

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### RIGHT MINDFULNESS

In *The Little Prince*, the fox tells his friend, “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” The intellect tries to understand what is essential through analysis, comparison, contrasting, judging, thinking. It can understand what a thing does, but it cannot *know* what a thing is. The old Ch’an teachers said of the Buddha, “I’ll grant you that he knew, but I won’t admit that he necessarily understood.” I take their meaning to be that the Buddha saw “what is essential” from the deep well of his heart. It is not necessarily true that he understood with his intellect. Perhaps not even a Buddha can transform essence into words.

As we turn toward *sati*, and the seventh step of the Eightfold Path, perhaps we can remember the fox’s wise words. The Buddha said that we must place *sati* before us when we sit on the cushion, but we must also place *sati* before us when we stand, walk, look and listen; while we wash the dishes, arrange the flowers, pour a cup of tea, engage in conversation, use the bathroom and lie down to sleep at night. Twenty-four-seven *sati* is what the Buddha taught, but here’s the thing: He never told us what *sati* is.

The Buddha’s circumspection when it comes to *sati* is not necessarily typical. Indeed, his Dharma sermons are evidence of a tremendous intelligence and ability to explain

the most subtle meanings to his disciples. His teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the Three Marks of Existence, Right Understanding, his wonderful similes and metaphors could not be clearer. But when it comes to *sati*, he never attempted to tell us precisely what it is. One wonders why. Perhaps, he *knew* *sati*, in the sense of “seeing rightly,” and perhaps he rightly understood that it is impossible to put what one knows in the heart into words.

There are two ways to approach *sati*. We can try to distill it down to its essence, similar to the ancient practice of *neti neti*, “not this, not that,” or we can look at *sati* from the perspective of its context in the practice of mindfulness meditation. Our tendency is to think of *sati* and mindfulness meditation as being the same, but they are definitely not. Hopefully, we will see from the following discussion that the practice of mindfulness, so elegantly described in the Satipatthana Sutta, is much more comprehensive than *sati*, which, in a sense, is small indeed.

Mindfulness meditation, especially from the Theravada tradition, is made up of five separate factors, only one of which is *sati*. Indeed, *sati*, in relationship to the other four factors, becomes *samma sati*, Right Mindfulness, the seventh step of the Eightfold Path.

Shinzen Young, one of the foremost contemporary teachers of mindfulness practice in the West, defines mindfulness as a “three-fold attentional skill set, involving concentration power, sensory clarity, and equanimity.” This is about as elegant a description of mindfulness practice as one will find, but where is *sati* in his description of mindfulness? One might surmise that Shinzen would define *sati* as “sensory clarity.” It is a good start.

Sati is the very core of Vipassana meditation and is

central to the Theravada tradition. The Pali scripture, where the Buddha describes the practice of mindfulness, is the *Mahsatipatthana Sutta*, The Great Discourse on Establishing Mindfulness. Here is Dwight Goddard's translation of the crucial words *parimukham satim upatthapeti*:

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* [italics mine].

With attentive mind he breathes in, with attentive mind he breathes out.

Note that Goddard translates *sati* as "attentiveness." To him, the mind's ability to attend to each object as it arises is the key to understanding what *sati* is. In *Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, J.N. Farquhar translates *sati* as "watchfulness." Watchfulness connotes the aspect of seeing, which is somewhat reminiscent of the little fox's words. "Watchfulness" is also used by many Tibetan teachers, almost in distinction from the word "mindfulness." In this sense, mindfulness might describe *sati* from the lens of dualism, whereas watchfulness comes from a non dual perspective. U Pandita rather begrudgingly accepts the word mindfulness as the English word for *sati*, adding that he would prefer to use "observing power."

Other teachers translate *sati* simply as "awareness." There is no question that *sati* has something to do with awareness, but it is perhaps an overreach to think of *sati* and awareness as synonymous. So far, we have described *sati* as attentive, watchful, observant, mindful and aware. Perhaps we can add Shinzen's "clarity" to the mix. Surely there are numerous other possible English words, but there is no

doubt that the word “mindfulness” has become the accepted English term for sati over the past four decades.

In *Satipatthana: the Direct Path to Realization*, Venerable Analayo offers a thorough study of mindfulness and the four establishments of mindfulness in our daily practice. It is a book that I highly recommend for any student of Vipassana meditation (as well as U Pandita’s excellent *In This Very Life* and Bhante Gunaratana’s *Mindfulness in Plain English*). In his effort to capture the essence of sati, Analayo does a wise thing; he talks around it, circling it if you will. He begins with the literal meaning of sati, saying that it is closely related to the Pali verb *sarati*, “to remember.” Analayo reminds us that the Buddha’s close friend and disciple Ananda was credited with being most eminent in sati. It was Ananda’s prodigious memory that gave him the ability to recite all of the Buddha’s sermons at the first great council after the Buddha’s death. However, Analayo reminds us that sati is not memory per se. It is the factor that facilitates a keen memory.

