

# Study On the Meditation Methods of Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta

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## Abstract

At one time the Blessed One was living among the Kurus, at Kammasādhamma, a market town of the Kuru people, a location corresponding to the area of New Delhi. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhu thus: "Monks," and they replied to him, "Venerable Sir." The Blessed One spoke as follows: "There is, monks, this one way to the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and distress, for the disappearance of pain and sadness, for the gaining of the right path, for the realization of *Nibbāna*: - that is to say the four foundations of mindfulness."

In this Sutta, Buddha presented a practical method for developing self-knowledge by means of *kāyānupassanā* (observation of the body), *vedanānupassanā* (observation of sensations), *cittānupassanā* (observation of the mind) and *dhammānupassanā* (observation of the contents of the mind). The meditation practice of Mahāsi Sayārdaw was also explained, discussed and reviewed.

## 1. Introduction

The practice of the four-fold *satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishing of awareness, was highly praised by the Buddha among the suttas preached by Him. In the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Buddha mentioned its importance as *ekāyano maggo* – the only way for the purification of beings, for overcoming sorrow, for extinguishing suffering, for walking on the path of truth and for realizing *Nibbāna* (liberation).

The *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* begins with the observation of the body. There are several different points to be explained: observing respiration, giving attention to bodily movements etc. It is from these points that we can progressively develop *kāyānupassanā*, *vedanānupassanā*, *cittānupassanā* and *dhammānupassanā*. However, no matter from which point the journey starts, stages come which everyone must pass through on the way to the final goal. In these meditation methods taught by Buddha in this Sutta, the meditator yogi/monk need to observe the phenomenon of arising, the phenomenon of passing away, the phenomenon of arising and passing away.

These methods reveal the essence of the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Unless, these three levels of *anicca* (impermanence) are experienced, we will not develop *paññā* (wisdom) – the equanimity based on the experience of impermanence, which leads to detachment and liberation. Therefore, in order to practice any of the four-fold *satipaṭṭhāna*, we have to develop the constant thorough understanding of impermanence which in Pāli is known as *sampajañña*.

*Sampajañña* has been often misunderstood. In the colloquial language of the day, it also had the meaning of 'knowingly.' For example, Buddha had spoken of "*Sampajañnamusā bhāsītā* and *Sampajañna musāvāda* which means "consciously, are the three? Pleasant sensations, unpleasant sensations and neutral

sensations. Meditators, these are the three types of sensations, Practice, meditators, the four-fold *satipaṭṭhāna* for the complete understanding of these three sensations.”

The practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, which is the practice of *vipassanā*, is complete only when one directly experiences impermanence. Sensations provide the nexus where the entire mind and body are tangibly revealed as impermanent phenomena, leading to liberation.

## 2. Contents of *Four Satipaṭṭhāna*

The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the *Satipaṭṭhana Sutta*, is the tenth discourse of the Middle Length Collection (Majjhima Nikaya) of the Discourses of the Enlightened One. There is another version of it, in the Collection of Long Discourses (Digha Nikaya No.22), which differs only by a detailed explanation of the Four Noble Truths.

The contents of *Four Satipaṭṭhāna* are as follows:

- 1) Kāyānupassanā ānāpānāpabbam
- 2) Kāyānupassanā iriyāpathapabbam
- 3) Kāyānupassanā sampajānapabbam
- 4) Kāyānupassanā paṭikūlamanasikārapabbam
- 5) Kāyānupassanā dhātumanasikārapabbam
- 6) Kāyānupassanā navasivathikapabbam
- 7) Vedānupassanā
- 8) Cittānupassanā
- 9) Dhammānupassanā nīvaraṇapabbam
- 10) Dhammānupassanā khandhapabbam
- 11) Dhammānupassanā āyatanapabbam
- 12) Dhammānupassanā bojjhaṅgapabbam

Thus, this *Satipaṭṭhāna* method/ practice includes – six types of Kāyānupassanā, one type of Vedānupassanā, one type of Cittānupassanā and lastly four types of Dhammānupassanā.

## 3. Six types of Kāyānupassanā

1) In Kāyānupassanā ānāpānāpabbam, Buddha taught his disciples how to contemplate the body as body, how to breath in and out mindfully and how to note-down the breathing process to get awareness of mind and body.

