# The *Satipaṭṭhāna* Method

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**DRAFT (05/22/23)**

> *Having spotted the lone rōnin standing on the dusty street, the miscreants arrayed themselves in a show of opposition, with weapons drawn. However, the ten of them together were about to prove no match for Sanjuro. His keen gaze assessed the situation impassively as he approached at a steady pace. When warned to come no closer, he immediately quickened his pace, but with sword still sheathed. When the pistoleer drew and aimed his weapon, Sanjuro suddenly darted to the side, shot an unseen dagger through the gunman's wrist, leaped into the fray, and within seconds had dispatched all but one of the men, a young coward whom Sanjuro out of compassion allowed to flee. The gunman, now dying in the dirt, asked Sanjuro to hand him his weapon, that he may take it with him to the next world, assuring Sanjuro that it was now empty of bullets. The pistoleer attempted to aim the gun at Sanjuro as the rōnin watched unmoved and the dying man, for want of strength, fired his pistol harmlessly into the ground.*[1]

This paper is about skill in practice, and what better way to begin than with the quintessence of skillfulness in popular culture, the martial arts genre? Of what did Sanjuro's skillfulness consist? He had brought four qualities into the skirmish, each of which his ten opponents, even collectively, could not match: ardency, proficiency, comprehension and composure. What is often

1 This is a depiction of the climax of Akira Kurosawa's 1961 film *Yojimbo.*

overlooked is how fundamental these qualities are to the advanced Buddhist practitioner as well.[2]

Ardency has to do with motivation. The ten wrongdoers could scarcely apprehend the depth of compassion for the plight of the innocent among the villagers that impelled Sanjuro, even greater than the concern for his own life, which he had already nearly sacrificed in this cause.

Sanjuro's proficiency lay in his knowledge and training, assuredly imparted by some samurai master and further developed as he practiced his trade in situations like this. He understood weapons and human anatomy, how to respond in the most skillful way to specific situations. Most of his know-how would have become internalized through practice and repetition, ready at hand spontaneously without thought, neurally encoded.

Sanjuro's comprehension was evident in his thorough assessment of the evolving situation: the dangers and opportunities, the weapons and even psychological profiles of his adversaries. Most of this could proceeded spontaneously drawing on trained proficiency, but any unique circumstances would have required further thought and deliberation, in this case the presence of the pistol, a weapon with which he seemed to have limited familiarity. The keenness of his comprehension was dramatized in his realization that the dying gunman was deceiving him, along with the certitude that he would be too weak to fire the uplifted pistol.

Sanjuro's composure was clear in his demeanor: while his opponents were disrupted from their gambling then exhibited fear and agitation, he had put all self-concern calmly aside and anything else not immediately relevant to the task he was

2 … but perhaps the reason we have Shao Lin monks and their ilk.

determined to accomplish, to center without emotion or distraction directly on that and nothing beyond. What a guy!

These same four qualities are listed as providing essential prerequisites to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. In fact, we will see momentarily that they even give this foundational practice its name. Accordingly, in the Buddhist context I will call the employment of these qualities the "*satipaṭṭhāna* method." The "*satipaṭṭhāna* method is described in this passage:

> Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating the body in the body, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating feelings in feelings, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating mind in mind, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating *dhammas* in *dhammas*, ardent, comprehending, and proficient, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. (MN 10 i56)

This text describes skill in practice. The practice itself is described in four aspects:

(1) contemplating body in body,
(2) contemplating feelings in feelings,
(3) contemplating mind in mind, and
(4) contemplating *dhammas* in *dhammas*.

The Pali word that I'm translating as 'contemplating,' used throughout the *satipaṭṭhāna*, is a variant of the gerund *anupassanā*, literally 'seeing along' or 'watching.' The general practice is therefore a kind of seeing in a deep or penetrating

sense, aimed at "seeing things as they really are," for instance seeing without presuming a self, seeing the impermanence in all things and seeing clearly the immediate sources of suffering. This practice demands enormous skill, is carefully cultivated over time, and in particular requires that we bring certain qualities to bear in the practice, which are those enumerated in the text:

(1) Ardency,
(2) Comprehension,
(3) Proficiency,
(4) "Putting away covetousness and grief for the world."

Let's look at these in more detail:

**Ardency** (*ātappa*) is also translated as 'zeal' or 'exertion.'[3] It is the active energy of Buddhist practice is closely aligned with right effort (*sammāvāyāma*).[4]

**Comprehension** (*sampajañña*) is also translated as 'clear comprehension,' 'watchfulness,' 'alertness' or 'deliberation,' and entails an understanding or response, centered around the circumstances relevant to the current practice task and informed by proficiency.

