

THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

By Victor Byrd

RIGHT MINDFULNESS (*samma sati*)

One early morning, during a seven-day retreat in Temecula, California, I followed my usual routine of climbing out of bed, slipping on some warm clothes and walking toward the front doors of the Meditation Hall. One of my yogi jobs on these retreats is to unlock the front doors so that our coffee yogi can come in and start brewing a fresh pot for those of us addicted to the dark, rich coffee bean. Then I turn on a few lights to softly illumine the silent Hall, light some incense and retreat to my room for the thirty minutes left before our first sit at 6 AM. But this particular morning something out of the ordinary happened before I even slipped on my sweatshirt. The thought quietly crept into consciousness: "What is the point of this?" The question had to do with the day ahead and my job of teaching meditation, yoga and giving a dharma talk. I was exhausted and frankly, feeling just plain old. What was use of all this work?

Clients who have sat with me in psychotherapy know that I consider the question "What is the point of this?" to be one of the most insidious weapons in Doubt's arsenal. The dictionary defines the word insidious as "proceeding in a gradual, subtle way that is treacherous and crafty." This describes, "What is the point of this?" to a "T." The question is deadly because it seems benign and rational. But, in fact, the question, "What is the point of this?" is not a question at all. It is a direct attack on our sense of well-being. It could mean, "What is the point of doing all this work?" But all too often it means, "What is the point of trying?" and worse, "What is the point of living?"

The previous night, I had given a dharma talk on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. This may explain why I so quickly recognized the crafty and subtle whisper of doubt flowing through my consciousness and why, in that early morning before the sunrise, some part of me was able to aim its biggest gun to combat that insidious thought. In a space that lasted less than five seconds, the mind simply turned inward and looked at itself. Who can explain this? It is said that a knife cannot cut itself and neither can the eye see itself. Certainly an eye can see its reflection in a

mirror but an image of something is not the same as the thing itself. How can the mind, which has been conditioned by greed, hatred and delusion for untold thousands of years, looking relentlessly at everything but itself, turn and actually see itself? Perhaps this is not the appropriate question at all. Perhaps the question should be: How can we embrace the miracle of what our mind can be and do?

Recently I read the story of Tsung Tsai, a Ch'an monk who walked for one year from Mongolia to Hong Kong in order to escape the horrors of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (an oxymoron if ever there was one). In *The Bones of the Master*, by George Crane, Tsung Tsai reminds his friend "Georgie" that the same mind that creates a hungry ghost can make a buddha. This is the miracle of what our mind can be and a fleeting glimpse of what I saw that morning in Temecula.

In the space of a few seconds when the mind turned within and looked at itself, it saw the truth. Not I. I did not see the truth because for those few moments there was no I. The mind saw that the thought "What is the point of this?" was nothing but its own creation. The mind recognized that the thought "What is the point of this?" was pure emptiness. There was no ego in the equation. The mind also saw for one precious moment the truth of *sunyata*, the void. This was utterly freeing. There was no need to dress the bones of doubt with rational clothes such as "This is nothing but a hindrance" or "This is just a thought." *There was no need to think at all.* The mind simply knew itself. No problem.

Zen legend says that when Bodhidharma, the first Patriarch of Zen Buddhism, brought the Buddha's teaching to China in the late fifth century, he pointed his students toward the mind. Just that. And yet the meaning of "he pointed toward the mind" remains nearly beyond the boundary of our imagination. We will watch anything, from the signs on the 405 Freeway to the warning labels on medicine bottles, but what is the mind to do when it is asked to watch itself? Bodhidharma had the great sense to remain silent in the face of such impossible questions. Indeed, it is said that when the Emperor Wu asked him his name, Bodhidharma said, "I don't know." Not having his great good sense, I made the mistake of trying to share the experience of the mind watching itself in my dharma talk that evening. In other words, my ego was saying, "I'm Back!"

After briefly explaining the events surrounding doubt's disturbing visit to my room that morning, I said that I had come up with a brilliant idea for our sangha, a Tee Shirt! We would print these words on the front: "It's Your Mind Stupid." Most of us remember James Carville and Paul Begala's brilliant slogan in Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign: "It's the economy stupid." That mantra kept the spinmeisters and thousands of other people working in the trenches to stay on point. When the subject strayed too far afield everyone was reminded of the mantra on the blackboard: "It's the economy stupid." It worked for the President so I thought it might work for us as well.

Unfortunately, my mantra did not have a similar effect. In fact, I ruffled many a feather that night. A few years later, and a little wiser, I understand how insulting my slogan must have been. We spend our lives convincing ourselves (and each other) that we are something other than mind. There is "my" mind and there is "me," separate from "my" mind. If I am feeling sad or angry, I don't want to hear you tell me that my sadness or anger is nothing but a mind state. It sounds dehumanizing and minimizing. "Mind state? What do you mean mind state? It's Me. I feel sad, not my mind!" Isn't it so? I (the ego) need to be acknowledged and validated. Imagine telling your best friend about the anger and grief you feel since your lover dumped you for someone younger. If your friend tried to pull you out of your grief by telling you, "Well, it's your mind stupid," how long would she remain in your address book?

