



# EVAM ME SUTTAṀ

## This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

## Emptiness and satipaṭṭhāna

### Introduction

We have seen how the entry into emptiness resolves into simplicity. This is the simplicity of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā*, the insight arising from remembering to stay present. There is a close relationship between emptiness and insight, which we shall look at in these notes. We also find a link between the idea of “progress” and emptiness/insight, which we also need to explore. For while progress requires time, insight can only happen now.

The simplicity of emptiness shows us the simplicity of practice, for both practice and awakening of of one piece. There is no gap between them. And just as practice must be done now, for it cannot be postponed, so awakening must be done now, for it too cannot be postponed. Both practice and awakening entail a relationship to reality, one that abandons our habitual projections onto reality, our attempts to construct a self-within-her-world who will one day in the future be satisfactory. Or attempts to live a story in which everything will come good in the end. For practice-awakening brings all stories to an end, now.

### Sampajañña

We have seen how *sampajañña* (“clear understanding,” “clear comprehension,” “clear awareness”) is always associated with *sati* (“mindfulness”), to the degree that we often find the compound *sati-sampajañña* (“mindfulness-&-clear-understanding”). *Sati* literally means “memory.” Classically defined as “remembering the object,” *sati* refers to *presence*. What happens in the moment we are distracted? Suddenly, we forget. We forget the meditation *object*; or we forget to meditate. Awareness slips unseen from the object, we are distracted, but at first *we don’t know we are distracted*. We have forgotten what is present; or we have forgotten to be present. Suddenly we know, “I’m distracted!” and in that knowing are no longer distracted, but clearly aware. Have you ever wondered why, at that precise moment, you realised you were distracted? You didn’t know a moment before; what happened to change this situation? We remember. We remember *what* is present (this distraction); or, we remember *to be* present (to this distraction). So the opposite of mindfulness is forgetting.

The action of mindfulness is staying present, by remembering what is present, or remembering to be present. *Sampajañña* (clear understanding) is the intelligence associated with presence. *Sati-sampajañña* could be interpreted as “intelligent presence.” This is the essence of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā*.

We have all heard of *vipassanā* or “insight” meditation, but what is *satipaṭṭhāna*? Again, *satipaṭṭhāna* is a compound word made of two parts, but because of the rules of Pāli word formation there is an ambiguity built into its meaning. *Satipaṭṭhāna* can be broken up into both *sati + paṭṭhāna* and *sati + upaṭṭhāna*.

- *Sati-pa-(t)ṭhāna*: “*Paṭṭhāna*” (from *pa*, which functions as an intensifier, and *ṭhāna*, a “place” or “station”) is usually translated as “foundation,” and could be translated as “domain.” So

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*sati-pa-(t)thāna* means the “foundations of mindfulness,” or “domains of mindfulness.” *Paṭṭhāna* indicates *where* or *on what* mindfulness should be placed, and *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (M10) lists four of these domains: body (*kāya*), feelings (*vedanā*), heart/mind (*citta*) and phenomena (*dhammas*). These represent the entire body-mind process, the whole range of human experience. Or, we could say they indicate the five clung-to aggregates (*pañc’ upādānakkhandhā*), which again indicates the self-within-her-world. *Sati-pa-(t)thāna* is remembering *what* is present.

- *Sati-upa-(t)thāna*: “*Upaṭṭhāna*” (from *upa*, denoting nearness or close touch, and *thāna*, “being settled or established”) means “keeping near,” or “staying intimate,” and so indicates the activity of “staying present” or “attending.” *Sati-upa-(t)thāna* is the activity, the practice itself. *Sati-upa-(t)thāna* is remembering *to be* present.

*Sati* is linked with *sampajañña*, and the practice of *sampajañña* receives its own section in *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, where it is associated with body awareness.

When walking, a bhikkhu knows he is walking; when standing, he knows he is standing; when sitting, he knows he is sitting; when lying down, he knows he is lying down. Whatever way his body is placed, he knows that is how it is. ...

When going forward or going back, a bhikkhu clearly understands (*sampajānakāri*) what he is doing. When looking forward or looking back, he clearly understands what he is doing. When bending and stretching, he clearly understands what he is doing. When carrying his inner and outer robe and his bowl, he clearly understands what he is doing. When eating, drinking, chewing and tasting ... when shitting and pissing ... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep and waking up, speaking or staying silent, he clearly understands what he is doing.

