Dhamma Teaching

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Bhante Chandaratana

Three Stages in Satipaṭṭhāna Practice
Bhante Chandaratana

In the establishment of mindfulness, you can have a variety of objects. You can establish mindfulness in body postures, body movements, ongoing processes, bodily activities, and any actions you do. All these belong to the Kāyānupassanā level – the body-related establishment of mindfulness. Feelings, too, can be used to establish mindfulness. Even the mind itself can be used as the object of mindfulness. So, there is a very broad range available for you to establish mindfulness. This is what we can consider as the first stage in Satipaṭṭhāna. Typically, when people talk about mindfulness, this is the level they are referring to.

Why do we establish mindfulness? Because the mind is like a monkey, always jumping here and there, distracted. So we say, "Let me take a break. Let me anchor myself." Okay, I establish mindfulness on the breath. In this way, you are choosing a focus. It's like putting blinders on: "I'm going to tune out everything else and stay with the breath." That may be necessary in the beginning, because without restraining yourself a little, without establishing mindfulness, you cannot move forward to the next levels of practice.

So the first step is to minimize distractions, reduce overthinking, and establish mindfulness on a chosen object. This is the stage that Western mindfulness usually emphasizes the most. When mindfulness is established and maintained, something else starts to grow as a by-product – concentration. This is what we call Samādhi (at this level).

For example, you begin with mindfulness of breathing. At first you can stay with the breath for maybe 10 breaths. Then 20 breaths. Then 30, 50 breaths. You realize, "Now I can maintain mindfulness continuously." What has happened? Not only has mindfulness developed, but another quality has emerged. The mind no longer wants to be distracted; it enjoys staying with the breath. This is the quality of concentration. Do you see how the second quality depends on the first? Mindfulness must come first – then concentration follows.

Now, if you put Samādhi in the forefront and neglect mindfulness, certain difficulties arise. Mindfulness needs to be the overall guide, the umbrella under which everything else is held together. This approach is much safer and more balanced.

Actually, the Buddha himself explained this in the Bojjhaṅga Saṃyutta. In the Aggi Sutta, he describes the seven enlightenment factors. Three of them activate and energize the mind; another group calms and relaxes the mind. Both sides need to be balanced. And who looks after the balance? It is mindfulness.

So in the Satipaṭṭhāna model, the establishment of mindfulness is the foundation, the very first stage. As you continue, concentration, energy, and effort naturally develop alongside it. But you cannot stop there. If you just remain in concentration, happy and blissed out, that is not enough. The next step is to look more wisely, to investigate. You turn mindfulness toward the body, feelings, or the mind itself, to understand things as they truly are.

Take the breath, for example. You begin to notice: How does it start? How does it change? How does it disappear? Is "the breath" a single phenomenon, or does it consist of many subtle aspects? Does it carry qualities like hardness, softness, roughness, vibration?

Or take feelings. At first, a feeling may seem to last for a few minutes. But later, you realize it is not like that – each feeling is actually a stream of tiny sensations, quickly arising and vanishing, moment by moment. Here, mindfulness grows sharper and clearer. It is joined by wisdom. Now we have mindfulness, concentration, effort – and wisdom entering the picture.

This is the second stage of Satipaṭṭhāna. It is connected to the five faculties: faith (saddhā), effort (viriya), mindfulness (sati), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā). All five are now active. But wisdom cannot develop immediately. First, the supporting qualities must be established. Then, when they are available, wisdom naturally begins to unfold.

At this stage, you continue observing carefully – body, feelings, mind. You observe them this week, the next week, the next month. Outwardly, your meditation practice may look the same, but inwardly, your character begins to change.

Earlier, in the first stage, you could measure progress by numbers: five breaths today, ten tomorrow, twenty next week. But in this second stage, progress is not so easily counted. Instead, it shows in your behavior, your character.

For example, maybe you once loved certain foods or social activities. As wisdom develops, your attachment to these weakens. You feel more dispassionate: "I don't really want to go to parties. I'd rather stay quiet, secluded, spend time in practice, read Dhamma." Priorities shift. You spend less time on politics or worldly debates. Interests that once absorbed you no longer hold the same weight. This change takes time. You cannot expect it all at once.

In the beginning of this second stage, effort is still needed – careful, precise observation of arising and passing away. But gradually, effort becomes lighter. The mind understands impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. Now motivation arises naturally; you don't need anyone else to push you to practice. Meditation becomes effortless, more relaxed. The mind grows quieter, more still. Thinking drops away, and you can observe with a neutral, detached awareness.

This neutrality leads to equanimity toward all formations (saṅkhārupekkhā). You don't interfere with phenomena, you don't identify with them. "This is not me, not mine, not myself." You see processes unfolding due to causes and conditions, with no owner. This is the wisdom perspective.

From here we come to the third stage of Satipaṭṭhāna.

In this third stage, the mind becomes deeply withdrawn and dispassionate. At a certain moment, everything seems to stop. Thoughts vanish. The mind feels blank, as if it has come to a complete standstill. At first, these are brief, almost unnoticed moments. But with practice, such moments repeat more often, sometimes lasting longer – two moments, three moments, several moments of profound stillness.

Here, there is simply experiencing without "an experiencer." Seeing without a seer. Hearing without a hearer. Just pure experiencing.

But there is a challenge: though you know you have touched something profound, you cannot yet maintain it. To stabilize this realization, the Noble Eightfold Path comes into play – morality, tranquilty, and wisdom working together.

On the cushion, during sitting, you may experience deep stillness. But when you get up, thoughts return, proliferations arise. So the task is to extend that wisdom into daily life. That's why at Nissarana Vanaya we emphasize walking meditation. If you can carry that same stillness and clarity while walking, with eyes open, then you are truly broadening the practice.

The practice must not be confined to one hour of sitting. It should become a way of life. Wherever you go, you observe the mind, notice defilements, watch your state of awareness. Practice becomes integrated into your daily living.

This is the broader dimension of the third stage. Here the Buddha emphasized sīla, samādhi, and paññā. These qualities become more deeply embedded in you. The practice begins to shift from the mundane level toward the supramundane.That is why the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is so comprehensive.

The first stage itself is broad. The second stage is broader. And the third stage is even more expansive, covering the whole of the spiritual path.

In short:

- Stage one – mindfulness as foundation (satipaṭṭhāna)
- Stage two – wisdom begins to unfold (satipaṭṭhānabhāvanā)
- Stage three – profound detachment, stillness, and integration into life (satipaṭṭhānabhāvanāgāminī paṭipadā)

And yet, we should be realistic. We are not arahants! Old habits return, and we get caught again. But from time to time, we also experience release, freedom from the trap. This is the path – gradual, deepening, and transformative.

Bhante G teaching Dhamma in the Sangha Hall, September 2025