**Proficiency** (*sati*) is most commonly translated as 'mindfulness.'[5] It refers to active memory, bringing to mind and bearing in mind of previously learned "know-how,"

3 According to the PTS dictionary.
4 Thanissaro (2012, 2, 13).
5 I explicitly avoid translating *sati* as 'mindfulness.' This is because this term has been hijacked in much of modern Buddhism and popular culture, lending itself to interpretations that bear little trace of its early meaning as 'recollection.' In 'proficiency,' I hope to restore something close to Rhys David's original apt use of 'mindfulness' to refer to memory applied to purposeful activity in the present. See my related paper *How "mindfulness" got mislabeled*.

thematically centered around what is relevant to performance of the current practice task.

**“Putting away covetedness and grief for the world”** is “composure” or “non-distractedness,” terms I’ll use below. It is the exclusion from attention of any circumstances or know-how not relevant to the current practice task.

Bringing these four qualities to bear is what I call the “*sati-paṭṭhāna* method,” the art of skillfulness, attentive to the present practice conditions, tutored and trained in how to accomplish the current task or practice. In the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, it brings our *Dhammic* principles and skills into our present experience of body, feelings, mind or *dhammas*. We note that the same method appears to apply not only to Buddhist contemplative practice, but to martial arts as well. Moreover, it pervades all aspects of Buddhist practice and is applicable, practically speaking, far beyond.

### *The etymology of ‘satipaṭṭhāna’*

Teachers and scholars widely fail to appreciate that ‘*satipaṭṭhāna*’ refers literally to the method, not to the practice, of *satipaṭṭhāna*. The word is a compound of two words:

*sati* ‘proficiency’ + *upaṭṭhāna* ‘attending.’

*Sati* ‘proficiency’ is one of the four factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method introduced above. The Pali word is a derivation of a root meaning ‘memory’ or ‘recollection’ and corresponds to the verb *sarati* ‘remember’ or ‘recollect.’ The cognate word in Sanskrit *smṛti* has a similar meaning and was commonly used at the time of the Buddha specifically in reference to memory of sacred Brahmanic texts or even to the body of sacred texts itself, which

for many centuries were preserved in rote memory before they were committed to palm leaf.[6]

Indeed, *sati* is always (!) some form of memory in the early texts, and virtually always in support of the performance of some task or practice. Let me cite some key examples. First, *sati* is the first of the seven "awakening factors" (*bojjhaṅga*), where it is clearly allocated the function of bringing the *Dhamma* to mind so that it can examined and investigated:

> Whenever, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* dwelling thus withdrawn recollects that *dhamma* and thinks it over, on that occasion the awakening factor of *sati* is aroused by the *bhikkhu* . The *bhikkhu* develops the awakening factor of *sati* at that time. The *bhikkhu* completes the awakening factor of *sati* at that time. (SN 46.3)

In short, a *Dhamma* teaching is chosen as the first awakening factor, and all that is previously known, relevant or intuited concerning this teaching is brought to mind. This fulfills proficiency. The second awakening factor, "investigation of *dhammas,"* then begins to examine how this teaching manifests in present experience. This fulfills comprehension. The third factor fulfills ardency and the rest of the series fulfills composure. Proficiency based on the *Dhamma* is what we must continually bring to mind and hold in mind in order to practice *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation,[7] or in order to engage in virtually any other Buddhist practice.

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6 We should not forget that this same practice of rote memorization of scriptures was successfully emulated in the early Buddhist Sangha as well, apparently uniquely among non-Brahmanical schools. It therefore makes sense that *sati* would have an analogous connotation in the early texts.

7 In fact, the three beginning awakening factors correspond to the task of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of *dhammas.*

Elsewhere the Buddha offers us the following example of proficiency:

> Just as the gatekeeper in the king's frontier fortress is wise, proficient, and intelligent, one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances, for protecting its inhabitants and for warding off outsiders, so too a noble disciple is proficient, possessing supreme proficiency and discrimination, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. With proficiency as his gate-keeper, the noble disciple abandons the unwholesome and develops the wholesome, abandons what is blameworthy and develops what is blameless, and maintains himself in purity. (AN 7.67 iv110-1)

The gatekeeper performs his occupation by bringing previous know-how to bear in assessing each person seeking entry. Aside from any acquired intuition about of who looks suspicious, he will draw on this memory of particular incidents involving particular people that he might now recognized from the (ofttimes distant) past. This is his proficiency. The noble disciple is then asked to develop an analogous proficiency in *Dhammic* practice in assessing our own intentions as they seek entry one by one.[8]

I choose to translate *sati* as ‘proficiency,’ because the vaguer ‘memory’ or ‘recollection’ fails to put us in mind of the particular kind of memory that skilled Buddhist practice demands. This will include not only taught principles that can be put into practice to perform tasks, but also the internalized manifestations, whose application has become automatic and effortless through years of practice, much as years of learning scales and chords manifest in spontaneous movements of the virtuoso’s finger tips. In

8 In SN 48.9 the noble disciple’s proficiency is described in exactly the same way, including recalling and bearing in mind even things that were done and said long ago.