This general body awareness is usually regarded as a basic or elementary aspect of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. Yet in *Mahāsuññata Sutta* we find this practice discussed *after* the attainments of emptiness (indicating advanced insight practice) and imperturbability (indicating advanced concentration practice).

When a bhikkhu abides thus [in emptiness], if his mind inclines to walking, he walks, thinking: “While I am walking thus, no evil unwholesome states of desire and grief will harass me.” In this way he has clear understanding of that. ... If his mind inclines to standing ... sitting ... lying down, he lies down, thinking: “While I am lying down thus, no evil unwholesome states of desire and grief will harass me.”

Similarly, the Buddha discusses how one who “abides in emptiness” will have clear understanding of his speech, so avoiding wrong speech and practising right speech (*sammā vācā*); and clear understanding of his thoughts or intentions, so avoiding wrong thought/intention and practising right thought/intention (*sammā sankappa*). This, in the context of *Mahāsuññata Sutta*, indicates a return to the world of normal activity, yet within a deep state of emptiness. And this world of normal activity is the world of basic or elementary *satipaṭṭhāna* practice.

## The gradual training

We find in the discourses two distinct presentations of the path, or two strategies of awakening. One is the “gradual training” (*anupubbasikkhā*), representing the path of the *samatha-yānika* (“one who makes serenity her vehicle”), who first develops concentration and then insight. (See, for example, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, “Fruits of the Homeless Life” (D2), and *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta*, “Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant’s Footprint” (M27).) The second strategy is *satipaṭṭhāna*, representing the path of the *vipassanā-yānika* (“one who makes insight her vehicle”), who develops just insight without a separate or prior training in concentration. (See *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.)<sup>1</sup>

The gradual training begins with the arrival in this world of a *tathāgata*, a fully-awakened one,

who teaches the dharma. Then a “householder” hears the dharma, faith arises, and s/he “goes forth” into the “homeless life” of a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī. She first practises ethics, then the restraint of the sense faculties (*indriya-samvara*), then clear understanding (*sampajañña*). Then, “possessing this aggregate of refined virtue, and this refined restraint of the faculties, and possessing this refined mindfulness-&-clear-understanding,” she goes to an appropriate place to practise meditation. Then follows the abandonment of the hindrances, and progression through the various stages of *jhāna* until, with her “concentrated mind thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, she directs it” to insight. The gradual training shows a steady advanced from the basic to the advanced, from the superficial to the profound. Here is the explanation of the practice of restraint (*samvara*) of the sense faculties (*indriya*):

On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at its signs (*nimitta*) and features (*anubyañjana*). Since, if he left the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of desire and grief might invade him, he practises the way of its restraint, he guards the eye faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the eye faculty. On hearing a sound with the ear ... On smelling an odour with the nose ... On tasting a flavour with the tongue ... On touching a tangible with the body ... On knowing a phenomenon with the mind, he does not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if he left the mind faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of desire and grief might invade him, he practises the way of its restraint, he guards the mind faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the mind faculty.

“Not grasping at signs” reminds us of “abiding in emptiness” (*suññatā-vihāra*) by “giving no attention to all signs” (*sabbanimittānaṃ amanasikārā*). The tradition sees “signs” (*nimitta*) in the context of restraining the sense faculties as representing the most distinctive qualities of an object when it is first noticed, and “features” (*anubyañjana*) as the details that appear on closer inspection.<sup>2</sup> Of course, “signs and features” imply a relationship to experience clouded by delusion, so the signs that are perceived are those of permanence, satisfactoriness and self. And these are projections - they are not actually there, a fact that we miss because of the habitual weakness or perversity of our perception. “Desire and grief” indicate the affective response of attraction and aversion that are conditioned by these distorted projections of permanence, etc. “Not grasping at signs,” in other words, indicates *doing* emptiness, *doing* insight. And this last reminds us that insight (*vipassanā*) is derived from the verb *vipassati* - “to insight.” Insight is an action.

Next in the gradual path comes clear understanding (*sampajañña*), outlined above.

When going forward or going back, a bhikkhu clearly understands (*sampajānakāri*) what he is doing. When looking forward or looking back, he clearly understands what he is doing. When bending and stretching, he clearly understands what he is doing. When carrying his inner and outer robe and his bowl, he clearly understands what he is doing. When eating, drinking, chewing and tasting ... when shitting and pissing ... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep and waking up, speaking or staying silent, he clearly understands what he is doing.