Like a professional photographer taking many photos of an object, Analayo presents sati from many angles. Calling it “present moment awareness,” he says, “One is wide awake in regard to the present moment.” Sati can be thought of as a wide angle lens, as opposed to the narrow lens that comes through concentration. It is “a calm and detached type of observation,” and in the scriptures it is compared to the probe of a surgeon. Most importantly, Analayo says that “Sati is the mental quality that enables wisdom to arise.” This is the key attribute that makes sati so crucial to Vipassana meditation, which, after all, is translated as *insight* meditation.

Joseph Goldstein distinguishes sati from *sanna*, perception, saying that sati is like the frame around perception. Analayo agrees. He says that “Sati does not

change experience, it deepens it.” Analayo summarizes his discussion of sati by saying that it “entails an alert but receptive equanimous observation.” In addition to the previous adjectives describing sati, we can now add that it is receptive, equanimous, observing, calm, and detached. It offers a wide view and is somehow connected to wisdom (*prajna*). Indeed, Ajahn Sumedho frequently combines sati with *prajna*, calling it “sati-prajna” (as well as “sati-sampajana”).

Perhaps Analayo wisely sees that one cannot capture sati in the nest of words, which is why he talks around it. He establishes a context for sati by explaining how it fits in the structure of the Buddha-dharma. Clearly it is a cornerstone. For instance, sati is the first of the seven seeds of awakening in the garden of our mind. The factors of awakening are one of the core “lists” that occur in the fourth establishment of mindfulness. They arise much like an organic process, occurring naturally after consciousness has reached a certain level of purification.

In addition, there are five spiritual factors – sometimes called, appropriately enough, the controlling factors. They are like digital dials on an instrument panel – each one indicating a different control over our practice. The first two instrument dials are faith and energy; the last two are concentration and wisdom. Our practice vehicle can get out of whack in a multitude of ways: We can have too much faith and not enough wisdom, a condition that pours millions of dollars and people into cults. In reverse, we can have too much wisdom with little faith. In the West, where science has become our new religion and faith has been relegated to irrational emotionalism and religiosity, we tend to wonder how it is even possible to have too much wisdom. This is probably a sad indication of how far out of balance we have become. Buddhism teaches that wisdom without

faith becomes “dry,” rigid, and arrogant. It is a far cry from the rich meaning of intuitive wisdom, or prajna.

We can also have too much energy and not enough concentration. When there is too much energy in the system, the mind can be intoxicated with religious or spiritual fervor; one wants to share the Dharma with everyone, and seemingly brilliant thoughts literally cascade through our mind. We can also have the reverse situation where there is strong concentration but low energy. This is the perfect storm for falling asleep while meditating. The middle dial on the panel operates as a balance between the two groups, and it is none other than sati.

Finally, and most cogent to this discussion is sati’s role in the Eightfold Path. As the seventh step, it becomes *samma sati* or Right Mindfulness. There is a good reason why the Buddha adds samma (right) to sati in the Eightfold Path. For instance, a master thief could not possibly succeed without the aid of sati. Imagine his moving stealthily about in a museum intending to steal a priceless painting. He (or she) would need extraordinary concentration in order to focus on all the barriers set up to protect the painting, all the while following the intricacies of the master plan. But even the most powerful ability to concentrate would not be sufficient to pull off the heist. Our thief would also need to have the ability to adjust to the unexpected, perhaps hearing the faint steps of a guard approaching or suddenly recognizing some new device recently installed and unplanned for. These events require an ability to be totally present with a wide lens and to be able to spontaneously change in order to adapt to the new situation, moment by moment. This ability falls under the aegis of sati. Sati can transform an average jewel thief into a master thief as well as facilitate profound insights in Vipassana meditation. It can be used for ill or for good. This is why sati must be connected to samma in the Eightfold Path and linked to the steps that precede it. Right

Understanding paves the way for Right Mindfulness.

One pitfall to seeing sati clearly is the tendency to “personalize” it to a nearly anthropomorphic degree. For instance, Analayo describes sati as “calm and equanimous.” But would we describe a camera taking a photo as calm and equanimous? Even comparing it to a surgeon’s probe invites personification. One well-known Buddhist teacher describes sati in feminine tones, comparing it to a loving mother watching over her children. Conversely, U Pandita does not like a passive connotation for sati. He says that it has an active, even confrontational intensity. It must “leap forward onto the object, covering it completely, penetrating into it, not missing any part of it.” Here sati takes on a masculine almost warrior-like quality. This matches the heroic language the Buddha used. After all, Gautama Buddha was from the Kshatriyas (kings and warriors) Indian caste. Clearly we see the difficulty of culling sati down to its bare essence. Even the term “silent witness” is problematic. Can we say “witness” without personifying it? Obviously not. As long as there is the fantasy of a person inside, I will always project that person into the outside. So the ego will be most certain that there is a silent witness, and that witness is none other than “me!”