2) In Kāyānupassanā iriyāpathapabbam, Buddha explained that meditation can be done in four postures such as sitting position, lying down position, walking position and standing position. When practicing meditation, the monk has to take awareness of these four postures and have to know his body position,

3) In Kāyānupassanā sampajānapabbam, Buddha taught his disciples to take awareness of every body movement, to take notice of what he is doing in looking, in bending, in stretching, in carrying etc. He must take awareness in eating, drinking, chewing, swallowing, drinking and take care also in passing excreta or urine in his daily life.

4) In Kāyānupassanā paṭikūlamanasikārapabbam, Buddha preached that the monk has to review his whole body including thirty two parts of his body such as hairs, nails, teeth, skin, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, excreta etc.

5) In Kāyānupassanā dhātumanasikārapabbam, Lord Buddha explained that there were mainly four body elements: the earth element, the water element, the fire element and the air element. The monk should have to review these four principle body elements in his daily activities and in meditation.

6) In Kāyānupassanā navasivathikapabbam, Buddha taught how to review the unpleasant sight of decomposed body (or) a corpse thrown aside in a in a charnel-ground, one, two or three days dead, bloated, discolored condition,

#### 4. Vedanānupassanā

In Vedanānupassanā *Satipatthana Sutta*, Buddha explained that there are various types of feeling such as - a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, a pleasant sensual feeling, a pleasant non-sensual feeling, a painful sensual feeling, a painful non-sensual feeling and a sensual feeling that is neither-painful-nor-pleasant. The monk must abide contemplating feelings as feelings internally, externally so that he gets awareness and knows arising and vanishing phenomena in the feelings.

#### 5. Cittānupassanā

In Cittānupassanā *Satipatthana Sutta*, Buddha taught on the topic of contemplation of mind. By this practice and awareness, the monk might abide contemplating mind as mind internally, externally and could kill *kilesa* (defilements).

#### 6. Four types of Dhammānupassanā

1) In Dhammānupassanā nīvaraṇapabbam, Buddha explained how to abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in respect of the five hindrances. He said that a monk should also know that ill-will, sloth-torpor, worry and flurry and doubt is present/ absent in his mind, so that he can contemplate his mind objects as mind-objects in respect of the five hindrances.

2) In Dhammānupassanā khandhapabbam, Buddha preached about the contemplation of mind-objects in respect of the five aggregates of grasping. He said form (body), feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness are the five aggregates which a monk must contemplate as mind-objects.

3) In Dhammānupassanā āyatanapabbam, Buddha explained about the contemplation of mind-objects in respect of the six internal and external sense-bases. He said that eye with sight-object, ear with sound, nose with smell, tongue with taste, body with tangible, mind with mind-object are the six internal and external sense-bases which the meditator must contemplate.

4) In Dhammānupassanā bojjaṅgapabbam, Buddha taught that there are seven factors of enlightenment to contemplate such as – enlightenment factor of mindfulness, enlightenment factor of investigation of

states, enlightenment factor of energy, enlightenment factor of delight, enlightenment factor of tranquility, enlightenment factor of concentration and enlightenment factor of equanimity.

Then, Buddha preached the benefits of practicing these four *satipaṭṭhāna*. He explained that a monk/ yogi who practice these four foundations of mindfulness for just seven years may expect one of two results: Arahant-ship or Non-Returner in this life. Then he said that whoever should practice them for just six years, five years to one year, seven months to one month, half a month to one week may expect the same results as above.

## 7. Mahāsi Sayārdaw's Insight Meditation

Mahāsi Sayārdaw was born on 29 July, 1904 at Seikkhun village in Upper Burma. He became a novice at age twelve, and was ordained at the age of twenty by the name Sobhana. He was a Burmese Theravada Buddhist monk and meditation master who had a significant impact on the teaching of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation in throughout Asia and the Western countries. He helped to establish meditation centers all over Myanmar, as well as in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Thailand. Mahāsi Sayārdaw was a questioner and final editor at the Sixth Buddhist Council on May 17, 1954. He passed away on 14 August 1982, following a massive stroke, thousands of devotees braved, the torrential monsoon rains to pay their last respects.