In Mahāsuññatā Sutta, clear understanding, the intelligence within presence, indicates the practice of the one who “abides in emptiness.” Again, it indicates *doing* emptiness. And so emptiness and the practice of emptiness are not goals to be reached some time in the future, when we are sufficiently mature in the practice; they are meant to be realised and practised *now*, even at the very beginning of the practice. Of course, this does not deny the reality of progress and maturity in practice; but it does indicate that awakening is not something to be postponed. It is available now. It is only available now.

## Bāhiya Dārucīriya

We can see this illustrated by the story of Bāhiya Dārucīya (Bāhiya of the bark-cloth), so called because he was a renunciate who wore clothes made of bark. He is venerated by the tradition as

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the fastest of the Buddha's students to attain full awakening. One morning he bailed up the Buddha when he was on his alms round and demanded the teaching, refusing to wait for some more appropriate time. He wanted it now. This is what the Buddha told him:

Then, Bāhiya, here is how you should train:  
 In the seen, there will be just the seen;  
 In the heard, just the heard;  
 In the sensed, just the sensed;  
 In the known, just the known.  
 In this way you should train yourself.

When there is, for you, in the seen just the seen;  
 In the heard, just the heard;  
 In the sensed, just the sensed;  
 In the known, just the known;  
 Then you are not by that.  
 When you are not by that,  
 Then you are not there.  
 When you are not there,  
 Then you are neither here nor beyond, nor in between the two.  
 Just this is the end of suffering. (Udāna 1.10)

The Buddha begins with *practice*: this is what you should do. "In the seen, there will be just the seen; in the heard, just the heard; in the sensed, just the sensed; in the known, just the known." The "sensed" refers to the senses of smelling, tasting and touching; "known" refers to the sense of mind. What one should *do* is stay present to experience without getting lost in concepts *about* experience; without grasping at "signs and features." This is the essence of *vipassanā* practice, from the beginning to the end. Of course, when we attempt this - when we actually try to just see, just hear, and so on - we quickly realise the impossibility of the project. For we are locked into habit, conditioned by beginningless delusion and its accompanying craving. But we can learn to see the fact *that* we are endlessly projecting into experience that which is not there, and *how* we are projecting. When we become intimate with all this we naturally begin to abandon these projections, for we see, directly, the pain this brings, and eventually we reach the point where we have had enough, and stop.

Bāhiya was remarkable in that he stopped, immediately, showing us that ultimately, it's not a question of time. But here, let us emphasise how this early, ordinary practice of sense restraint and clear understanding culminates in the attainment of *nibbāna* - it's all of a piece, and the common factor is the abandonment of our normal, habitual, taken-for-granted ways of constructing a meaningful world through our conceptual (in the deep sense) activities.

What happens then? *When* "in the seen there is just the seen," and so on, *then* "you are not by that." We cease to define ourselves and our world "in terms of," "by means of" ... something. We cease the process of conceiving (*maññanā*) and proliferation (*papañca*) that we have been looking at. We are fully present; deeply intimate; no longer separating ourselves from this, now.

When you are not by that,  
 Then you are not there.  
 When you are not there,  
 Then you are neither here nor beyond, nor in between the two.  
 Just this is the end of suffering.

When we stop projecting onto experience, then we are not stuck anywhere - consciousness is "unsupported" (*apatiṭṭhita*), "non-indicative" (*anidassana*). We are free. The details of this verse - the "here," "beyond" and "in between the two" - can be variously interpreted. For example, "here" may refer to the subjectivity that senses, "beyond" the world that is sensed, and "in between the two" the construction of an imagined person - a "self" - who is undergoing this

experience and who seeks to own and control as much of both the subjective and objective worlds as possible. And again, this practice of abandoning everything is merely the fulfilment of the basic practice of sense restraint and clear understanding.

## Atammayatā

The gradual training takes time; *satipaṭṭhāna* occurs now. In Mahāsuññatā Sutta, after discussing the practice of clear understanding the Buddha changes tack, and speaks directly of insight itself.

Ānanda, there are these five clung-to aggregates in regard to which a bhikkhu should live contemplating arising and cessation in this way: “Such is material form, such its arising, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its arising, such its disappearance; such is perception, such its arising, such its disappearance; such are formations, such their arising, such their disappearance; such is consciousness, such its arising, such its disappearance.”

When he lives contemplating arising and disappearance in these five clung-to aggregates, the conceit “I am” based on these five clung-to aggregates is abandoned in him. When that is so, that bhikkhu understands: “The conceit ‘I am’ based on these five clung-to aggregates is abandoned in me.” In that way he has clear understanding of that.