The problem of personalizing sati is relentless. The ever present feeling of “I am,” an undercurrent flowing beneath conscious experience, is processed by the ego as “me,” and that “me” takes ownership of every experience. Unfortunately, delusion does not end simply because I sit on a cushion, close my eyes, and focus on the in and out breath. In fact, at least for most beginning meditators, the ego inevitably takes ownership of the activity of meditation. One says, “I meditated. I was mindful of my breath. I watched the rise and fall of my abdomen.” In response, a teacher might gently ask, “And who was it who meditated?”

Who was mindful? Who watched the rise and fall of the abdomen?” What better disguise for the ego than to wrap itself under the cloak of sati!

There are limitations to approaching something as ephemeral as sati through any single discipline or tradition, even one as singularly devoted to it as Vipassana meditation. Carl Jung wisely pointed out that our greatest strength will usually be our greatest weakness. This is the view I suggest we take as our investigation into sati deepens.

Hopefully, we will see sati more clearly by looking at it from both inside and outside the Theravada tradition. There is one caveat to mention: My Vipassana training is limited mostly to the Mahasi Sayadaw noting style. There are other Vipassana techniques from Southeast Asia that strongly disagree with the noting method, and emphasize other approaches to sati. Regardless of the particular techniques of working with sati, mindfulness practice is the absolute heart of Vipassana meditation.

In Vipassana meditation, the meditator focuses on the object. While there are exceptions to any statement as general as the one above, surely it is agreed that the fundamental method of Vipassana meditation is to investigate phenomena. As we will see when we turn to the four establishments of sati, the object becomes increasingly subtle as one progresses, but the aim remains the same: an increasingly microscopic examination of the arising and passing away of all phenomena. Under a microscopic investigation, and with the clarity that comes from a mind that has become still, every object of meditation eventually reveals three secrets: It is impermanent, it is unsatisfactory, and it does not contain a self or person or ego within. From this act of “seeing rightly” comes insight into the Dharma.

The linchpin of this investigation is sati. Indeed, the Buddha teaches that investigation (*dhamma vicaya* in Pali) – the second factor of awakening – flows naturally out of the first factor, which is established sati.

Other styles of Buddhist meditation, particularly those that have evolved from the Mahayana tradition, focus on the subject rather than the object. Much of this shift in focus can be traced back to the extraordinary genius of Nagarjuna, (150-250 CE), who founded the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism. Nagarjuna formulated the concept of *sunyata* (emptiness) and the concept of “two truths” (absolute and relative). Centuries later, Bodhidharma carried the Mahayana teaching to China. Here the shift in focus from object to subject found completion. The Ch’an teachers say of Bodhidharma that “he pointed directly toward the mind.” In keeping with this shift in focus, the old Ch’an masters advise us to empty the self and not worry about emptying the object. If we empty the self, the object is automatically emptied. Another frequent analogy is the suggestion that we work with the root and forget about the branches. Suffice it to say that the shift from Vipassana to Ch’an meditation is almost the same as the difference in extroversion and introversion. They are completely opposite ways of seeing. In the introverted approach, Sati is still the linchpin, but its aim is toward the observer rather than the observed.

A radically different approach to sati comes from another great Indian tradition, Vedanta. Unlike classical Buddhism, which can hardly bear to use the word “self” in a sentence, other traditions, such as the Vedanta of Hinduism and Buddhist Mahayana address the mystery that surrounds the concept of self. We saw that Analayo related sati to the Pali word *sarati*, or remembering. In *The Doctrine of Awakening* the brilliant Italian scholar Julius Evola translates

sati with its Sanskrit word *smriti*, which also means remembering, but with a startlingly different connotation. Evola translates the Buddha's famous phrase *parimukham satim upatthapeti* as placing "the memory of oneself before oneself." This is a far cry from the rather spare Theravada translation of "putting mindfulness to the fore." Evola's translation is more attuned to the teaching of the Upanishads, the magnificent sacred scriptures that preceded the birth of the Buddha:

The knowing Self is not born, It does not die. It has not sprung from anything; nothing has sprung from it. Birthless, eternal, everlasting, and ancient, It is not killed when the body is killed.

(Katha Upanishad)

One of greatest Advaita masters of the past century, Nisargadatta, emphasized sati:

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.

Nisargadatta seems to acknowledge that there is no word that really captures "it," saying that we can call it mindfulness, witnessing or simply attention, but the point is that everyone is already aware of himself. Deepening and broadening self-awareness is the "royal way" to true wisdom. Nisargadatta is suggesting that meditation should focus not merely on the object or the subject but on that which is beyond the subject-object dichotomy: that which is self-aware. This is strikingly similar to the Dzogchen

teaching.