Buddhism, I daresay, our development of proficiency in practice also marks our progress on the path.

With regard to the second word of the compound *satipaṭṭhāna*, two alternative etymologies have been proposed:

> *sati* ‘proficiency’ + *paṭṭhāna* ‘foundation,’‘establishment,’ or
> *sati* ‘proficiency’ + *upaṭṭhāna* ‘attending,’

In the first etymology, favored in the Pali commentaries, the word *paṭṭhāna* is literally

> *pa-* ‘forth’ + *ṭhāna* ‘standing,’

hence ‘foundation’ or ‘establishment.’ In the alternative etymology, the word *upaṭṭhāna*, in which the ‘*u*’ is elided to produce the ambiguous compound, is literally

> *upa-* ‘close’ + *ṭhāna* ‘standing,’

hence something like ‘caring for,’ ‘attending to.’[9] Most modern scholars[10] seem now to agree that this second analysis is correct,[11] for several reasons:

(1) The equivalent of *satipaṭṭhāna* in Sanskrit Buddhist texts is *smṛtyupasthāna*, which is unambiguously built on the cognate of *upaṭṭhāna*, not that of *paṭṭhāna*.

(2) The gerund form *paṭṭhāna* does not occur by itself in the early texts.

(3) The other inflections of the verb *upaṭṭhahati* routinely occur in association with *sati*, for instance *upaṭṭhita sati* ‘attentive proficiency.’

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9 The PTS dictionary lists “attendance, waiting on, looking after, service, care, ministering.”

10 See Anālayo (2007, 29-30).

11 … yet, oddly, most continue to gloss it as ‘foundations’ or ‘establishment.’

In fact, in the description of the first exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* we have,

> … *parimukhaṁ satiṁ upaṭṭhapetvā* …
> '… having attended proficiently to what is in front …'[12]

I will translate *upaṭṭhāna* as 'attentiveness,' which connotes more active engagement than 'attending,' and the whole compound *satipaṭṭhāna* as 'proficiency-attentiveness.'

Picture a nurse standing close to her patient in order to attend to his needs caringly. She is alert, sensitive and composed. This is *upaṭṭhāna*. In her attentiveness, she brings all of her training and knowledge to bear to the assessment of his needs in order to respond appropriately. This is *sati*. Likewise, a Buddhist practitioner sits close to experiential factors in the present practice situation – raw sense impressions, the arising of feelings, of ill-will, and so on – with the same attentiveness. That is *upaṭṭhāna*. In attending to her experiential world, the practitioner brings her *Dhammic* proficiency to bear in order to interpret her experiences and and to recognize the conditions by which they arise. This is *sati*.

Notice that the etymology of the compound '*satipaṭṭhāna*' reflects quite closely the *satipaṭṭhāna* method itself, but only incidentally the practice of contemplation (*anupassanā*) through its incorporation of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, even though the term *satipaṭṭhāna* is almost always used with reference to the practice. To avoid confusion, I will clearly distinguish, in what follows, "the *satipaṭṭhāna* method" from "the *satipaṭṭhāna* (contemplative) practice."

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12 MN 10 i56. Here, *parimukhaṁ* ('what is up front,' that is, what is relevant to the practice task at hand) is the object of the verb, and *satiṁ* is an adverbial accusative.

Proficiency is the dominating influence in all this. This is why we call in an expert to do a difficult task. And so it is with Buddhist practice:

> And how is proficiency its [the spiritual life's] authority?
>
> Proficiency is internally well-attentive: 'In just such a way I will fulfill the training pertaining to good conduct that I have not yet fulfilled, or assist with wisdom in various respects the training pertaining to good conduct that I have fulfilled.'
> …
> Proficiency is internally well-attentive: 'In just such a way I will scrutinize with wisdom the teachings that I have not yet scrutinized, or assist with wisdom in various respects the *Dhamma* that I have scrutinized. (AN 4.245)

The phrase 'proficiency is ... well-attentive' is *sati su-upaṭṭhitā hoti*, which (putting aside *su-* 'well') is cognate with *satipaṭṭhāna*. Notice that two tasks are cited here (of four in the complete passage) to which proficiency is attentive: training in good conduct and scrutinizing the *Dhamma*. The first pertains to developing and cultivating ethics, and the second to wisdom, the second seemingly the specific contemplative practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* itself. Therefore *sati sūpaṭṭhitā hoti* with respect to both tasks is in reference to the more general *satipaṭṭhāna* method, not the specific contemplative practice that goes by that name.