If "It's your mind stupid" had been an accepted intervention in psychotherapy, the profession would have never gotten off the ground. But what if you told your sad story to a buddha? His or her response might not be as insulting as "It's your mind stupid," but neither would it be the reflective listening and unconditional positive regard of a therapist. The Buddha's message of freedom from suffering is "Tough Love," pure and simple. In the seventh step of the Eightfold Path, Right Sati, he gets down to business, to the basic techniques that we need in order to move out of the content and into the process of living.

The Buddha tells us that the path toward freedom must eventually turn in one direction only: toward the mind. As we said at the end of the previous chapter, the Eightfold Path now moves in the direction of home.

How does the mind watch itself? According to the Buddha, it is able to experience its own essence through the lens of sati:

The only way that leads to the attainment of purity, to the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, to the end of pain and grief, to the entering upon the right path and the realization of Nibbana, is the Four Fundamentals of Sati.

In his translation of the Satipatthana Sutra, Dwight Goddard calls sati “attentiveness.” His translation of this pivotal sutra in Theravada Buddhism is as follows:

But how does the disciple dwell in the contemplation of the body? There the disciple retires to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to a solitary place, sits himself down, with legs crossed, body erect, and with *attentiveness* fixed before him (my italics).

With attentive mind he breathes in, with attentive mind he breathes out. When making a long inhalation, he knows: I make a long inhalation; when making a long exhalation, he knows: I make a long exhalation. When making a short inhalation, he knows: I make a short inhalation; when making a short exhalation, he knows: I make a short exhalation. Clearly perceiving the entire body, I will breathe out: thus he trains himself. Calming this bodily function, I will breathe in: thus he trains himself; calming the bodily function, I will breathe out: thus he trains himself.

The translation that I prefer for sati is “watchfulness,” as used by J. N. Farquhar in *Outline Of The Religious Literature of India*. Thus, the Satipatthana Sutra would read, “...and with *watchfulness* fixed before him. With a watchful mind he breathes in, with a watchful mind he breathes out.” But the English word that has achieved universal acceptance for sati is mindfulness. With this translation, the sutra reads, “...and with *mindfulness* fixed before him. With mindfulness he breathes in, with mindfulness he breathes out.”

U Panditta accepts the word mindfulness but only with reluctance, saying that he would prefer to use “observing power” as the English translation. Mindfulness has a passive connotation that does not feel accurate to him. He describes sati as an observing power that leaps

forward, penetrating into the object. U Panditta's preference for active words to describe sati is hardly surprising. The Buddha came from the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste in India, and a martial tone pervades the Pali Scriptures.

In *Mindfulness in Plain English*, the book I most frequently recommend for beginners in Vipassana meditation, Bhante Henepola Gunaratana agrees that sati is an active force but his view of sati feels more feminine, even soft. He humanizes it with a certain warmth. But to his credit Bhante Gunaratana admits that someone else could describe sati quite differently and still be absolutely on target.

Whatever else sati is, surely it is neither good, bad, hot, cold, active nor passive. A skilled jewel thief must be extraordinarily aware of his surroundings. Were it not for this dancing (attentive, watchful, mindful) quality of sati, he would be caught flat-footed with his hand in the jewelry case. Parenthetically, I have noticed that adults with Attention Deficit Disorder frequently develop a higher degree of sati as compensation for their inability to maintain steady concentration.

In truth, it is not sati that we are discussing as the seventh step of the Path at all: It is *samma sati* or RIGHT sati. What makes it right sati? Right Understanding, the first step of the Path, in combination with Right Thought are the careful guides that lead sati into full partnership on this spiritual journey. In *The Doctrine of Awakening*, Julius Evola says that a person with right understanding and right thought has *power over the heart rather than being in the power of the heart*. As romantic as it sounds to let our hearts lead the way, Buddhism clearly teaches us that wisdom must always be our heart's guide. A being that is no longer in the power of the heart has the "wedge" that allows him to begin the work of turning toward the mind. While sati is the only way to freedom, without Right Understanding and Right Thought, it is nothing but a fantastic talent gone to waste.

According to Nyanaponika Thera in *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, Vipassana meditation is centered in sati. I mention this only to stress that Nyanaponika Thera comes from the perspective of Theravada Buddhism and in this tradition, the Satipatthana Sutra is the root sutra and sati is the common thread connecting all styles of Vipassana meditation. This is not to say that the practice of sati (mindfulness) is universally accepted in all Buddhist traditions. In *The Faith To Doubt*, Stephen Batchelor says that the

basic text of the Satipathana Sutra was never even translated into Tibetan and “such systematic practice of mindfulness was not preserved in the Tibetan traditions.” In general, however, all traditions highly value the cultivation of sati. Hung Jen, the Fifth Ch’an Patriarch (counting from Bodhidharma) says this:

You will achieve success in the cultivation of the path when your practice of correct mindfulness is complete. To never fail in correct mindfulness – even when one’s body is being torn apart or at the time of death – is to be a Buddha.