Similarly, from the Ch'an tradition, the contemporary Ch'an master Sheng Yen says:

Let me repeat how you enter the practice of huatou. First, relax your body and mind. Second, when sitting, eating, walking, working, listening, being vexed, being drowsy, be aware of who is experiencing this. With this awareness, you will establish an intimate connection with the self. Keep asking, "Who is experiencing this?"

One of the most insightful glimpses into the essence of sati come from that wild Indian genius, Bhagwan Sree Rajneesh, who in his later years preferred to be called Osho. His description of sati follows Nisargadatta's. 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.

One is reminded of Krishnamurti's frequent admonition to his listeners not to get lost in the speaker. Although he did not necessarily mention sati by name, this was his constant focus as a teacher. Over and over he folded each topic of conversation back toward the listener, just as they relentlessly tried to focus on him as the "speaker."

Rajneesh posits that sati is a finely balanced point of awareness that remains focused on the subject *and* object simultaneously. In other words, we must not forget the self in any form of attentiveness. If we can “trace back the radiance” to use Chinul’s brilliant expression, *while focusing on the object*, we have stripped the ego of its primary cover during meditation. This shift in focus is of enormous consequence. Nisargadatta urges us to remember:

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

It makes perfect sense that “self-awareness” does not find an easy resting place in Theravada Buddhism, a tradition that emphasizes the Buddha’s teaching of no self, thus the pristine translation of “putting mindfulness to the fore.” A self does not need to be mentioned. As we see in Ch’an master Sheng Yen’s words quoted above, Mahayana Buddhism bears a striking similarity to Vedanta. This is hardly surprising since Advaita and Mahayana developed in physical as well as temporal proximity. Both traditions are comfortable talking about the self. For instance, Zen master Dogen said that we actually begin our practice by studying the self. Surely the only way to do this is through self-remembering, and how else but through sati could we possibly do this? When we study the self a paradox occurs: we forget the self. This is precisely what Nisargadatta intended by urging us to stay with the feeling of I Am. You get beyond the limited self by seeing it rightly, not by ignoring it. According to Dogen, self study opens the door to Reality: “To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by myriad things.”

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 neat little categories. For one thing, who among us does not drag around a 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. We experience a ubiquitous self-referencing everywhere we go in this world. Thinking *about* yourself is hardly the same as trying to be *with* yourself. To confuse self-referencing with self-remembering is to miss it by a mile. Self-remembering occurs when we turn the light inward and feel the subtle touch of inner presence. To one who is terrified by feelings of emptiness and isolation, this takes unbelievable courage. It can only begin with the presence of sati.

Earlier, we spoke of the five elements that create mindfulness meditation – remembering that Shinzen Young names only three. Sati is what remains after we have separated out the other elements. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha describes the practice of mindfulness thusly:

Here monks, in regard to the body a monk abides contemplating the body, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.

Five elements combined create the practice of sati: diligence, clear knowing, sati itself, a state free from desire, and a state free from discontent. Whether we call it diligence, or ardor, or whether we use Nisargadatta's favorite word, earnestness, the first element of satipatthana is the sine qua non of spiritual practice. It is the true face of our basic attitude. What is more crucial to the success of any endeavor than the basic attitude toward the effort? Even though our attitude is pivotal to mindfulness meditation, it

is not what sati is.

The Buddha's definition of satipatthana makes a second and even more subtle distillation of sati by separating it from what he calls "clear knowing" or clear comprehension. In the Pali scriptural language, clear knowing is called *sampajana*. This is undoubtedly the most difficult part of the definition for us to understand, because we invariably attribute the faculty of knowing to sati. Indeed, it is a stretch to distill seeing (sati) from knowing (sampajana). As mentioned earlier, Ajahn Sumedho frequently combines sati with sapajana, referring to it as sati-sampajana.

The first two factors, diligence and sampajana, are the factors that must be present with sati to create a stable mindfulness practice. The last two factors, "desires and discontent in regard to the world," must be absent for the establishment of mindfulness. They obscure the clear light of sati. When the dark clouds of desire and discontent have vanished, sati can shine forth.

What is the essence that is left when we remove sampajana from sati? Even with the inherent problems of personification, I vote for the Hindu expression "silent witness." Sati simply watches. This is exactly what a security camera does in a department store. Imagine that there are six shoplifters constantly changing disguises as they try to steal objects from the store all day long. The security camera watches the activity. It does not have an attitude about what it sees. It does not label the shoplifters as good or bad people. It simply sees what is. More importantly, it does not even *know* what it is seeing. This is the crucial distinction. The job of knowing belongs to someone who reviews the film. That person knows that someone has surreptitiously placed an item in a deep pocket and is carefully heading for the exit. This is the job of

sampajana. It knows what sati sees. The more sati sees, the more sampajana knows. It knows who the six shoplifters are: Seeing, Hearing, Tasting, Touching, Smelling, and Thinking. They rob the store of its integrity and harmony. Sati combined with sampajana begins the process that can culminate into prajna. Imagine three employees working together to mind the store: Earnest Diligence, Silent Witnessing and Clear Knowing. For sure, they pave the way for insight.