### *Proficiency-comprehension*

We should note that *sati-upaṭṭhāna* 'proficiency-attentiveness' exists alongside another similar and common compound, *sati-sampajañña* 'proficiency-comprehension.' Notice that this second

compound refers to the two central factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method but omits ardency and non-distractedness, though it certainly alludes to the entire method. This compound occurs widely, for instance, in association with contemplation:

> This is Nanda's proficiency-comprehension: Nanda knows feelings as they arise, as they remain present, as they disappear; he knows perceptions as they arise, as they remain present, as they disappear; he knows thoughts as they arise, as they remain present, as they disappear. That is Nanda's proficiency-comprehension. (AN 8.9 iv168)

… and with shame and conscience:

> Bhikkhus, when there is no proficiency-comprehension, for one deficient in proficiency-comprehension, shame and conscience lack their proximate cause.
> (AN 8.81 iv336)

… and with sense restraint:

> Restraint of the sense faculties, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for restraint of the sense faculties? It should be said: proficiency-comprehension. (AN 10.16 v115)

Literally, 'proficiency-comprehension' is descriptive of a ubiquitous faculty of general human cognition, one that you are employing right now, as you read these words: your actively engaged proficiency certainly includes your English-language know-how, your knowledge of Buddhism, and much more, without which you would be unable to comprehend what I am writing about. Your comprehension includes the meanings you assigning to the sentences you hear, whatever degree of thought and deliberation this inspires, whatever integration of new

knowledge with old you manage, and – bottom line – whatever you take away from this paper.

Proficiency and comprehension are always inseparably linked, like two sides of one coin, simply angled in opposing directions. There is no comprehension without the activation of proficiency, and proficiency is pointless if it does not lead to comprehension. Moreover, even as proficiency informs comprehension, comprehension extends and refines future proficiency. Although proficiency-comprehension is fundamental to human cognition, it is further developed and cultivated in Buddhism to produce proficiency-attentiveness, which (one might almost guess) is more attentive than the raw faculty.

Scholars have repeatedly pointed in the direction of this faculty in their accounts of *sati*: Rhys-Davids, who adopted the translation ‘mindfulness’ fourteen decades ago, noted “the constantly repeated phrase 'mindful and thoughtful' (*sato sampajâno*), … that activity of mind and constant presence of mind which is one of the duties most frequently inculcated on the good Buddhist.”[13] Shulman describes *sati* in terms of the fusion of memory and attention and Thanissaro in terms of active memory that provides an immediate “framework” for understanding experience and what has to be done in this regard.[14] Elsewhere[15] *sati* is seen as a faculty of memory that bears in mind the Dhamma in a manner relevant to the practitioners spiritual quest. Dreyfus[16] (2011) discusses *sati* from the perspective of cognitive science in terms of “working memory” as a natural cognitive function.

13 Rhys Davids (1881, 145).
14 Shulman (2014, 112-4), Thanissaro (2012, 1, 15).
15 Levman (2017).
16 Dreyfus (2011).

Proficiency-comprehension works as an interplay in which the first factor constrains and shapes the second "top-down" and the second, with respect to the current situation activates new proficiencies "bottom-up" and challenges the expectations of prior learning and experience. Moreover, proficiency acquires new know-how for future reference from what it learns from the comprehension of the current situation, as well from a process of "internalization," whereby declarative or conceptual know-how morphs, through use in practice, into intuitive or embodied responsiveness to situations, akin to muscle memory, that require much less cognitive effort.

For instance, consider how difficult driving a vehicle was in the early weeks, when your proficiency was very low. It demanded your full attention to the driving conditions, and even that was not enough, because you weren't able to sort out your experience of the swirl of cars, curbs, street signs, bikes, kites, angry drivers honking behind and pedestrians scattering in front, into plans of action with so little top-down contribution of proficiency. However, with time your proficiency in this area became so internalized that your current ability to drive is quite spontaneous and largely effortless.