Sati is also a vital aspect of other Indian disciplines. For example, it is mentioned in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras and Nisargadatta, the great advaita teacher of the past century says this:

There is such a way, open to all, on every level, in every walk of life. Everybody is aware of himself. The deepening and broadening of self-awareness is the royal way. Call it mindfulness, or witnessing, or just attention – it is for all. None is unripe for it and none can fail.

Call it observing power or attentiveness. Call it watchfulness, witnessing or mindfulness, the word does not matter. Nisargadatta says that what does matter is that sati is the royal way. After all is said and done, we can sit for one hundred years, developing extraordinary powers of samadhi (concentration) so that we can achieve peak moments of bliss and religious ecstasy. We can read and study every spiritual text that exists on earth. We can find and sincerely follow a teacher who is truly awake. We can practice sila (virtue), feed the homeless and give generously to the needy (dana). We can chant the metta prayer every Sunday and practice it during the week. All of these things are excellent spiritual disciplines. But the Buddha says that there is only one way to reach complete liberation and that way is through sati and its four foundations. It bears repeating: Sati is the only way to complete liberation.

At this point it should be clear that there is only one word that truly captures the mystery of sati and that word is Sati! Gertrude Stein got it right when she said, “a rose is a rose is a rose.” To us, sati is sati is sati. Thus the sutra would read, “...and with *sati* fixed before him. With sati he breathes in, with sati he breathes out.”

The Buddha did not waste his time (or ours) trying to define sati. Instead, he focused on its development and how to bring it into our meditation practice. In a gym, a good trainer does not waste time answering clever questions about physiology. She has us close our mouths, sit our bottoms on the Universal machine and start sweating. We don't have to understand human physiology in order to develop muscles. What we need to do is lift weights. Likewise, we can develop sati without talking a lot about it. This was the Buddha's approach to teaching. He said that a person who has been struck by a poison arrow will be long dead before he can get all the answers he needs about who shot the arrow, what kind of poison is on the tip, what are the physician's credentials, did he graduate from a top medical school? In dire situations, there is no time to fret over what is in the medicine. If we are near death, we swallow the medicine and pray. The antidote for what ails us is samma sati.

The story of ten blind people touching a giant object standing in their midst perfectly describes the task before us. They could not see the elephant, but they could touch this huge, living being with their hands. It had four legs, a long, thin trunk and a huge round body. But where are the hands to touch sati; where is the nose to smell it? Sati lies beyond the reach of our six senses, as does all mystery. Perhaps it can be known, but it can never be understood. Nisargadatta says, "You may try to trace how a thing happens, but you cannot find out why a thing is as it is. A thing is as it is, because the universe is as it is." Sati is as it is. We must not pretend to understand it any more than the blind men could see the elephant. The best we can do is to edge ever closer to it.

One extremely sensitive "pair of hands" that truly captures the "feel" and mystery of sati belongs to a wild Indian genius, known in his later years as Osho: Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh. Rajneesh's view of sati is similar to that of Nisargadatta and Ramana Maharshi. It is probably closer to Advaita Vedanta than orthodox Buddhist teaching. I mention this for readers who are not familiar with the Hindu religion. Whether you agree or disagree with Rajneesh's view, there is no doubt that he has described something that is absolutely rare, extraordinary and nearly impossible to maintain. (Sounds like sati to me!)

Sati is the knowing factor of the mind. The mind concentrates on an object (samadhi) and knows the object (sati). This knowing, by the way, must not be confused with perception, which is the third skandha.

Perception is the instant recognition of the distinguishing marks of a thing (“It’s a snake.”) It operates every moment and sad to say, usually without sati present. Joseph Goldstein says that sati is the *frame* around perception, a state of knowing that actually watches over perception. But Rajneesh insists that there is one more special factor to the knowing aspect of sati that distinguishes it from the other mental factors. In *That Art Thou*, he says that *sati is always double-arrowed*.

Ordinarily, our consciousness is one-arrowed. For example, if you are listening to me you will forget yourself completely. If I say it, then suddenly you will remember: you have forgotten yourself completely. You are listening to me, so your consciousness has become one-arrowed, your consciousness is arrowed towards me, the speaker. But where is the listener? You are not aware of yourself as the listener.

We know this truth intimately. When we listen to a speaker, we completely forget that there is a listener. As an experiment, try to observe this during your day. You will see that as you concentrate on something you tend to forget the concentrator. The more deeply you concentrate, the more you become absorbed in the object of concentration. Sometimes we become so engaged in an activity that when we take a break we discover that hours have passed. The doer has disappeared in the doing and often this feels quite good.

Rajneesh posits that sati is a finely balanced point of awareness where consciousness remains focused on the subject and object simultaneously. In other words, it does not disappear in the doing. Needless to say, if we think of sati as an arrow with points on either end, we would surely agree that its presence is a rare visitation indeed.