Finally, an intriguing psychological glimpse into the mystery of sati needs to be mentioned before we turn to the practice of mindfulness. It comes from the reports of people who have experienced various traumas. We have heard the stories too many times to dismiss them as fantasy. A woman says that during surgery the anesthesia did not put her to sleep. She literally watched the surgery from some vantage point outside her body, and can report the conversation between doctors and nurses, as later verified by those same doctors and nurses. How could this possibly be? Children have reported looking down as their little bodies were being sexually abused. They had the sensation of watching the violation of their body / mind from the ceiling. Almost everyone has heard a story about a person leaving the body at the time of death, only to return to this life because it was not their time. Can a silent witness leave this body and watch it in a calm detached manner, even as the body / mind endures enormous trauma?

However inexplicable, and unbelievable, the answer seems to be undeniably yes. I suggest that this is our greatest clue into sati. The astonishing truth is that the mind has the ability to look back at the body / mind from a distance, from outside the boundaries of body / mind. In fact, perhaps the Buddha's instructions are *literally* true, when he said that we must place sati before us! Perhaps the

extraordinary truth is that the mind has an uncanny ability to look at itself.

At best, an attempt to define the essence of sati is only a finger pointing toward the moon. The most that we can say is that sati is a point of focused awareness that is not located within the boundaries of the body / mind. Perhaps it is the impersonal, colorless, shapeless, silent witness that completely transcends all our personal identifications and exists, not only in us, but around us, connecting us not only to the internal world, but to the eternally beyond. In truth, the Buddha's reluctance to define sati makes perfect sense. It cannot be defined with words. We now turn to the Buddha's description of the activity of mindfulness as found in the great Satipatthana Sutta.

### **The Four Establishments of Sati**

Ramakrishna compared us to the fabled musk deer roaming the earth seeking the source of the delicate scent of musk, never knowing that the scent comes from its own essence. This was the Buddha's meaning when he said that as long as we keep walking to the end of the world, the world will never end. At some point we must stop this ceaseless wandering, searching the world for what has always been within. With the precision of a geographer, the Buddha created a map of our inner universe, dividing the entirety of our psychic universe into four quarters. It is a brilliant inner map. He called these four quarters the four establishments - foundations or abidings - of sati. Whatever English word you prefer, these four contemplations are a safe port in any storm.

Earlier, we discussed the matrix of the Twelve Nidanas and how we roam ceaselessly from nidana to nidana, trapped on the endless wheel of samsara. Even if only for a

brief moment of clarity, the Four Contemplations are a rescue helicopter lifting us from the flood of the Twelve Nidanas. While walking to the car in the morning the double arrow of sati can allow consciousness to know that a body is walking and know that a mind is watching the body: nama-rupa. When lying down to sleep at night one can know that a body is lying and know that a mind is watching the body: nama-rupa. One can know that the mind state is worried or peaceful, anxious or zoned out. While waiting in a long line, one can know that a body is standing and feel the mind's constriction or relaxation. While driving on the freeway, one can suddenly realize that she is lost in impatience or anger or is simply daydreaming. Sati is the still point of present moment awareness that gives us the chance to know. Sampajana is the knowing.

### 1) *Kayanupassana* (sati of the body)

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.

The practice of satipatthana (the activity of sati) involves an attitude that is ardent or diligent, a mind that clearly comprehends what sati sees (sampajana), and a mind that is free from desire and discontent. With these five factors in place, satipatthana begins with the most obvious, universally experienced, and intimate fact of our inner world: the body or *kaya*. Contemplation of the body is an acknowledgement that it is a living, breathing presence. It is a physical animal, however insulting that may be to our "human" sensibilities. It is "brother ass" in the words of Saint Francis of Assisi. It has gas, it urinates, and it needs fuel, water and air. It has to sleep. It is as close to us as wet

is to water. In the scriptures, *kaya* is also referred to as *rupa*, or form, one half of the combination that makes up the fourth *nidana*, *nama rupa*. 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. How close this comes to describing the reality of *kayanupassana*! Something in us shrinks from the actual reality of this animal body, and yet, paradoxically, we cling to it like white on rice. Perhaps that is why we are more comfortable saying that we have a body rather than saying that we are a body. That felt reality of a vein pulsing in the neck forces us to admit how utterly fragile and impermanent our physical existence really is. Surely, something deep within knows that even Big Ben cannot tick forever, cannot be repaired forever; this living, breathing body, this palpable presence of organic life, can become too terrifyingly real when it breaks through our ego's normal wall of denial.

It is a huge deal to stay connected to the reality of this organic clock ticking away. To do so invites a stunning and shattering insight: We are rowing merrily down the stream in a canoe filled with holes, to borrow one of Ruth Denison's favorite analogies. The canoe may have slow leaks, or the water may be gushing in, but this little boat has been sinking since the day it was launched. 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, a body is sitting there.