"Working memory" is a theoretical model that makes sense of how processes like proficiency-comprehension work cognitively. Our various proficiencies are part of "long-term memory," results of comprehension of "short-term memory." Working memory is that part of overall memory that is activated for easy access as required to perform the current task or practice.[17] Basically, proficiencies and comprehension relevant to the current stage of the current task are activated together in working memory. Now,

17 There is no one established model of working memory. What I describe is a composite. See Miyake and Shaw (1999) for an overview.

memory in general is associative: things are active in working memory because they have close associations with other things that are in working memory. This explains how proficient expectations about the current situation will tend to excite any details that verify those expectations, and how newly comprehended conditions may excite previously inactive proficiencies.

This model also gives us an understanding of “attention” as the scope of what is currently active in working memory at a given time, which is ideally relevant to, or centered around, the current practice task and as narrow or broad at any given time as the task demands. This scope is what has been “brought to mind” and is now “kept in mind,” effectively as negotiated in the interaction of proficiency and comprehension.[18]

As mentioned, “attentiveness” is an area in which Buddhist practice seeks to develop and cultivate the raw human faculty of proficiency-comprehension into something exquisitely refined. A perhaps surprising correlation in common human cognition is that higher proficiency generally means greater scattering of attention. Consider how you *now* talk on the phone, eat lunch, listen to the radio, text, honk at inept drivers and lean out the window to flirt with pedestrians, all while you are driving. Your attention has become scattered. With increased proficiency, driving has lost its challenge and in itself is somewhat boring, so you look elsewhere to occupy yourself. The resulting surplus of available cognitive energy has become allocated to additional tasks, that is you multi-task, or simply disperse it into nothing in particular. This natural tendency in human cognition toward reallocating surplus attention

18 Focused or one-pointed attention – certainly manifest in human cognition – is also sometimes build into the model in terms of a special or higher state of activation.

makes one “a jack of all trades, master of none,” which must have carried a fitness advantage in in our ancestral environment.

However, Buddhist practice seeks to reverse this tendency, for the *Buddhadhamma* shares a characteristic found in the many “arts,” including martial arts, *haute cuisine*, sculpture, music or sports: We are intent on virtuosity, so that our performance is optimized and our proficiency develops continuously and single-mindedly beyond mere adeptness. In this way we progress on the path, with time and training to become a wizard of wisdom and a virtuoso of virtue. As in these other arts, we develop and cultivate the simple proficiency-comprehension of the worldling into something more refined, primarily by controlling attentiveness, which is what makes the *satipaṭṭhāna* method the art of skillfulness.

Attentiveness is optimized when it is centered around a the performance of a single practice task, with minimal multi-tasking or dispersion of attention, where active proficiency and comprehension are optimally relevant to, or gathered around the “theme”[19] of the task at hand. This is “one-centeredness” (*ekaggatā*), centeredness around a single theme. We don’t discuss *samādhi* in this paper, but the condition of one-centeredness is also the point at which *samādhi* arises to take up the theme (as the *samādhi-nimitta*) in order to facilitate insight (as an aspect comprehension) and internalization of Dhamma (as an aspect of proficiency), as well as to stabilize the mind around the “theme” of the practice task. See my related paper *The miracle of samādhi*, on *samādhi* as integral to the *satipaṭṭhāna* method.

19 Thanissaro (2012, 31) uses ‘theme’ in this sense.

### *Training in proficiency-attentiveness*

The *satipaṭṭhāna* method is applied throughout to provide attentiveness and to perfect proficiency in every aspect of Buddhist practice. As the general art of skillfulness, we also train in the *satipaṭṭhāna* method for its own sake. A simile in the Saṁyutta Nikāya graphically illustrates this in a non-*Dhammic* context:

> The Blessed One said this: "*Bhikkhus*, suppose that on hearing, 'The most beautiful girl of the land! The most beautiful girl of the land!' a great crowd of people would assemble. Now that most beautiful girl of the land would dance exquisitely and sing exquisitely. On hearing, 'The most beautiful girl of the land is dancing! The most beautiful girl of the land is singing!' an even larger crowd of people would assemble. Then a man would come along, wishing to live, not wishing to die, wishing for happiness, averse to suffering. Someone would say to him: 'Good man, you must carry around this bowl of oil filled to the brim between the crowd and the most beautiful girl of the land. A man with a drawn sword will be following right behind you, and wherever you spill even a little of it, right there he will fell your head.' What do you think, *bhikkhus*, would that man stop attending to that bowl of oil and out of negligence tum his attention outwards?"
>
> "No, venerable sir." (SN 47.20)

The task to be performed here is that of carrying the bowl without spilling a drop of oil. However, we can see each of the factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method fully at work: the sword represents ardency and the girl (the challenge to) non-distractedness. Comprehension and proficiency are represented by the task of

keeping the oil in the bowl. We are not told, but it is easy to imagine, the proficiency and comprehension involved: the position of the bowl, perhaps the art of balancing it on his head, the anticipated movements of the various people present and the potential for being bumped, the assessed reliability of walking surfaces, the careful placement of each step, down to the potential affect of wind. The body and its physical surroundings are the most apparent basis for skillfulness practice. Although the man's attention must be broad to include almost every aspect of the present situation within the theme, it must at the same time strictly *exclude* the girl dancing and singing, for she could easily become a fatal distraction.