Imagine that we are watching a thrilling movie, listening to a wonderful jazz singer or reading a heart-pounding novel. Losing ourselves completely in the experience (“the willing suspension of disbelief”) is the very ticket that allows our imagination to soar. As we sit and listen to a charismatic teacher expounding on the Dharma, the ego seems to disappear temporarily as it fuses with or merges into the visual, auditory experience. This happens when we watch our favorite half hour sitcom on T.V. and one only needs to picture the rapt faces of children gathered

around the television screen on Saturday morning to understand this amazing human ability.

Our capacity to merge completely into an experience is what Rajneesh describes as one-arrowed consciousness. The arrow has one sharp point at its tip and that tip is pointed toward the object through the processes of seeing, hearing, tasting, thinking, etc. Imagine that you are practicing mindfulness to breathing. The mind has settled and you are able to bring one pointed focus to watching and noting the gentle rise of the stomach as you inhale and its slow fall as you exhale. Perhaps the experience leads to a sense of expansiveness and silence. Or picture yourself practicing mindfulness to walking. As you focus on each moment of the foot lifting, moving through the air and gently touching the ground, your mind slows down. You experience minute details such as the sensation of the foot as it touches the ground, from toe to heel, and you feel all the subtle sensations in the hips as the weight shifts from the right to left. Again, the mind becomes increasingly one pointed, sensitive and grounded. Is this sati? Not according to Rajneesh.

From his perspective, sati enters our meditation practice only when consciousness becomes double-arrowed and the mind rests in the subject and the object simultaneously. In other words, as you practice mindfulness to walking, regardless of the incredible awareness of the subtle factors involved in each part of the process, you never lose sight of the walker as well as the walking. This is an amazingly difficult practice. It is core to the teachings of Nisargadatta, by the way. He urges us to relentlessly “remember the self.”

How do you find a thing that you have mislaid or forgotten? You keep it in you mind until you recall it. All you need to do is try and try again.

Who would seriously argue against Nisargadatta’s assertion that we have somehow “mislaid” ourselves? The irony is that in forgetting our self we become completely caught in an unconscious longing for our missing self and usually end up looking for our reflection in the world around us. The result is a constant self-referencing that has become ubiquitous. Tell your friend that your don’t feel well, then silently count to ten. The odds are he will launch into his own illness de jour and you will have to suppress the desire to throttle him as you wait for him to stop talking so

that you can continue with your own sad tale of woe. The end of self-referencing is the beginning of self-remembering. Dogen says, “To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by all things.”

In his instructions for breathing meditation, the Buddha says that as we “fix sati before us” and inhale a long or short breath, we must *know* that the breath is long or that the breath is short. Why does the Buddha insist that we *know* that we are breathing? Perhaps this is his way of saying that our consciousness must not be one-arrowed. We must stay connected to the knowing because the knowing is what keeps consciousness double-arrowed. The moment we lose awareness of the knowing we may ascend to a mountaintop experience through samadhi, but wisdom will not necessarily follow. According to the Buddha, wisdom (prajna) comes only from sati. No wisdom, no freedom.

It’s as if some terrible trick has been played on us! Since we were little ones we were told to *pay attention!* And bless our hearts, haven’t we done our best to pay attention all our lives? (Did you ever have a teacher tell you to pay attention to yourself?) Julius Evola translates sati (*smriti* in Sanskrit) as *parimukham satim upatthapeti*, or placing “the memory of oneself before oneself.” Clearly, this is Ragneesh’s double arrow. The problem is that we have been told all of our lives that it wrong to think about ourselves. Won’t we be accused of that dreaded N word: Narcissism? “Pay attention to the teacher, not yourself you self-centered little brat.”

The distinction between self-remembering, *placing the memory of oneself before oneself*, and the wound of narcissism, which causes us to seek the reflection of ourselves in the outside world, is nearly impossible to put into two neat little boxes. For one thing, who among us does not drag around a little bag of narcissistic wounds? A person who is caught in a constant search for her identity is doomed to constantly think *about* herself. We all know it. But to confuse self-referencing with the Self-remembering of sati is to miss it by a mile. Sati is not thinking about yourself, nor is it looking for your reflection in others. Sati arises when we turn the light inward, feeling the subtle touch of inner presence. If narcissism causes us to be self-conscious, the inner work of sati helps us to be conscious of the Self.

If we accept this “hard line” view of sati, we are actually forced to admit that practically no one on earth has any interest in it! Bad news

indeed. Think of watching a wonderful movie, a film that has entirely captivated our imagination. We cry when the hero dies, sigh at the lovers' first embrace. We scream as the dark figure pounces from around the corner. The arrow is pointed exclusively in one direction only: toward the object. T. S. Eliot said that we can hear music so deeply that it isn't heard at all. In other words, we become the music because we are so deeply absorbed in it. Isn't this what makes life worth living, our capacity to experience something, and to our very core?

