



Satipatthana – Mindfulness Meditation: The Four Foundations of Mindfulness – Part I

Donald Cornelius, Ph.D.

This text is the first part of a talk delivered by Dr. Donald Cornelius to the members of the Inisfada Zendo at Molloy College on August 3, 2014. This part of the talk focuses on the first foundation of mindfulness as it is developed in the Satipatthana Sutra—mindfulness of the body.

I was asked me to speak with you this morning on the Buddhist meditation tradition of South East Asia: referred to as Vipassana Meditation, in its English translation Insight Meditation or now more commonly as Mindfulness Meditation.

A little history sets the context of this tradition within the Buddhist narrative and how it found its way to the west during the 70s and early 80s.

In the Pali Canon, which is a textual compilation of the Buddha's teachings, we find a distillation of the instructions for the meditation practice taught by the Buddha. The teaching is contained in the Satipatthana Sutta: The Four Foundations of Mindfulness. You will find the full text of the sutta in the Appendix at the end of the talk.

The Buddha frequently reminded his followers that his teaching was about one thing and one thing only, dukkha and the end of dukkha. How dukkha arises and how it can be eliminated. Dukkha has been commonly translated as suffering. However, suffering as an English equivalent to dukkha is an inadequate translation. In the Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion Sutta the Buddha describes dukkha in these words: "Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, death is dukkha: sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are dukkha; associating with the unbeloved is dukkha; separation from the loved is dukkha; not getting what is wanted is dukkha. In short, all our common experiences of wanting and not wanting are dukkha." (SN 56:11). Sometimes dukkha is rendered as stress, unsatisfactoriness, or just plain being out of sorts.

The Buddha's primary motivation then was to discover a way for humans, first for himself and then for others, to reduce or eliminate the inevitability suffering associated with the reality of being born human; sickness, old age and death. That while life has many opportunities for joy and happiness, ultimately life is experienced as impermanent, imperfect and deeply impersonal. When Siddhartha Gautama left home at age thirty he searched through all the spiritual traditions of his time that promised to teach the way to address the malady of human suffering (dukkha), but he never found a satisfactory remedy. So he embarked on a path of self-discovery. We now call the result of this self-discovery, his awakening or enlightenment.

The content of this enlightenment was codified by his early followers as the Four Ennobling Truths; knowing dukkha, knowing the causes of dukkha, knowing the end of dukkha, and fourthly, knowing the method or path to end dukkha, the method we know as

the eight fold path. Right or correct view, correct intention, correct action, correct speech, correct livelihood, correct effort, correct mindfulness and correct concentration.

There are three sets within the eight fold path: the first set, is wisdom or the correct understanding of how things actually work: right view and right intention. The second set is ethical: right action, speech and livelihood. And the third set is right or correct method: correct effort, correct mindfulness and correct concentration.

Today we are focused in this talk on understanding the method. If mindfulness is one of the core principles of the eight fold path to the ending of dukkha. How is mindfulness developed? In the Satipatthana Sutta the Buddha teaches his followers the skill of mindfulness. We are given instruction of how to be mindful of the 1) body, 2) mindful of our feelings (what it feels like in the body to want, not want, or to be insensitive to feeling), 3) mindful of the thoughts associated with our feelings, and fourthly, with how our body, feelings and thoughts square with the dhammas, or with the realities of the human experience. We are told in the Sutta that this is the practice that will end dukkha and lead to true happiness. The Buddha was very clear. Mindfulness is a skill, it can be taught, a person can learn it, a person can practice it; it is within the capacity of any human person who exerts right effort. All humans have the capacity to become enlightened or to be awake; to reduce and potentially eliminate the experience of dukkha.

When people encountered the Buddha after his enlightenment, they were immediately aware that he was different, those who knew him saw it as a glow. Are you a god, a deva, an angel, a super human person, they asked? No, I am only awake, I am Tathāgata. This was how the Buddha referred to himself; the only thing special about him was his skill as a practitioner of the four ennobling truths and the eight fold path. He remained until his death a human who had followed the path to its end, nothing more.

I'll return to these four foundations in a moment, but first again a little historical context.

In the two thousand six hundred years after the Buddha's awakening, Buddhism became, for want of a better word, a religion. Following the trade routes, it spread south and east to Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, north into China, from China to Japan, and when Buddhism was finally routed from India by Islam and Hinduism in the eleventh and twelfth century into Tibet. Finally within our own time, Buddhism comes into much of the western world. Today sitting here we are part of this migration, this history of transmission.