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.

It bears repeating that it is not sati which knows, this is the function of sampajana. Sati is the still point of awareness that allows the knowing faculty to manifest. Usually, in the beginning of our practice, we discover that it is impossible to watch the breath without controlling it. A teacher hears this frequently from beginning students. The mere suggestion that it is possible to watch the breath from a point of awareness that is not engaged in control opens the mind to a radically new perspective.

When we try to focus our attention exclusively on the object, in this case the in and out breath, we are actually moving in the direction of a one-pointed arrow, to use Rajneesh's analogy. Unquestionably, a one-pointed focus deepens the concentration; the mind "collects" or unifies itself, and this practice can lead to extraordinary mind states, called *samadhi*, which we will examine in greater detail in the following chapters.

Deep concentration and the resulting mind states are not the defining characteristics of Vipassana meditation, as the Buddha clearly explains. Vipassana meditation is defined by insight, or *prajna*. In Vipassana we never disconnect from *knowing*. The Buddha is very clear in his instruction: We must *know* that the breath is long or short. Maintaining an awareness of whether the breath is long or short prevents one from going too deeply into concentration on the object. This is where the role of sati becomes so crucial. In the one-pointed arrow, subject and object merge or unify into *samadhi*. In truth, this is not entirely different from being completely lost, enthralled, in listening to beautiful music.

This is not to say that sati has disappeared from the experience, by the way. When sati has completely disappeared from consciousness, we fall asleep, which is another form of concentration. Thus, awake concentration depends on the presence of sati. In samadhi, however, sati has become subservient to the concentration. Alternatively, when sati is the still point of awareness between the subject and object, allowing the knowing function of sampajana to remain active, the door to insight is open. This describes Vipassana meditation.

Another practice of mindfulness of the body is the four postures: the body standing; the body moving; the body sitting; the body lying. As we sit on the cushion, we are asked to be mindful of the fact that the body is sitting. It is obvious and yet so easily forgotten. Particularly on meditation retreats, we walk carefully and slowly in the practice of mindful walking. Again, it is crucial that we distinguish between a one-arrowed concentration meditation that focuses on the sensations of each foot as it lifts, moves and touches the ground, and Vipassana meditation where sati remains the still point between the activity of walking, and the *knowing* that there is a body moving. It is easy to understand why the Buddha urges us to be ardent and diligent in our practice!

Another satipatthana meditation on the body is to contemplate the reality that it 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 (the earth element) with bones, teeth, nails, and soft with tongue, earlobes and skin. It is constantly in the motion of expansion and contraction (the air element) and is held together with the cohesive element of water. A body made of earth, air, fire and water, is clearly impermanent. Deeply seeing this is a profound insight into

the three characteristics, anicca. As the body slowly deteriorates it suffers pain, the profound insight of dukkha. And when one sees that the body possesses no living ego no self, the door is open to the most profound insight of all, anatta. Contemplating the composition of the body is Vipassana meditation in a nutshell.

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 if sati is obscured, there is an immediate fusion of the sensation and the “me” observing it. I become the pain. Whether I want to admit it or not, I no longer have pain, I am pain. The presence of sati creates a wedge between the object and that which observes the object. This wedge is one moment of freedom, however fleeting. With sati present, there is a slight possibility of non-reaction. Sati does not choose a response for us, but its presence gives us the possibility of a choice. Sampajana helps us to choose.

Other Vipassana styles emphasize the sweeping technique. Here, the meditator learns to connect with each part of the body as consciousness sweeps down from head to toe. This is an ancient yoga practice and is an excellent way to work with 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 for beginning satipatthana. Nothing teaches us the truth of craving (tanha) like the pleasures that we experience from the body. Its pains teach us about aversion. And as mentioned above, it teaches us par excellence the three characteristics of suffering, impermanence, and no self. Through the insights that arise from contemplating the body, wisdom can emerge.

## 2) *Vedananupassana* (sati of the feelings)

The second contemplation of sati is vedana, the Pali word for feelings or sensations. We saw 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 the second skandha. There must be a “me” in there who is feeling.

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.

Shinzen Young has a favorite saying that is simple and yet profound, “Subtle is significant.” The practice of satipatthana is precisely a continual movement toward increasingly subtle objects of awareness. 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. It implies an ability to watch the body (*kaya* or *rupa*) from a place beyond the body. From this place, the Buddha skillfully guides us to an even more subtle world, the world of feelings and sensations. This is a journey of dis-identification, first from the body and now from feelings and sensations. That which sees the body cannot possibly be the body. That which sees feelings and sensations cannot possibly be feelings and sensations. This is the step-by-step process of negation, called *neti neti*. Nisargadatta calls it the *via negativa*. As we said above, only

sati, the still point between subject and object, can create the wedge that makes this process of negation possible.