But what if our aspiration goes beyond a desire to be entertained all our lives? What if we want to know our own self to the very core? Then the fantastic capacity of the mind to become absorbed in an object needs to be controlled and redirected. In a sense, we have to relearn the way we concentrate, through a process of self-remembering. This is the function of sati.

I must add one caveat (better known as covering one's derriere) before we turn to the Buddha's instructions for the practice of sati. In presenting Rajneesh's view of double-arrowed consciousness, I have not intended to grandly dismiss the traditional Burmese or Thai approach to sati as taught by masters such as the Venerable Mahashi Sayadaw or Ajahn Chah. As if I could. Untold numbers of meditators have traveled to the forests and towns of Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka to sit with these masters and they have benefited immeasurably from these teachings. Indeed, over the course of many years, my own personal experience of sati has been nurtured during intensive Vipassana retreats, presented in the style of Mashahi Sayadaw.

For example, I remember one evening at Insight Meditation Society in Barre as I stood in the dining hall dipping a tea bag into the steaming hot water, I noted "dipping, dipping," just as I had been relentlessly noting everything imaginable for over two months. But this particular evening something shifted as I stood holding that cup. The only way I can describe what happened is to say that some process in the mind simply took over the noting, as if conscious intention was no longer necessary. There was no longer an "I" choosing to practice sati. It was as if sati was practicing sati. This state continued for a couple of days. Why was this such a big deal? It signaled the beginning of a process that eventually led to that moment in Temecula when the mind saw itself with such clarity. This is the essence of inner work, one small step after the other from the unreal to the real.

This experience of sati did not come from reading Rajneesh or from any notion of consciousness as a double arrow, nor was I trying to watch the mind while noting the activity of dipping a tea bag into a cup of hot water. I was simply following the Burmese style of practicing sati. But perhaps in that very moment when consciousness shifted beyond the normal ego state and sati seemed to take control of the mind function, some still point emerged between noting the object and watching the mind. In any case, I am convinced that a definition of sati as the still point between subject and object is as close as we can come verbally to its wonderful mystery.

The Four Foundations of Sati

The Buddha said that as long as we keep walking to the end of the world, the world will never end. To the Buddha, the world is no wider than our mind, indeed the world is our mind. With the precision of a geographer, he created a map of our inner universe, dividing it into four quarters. Sati is the sun that shines over each quarter. These four foundations cover the entire expanse of our psychic experience: north, south, east and west. The four foundations are also referred to as the four contemplations, the four abidings, or the four introspections. Whatever English word you prefer, these four contemplations are a safe port in any storm.

When I find that I am having a difficult time settling in during a sit, if I am distracted or restless, tired or sleepy, I turn to these four contemplations. They bring me back to present moment awareness, just as they have brought meditators home for over two thousand years. The four contemplations can pull me out of the robotic matrix of the Twelve Nidanas, even if for only a brief moment of clarity. While walking to the car in the morning the double arrow of sati can know that the body is moving and know the mind that is watching the body. When lying down to sleep at night we can know that the body is lying down and that the mind is worried or peaceful. While waiting in a long line, we can know that the body is standing and feel the mind's constriction or relaxation and calm. While driving on the freeway, we can suddenly realize that we are lost in impatience or anger. Sati is present in each moment of awareness.

There the disciple lives in contemplation of the Body, in
contemplation of Feeling, in contemplation of the Mind, in

contemplation of Phenomena, ardent, clearly conscious and fixed on sati, after putting away worldly greed and grief. (Satipatthana Sutra)

1) Kayanupassana (sati of the body)

This is where the practice of sati begins. It is the most obvious, universally experienced and intimate fact of our existence: the body. Awareness of the body is an acknowledgement of a living breathing presence, a physical animal as close to us as wet is to water. In Sanskrit, the body is also referred to as *rupa*, or form, one half of the combination that makes up the fourth nidana, *nama rupa* (body-mind). Form is also the first skandha, one of the five frames of the magic show that has hypnotized us for eons.

In the *Koran*, there is a reference to God as being closer to us than the pulse of the vein in our neck. The analogy of the vein in our neck is almost too close for comfort. Something in us shrinks from the actual reality of this animal body. Perhaps that is why I am more comfortable saying that I have a body rather than I am a body. The felt reality of a vein pulsing in my neck forces me to admit how utterly fragile and impermanent my existence really is. Surely, something deep down knows that a ticking clock cannot be repaired forever; our living, breathing body, this palpable presence of organic life, can become too terrifyingly real.

It is a huge deal to stay connected to the reality of this living organic clock ticking away. To do so invites a stunning and shattering insight: We are rowing in a sinking boat! It may be a slow leak, or it may be a gusher, but this little boat is on its way down. This is precisely where the Buddha says that we must begin the practice of sati, with this most obvious fact in the world. Whatever else is sitting in meditation, without a doubt, there is a body.

The Buddha lists a number of ways to focus on the reality of “there is a body sitting.” He begins with *anapanasati* (sati of the breath).

With sati he breathes in, with sati he breathes out. When making a long inhalation, he knows: I make a long inhalation. When making a long exhalation, he knows: I make a long exhalation.