The contemplation of the impermanence of the five aggregates is the essence of *vipassanā* practice. Here, the practice is seen in its full maturity, the point where the conceit “I am” disappears. Again, we are dealing with absence (the conceit “I am” is now absent); and again, it is clear understanding (*sampajañña*) that recognises this absence.

Next we might ask the question: *when* does this awakening take place? How long does it take to get there? Let us look at how Cūḷasuññatā Sutta deals with the attainment of full awakening. Here, the meditator has attained to the “signless concentration of mind,” and then makes that very condition the meditation object.

Again, Ānanda, a bhikkhu ... attends to the singleness dependent on the signless concentration of mind (*animittaṃ cetosamādhim*). His mind enters into that signless concentration of mind and acquires confidence, steadiness, and resolution. He understands: “This signless concentration of mind is formed and volitionally produced (*abhisaṃkhato abhisañcetaṃ*). But whatever is formed and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to cessation (*yaṃ ko pana kiñci abhisaṃkhataṃ abhisañcetaṃ tad aniccaṃ nirodhadhamman ti pajānāti*).”

When he knows (*jānato*) and sees (*passato*) this, his heart is liberated from the taint of sensual desire (*kāmāsavā*), from the taint of becoming (*bhavāsavā*), and from the taint of delusion (*avijjāsava*). When it is liberated there comes the knowledge (*ñāṇa*), “It is liberated.”

The peak experience of the signless concentration of mind is yet another construction. It arises and ceases dependent on conditions, and “volition” or choice (*abhisañcetanā*), the active *desire* for a particular kind of experience, including a particular kind of meditative state, is perhaps the most significant conditioning or forming factor. Just as delusion is actively constructed, so too is the path that leads out from delusion. But this experience of the path - *any* experience - is impermanent, and so unsatisfactory and not-self. Knowing and seeing this, the heart is liberated. And notice that “when it is liberated there comes the knowledge (*ñāṇa*), ‘It is liberated.’ ” Is this *ñāṇa* (knowledge) the *sampajañña* (clear understanding) of Mahāsuññatā Sutta? And is it characterised by a recognition of absence - here the absence of the taints?

In Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta (Eleven doors to the deathless) (M52) Venerable Ānanda is asked by the layman Dasama of Aṭṭhakanāgara, “Venerable Ānanda, has any one thing (*eka dhamma*) been proclaimed by the Blessed One who knows and sees, accomplished and fully awakened, wherein if a bhikkhu lives diligent, ardent, and resolute, his unliberated mind comes to be liberated, his undestroyed taints (*āsavas*) come to be destroyed, and he attains the supreme security from

bondage that he had not attained before?” In other words, is there any *one thing* that triggers full awakening?

Ānanda replies that there is such a single thing, and in an exposition of the gradual training he lists 11 progressively more profound attainments consisting of the four material absorptions (*rūpa jhānas*), the four sublime states (*brahma vihāras*) and the first three of the four immaterial absorptions (*arūpa jhānas*). For each one he repeats the same refrain:

He [the practitioner] considers this and understands (*pajānāti*) it in this way: “This [attainment] is formed and volitionally produced (*abhisamkhatō abhisāñcetaṃ*). But whatever is formed and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to cessation.” Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. But if he does not attain the destruction of the taints, then because of that desire for *dhmma*, that delight in *dhmma*, with the destruction of the five lower fetters he becomes one due to reappear spontaneously [in the pure abodes] and there attain final *nibbāna* without ever returning from that world.

Dasama asks for “one thing” (*eka dhamma*) and gets eleven “doors to the deathless.” Of course there is only one door to the deathless, but it’s available at any point along the path of gradual training; it’s available now; it’s *only* available now. At any point along this path, what constitutes the path itself can be seen to be “formed and volitionally produced (*abhisamkhatō abhisāñcetaṃ*).” That which is “formed” is a formation, something made up of parts, something which is what it is because of the coming together of things other than itself. A formation is “impermanent, subject to cessation,” because whatever is made up of parts will, sooner or later, break up into those parts. Similarly, that which is “volitionally produced” is also formed, but specifically formed by choice, volition or intention (*cetanā*). Volitional formations constitute the sphere of human activity, which in turn corresponds to the sphere of moral responsibility. They are those aspects of our lives for which we have no choice but to take responsibility, because they are those aspects of our lives which are formed by our choices. And they are happening now. It’s not a question of time.