Although mindfulness meditation, Satipatthana, was a core teaching of the Buddha, like his other teachings they were seen and practiced through the filters of the cultural and religious traditions where they landed. Overtime meditation practices were forgotten or ignored left mostly to the monastics, even in the monasteries there were very few monk/nun meditators. For two thousand years most Buddhists did not even know there was a Pali Canon or the teachings of the Satipatthana Sutta. For the most part the teachings of the Sutta were forgotten. In fact, good accurate English translations have only been available in the last ten or fifteen years. Through the centuries small meditation communities in Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka were the only places Vipassana was practiced. Lay people, householders, like us were never instructed in the practice of mindfulness meditation.

That is until the Beatles and the hippies began their love affair with the east. While most went to India, a few souls went to Korea and Japan, bringing Zen practice west and others to Thailand and Burma, bringing the Vipassana tradition. Tibetan meditation practices gained popularity when the Dali Lama and the Tibetan diaspora emerged.

I would like to briefly outline the essential four elements of Satipatthana. Quoting from the Sutta:

The Blessed One said this: Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and distress

(dukkha), for the attainment of the true method, and for the realization of Unbinding (nibbana) — in other words, the four satipatthanas. Which four?

“There is the case where a monk remains focused on the 1) body in and of itself — ardent, alert, & mindful — putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on 2) feelings... on 3) mind... mental qualities in and of themselves — ardent, alert, & mindful —. He remains focused on 4) dhammas in and of themselves — ardent, alert, & mindful, putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world.

The Buddha instructs us to be aware, mindful, attentive with open acceptance to what is occurring in our bodies, in our feelings, in our thoughts, and fourthly what we are thinking or understanding about our thoughts. What is important as we approach mindfulness meditation (satipatthana) is to see that it is an active process. The mind is not blank; it is not empty; in the meditation the mind is actively attentive to what is occurring in our bodies and our thoughts as we sit in attentive observance. The mind sees itself, and it sees itself for what is present without judgment or resistance. Active attention is a necessary and fundamental skill to be developed if we wish to see dukkha and to minimize the impact of dukkha on our thoughts and behavior.

The Buddha starts with the body as the fundamental focus for our practice. Quote the Sutta:

“And how does a monk remain focused on the body in & of itself?

“There is the case where a monk — having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building — sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect and setting mindfulness to the fore [lit: the front of the chest]. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

“Breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.’ Just as a skilled turner or his apprentice, when making a long turn, discerns, ‘I am making a long turn,’ or when making a short turn discerns, ‘I am making a short turn’; in the same way the monk, when breathing in long, discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long’... He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.’

“In this way he remains focused internally on the body in and of itself, or externally on the body in and of itself, or both internally and externally on the body in and of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that ‘There is a body’ is maintained to the extent of knowledge and remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself.

Breath awareness is the foundation skill and is the skill the practitioner learns as a place of refuge and return. Serious meditation requires a safe secure resting place, a refuge, if we are going to effectively observe feelings, thoughts and the content of our thoughts. As we all know from our practice, it isn't an easy thing to watch the mind uncritically. Very quickly in meditation we discover we don't like where our mind is going, what it chooses to focus upon, and that we have so little control over that focus. The mind truly has a mind

of its own. And when we watch the mind carefully, with awareness, mostly we're not happy with what is there. Or alternatively we are seduced by our minds as it gets lost in fantasy or avoidance of the present moment. We are lost in a dream, or lost in the past or lost in the future.

Training the breath is the first step in training the mind. As the breath is trained the practitioner is beginning to learn the quality of right effort, the sixth ennobling truth. There are two principle qualities in correct effort. The first is the simple act of remembering. As we sit, the mind begins to wonder and the practitioner remembers to return to the breath. Again and again remembering to pay attention, remembering to observe what is occurring in the body and in the mind. When the focus of our attention drifts; we remember to return to the experience of the breath.

Then second quality of correct effort is energy, we remember satipatthana is an active process. We need to be awake to awaken. We need to be awake to remember. So we bring energy to the practice of breath mediation.

The second step in using the breath to train the mind is teaching the mind to concentrate, to focus. Concentration, the eighth ennobling truth, is yet another fundamental skill of satipatthana. As we sit in meditation practice we quickly become aware of the mind's fickle attention span. Like a bee and flowers, it flits from one thought to another, moving quickly and resisting staying with the experience of the breath. Staying with the breath, remembering to return to the breath, doing it hundreds and thousands of times, trains the mind to concentrate, to pay attention, to be mindful of the present moment; the more concentration developed, the more the practice of satipatthana deepens.

Awareness of the body as the breath, is the beginning of insight, mindfulness becomes possible through the breath. Mindfulness of breath trains the mind to concentrate, to remember, to make the effort, to be aware. With these skills in place, we now have the basic tools to deeper our levels of active awareness, awareness of feelings, awareness of thoughts related to our feelings, and awareness of dhamma, of reality, of things as they are. This is the beginning of satipatthana; the first step in developing the skill of mindfulness.

Donald Cornelius, 8.3.2014 – Rockville Centre, NY

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