As I focus on the breath, only sati remembers that it is the body that is breathing. If sati begins to lose one end of the arrow, my meditation may move into one-pointed concentration practice with breath as the object. Even as sati silently disappears into the mist of unconsciousness, the concentration can actually deepen. I may experience bliss and even rapture. But eventually these wonderful feelings will vanish and soon the ecstasy I am feeling may end in daydreaming or, worse, in the soft sounds of my snore. The Buddha is very clear in his instruction: Sati is the *knowing* that the breath is long or short, and the *knowing* that it is the body breathing. The moment we have forgotten that it is the body breathing, we are convinced that it is “I” breathing.

Another practice of sati of the body is the four postures: the body standing; the body moving; the body sitting; the body lying. As we carefully and slowly walk, we are practicing sati of the body moving. Again, it is not just a concentration exercise on the movement of each foot. It is also a practice of *knowing* that there is a body moving. This knowing must extend to the other three postures. How often do we take a moment to notice that we are lying down, or, as we sit in meditation, that the body is sitting?

One powerful meditation on the body is to contemplate the reality that the body is a composite of the four elements of fire, earth, air and water. The body generates heat (the fire element) and experiences the absence of heat as cold. The body is hard (earth element) with bones, teeth, nails, and soft with tongue and skin. It is constantly in the motion of expansion and contraction (air element) and is held together with the cohesive element of water.

If there is a sharp pain in some area of the body, in the absence of sati I instantly become the pain: Ouch! If my back is aching, I may note it as sensation, or more specifically as an unpleasant sensation, but without sati there is a fusion of sensation and “me” so that I become absorbed in the pain. Whether I want to admit it or not, I no longer *have* pain, I *am* pain. Sati creates a wedge between the sensation and that which experiences the sensation. With sati, there is a possibility of non-reaction and even choice. In fact, sati does not choose for us but it allows us the possibility of a choice.

Ruth Denison emphasizes the sweeping technique in her Vipassana retreats, as does S. N. Goenka. The meditator learns to feel each part of the body as consciousness sweeps down from head to toe. This ancient practice is an excellent way to begin the first foundation of sati.

Sati of the body brings us down to earth, into the physical world of matter. It is home base, the place of beginning. Nothing teaches us the truth of impermanence (anicca) like our own body. Nothing teaches us the truth of craving (tanha) like the pleasures that we experience from the body. Nothing teaches us the truth of suffering (dukkha) like our own body. As we experience the truth of anicca, tanha and dukkha, the door to prajna or wisdom opens. The Buddha places the body in front of us as our living teacher of the dharma. Sati connects us to this living teacher.

2) *Vedananupassana* (sati of the feelings)

The second contemplation of sati is our old friend vedana, the Pali word for feelings and sensations. We have seen how crucial vedana is in the entire chain of the Twelve Nidanas. The offspring of feeling is craving (tanha) and from craving comes clinging (upadana). The inevitable result of clinging is suffering. We also saw that vedana is a double whammy. It is the second skandha. There must be a me in there who is feeling sad or happy.

But how does the disciple dwell in the contemplation of vedana?

In experiencing feelings, the disciple knows: this is an agreeable feeling, or: this is a disagreeable feeling, or: this is an indifferent feeling.

He knows how feelings arise, how they pass away. Feelings are there: this clear consciousness is present in the disciple. Because of sati, he lives independent, unattached to anything in the world. (Satipatthana Sutra)

The focus of sati has shifted from contemplating the reality of a body to the more subtle world of feelings and sensations. However insignificant it may seem, the ability to know that there is a body sitting and a mind watching the body is a tremendous accomplishment in meditation. The progression of sati is a journey of dis-identifying, first from the body and

now from feelings and sensations. That which knows the body cannot possibly be the body. That which knows feelings and sensations is something other than feelings and sensations. This step-by-step process is the journey from the unreal to the Real. Nisargadatta calls it a process of negating or eliminating what we are not, the *via negativa*. Sati, the still point between subject and object, is the wedge that makes this awareness possible.

This second step in the journey of disidentification – a contemplation of the feelings and sensations - is a more difficult climb. To maintain connection to sati when one is flooded with feelings - negative, positive or indifferent - is like reaching a base much higher up the mountain. The ability to note, “negative feelings are present” from a place of true awareness is quite significant.

3) *cittanupassana* (sati of the mind)

We said earlier that Bodhidharma pointed toward the mind as the silent answer to our deep longing for truth. This third contemplation is that moment of turning the light of sati toward the mind itself. (It really is your mind stupid.) The journey of disidentification through the wedge of sati first began with the body and then moved to the feelings and sensations that radiate from the body and mind. Now sati is ready to turn toward the mind itself and surely this is an exponentially deeper level of identification. It is one thing to know that I am not my body. It is much harder to maintain sufficient awareness to know that I am not my feeling. Imagine the freedom that comes from watching a thought and knowing that you are not that thought.

