

VBG Sutta Sharing Dec 2017: Satipatthana

(This article is to be read in conjunction with the Nov 2017 article on Sati)

Whereas there is a clear definition of Sati (mindfulness) in nine suttas, there is no similar clear-cut definition of Satipatthana given in the suttas. How it is used appears to be the same as sati, namely mindfulness on four specific objects. However there is an important difference between them. This can be seen if we study carefully several suttas in the Satipatthana Samyutta (chapter 47 of the Samyutta Nikaya) and a few other suttas.

SN 47.1

“Monks, this is the one-way path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the passing away of pain and grief, for the achievement of the method, for the realization of nibbana, that is, the four satipatthana. What four?”

Here, monks, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly aware, mindful, having removed covetousness and grief in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... Dhamma in Dhamma”

So we see above that the practice of satipatthana is to be mindful of the four objects as in the practice of sati.

Now we refer to an important sutta below:

SN 47.20

“Monks, 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 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, monks, would that man stop attending to that bowl of oil and out of negligence turn his attention outwards?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“I have made up this simile, monks, in order to convey a meaning. This here is the meaning: ‘The bowl of oil filled to the brim’: this is a designation for mindfulness directed to the body. Therefore, monks, you should train yourselves thus: ‘We will develop and cultivate mindfulness directed to the body, make it our vehicle, make it our basis, stabilize it, exercise ourselves in it, and fully perfect it.’ Thus, monks, should you train yourselves.”

It is clear in this sutta that the man has to pay intense, unremitting, one-pointed attention on the bowl of oil and not allow it to spill because his very life depends on this. This is said to be how mindfulness directed to the body should be practised, i.e. satipatthana on the body. This implies that satipatthana means ‘intense, unremitting, one-pointed mindfulness’ or simply ‘intense mindfulness’. This is corroborated by MN 118 below:

MN 118 (Anapanasati Sutta)

“And how, monks, do the four satipatthana, developed and cultivated, fulfil the seven factors of enlightenment (bojjhanga)?

Monks, on whatever occasion a monk abides contemplating the body in the body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief in regard to the world - on that occasion unremitting mindfulness is established in him. On whatever occasion unremitting mindfulness is established in a monk - on that occasion the mindfulness factor of enlightenment is aroused in him, and he develops it, and by development, it comes to fulfillment in him. ... ”

So we see here in the Anapanasati Sutta that satipatthana is referred to as ‘unremitting mindfulness’. Also we notice in this sutta that anapanasati (mindfulness of the breath meditation) fulfills the four satipatthana. This means that when one cultivates and develops intense, unremitting, one-pointed mindfulness on the breath, one is also observant of changing body states, feelings, mind states, and Dhamma. This is also stated in MN 111 where the Arahant Sariputta said that he was aware of all these changing states while in the various jhanas (states of perfect/right concentration).

The next sutta shows that the practice of satipatthana results in states of concentration:

SN 47.8

“So too, monks, here some foolish, incompetent, unskillful monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly aware, mindful, having removed covetousness and grief in regard to the world. While he dwells contemplating the body in the body, his mind does not become concentrated, his hindrances (i.e. hindrances) are not abandoned, he does not pick up that sign. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... Dhamma in Dhamma ... he does not pick up that sign.

That foolish, incompetent, unskillful monk, does not gain pleasant dwellings in this very life, nor does he gain mindfulness and clear awareness. For what reason? Because, monks, that foolish, incompetent, unskillful monk does not pick up the sign of his own mind. ...

So too, monks, here some wise, competent, skillful monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly aware, mindful, having removed covetousness and grief in regard to the world. While he dwells contemplating the body in the body, his mind becomes concentrated, his hindrances are abandoned, he picks up that sign. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... Dhamma in Dhamma ... he picks up that sign.

That wise, competent, skillful monk gains pleasant dwellings in this very life, and he gains mindfulness and clear awareness. For what reason? Because, monks, that wise, competent, skillful monk picks up the sign of his own mind.”