The discourse concludes:

> "I have made up this simile, *bhikkhus*, in order to convey a meaning. This here is the meaning: 'The bowl of oil filled to the brim': this is a designation for proficiency directed to the body. Therefore, *bhikkhus*, you should train yourselves thus: 'We will develop and cultivate proficiency directed at the body, make it our vehicle, make it our basis, stabilize it, exercise ourselves in it, and fully perfect it.' Thus, *bhikkhus*, should you train yourselves." (SN 47.20)

This conclusion is striking. It recommends training in proficiency-attentiveness itself, through choosing themes connected with the body or with proficient engagement in physical tasks. Developing and cultivating 'proficiency directed to the body' (*kāyagatā sati*), making it our vehicle, making it our basis, stabilizing it, exercising ourselves in it, and fully perfecting it, is often the most direct way of training our skill in the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, which we can thereby begin to apply spontaneously to whatever task we undertake, not only to tasks

defined by *Dhamma* or having to do with the body. This is echoed in another *sutta*:

> … one thing, when developed and cultivated, leads to proficiency-comprehension … What is that one thing? Proficiency directed to the body. (AN 1.276)

In other texts we learn that applying wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) to the contemplation of the arising and falling of feelings, perceptions and thoughts develops skill in *sati-sampajaññā*, and that the contemplation of insubstantiality and suffering with regard to the aggregates,[20] or the development and cultivation of *samādhi* leads to proficiency-comprehension.[21]

This training in the method itself is taken to heart in the following passage from the *Samaññaphala Sutta* describing one stage of the gradual training, a practice stage prior to the stage at which *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation is practiced:

> "And how, great king, is the *bhikkhu* endowed with proficiency-comprehension? Herein, great king, in going forward and returning, the *bhikkhu* acts with comprehension. In looking ahead and looking aside, he acts with comprehension. In bending and stretching the limbs, he acts with comprehension. In wearing his robes and cloak and using his alms-bowl, he acts with comprehension. In eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting, he acts with comprehension. In defecating and urinating, he acts with comprehension. In going, standing, sitting, lying down, waking up, speaking, and remaining silent, he acts with comprehension. In this

20 AN 6.29, SN 22.122 iii168-9, DN 33 iii223. See my associated paper *Samādhi springs up* for more on this.

21 DN 33 iii223.

> way, great king, the *bhikkhu* is endowed with proficiency and comprehension. (DN 2 i70-1)[22]

The challenge of this practice is that the *bhikkhu* is already so proficient in these routine actions that they require little cognitive effort. Under these conditions, his attentiveness would normally be scattered. Yet, he is asked to retain clear comprehension and remain attentive anyway. That is where the challenge lies, and where proficiency is to be gained, in maintaining attentiveness anyway, under unconducive circumstances.[23]

### *Right proficiency*

Right proficiency (*sammāsati*) is the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path. In this paper we've managed to look at proficiency (*sati*) itself, as well as its progressive Buddhist enhancements as proficiency-comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*), as the *satipaṭṭhāna* method (proficiency-attentiveness) and as the *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplative practice. We would hope right proficiency would correspond in the Buddhist context to one of these degrees of elaboration of the root concept *sati*.

I will suggest here that right proficiency is the application of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method (proficiency-attentiveness) to the other path practices. But to reach that conclusion, we must first look at the two primary ways in which right proficiency is defined in the

22 This passage also shows up almost word for word as an exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself, at MN 10 i57.

23 Everyday attentive proficiency may often feel a lot like modern "mindfulness" practice. That's great; keep doing what you are doing. The current paper seeks to demonstrate that what seems to be a single unexplained faculty is a constellation of factors (and presented that way in early Buddhism) that are necessary to understand the role of *Dhamma* and *samādhi*, for instance, in Buddhist practice, or how all of this facilitates liberation. See my related paper *How "mindfulness got mislabeled* for a critique of the modern understanding of "mindfulness."

early texts. The first is as something that circles around the other factors of the path. The second is as the "four *satipaṭṭhānas*."