But how does the disciple dwell in contemplation of the mind?

There the disciple knows the greedy mind as greedy, and the not-greedy mind as not-greedy; knows the angry mind as angry, and the not-angry mind as not-angry; knows the deluded mind as deluded, and the undeluded mind as undeluded. He knows the composed mind as composed, and the scattered mind as scattered.
(Satipatthana Sutra)

The Buddha says that we must know when our mind is concentrated, and know when it is not concentrated. We must know when it is free, and

when it is not free. In other words, we literally must find a vantage point from which to watch our own mind.

One of the most brilliant and helpful analogies about sati comes from Shinzen Young, who compares sati with Archimedes' famous lever. You may remember that Archimedes said, "Give me a place to stand and I will move the world." When we can stand on the sure ground of sati, we have found a place to move the mind out of its fusion with unconscious contents (our dream world) into the Real. When the light of sati is able to witness the mind we have begun to emerge from the subject-object dichotomy into an entirely new way of being. The journey has taken us much higher up the mountain.

4) *dhammanupassana* (sati of the mind objects)

This fourth contemplation is the most difficult to comprehend for many reasons. If the third contemplation is the crucial turning toward the mind, what is the Buddha pointing toward in the fourth contemplation? The literal translation of *dhammanupassana* is "contemplation of the dharma," dharma meaning "mind objects" or phenomena. Every image or object in our mind comes and goes, rises and passes away. We know that. This is one of the meanings of the Sanskrit word "dharma." Each mental object is a "dharma." In bringing sati toward the arising and passing away of objects in the mind, is the Buddha pointing us toward the truth that our mind is as ephemeral as a cloud floating across the sky? The Satipatthana Sutra is oddly vague at this point. The only thing that the Buddha actually describes in this passage is his famous "groups" of the core concepts of the Buddha-dharma. He begins with the crucial Five Hindrances.

But how does the disciple dwell in contemplation of the phenomena?

There the disciple dwells in contemplation of the phenomena, namely of the Five Hindrances.

The Buddha then lists the five hindrances: sensual desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt. After the Five Hindrances, the Satipatthana Sutra continues with another key list: the five skandhas. One contemplates the five elements of ego: form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. One contemplates how they arise and pass away and one contemplates how they are empty of personality. Here we

see the marvelous interconnectedness of each step of the Eightfold Path. In our study of Right Understanding, we saw how the Buddha emphasized the five skandhas as the central magic show that mesmerizes us into the delusion of ego. Sati is the only way to pierce the veil of that core illusion. The lists continue: contemplation of the Four Noble Truths, contemplation of the Seven Elements of Enlightenment (the seeds in our psychic garden), and contemplation of the sense factors and the fetters that arise with them.

Through the process of disidentification, something that finds a place to stand beyond the mind is able to witness the mind. Of course, that something is sati and this is the third contemplation. The journey continues onto witnessing objects within the mind. But clearly, the Buddha is pointing to something far subtler in this fourth contemplation. For one thing, he only mentions core aspects of the Dharma (his teaching) rather than any dharma passing through consciousness. Indeed, he seems to be saying that in the fourth contemplation our focus must remain tethered to the Buddha-dharma. In other words, in addition to awareness of the body, feelings and finally the mind itself, this fourth contemplation of sati is a kind of Dharma umbrella that covers the lower three contemplations.

Imagine that you are aware of the fact that there is a body sitting, which is the first contemplation. From that foundation, you can begin to focus on the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent sensations, which is the second contemplation. If sati is strong enough, you can then focus on the mind, seeing perhaps that it is in a reactive state of constriction and aversion due to the unpleasant sensations. This is the third contemplation. It is hardly an automatic process and most of us would agree that awareness of the third level of sati comes after a great deal of right effort.

Now, the mountain climb continues. If I have developed even greater (more subtle) powers of sati, I realize that the object (dharma) within the mind is one of the five hindrances; in this case the hindrance of aversion or anger, a poison that undetected will destroy any chance of equanimity. The realization that I am experiencing one of the five hindrances is an insight that sometimes can lift me out of its spell. But I may experience a more profound insight. I may see, feel, and know that I am suffering. This is an insight into the Buddha's First Noble Truth. It is an opening into wisdom. This process is Vipassana (insight) meditation in a nutshell.

I want to add a personal note to this discussion. My sense of what happened to me in Temecula when the mind turned within is that this was the fourth foundation of sati. That experience is impossible to describe verbally because the ego had to disappear in order for the mind to witness itself. My suspicion is that this is why the Buddha does not even try to describe the fourth foundation other than mentioning his Dharma lists. Perhaps sati has become so subtle in the fourth contemplation that the words of the Buddha can only point us in the right direction, much like a finger pointing at the moon. Those who can see will see.

Shinzen Young is fond of saying “subtle is significant.” When I first heard this, I found his words quite unremarkable but, as the years have gone by, I have begun to notice something rather surprising. Subtle *is* significant! The smarter I get, the smarter Shinzen Young also seems to get. Funny how that works. One way of imagining the process of sitting in meditation for thirty minutes is to see it as a movement from the subtle to the more subtle. The gradual refinement of each of the four contemplations corresponds to this movement of subtlety.

