downwards, and starting from the skin all round, ever sees even the minutest atom of pureness; on the contrary, he sees nothing but various very malodorous, offensive, drab-looking sorts of impurity, consisting of the head-hairs, body-hairs, and the rest.

This meditation is necessary to the modern world, which places an exaggerated importance on the body. Man is so attached to his body, regarding it as his own precious possession, that nothing short of a drastic dissection (as contained in this meditation) will arouse the sense of repulsion necessary to establish that elevating and lofty detachment with regard to one's body which ultimately leads to a realization of the rise and fall of all things. He comes to see things as they are. He touches a higher plane.

There are two other types of mindfulness of the body, namely, mindfulness of the four elements and mindfulness of the decomposition of the body. In the former, there is a different kind of dissection of the body. The body is reduced to the four fundamental manifestations of matter, namely, the element of earth, the element of water, the element of fire, and the element of wind. These elements the human body possesses in common with all forms of inanimate matter. These fundamental qualities of matter are sometimes referred to as solidity, adhesion, calorificity, and motion. This mode of dissection (bringing out the thought that the body is not different from inanimate matter) helps to establish in the mind the impersonal and impermanent nature of the body which is forgotten and obscured by reason of the great emphasis on the body placed by the modern age, and ultimately leads to a realization of the rise and fall of all things. Seeing things as they are, he touches a higher plane.

The mindfulness of the decomposition of the body is just as beneficial in its effect as any mindfulness based on the dissection of the body. When one contemplates the various stages of decomposition of the dead human body; how it becomes bloated; how it turns blue; how matter oozes out of the eyes, nose, mouth and other openings of the body; how it becomes a prey to a myriad of worms; how the flesh comes off the bones; one cannot avoid considering that the same fate can befall one's own body which one views so tenderly. These drastic contemplations (especially recommended for those obsessed with thoughts of lust, which the tendencies of the modern age seem to engender rather than reduce), will also arouse the sense of repulsion necessary to establish that elevating and lofty detachment with regard to one's body which ultimately leads to a realization of the rise and fall of all things. Seeing things as they are, he touches a higher plane.

We have concluded a detailed (though still incomplete) consideration of the first type of mindfulness, namely mindfulness of the body (*kāyānupassanā*). Now we proceed to the second type, namely, mindfulness of sensations (*vedanānupassanā*). Here too, the disciple must view the matter objectively. He must not identify himself with any sensation that he

experiences. Sensations are pleasant, unpleasant and indifferent, and in regard to each of these sensations one must view the sensation and the sensation only. A man suffering from pain normally tends to identify himself so closely with the pain-feeling that he is unable to take a detached view of it. The pain is all-important. He is overpowered by it. Similarly, with regard to a pleasure sensation. Mindfulness of sensation helps one to stand out of one's body, as it were, and view these sensations with the detachment of a spectator.

The commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta mentions the case of a Thera whose objective contemplation of a severe pain was so intense that when he was asked where the pain was, he was simply unable to locate the seat of pain. To the disciple who thus trains himself to look with dispassionate calm upon the sensations without identifying himself with them, they sooner or later cease to assume the all-important, all-compelling nature they once did. Sensations too will be regarded as part of the ever changing phenomena which constitute the life process. He knows that these sensations are not permanent. They too arise and pass away. Just as in respect of the body, so in respect of the sensors, he will find that there is no basis which can logically support any notion of "I" or "mine." It is not a case of "I feel" but "there is a feeling." In none of these fleeting sensations is there to be found any permanent principle to which it is profitable or desirable to cling. When the nature of sensations (their rise and fall) is thoroughly comprehended, the disciple is no longer moved by them. By observing the rise and fall of sensations, he observes the rise and fall of all things. He sees things as they are. He touches a higher plane.

The third type of mindfulness is mindfulness of thoughts (*cittānupassanā*). Just as the disciple is expected to watch objectively the play of sensations in him, so he is expected to watch objectively the play of thoughts upon him. It is highly beneficial to mind the mind this way. Do we ever deal with thousands of visitors every day? Yes we do. Every day thousands of thoughts enter our minds. We are so accustomed to this that we take these visitors for granted. Every thought we think influences us for good or bad. A subsequent thought however can modify the influence of the previous thought. A thought of anger, for example, has injurious effects on one's mind, and even on one's body; but if the immediately subsequent thought is one of an opposite nature, or one of repentance and a realization that what was done was wrong, the injurious effects of the angry thought may be modified. If we develop the habit of looking at any bad thought objectively, we can easily arrest the progress of that bad thought. Practising mindfulness of thought is the cultivation of the habit of looking objectively at a thought, and not subjectively, and of being deeply aware of its presence.

