

The Way of Mindfulness: *The Satipatthana Sutta*

The *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, is generally regarded as the canonical Buddhist text with the fullest instructions on the system of meditation unique to the Buddha's own dispensation.

The practice of *Satipatthana* meditation centers on the methodical cultivation of one simple mental faculty readily available to all of us at any moment. This is the faculty of *mindfulness*, the capacity for attending to the content of our experience as it becomes manifest in the immediate present. What the Buddha shows in the sutta is the tremendous, but generally hidden, power inherent in this simple mental function, a power that can unfold all the mind's potentials culminating in final deliverance from suffering.

To exercise this power, however, mindfulness must be systematically cultivated, and the sutta shows exactly how this is to be done. The key to the practice is to combine energy, mindfulness, and clear comprehension in attending to the phenomena of mind and body summed up in the "four arousings of mindfulness": body, feelings, consciousness, and mental objects.

Most contemporary meditation teachers explain *Satipatthana* meditation as a means for generating insight (*vipassana*). While this is certainly a valid claim, we should also recognize that *satipatthana* meditation also generates concentration (*samadhi*). Unlike the forms of meditation which cultivate concentration and insight sequentially, *Satipatthana* brings both these faculties into being together. Though naturally, in the actual process of development, concentration will have to gain a certain degree of stability before insight can exercise its penetrating function.

In *Satipatthana*, the act of attending to each occasion of experience as it occurs in the moment fixes the mind firmly on the object. The *continuous* attention to the object, even when the object itself is constantly changing, stabilizes the mind in concentration, while the observation of the object in terms of its qualities and characteristics brings into being the insight knowledge.

To practice *Satipatthana* successfully a student will generally require a sound theoretical knowledge of the practice along with actual training, preferably under the guidance of a qualified teacher. The best source of theoretical knowledge, indeed the indispensable source, is the *Satipatthana Sutta* itself.

However, though the sutta is clear and comprehensible enough as it stands, the instructions it offers are extremely concise, often squeezing into a few simple guidelines directions that might need several pages to explain in a way adequate for successful practice.

For this reason, from an early period, the ancient masters of Buddhist meditation began to supply more detailed instructions based on their own practical experience. These instructions eventually evolved into a lengthy commentary on the *Satipatthana Sutta*, which was then incorporated into the complete commentaries on the two collections in which the sutta appears, namely, the *Digha Nikaya* and the *Majjhima Nikaya*.

The two commentaries that have come down to us today, based on the older Sinhala commentaries, are called the *Sumangala-vilasini* (on the *Digha Nikaya*) and the *Papañca-sudani* (on the *Majjhima Nikaya*). These commentaries are ascribed to Acariya Buddhaghosa, an Indian thera who worked in Sri Lanka in the 5th century A.C., but are securely based on the old commentaries which record the explanations devised by the ancient masters of the Dhamma.

The commentary has in turn been further elucidated by a sub-commentary, or *tika*, by Acariya Dhammapala, who worked in South India, near Kancipura, perhaps a century or two after the time of Buddhaghosa.

The book, *The Way of Mindfulness*, contains all the authorized instructions on *Satipatthana* meditation passed down in the Theravada tradition: the *Satipatthana Sutta* stemming from the Buddha himself (in the more concise version of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, which omits the detailed analysis of the Four Noble Truths found in the *Digha Nikaya's Maha-satipatthana Sutta*); the commentary by Buddhaghosa; and selections from the *tika* by Dhammapala.

While the volume of material found here (see reference to the complete article, "The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipatthana Sutta and Its Commentary", by Soma Thera) will certainly exceed the amount a beginner needs to start the practice, the book will prove itself useful at successive stages and will eventually become a trusted friend and advisor in all its manifold details. Thus the reader should not be intimidated by the detail and the sometimes formidable technical terminology, but should continue reading, selecting whatever material is found useful and leaving until later whatever presently seems difficult to grasp.

The book was originally compiled in the late 1930s by Ven. Soma Thera (1898-1960), a bhikkhu of Sri Lanka, and has been maintained in print since the early 1940s. The Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy has published the work since 1967 in several editions. This latest version contains several minor changes in terminology authorized by the present writer. Christine Chan and her friends in the Buddhist Communities in Malaysia, as well as Rev. Suddhinand Janthagul from Thailand, who helped in the proof-reading of the Pali texts, deserve our congratulations and appreciation for their hard work in transcribing the book and for making it available for free distribution. I am sure this book will prove an invaluable road map for anyone who has entered the steep and rugged road of *Satipatthana* meditation, leading to final deliverance from suffering.

A Message by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Kandy, Sri Lanka)

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