Earlier, we referred to the Buddha as a geographer who divided the universe of our psychic experience into four quarters. There are plenty of other similes. For instance, the scriptures say:

Just as a skilled butcher or butcher’s apprentice, who has slaughtered a cow and divided it into four separate portions, should sit down at the junction of four highroads: just so does the disciple contemplate this body with regard to the elements.

Everything in the Pali scriptures seems to be divided equally into threes and fours and fives, etc. Just as there are Three Poisons, Four Noble Truths, Five Skandhas, and Twelve Nidanas, our inner universe is divided into Four Contemplations. It is always unsettling to watch the eyes of meditators glaze over as one drones on and on about these core “Dharma Lists.” We tend to lose the subtle in what seems to be a tendency toward the linear. I think this is an unspoken (and often not unspoken) criticism that students of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism direct toward the Theravada teaching, which is to say, the early Pali scriptures seem to have sacrificed the subtle on the altar of precision. Could it be that in robotically teaching, studying and memorizing concepts such as the Contemplations of Sati we have missed the subtle meaning that was always present and intrinsic?

In the *Upanishads* another pinnacle of sacred Indian scriptures, one reads about the “Three Cities,” a reference to the gross, subtle, and causal *koshas* or sheaths that constitute our living reality. The yogis refer to the gross sheath as the *annamaya kosha*, or the “food body.” This is the outer layer, the bark of the tree, the shell that is part of and contains our mystery. It does not take a rocket scientist to recognize the similarity between this ancient Hindu teaching and Buddhism’s sati of the body.

As sati moves from a focus on the body (the gross outer layer), it becomes more refined or subtle. Why? Because its object has become more refined and subtle. In the Indian system, this second sheath is called the subtle body or the *pranamaya kosha*, the vital breath body. It is likely that when the Buddha referred to “knowing that the inhalation is long” etc, he was referring not so much to the breath itself as to the breath body, or the second sheath in Hindu philosophy. This second sheath, or breath body, corresponds in Buddhist terminology to *vedana*, which as we know, is the feeling body. It is literally shaped like the gross physical body but lighter, more transparent, and far more susceptible to all vibrations both negative and positive. Yoga teaches that this layer is actually where most of our illnesses (both physical and psychological) find entrance into our system. This, by the way, certainly explains why Indians believe in the enormous value of sitting in *satsang*, near one who has a healing vibration.

Many articles have been written about the psychotherapeutic relationship and the healing agent that resonates between the therapist and client. I often wonder how much of what stimulates positive change is nothing other than the power of *satsang*. If we do have a breath body, one that feels and absorbs vibrations, then perhaps the single most powerful healing agent in psychotherapy is the wordless and silent communication resonating beyond intellect, beyond the processes of thinking. Freud would spin in his grave.

The third body in Indian philosophy is the *manomaya sheath*, the mental layer. This movement of subtlety matches exactly the third contemplation of sati of the mind in Buddhism. The journey from the body, through the feelings, and then to the mind implies that sati has gone through a process of incredible refinement. That which watches must be more subtle than the thing being watched. It is one thing to sit and know is a body. It is nearly a miracle to sit and know that there is a mind.

In the Hindu philosophy, there is a fourth world, beyond the “three cities,” called *turiya*, literally, “the fourth.” *Turiya* refers to a state of awareness that is no longer identified with the lower three states of body, feeling and mind. It is a state of awareness that transcends all verbal description and it is by far the most subtle level of psychic reality. As we have seen, each “layer” of our being is increasingly subtle but by the time we reach this fourth level, “the causal level,” we have awakened. The fourth level is the level of knowing.

This fourth stage is called the *vijyanmaya kosha*, the knowing body. Perhaps the fourth level is the same as “higher spirit” in Western terminology or even “soul level.” I believe that *turiya*, or the fourth level, corresponds precisely to what the Buddha meant by the fourth contemplation, *sati* of the *dharma*. It is beyond verbal thought and thus it sees the unreality and illusion of all thought. To compare *sati* of the body to *sati* at the fourth level is to miss entirely the movement from the gross to the subtle and beyond.

This is the pure gold of *sati* where all the dross has finally been removed. *Sati* at the fourth level has become so purified that can *see* the truth of suffering, *see* the cause of suffering and *know* the way to end suffering. *Sati* at the fourth level is the mountain peak from which we begin to glimpse the beyond.

Sati is like the lighthouse that stands sentry by the shore. In darkness or stormy weather, its light leads the weary traveler to safe harbor. But if we closely examine the light itself, we discover it is very small. How does a relatively tiny bulb produce such a powerful light? There are a set of mirrors that catch the light and magnify it exponentially, turning it into a brilliant beam of energy that illuminates the darkest night. The clear mirror that magnifies *sati* is called *samadhi*, and it is the last step of the Eightfold Path.