The primary object of meditation has been given by Mahāsi Sayārdaw is the movement of rising and falling, the expansion and contraction of the abdomen. Since meditators have to continue contemplating for at least one hour in sitting position, an intense feeling, or sensation of pain, or discomfort is likely to be experienced after a long time of sitting posture, and then only focus on “contemplation of sensation” (*Vedanānupassanā*). According to Mahesh Tiwary, “*Vedanānupassanā* means to become aware of the presence of the object continuously, remaining detached totally from internal impact as being like and dislike or otherwise within and without”. The meditators must make a mental note on the specific part of the body where such sensations occur, and go on noting ‘pain, pain, pain.’ Having decreased the pain sensation, the meditators have to go back to the primary object and keep on contemplating the abdominal movement of rising and falling. In case of pain increases and becomes unbearable pain, the meditators are allowed to change their posture but with the mental notes of the intention to change with mindfully.

However, Mahāsi Sayārdaw highly recommended the tolerance while pleasant or painful feeling are arises, which is the key to open the door of deathless and changing the posture is like breaking the key. He encouraged that if the meditator could be tolerant of any sensations whether pleasant (*sukhavedana*), unpleasant (*dukkhavedana*), or neutral feelings (*upekkhavedana*), then the door of enlightenment could be experienced within oneself. Moreover, he mentioned that ‘suffering’ (*dukkha*) is concealed by body-posture. If the meditator changes very often the body-posture, it is very difficult to understand the ‘suffering’ (*dukkha*).

For the beginner it is a very effective method of developing the faculties of attention, concentration of mind and insight in contemplation. The ability to know each successive occurrence of the mental and physical processes at each of the six sense organs is acquired only when insight contemplation is fully developed. “The meditator should continue with this exercise in full awareness of the abdomen's rising

and falling movements. We must never verbally repeat the words, rising, falling, and do not think of rising and falling as words. Be aware only of the actual process of the rising and falling movements of the abdomen. Avoid deep or rapid breathing for the purpose of making the abdominal movements more distinct, because this procedure causes fatigue that interferes with the practice. Just be totally aware of the movements of rising and falling as they occur in the course of normal breathing”.

While occupied with the exercise of observing each of the abdominal movements, other mental activities may occur between the noting of each rising and falling. Thoughts or other mental functions, such as intentions, ideas, imaginings, are likely to occur between each mental note of rising and falling. If you imagine something, you must know that you have done so and make a mental note, imagining. If you simply think of something, mentally note, thinking. While the mind wanders from the meditation object of rising and falling of abdomen, then just mentally note, as wandering and all the mental activities and noticing them is called the contemplation of mind (*Cittānupassanā*). After its disappearance, continue with the primary object, by being fully aware of each movement of the rising and falling abdomen. Each movement must be contemplated in its respective order whether sitting standing, laying or walking. Having thus seen the three characteristics by direct realization, the meditator, by inference from the direct experience of the objects, fully understands that all the objects are impermanence, and lead to suffering and non-self.

In conclusion, whatever method has been presented by Mahāsi Sayārdaw is not necessarily to say a new path, but rather just highlighted the approach of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method which comes under right mindfulness (*samma-sati*). Although he recommends the exercise of rise and fall of the abdomen as a central meditation object, but also the meditators are allowed to practice on breathing in and out through the nostril, which is the alternative way to practice. The aim of this practice is to bring great benefit and one is released from greed, hatred and delusion, which are the roots of all evil and suffering and to attain the realization of *Nibbāna*.

## 8. Conclusion

By practicing these four four-fold *satipaṭṭhāna* method, mindfulness is developed stage by stage. In practical way, we should not stick to one method only and all four types of *satipaṭṭhāna* method should be applied during meditation hours because whatever arises in the *Khandhā* aggregate would all come under mindful observance and awareness. All that needs to be recognized and covered by mindfulness has been experienced during our meditation procedure. Thus, all body movements and postures should be noted as they are made or assumed; all forms of consciousness and processes of thought; and all sensations or feelings should be noted as they arise. Similarly, all conditions and characteristics of phenomena should also be noted as they arise conspicuously. This covers the practice of all four *satipaṭṭhāna* disciplines.

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