

Satipatthana - The Fourfold Focus of Mindfulness

By Ajahn Brahmavamso

NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

More has been said about the practice of Satipatthana than about any other meditation practice by Buddhist teachers of today... except by this monk! So in this Dhamma article I will keep up with the trend by presenting some practical observations on this most misunderstood of Lord Buddha's Teachings.

Those of you who have been "sitting around" Buddhist Centres for a while have probably heard some teachers claim that the fourfold "Focus of Mindfulness" (my translation of "Satipatthana") is the "one and only way" to the goal of full Enlightenment! Although this is an impressive sales pitch for the teaching, it is neither a true translation of the original text nor consistent with what the Lord Buddha said elsewhere. The very phrase ("Ekayana Magga") which is mistranslated as "one and only way" occurs again in the 12th Sutta (discourse) of the Majjhima collection where it unmistakably means a "path with only one possible destination". Many different paths can share a common destination. In fact, the "one and only path" is the Lord Buddha's description, not of Satipatthana, but of the Noble Eightfold Path:

"Of all Ways, the Noble Eightfold Path is the best.
This is the only way, there is none other for the purity of insight"

Dhammapada verses 273 and 274 (abridged)

Thus, the "only way" to Enlightenment, as all Buddhists should know anyway, is the Noble Eightfold Path. The fourfold Focus of Mindfulness constitutes only a part of this Path, the 7th factor. Jhanas are the 8th factor and there is also Right View, Right Intention, Right Effort and the three factors of Right Virtue. Each of these eight factors are necessary to achieve the goal of full Enlightenment. If any were redundant, then the Lord Buddha would have taught a 7-fold path, or a 6-fold path etc. So, in your practice of Buddhism, please keep in mind that all eight factors of the noble Eightfold Path should be cultivated as the "one and only way". Now the fourfold Focus of Mindfulness method as taught by the Lord Buddha, is a very advanced practice. So advanced that the Lord Buddha said that if anyone should develop them in the way He described for only seven days, then they would achieve full Enlightenment or the state of non-returner. Many meditators reading this may have gone on such a retreat for nine days or even more and not yet fulfilled this most lofty of the Lord Buddha's promises. Why not? Because, I suggest, you were not following the Lord Buddha's instructions.

If you want to practise the fourfold Focus of Mindfulness in the way that the Lord Buddha said leads so rapidly to Enlightenment, then certain things are required before you begin. The essential preparations are in short, full cultivation of the other seven factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. Or, as the Lord Buddha said in the Anguttara collection ('Nines', Suttas 63 and 64), one should maintain the five Precepts (the longer the better), abandon the five Hindrances and then practice Satipatthana.

These vital prerequisites are actually stated by the Lord Buddha in His two discourses on the fourfold Focus of Mindfulness, as "Vineyya Loke Abhijjha-Domanassam" (please forgive me quoting Pali. It is the only way I can make this important point). This phrase is usually translated as "having put away covetousness and grief for the world", or something similar. Such translations mean so little to meditators that they ignore this instruction altogether, and thereby miss the bus! In the time of the Lord Buddha, the monks, nuns and lay disciples would have understood the phrase to mean "after having abandoned the five Hindrances"! The authoritative commentaries to the two Satipatthana Suttas taught by the Lord Buddha both clearly state that "Abhijjha-Domanassam" (sorry for the Pali again!) refer precisely to the five Hindrances. Elsewhere in the recorded Teachings of the Lord Buddha, "Abhijjha" is a synonym for the first Hindrance, "Domanassam" is a synonym for the second Hindrance, and together they stand, in Pali idiom, as an abbreviation for all five. This then means that the five Hindrances must be abandoned first before beginning any of the Focus of Mindfulness practices. It is, in my not-so-humble opinion, precisely because meditators attempt to practise the Satipatthana method with some of the Hindrances still remaining that they achieve no great or lasting result.

It is the function of Jhana practice, the ultimate factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, to abandon all of the five Hindrances long enough to gain BIG Insight. For example, in the 68th Sutta of the Majjhima collection ("Nalakapanna"), the Lord Buddha stated that for the meditator who does not attain to Jhana, the five Hindrances together with discontent and weariness invade the mind and remain. Only when one does attain to Jhana do the five Hindrances together with discontent and weariness not invade one's mind and remain the way the Lord Buddha said it is.

Any meditator who has experienced the powerful Jhanas would know through that experience, and what happens after, what a mind without any Hindrances is truly like. The meditator who hasn't known Jhanas does not realise the many subtle forms Hindrances can take. They may think that the hindrances are abandoned but, the truth is, they just don't see them and so do not get great results in their meditation. This is why Samatha practice which cultivates Jhana is part of the Satipatthana teaching and why it is misinformation to call Satipatthana "pure Vipassana". Even my teacher, Ajahn Chah, said over and over again that Samatha and Vipassana, "calm and insight", go together and are inseparable as the two faces of a coin.

Having patiently completed the necessary preparations, the meditator sustains their mindfulness on one of the four focuses: their own body, the pleasure and pain associated with each sense, the mind consciousness and, fourthly, the objects of mind. When the Hindrances are gone and one can sustain one's powerful and penetrating attention on these four objects, only then is it possible to realise that deep in our psyche, far deeper than the veil of intelligent thinking, we have been assuming a Self. We have been assuming that this body is "me" or "mine", that pleasure or pain has something to do with me, that the mind which looks on is our Soul or something close, and that the objects of mind such as thought or volition (the 'chooser') is a Self, me, or mine. In short, the purpose of the fourfold Focus of Mindfulness is to instruct one what to do when one has emerged from a Jhana, to uncover the deeply disguised delusion of a Soul and then see what the Lord Buddha saw, the Truth of Anatta.

This is not an easy thing to do, but it can be done, and it can take only seven days. That is if one follows the Lord Buddha's instructions, follows them and takes no short cuts.

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Notes (by Binh Anson):

[1] Other translation: Four Foundations of Mindfulness

[2] Five hindrances: sensual desire, ill-will, restlessness, sloth and torpor, doubt