**Right proficiency circles around everything else.** Let's begin by looking at how the Buddha incorporated the combination of right view, right effort and right proficiency as factors at work in virtually all of Buddhist practice.

> Right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong action as wrong action, and right action as right action. … One tries to abandon wrong action and to enter into right action: This is one's right effort. One remembers to abandon wrong action and to enter and remain in right action: This is one's right proficiency. Thus these three qualities – right view, right effort, and right proficiency – run and circle around right action. (MN 117 iii72)

This passage is stated verbatim for each of the first five factors of the noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action and right livelihood, that is, for each of the wisdom and virtue practices.

Understanding right proficiency in terms of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method makes perfect sense in this passage. Each path factor represents a *Dhammic* skill that manifests itself in practice situations. Right proficiency is the intermediate factor between right view and right effort, between know-how and practice, between competence and performance for each of these *Dhammic* skills. Right proficiency brings to mind those aspects of right view that are relevant to the practice situation, comprehends an appropriate response to that situation and authorizes right effort to consummate the response comprehended by right proficiency. Moreover, right proficiency thereby develops and ultimately

perfects its own function. If right cuisine were a path practice, our right view would be our cookbook and right effort the mixing, stirring, baking, and so on, that accomplishes the practice. Right proficiency would be the executive function between book and spoon that knows precisely what to do when, and also gains in expertise as it fulfills its function. With attentiveness the art of cuisine is gradually mastered.

Likewise, in the practice of right action, right proficiency brings the five precepts to mind (proficiency activating an aspect of right view) when the impulse arises to wack a pest or fabricate a whopper (comprehension evaluating the situation). Right effort follows up to avoid enacting that impulse. Without right proficiency, ethics might fail us at the crucial moment of action due to inattention to our values.[24] A constant and well developed attentive proficiency is necessary in making proper ethical choices as we find ourselves repeatedly in morally charged situations, weighing a constellation of factors such as our own motivations, our vows and commitments, the imperative to harmonize with others and do no harm, and our rough calculations of anticipated benefits.

Ethical practice is a matter of problem solving, and of well-trained internalization as "moral perception."[25] Long training of proficiency in ethics develops a virtue that arises spontaneously without thought, having fully internalized the principles to turn what used to be a desire to be good, or to be a good Buddhist, into pure kindness with no more regard for the principles than a virtuoso pianist needs to keep musical theory in mind while performing a concerto.[26]

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24 Garfield (2022, 86).
25 Garfield (2022, 5, 179).
26 Garfield (2012, 12-3, 18-22).

The path practices in which we gain proficiency fall under the categories of wisdom (right view and right resolve) and ethics (right speech, right action and right livelihood). This puts the development (*bhāvanā*) factors of right effort and right proficiency in a clearly defined relationship to the other path factors: The development practices uniformly serve auxiliary roles in enhancing the skillfulness with which the wisdom and ethical practices are performed.[27]

**Right proficiency is the four *satipaṭṭhānas*.** Right proficiency is alternatively defined in an oft repeated formula as follows:

> And what, bhikkhus, is right proficiency?
>
> Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating body in body, ardent, comprehending, proficient, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. [repeated as for body, also for feelings, mind and *dhammas*]
>
> This is right proficiency. (SN 45.8)

Though it cites the method, this appears to equate right proficiency specifically with the contemplative practice, rather than with the more general *satipaṭṭhāna* method of the previous definition. For instance, if right proficiency circles around right speech, then its role would now seem to be to *contemplate* right speech rather than to perform right speech more skillfully. The two definitions seem incongruous, especially given that among the many practice exercises found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and

27 The remaining development factor, *samādhi*, also plays a critical auxiliary role here, one that is tightly aligned with right proficiency, in support of non-distraction, internalization, integration and insight, leading to the mastery of skillfulness. See my related paper *The miracle of samādhi* on this.

other *satipaṭṭhāna* texts, none touches on right speech nor shows interest in any other ethical practice.[28]

However, these two definitions can be reconciled if we interpret the reference to the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in an well-attested alternative way. Definitions in the early texts are often definitions "by example." For instance, the following defines "perception":

> And why do you call it perception? It perceives; that's why it's called 'perception.' And what does it perceive? It perceives blue, yellow, red, and white. It perceives; that's why it's called 'perception.' (SN 22.79)

Clearly, the four colors are merely representative, and are implicitly understood to generalize to orange, green, birds, faces, tastes, harmonious sounds, the moon and so on.