This second step of satipatthana – contemplating the feelings and sensations – requires a more subtle or distilled sati. It is crucial that we see this. It is hard enough to remain connected to sati and sampajana while intense pain floods the body. It is exponentially more difficult to stay connected to sati and sampajana when one is flooded with feelings of negativity, or, for that matter, intense joy. This is similar to reaching a base much higher up the mountain. The air is thinner, sati is more refined. The ability to note “negative feelings are present” from the wedge created by sati is as Shinzen Young would say, significant.

### **3) *Cittanupassana* (sati of the mind)**

Bodhidharma points us in the direction of the third contemplation. Here, the light of sati turns toward the mind itself, and the journey of neti neti continues. How can the mind watch itself? The question is very nearly a koan, perhaps it is a koan. All we can say is that sati has now created a wedge within the mind itself. Now there is a presence that can be the observer. This is extraordinary! It is one thing to know that I am not my body. It is much more difficult to maintain sufficient connection to sati for sampajana to know that ‘I’ am not my feeling. Now, imagine the freedom that comes from watching a thought and knowing that you are not that thought! This is an exponential leap. The Buddha explains how the disciple dwells 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.

Shinzen Young has another wonderful saying, this time in the form of an analogy. He 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 sati has a place to stand, it can move the mind out of its fusion with unconscious contents into what truly is. When the light of sati is able to witness the mind, we have begun to emerge from the dualism of the subject-object dichotomy into an entirely new way of seeing. This is a point of convergence of the double arrow. Whether or not the focus of sati was previously on the object or toward the subject, as we reach the third contemplation, the movement turns decidedly inward. The journey has taken us much higher up the mountain, to even more rarified air. Subtle becomes increasingly significant.

#### **4) *Dhammanupassana* (sati of the phenomena)**

The fourth contemplation is by far the most difficult to comprehend, and, not surprisingly, there are a host of different interpretations as to its real meaning. If the third contemplation is the true turning point inward, what is the Buddha pointing to in the fourth contemplation? The literal translation of *dhammanupassana* is "contemplation of the dharma," (*damma* in Pali). The word "dharma" refers here to mental objects or phenomena. Every image or object in our mind rises and passes away. Indeed there is a constant movie playing in our mind. As sati sees the arising and passing away of objects in the mind, the truth of the ephemeral nature of all objects may emerge through the knowing faculty; dharmas are like clouds floating across an empty sky.

The Satipatthana Sutta is oddly vague about the fourth establishment of mindfulness. One wonders if we are, again, approaching something too subtle to be caught in the nest of words. It certainly makes sense if we consider the possibility that each stage of the four satipatthanas is increasingly more refined. By the fourth stage, we would have reached the land of silence. The only thing that the Buddha actually describes in this passage is his famous “lists” of the core concepts of the Buddha-dharma. He begins his naming with the 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. The five hindrances are thoroughly explained in many excellent books, including the ones mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Suffice it to say the Buddha is typically logical and elegant in the progression of these lists. The five hindrances are the first roadblock on the journey to the Real. After the Five Hindrances, the Satipatthana Sutra continues with the five skandhas. In the light of sati, plus sufficient concentration and Right Effort, one has learned to avoid the pitfalls of the five hindrances, and can now contemplate the five elements of ego: form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. One contemplates how they arise and pass away (anicca) how they are unsatisfactory (dukkha) and empty of personality (anatta). 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. With the fourth contemplation, we

can pierce the veil of that core illusion.

The lists continue with the third group: contemplation of the six sense-spheres. Again, this level of practice is founded on the first two. Now we have sufficient meditative power to withdraw from the six senses and turn within. As mentioned previously, this is comparable to pratyahara in the Yoga System. From here we move to the fourth list, the seven factors of awakening. After the crucial moment of turning within, the seeds of awakening begin to sprout in the garden of the mind. Only when the mind has awakened is it ready to turn to the epicenter of the Buddha-dharma and the final list, the Four Noble Truths. Amazingly, the fourth contemplation ends in a complete return to where we began: Right Understanding.

The process of satipatthana is one of increasing subtlety: from the gross object of a physical body, to the more transparent body of feelings, and then to the much more subtle mental body, the third establishment of mindfulness. This is a huge achievement in the process of transformation. The question is this: If the journey of satipatthana is an inexorable movement toward essence, from the subtle to the more subtle, what is so difficult to understand about these lists? From one perspective, the fourth establishment of mindfulness seems no more than parallel, or be even less subtle than the remarkable achievement of the third level, the establishment of sati of the mind.

My suggestion is that the Buddha silently points toward the moon in his description of the fourth establishment of mindfulness. Just as he refused to put sati into words, he does the same here. All he does is name core elements of the Buddhadharma. If, at each level of satipatthana, the mind has become increasingly capable of balancing and incorporating sati and sampajana into what it sees and

knows, surely, by the fourth level of satipatthana the mind has made a radical shift. It has now become tethered to the Buddha-dharma. No longer is the Dharma an external list of the Buddha's extraordinary insights. It has become completely internalized. The Buddhadharma becomes a living, breathing inner scripture. This is the meaning of the old Ch'an statement, "The wise enshrine the miraculous bones of the ancients within themselves." It is what Ajhan meant when he said that we must *be* the dharma. I would add that it probably signifies the movement from duality to the non dual.