No thought should be able to enter the portals of our mind without our being fully aware of it. Then only are we free from being blindly led by the force of thoughts. When a thought of anger arises, one must be fully aware of this and tell oneself, "Now look, a thought of anger has entered my mind." By this introspection a subtle effect is produced. The angry thought loses its compelling nature. It has spent its force and cannot express itself as an angry deed. This objective way of looking at any evil thought thus protects the disciple from its pernicious influence.

Whenever any evil thought enters the mind, the watch dog of sati barks at the unwelcome visitor and cautions the disciple who can then induce a thought of an opposite nature to counteract the evil thought. The commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta mentions the case of Phussadeva Mahāthera, who would stop walking if in the midst of a walk an evil thought were to enter his mind. He would not resume his walk until he had banished the evil thought.

The people of the place who had noticed this used to wonder whether he lost his way or had forgotten something. But when at the age of twenty he became an Arahant, only a few would have known how he achieved this. When an evil thought enters your mind, you must look at it fairly and squarely. Think of that thought and that thought only, and not of the circumstances that gave rise to that thought or the mode of action suggested by that thought.

Do not dwell on any such related questions. Look straight into that thought and dwell on it only. You will then be surprised to find how gradually that evil thought will lose its inviting nature. Persist in looking on. Like the philosopher defined by Pythagoras, just look on. That is all. The evil thought will no more incite you to action. It may even disappear.

It is not always easy to look into one's own mind. Man generally fights shy of looking too closely into his own mind since the awareness of his own silent evil thinking upsets his good opinion of himself. Continued practice of mindfulness of thoughts will help the disciple to understand that his thoughts are not himself. He will not identify himself with his thoughts. He will grow into the realization that, like the body, the mind also is not an entity but a temporary combination of passing things. This temporary assemblage gives the illusion of a permanent entity. As the constituent parts are impermanent and subject to change, so is the constituted combination. Just as the body is nothing more than a combination of hair, flesh, nails, teeth, all of which must perish, so is the mind nothing more than a combination (or rather a succession) of thoughts, all of which arise only to pass away. The mind is compared to the flow of a river. *Nadi-soto viya*: "The flow of thoughts makes the seeming entity of the mind." Just as drops of water, one following the other in rapid succession, give the impression of a line of water, similarly one thought follows another with such rapidity of succession that one is deluded into the belief that there is an entity called mind. Only the practice of *cittānupassanā*, mindfulness of thoughts, will reveal that thoughts are impersonal in their nature, and that they are distinctly fleeting phenomena. They come and go; they arise and pass.

The disciple thus realizes the rise and fall of thoughts. So, in respect of thoughts also he will find that there is no basis which can logically support any notion of "I" or "mine." It is not a case of "I think" but "there is thinking." In none of these fleeting processes can there be found any permanent principle to which it is profitable or desirable to cling. He depends on nothing. He clings to nothing in this world. He sees the rise and fall of all things. He touches a higher plane, and that way lies Nibbāna.

We now come to the last and a very different type of mindfulness, mindfulness of mental objects (*dhammānupassanā*). The word *dhamma* has here a very special meaning. It means "contents of thought" or "mental objects," and specially refers to the five mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇā*),³ the five aggregates of clinging (*pañca upādānakkhandhā*), the six bases (*saḷāyatana*), seven factors of enlightenment (*satta bojjhanga*),⁴ and the four noble truths (*cattari ariyasaccāni*).

These are the dhammas referred to in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Through the disciple's daily experiences he must be able to observe these dhamma or special mental objects. He must be alive to these conditions if they arise in him, and if they have not arisen in him, he must be aware that they have not arisen in him. It is not a theoretical knowledge of these dhammas that matters. One must actually experience them and know them as such when they arise. For instance, the five hindrances are not merely to be known theoretically as obstructions to spiritual progress, but one must be on the look-out to recognise them as soon as they arise in

³ They are sense desire, ill-will, sloth and torpidity, restlessness and worry, and sceptical doubt. See The Wheel No. 26: *The Five Mental Hindrances*.