Seeing into the constructed nature of experience - *any* experience - results in the deconstruction of conceivings (*maññanā*) and proliferation (*papañca*), and so the disappearance of the assumed and projected self. In the absence of conceivings and proliferation we experience *atammayatā*, literally “not-made-of-that-ness,” translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi as “non-identification” and by Bhikkhu Thanissaro as “non-fashioning.” In Sappurisa Sutta (The true person) (M113) we have another presentation of the gradual training, and the contrasting attitudes toward progress along this path by “untrue” and “true” people. For any given stage of the path, the untrue person “lauds himself and disparages others,” but the true person does not. When the path reaches the stage of meditation attainment, the language changes. For each attainment:

A true person [*sappurisa*] considers: “Non-identification [*atammayatā*] even with [this attainment] has been declared by the Blessed One; for whatever way they conceive it, it changes [*yena yena hi maññanti tato taṃ hoti aññatha*]. So putting non-identification first, he neither lauds himself nor disparages others because of his attainment ...

Non-identification or non-fashioning is a state of not projecting anything onto experience, and so not defining oneself in terms of any experience. From this perspective, we can see that *any* concept we have of reality is wrong, precisely because it is a concept *about* reality, not the reality itself. Any concept is a formation, a construction, something produced in a fog of delusion and the fires of craving. “Reality” is that which is not constructed, not produced, but simply *is*. This reality is called by the Buddha *nibbāna*. This is more fully discussed in the Dvayatānupassanā Sutta (Contemplations of duality) of Sutta Nipāta.

Whatever is considered by the world, including its *devas*, *māras* and *brahmas*, its contemplatives and priests, its rulers and peoples, as “This is true,” the *ariyas* have clearly seen, realistically and with complete wisdom, as “This is false.” This is the first contemplation.

Whatever is considered by the world, including its *devas*, *māras* and *brahmas*, its contemplatives and priests, its rulers and peoples, as “This is false,” the *ariyas* have clearly seen, realistically and with complete wisdom, as “This is true.” This is the second contemplation. (755)

See the world together with its *devas*, *māras* and *brahmas*, its contemplatives and priests, its rulers and peoples, with the conceit of self in what has no self, Stuck in name-&-form, it conceives “This is true.” (756)

In whatever way they conceive it, it changes  
And so it is wrong, for whatever is transient is false. (757)

*Nibbāna* is not false - *this* the *ariyas* know as true;  
And because of their realisation hunger ends - complete peace. (758)

Our concepts are static, and seek to tie the self-within-her-world down, to make it stable and at least potentially controllable. This strategy is doomed to failure, because already things have changed. *This* is new. And now already gone, replaced by *this*. The state of one who has ceased imposing concepts on experience is one of the cessation of hunger, “complete peace.” Such a person no longer imposes anything on experience. In Sappurisa Sutta the Buddha says of such a person:

This bhikkhu does not conceive anything [*na kiñci maññati*], he does not conceive in regard to anything [*na kuhiñci maññati*], he does not conceive in any way [*na kenaci maññati*].

One who ceases conceiving and is no longer identified with any experience is called *atammayo*, one who is “not made of/by that,” and *munī*, “silent.” Even when speaking to the crowds, she is silent. Because, fundamentally, she has disappeared completely.

## Conclusion

Throughout this course we have dipped into a few discourses and have sought to understand something of the Buddha’s teaching. Perhaps we can consider two aspects. The first is how we habitually project onto the purity of reality, of what is really *here*, that which is not real. We project ourselves, with our projects and concerns. The second is how the Buddha recommends we respond to this situation. There is no use either rejoicing in or rejecting it, for both these strategies are more of the same - more projections. Instead, the Buddha recommends we be simply and radically *present* to experience. In presence, that which is not real dissolves; that which remains is real. And presence entails the now, for what is present is present *now*. So the essence of the practice, and the way out of our dilemma, is intimacy. Resistance cuts us off from the real. Intimacy brings us to where we always are, but allows us to understand this fact.

And finally, we may have learned that the suttas are worthy of our attention. Reading them is a good practice. But never try to speed read a sutta. Read slowly, preferably out loud, and roll through the repetitions. For we begin to crack the code once we find the rhythm.

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1. Henepola Gunaratana. *A critical analysis of the jhānas in Theravāda Buddhism*. (Publisher/place unnamed): 1999: 89-90.
  2. Bhikkhu Bodhi & Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (trans.). *The middle length discourses of the Buddha. A translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. 2nd edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001: 1219-20 n. 322.