Imagine that you are aware of the fact that there is a body sitting, and you are able to experience its sensations from a vantage point separate from the sense of being a body. This is the first abiding in mindfulness. From this place, you may begin to focus on the experience of sensations as being pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent. In other words, sati-sampajana has become more refined and you have moved into the second contemplation of vedana. From this vantage point, sati may become refined enough for sampajana to become aware of the mind itself. Perhaps sati-sampajana *sees* and *knows* that the mind is in a reactive, constricted state due to unpleasant sensations in the body. This is the third contemplation.

When sati becomes even more distilled, like a refining process that removes dross from gold, one may be able to see, not only that the mind is constricted, but also that this constriction comes from aversion, and that this aversion is a hindrance to clarity and insight. This awareness of the five hindrances has moved the level of sati to the fourth contemplation. It is an insight that could possibly lift one out of the trance of aversion. The trail of insight does not stop here, however. One may experience an even deeper insight, seeing that this aversion causes true suffering. This

insight is an opening into wisdom. With the fourth establishment of sati, the Buddha-dharma has been internalized to the degree that when we sit, stand, walk or lie down, we do so under the safety of its unsurpassed protection.

In the Upanishads, there is a reference to the “Three Cities.” The mystic seer was pointing to the gross, subtle, and causal *koshas* or sheaths the ancient yogis believed constitute this living being. The gross sheath is known as the *annamaya kosha*, or the “food body.” This is the outer layer, the bark of the tree, the oyster’s shell that protects the pearl within. Clearly there is a similarity between this ancient Hindu teaching and the Buddha’s first establishment of mindfulness: *kaya*, (or *rupa*) the physical body.

The second sheath is called the subtle body - the *pranamaya kosha*. It is known as the vital breath body. Yoga teaches that this layer is actually where most of our illnesses (both physical and psychological) find entrance into our system. This explains why Hindus believe in the enormous value of sitting in *satsang*, near one who has a healing vibration. The corresponding level in the satipatthana scheme is an inner “layer” of feelings, *vedana*.

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 the satipatthana progression. The journey from the body, through the feelings, and then to the mind implies that sati itself has gone through a process of refinement. That which watches must be more subtle than the thing being watched. In the Indian system, it is like the unpeeling of an onion – moving ever closer to that which cannot be seen with the eyes. The satipatthana system emphasizes the process as a gradual progress of insight, but the end result seems quite

similar.

In the Hindu philosophy, there is a fourth state, 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 is, by far, the most subtle level of psychic reality. This fourth stage is called the *vijnanamaya kosha*, the wisdom body. Surely there is some correspondence to the Buddha’s fourth contemplation. Could it not be called the establishment of wisdom? Is not the fourth contemplation the abiding in wisdom? Here, *sati* has transcended discriminative thinking and can see *through* the unreal nature of thought. It is truly a journey from the unreal to the Real.

All the dross has finally been removed, and we come to the pure gold of *sati*. At the fourth level of awareness, one can *see* the truth of suffering; one can *see* the cause of suffering; one can *see* the way to end suffering. The wisdom mind can thus *know* the Four Noble Truths. At the fourth level *sati* reaches the mountain peak from which we can glimpse the beyond.

*Sati* is like a lighthouse that stands sentry by the shore. In darkness and stormy weather, its light leads the little boat home to a safe harbor. If we closely examine the light itself, we discover something rather amazing. The light is actually quite small. How does a relatively tiny bulb produce such a powerful light? The answer is that the lighthouse has a set of mirrors that reflect the light and magnify it exponentially. Thus the light is turned into a brilliant beam of energy that illuminates the darkest night. The clear mirror that magnifies the light of *sati* is called *samadhi*, and it is the last step of the Eightfold Path. To that we now turn.

Excerpt from *The Discourse Record of Chan Master Hongzhi*

Wide and far-reaching without limit,  
pure and clean, it emits light.  
Its spiritual potency is unobscured.  
Although it is bright, there are no objects of  
illumination.  
It can be said to be empty,  
yet this emptiness is [full of] luminosity.  
It illumines in self-purity,  
beyond the working of causes and conditions,  
apart from subject and object.  
Its wondrousness and subtleties are ever present,  
its luminosity is also vast and open.  
Moreover, this is not something that can be  
conceived of as existence or nonexistence.  
Nor can it be deliberated about with words and  
analogies.  
Right here --- at this pivotal axle,  
opening the swinging gate and clearing the way –  
it is able to respond effortlessly to circumstances;  
the great function is free from hindrances.