⁴ See The Wheel No. 1: *The Seven Factors of Enlightenment*, by Piyadassi Thera.

the mind. Similarly, whenever there is a dawning of the Truth, for instance the First Noble Truth, he should be able to recognise it as such.

This meditation is both an antidote to evil thoughts and a preparation for the reception of the Truths of the Dhamma. In this manner all the daily experiences of the disciple can be brought into conformity with the contents of the Dhamma at some point or other. Contemplating thus the mental objects as they arise, the disciple again finds that there is no permanent principle to which it is profitable or desirable to cling. He depends on nothing. He clings to nothing. Again he touches a higher plane, and that way lies Nibbāna.

Enough has been said with regard to the theory and practice of satipaṭṭhāna. Now we shall proceed to examine its applicability to modern life. First let us see how modern world-conditions have evolved.

The 17th and 18th centuries saw a fairly contented world with a child-like faith in the comforts and hopes that religion affords. Then the next century saw the dethronement of Religion by Science. Science reigned supreme and the modern world was busy constructing all kinds of powerful instruments and mighty machines for the convenience of man. Later, desire for world power made its appearance, threatening to take the place of Science. This led to a coalition between these two and, from that moment onwards, Science was prostituted for the sake of making instruments and machines, not for the convenience of man, but for his destruction. The First World War, followed by the Second World War, brought about tremendous changes in the world, changes in the social structure, economic upheavals and political revolutions. Man began to lose faith in the ancient ways of thinking. Man began to decry religion. Future rewards for moral goodness ceased to interest him and his one desire was the full enjoyment of the present. Collectively as a nation the desire was for full enjoyment of power, world power.

Consequently there was a falling off of moral standards; the two World Wars have proved this. The so-called civilization of the modern world is but a thin coating of conventional politeness. The two world wars scratched that coating and laid bare the beast in modern man. The mass destruction of human life, the agonies in concentration camps, the unspeakable horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all bear witness to the unfortunate fact that the modern world is heading towards destruction. Unless we cry halt we will be swept off by our own iniquities.

The scientist of the modern world seems to think that he has done a service to humanity.

What, I ask you, is the test of service? The modern scientific age has alleviated pain. Yes, it has cured diseases, discovered drugs and lengthened life. The modern Scientific Age has built great cities, great bridges and great factories. It has constructed marvellously efficient vehicles to travel on earth, on sea and through space. It has shattered distance, economised labour and captured time. But I ask you: has the modern scientific age invented one single instrument to make man more noble? Has the modern scientific age invented one single instrument to help man to eliminate his lust, his hate or his delusion?

Science has probed the external world and wrested from nature her secrets, yet it does not deliver salvation to man. There is another world, a more fruitful world for exploration, and that is the world of the mind. By dint of meditation, explore that world and you will be rewarded with the intuition which will solve the problem of life. You will then secure that *paññā* or higher wisdom which will make you see things as they really are.

Every little step you take in that direction is a step towards emancipation, a step towards Nibbāna. The great drift, the dangerous drift today, is away from true progress, and therefore the necessity for a counter-drift is as great. This is where the practise of

satipaṭṭhāna is important and relevant. By giving the modern man the necessary wisdom to understand evil tendencies as such, satipaṭṭhāna helps to give a powerful pull in the right direction. Whenever the tendencies of the modern age drag you away from the path of righteousness, almost without your knowing it, the faithful watch dog of sati can be depended upon to pull you back. Such is the strength of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

The modern age is essentially an age of rush and speed. Man really has no time to do any serious thinking. If he has any time to think, it is only to think as much as is necessary to run the giddy round of life from day to day. The consequence of not accustoming oneself to serious deep thinking is the liability to lose that power. If you do not use your hand for six months, it is liable to be atrophied. Similarly, if you do not engage in deep thinking, that faculty too is liable to be atrophied. The danger is that you will then blindly adopt the patterns of thought set before you by the few who can dominate you. This is what is happening today. In the field of business, in the field of agriculture, in the field of education, in the field of politics, in the field of human activity, a few dominate the minds of the many. The majority just follow the thought patterns of the thinking few.