I propose that the definition of right proficiency in terms of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* is similarly a definition by example, one that is implicitly generalized to the application of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method to other Buddhist practices as well. In fact, the fourfold contemplative practice should be particularly emblematic of proficiency-attentiveness, and thereby of right proficiency: This particular practice is utterly dependent on the method (the method is even part of the practice instructions). This particular practice provides optimal conditions for the full arising of the four factors of the method (ardency, comprehension, proficiency and nondistractedness) and – since the practice is contemplative and introspective – the functioning of the method is generally open to immediate inspection in this particular practice, and is even included as the theme of one of its practice exercises

28 In fact, if Sujāto (2012, 140, 192, 305) and Anālayo (2014, 176) are right, the earliest *satipaṭṭhāna* practice was limited to a greatly pared down set of exercises.

(contemplation of the seven awakening factors). Even though the method is broadly applied throughout Buddhist practice, never is it as successfully applied and so vividly apparent as when one is sitting, secluded, under a tree in meditation posture.

These same conditions that make this contemplative practice emblematic for right proficiency, also explain why the term *satipaṭṭhāna* migrated from the *satipaṭṭhāna* method to the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. This migration is so complete that it is rare for the term *satipaṭṭhāna* ever to refer directly to its method, even though that is where the literal meaning of the term is actually found. A contributing factor for the loss of the method's rightful name is probably the availability of the similar, largely equivalent term *satisampajañña* 'proficiency-comprehension' to refer to the method.[29] This migration is also so complete that there seems to be only one instance in the Pali *suttas* in which the word *satipaṭṭhāna* ever refers to a practice other than the fourfold contemplation. In the *Majjhima Nikāya* the Buddha describes himself as practicing "the three *satipaṭṭānas*," but in this case his task is to

> "… teach the *Dhamma* to his disciples out of compassion,"

under three alternative conditions:

(1) "his disciples will not give ear and exert their minds to understand,"

(2) "some of his disciples will give ear and exert their minds to understand," and

(3) "[all] his disciples will give ear and exert their minds to understand." (MN 137 iii 121)

29 Note that the term *paticca-samupāda* ('dependent coarising') seems similarly, but not so completely, to have migrated from a broadly applicable method of analysis based on conditional relations, specifically to the *twelve links* of dependent co-arising.

Here the practice is teaching rather than contemplating *Dhamma*, but certainly the application of the common *satipaṭṭhāna* method is what connects the two identically named practices.[30]

I conclude that right proficiency is the application to right everything else of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method (proficiency-attentiveness).

### *Conclusions*

We began this exploration by catching the thread of a foundational teaching in the introduction to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which we recognized as describing a kind of art of skillfulness, potentially of general applicability. We found that this fit the etymology of compounds made from the root *sati* and the structure of early Buddhist thought. In this way we recognized this teaching in *satipaṭṭhāna* itself, in *satisampajañña* and ultimately in *sammāsati*, the seventh factor of the noble eightfold path. We found that this teaching finds natural support in what we know about human cognition, and it provides a coherent, explanatory and functional account of what the early texts tell us about *sati*.

This paper has been about skill in practice and development of proficiency. Buddhism is a practice tradition, concerned with learning, mastering and eventually becoming a virtuoso, in the skill of life, we might say. The thought world of Buddhism is accordingly organized around skill in practice: around action (*kamma*), both skillful (*kusala*) and unskillful (*akusala*); around competence (*pariyatti*) and performance (*patipatti*); around development (*bhāvana*) and cultivation (*bahulīkata*) of

30 Kuan (2008, 31) assesses that *satipaṭṭhāna* is the same concept in both cases, but points out that Bhikkhu Bodhi disagrees.

proficiency. Those firmly on the path are “in training” (*sekkha*) and those who have mastered it “beyond training.” (*asekkha*). The similes of Buddhism draw repeatedly from music, crafts and professional life.

Right proficiency is right at the center of skill in practice. It is where *Dhamma* meets practice. It optimizes then masters skillfulness through the development and cultivation of attentiveness. It is present in the range of wisdom and ethics practices, and its own development is a practice in itself, honed as it is applied even in non-Buddhist arts and crafts (by Sanjuro and others). The goal of Buddhist practice is virtuosity, cultivated through learning the scores and chords of *Dhamma* until we perform brilliantly with the Buddha’s hands, responsively and spontaneously in each moment, as an embodiment of wisdom and virtue.

This paper is part of a series on *Rethinking Satipaṭṭhāna*. Please go to http://sitagu.org/cintita/satipatthana/ for references and for access to other papers in the series.