Consider the amount of thought created for you today. You do not always consciously and deliberately decide on the type of requirements you need, do you? The profound effect of large-scale advertisement in the modern world is such that some of your requirements are selected for you. Often without your knowing it, your clothes are selected for you, the books you read are selected for you and the medicines you take are selected for you. Such is the subtle psychology of advertisement. Newspapers also are responsible for creating such impressive thought patterns. The majority of men are content to accept these views without question. There is very little original independent thinking today. This can only mean that the powers of concentration of the majority are very weak. The resultant danger is that modern man is handicapped in his spiritual progress, for no one can progress spiritually unless he can concentrate and meditate.

However good a life you may lead, unless you practise meditation there is no guarantee of permanent moral rectitude. You may at any moment fall away from goodness. The easiest way to develop the power of concentration is to practise a little ānāpānasati each day. No other type of meditation can modern man use so easily. It is the only meditation that can ensure immunity from external influences.

Another feature of modern life is the stress that is laid on sex. Most things are managed and conducted today in such a way as to stimulate lust (*rāga*) in you. Look around and see for yourself whether this is not true. Look at the number of trashy novels and obscene publications which in the name of literature find a place in any wayside bookshop, and you will realize the dismal depths to which human depravity has sunk. Look at the cinemas and dances of the modern world. What good, I ask you, have these cinema and dance halls, these beauty parades and these night clubs, done to the modern man except to stimulate his lust? Unless from time to time the modern world is reminded of the correct view regarding the human body, the emphasis on sex and the body will continue to becloud the mind of modern man to such an extent that all sense of proportion will be destroyed and the unreal will be mistaken for the real. The result will be confusion, disharmony and degradation.

Another feature of the modern world is the morbid craving for variety. The inability, due to the absence of sati, to see things as they really are, and to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, has resulted in a state of mental indecision and chronic dissatisfaction. The even tenor of life is too dull for the modern man. He craves sensations; he is fed on sensations. He will continually yearn for something fresh, something new. He cannot content himself with existing methods, situations and conditions. He will always look

forward to new methods, new machines, new drugs, a new way of life, a new ideology. He is soon tired of existing things. Life is disappointing if there are no sensations. The morning paper is disappointing if there are no banner headlines. This attitude is symptomatic of a disease: mental unrest. The advertiser and the business man are quick to exploit this weakness of the modern man. Before one model of any article goes out of use, another model is brought to the market. See the changing fashions of dress.

See the changing types of furniture and other equipment. All these changes pander to this dangerous craving for variety. The only remedy for this ailment is to learn the art of looking at things as they really are. Once a customer is initiated into the art of looking at a thing objectively, he will not be easily influenced by advertisements. Objective observation will also help him to discover plenty of old wine in new bottles. The delusion of the importance of novelty is destroyed. Fully perceiving what is really essential in life, and fully distinguishing the essential from the non-essential by the aid of sati, he is no more a victim of this craze for sensations.

Now that I have shown to you the application of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta to modern life, there is one more aspect of the subject which needs attention. You may perhaps think that the way of satipaṭṭhāna is long and weary and that within the space of one life the much-spoken of results of the practice of satipaṭṭhāna cannot be achieved. Has the Buddha ever said so? Has the Buddha ever said that Nibbāna cannot be attained in this life itself? In a powerful oration in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha has emphatically declared that if any one practises these four types of mindfulness for seven years, then one or another of these two results may be expected by him: Arahantship here and now (*ditṭhe dhamme*) or at least the state of *Anāgāmi* (Non-returner). In the next sentence the Buddha says, "Let alone the question of seven years, O monks, six years is sufficient." In the next sentence he says in similar style that five years is sufficient.

Thus in successive sentences He brings it down from six years to five, four, three, two, and one year; and thereafter to seven months, six months, five, four, three, and two months; then to one month, half a month and finally to seven days. This shows that the ability to attain to Nibbāna is not so much a question of time as a question of the intensity and eagerness of the mind of the disciple. Just consider seven days to attain to Nibbāna. Quick results, are they not? The impatient modern man always yearns for quick results. Here is a guarantee of quick results.

Why does not modern man accept this offer? Perhaps he feels that the promise is too good to be true. What is important is not views but action. The proof of the pudding is in the eating of it, and not in any learned chemical analysis of its component parts. Therefore, I would finally make this appeal to you all, namely, stop all academic discussion about satipaṭṭhāna. Practise it quietly and observe the results for yourselves. "*Ehipassiko*," said the Buddha, "Come and see for yourself."

The Buddhist Publication Society

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is— a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or contact:

The Administrative Secretary
Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679