This sutta above shows that if a foolish, incompetent, unskillful monk practises satipatthana, his mind does not become concentrated, so the hindrances are not abandoned, and he does not gain pleasant dwellings (i.e. the jhanas - states of perfect/right concentration) in this very life, and he does not even gain mindfulness and clear awareness (sati-sampajanna).

However, if a wise, competent, skillful monk practises satipatthana, his mind becomes concentrated, the hindrances are abandoned, and he gains pleasant dwellings in this very life and also sati-sampajanna.

This shows very clearly that if one practises satipatthana correctly, one must attain the jhanas,

resulting in abandonment of the hindrances. In other words, satipatthana is the way/method/basis to attain the jhanas. This is exactly what is stated in MN 44 below:

MN 44 (Culavedalla Sutta)

“Unification of mind, friend Visakha, is concentration; the four satipatthana are the basis of concentration; the four right kinds of striving are the accessories of concentration; the repetition, development, and cultivation of these same states is the development of concentration therein.”

The four satipatthana are the basis of concentration, meaning that satipatthana is the practice for attaining concentration. In other words, satipatthana is synonymous with samatha meditation. This is also confirmed in MN 125 where satipatthana is mentioned in place of the first jhana.

MN 125 (Dantabhumi Sutta)

“Having thus abandoned the five hindrances, corruptions of the mind that weaken wisdom, he abides contemplating the body in the body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief in regard to the world. He abides contemplating feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... Dhamma in Dhamma ...

... Then the Tathagatha disciplines him further: ‘Come, monk, abide contemplating the body in the body, but do not think thoughts of sensual desire. Abide contemplating feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... Dhamma in Dhamma ...’

With the stilling of thought directed and thought sustained, he enters upon and abides in the second jhana ... third jhana ... fourth jhana. ”

Normally, after abandoning the five hindrances, a monk enters the first jhana as stated in several suttas, e.g. MN 51. Here instead, satipatthana is mentioned, followed by the second jhana, third jhana, and fourth jhana. Obviously here satipatthana is synonymous with the first jhana.

Concentration, i.e. jhana states, are essential for the development of psychic powers. It is not possible to attain psychic powers without first attaining the four jhanas. The Arahant Anuruddha was the foremost of the Buddha’s disciples with the divine/heavenly eye. He could see the thousandfold world systems; exercise psychokinesis (being one, he becomes many, etc.); possess the divine ear; remember many world cycles of past lives; read the minds of other beings; etc. In various suttas he attributed all of these psychic powers to the cultivation and development of the four satipatthana - SN 47.28, SN 52.3, SN 52.6, SN 52.11 to SN 52.24. Below we quote one such sutta:

SN 52.12

“By having developed and cultivated what things has the Venerable Anuruddha attained to such great supernormal knowledge/powers?

It is, friends, because I have developed and cultivated the four satipatthana that I have attained to such great supernormal powers. What four? Here, friends, I dwell contemplating the body in the body ... feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... Dhamma in Dhamma ... ardent, clearly aware, mindful, having removed covetousness and grief in regard to the world.

Further, friends, it is because I have developed and cultivated these four satipatthana that I wield the various kinds of psychic powers: having been one I become many; having been many I become one; I appear and disappear; I pass through fences, walls and mountains unhindered as if through air; I walk on the water without breaking the surface as if on land; I fly cross-legged

through the sky like a bird with wings; I even touch and stroke with my hand the sun and moon, mighty and powerful as they are; and I travel in the body as far as the Brahma world.”

Conclusion

The practice of right mindfulness (samma sati - the seventh factor of the Ariyan Eightfold Path) is to be mindful of the body, feelings, mind, and Dhamma in everyday life, without being distracted and enticed by forms, sounds, odours, flavours, and tangibles, which are Mara's bait. It is to be practised along with right effort (samma vayama - the sixth factor of the Ariyan Eightfold Path) to get rid of unwholesome states and to develop wholesome states. This is the essence of the spiritual path. This combination of right mindfulness and right effort is vipassana (contemplation).

The practice of satipatthana (intense state of mindfulness) is to attain concentration (samma samadhi - the eighth factor of the Ariyan Eightfold Path) in order to get rid of the hindrances (nivarana) and attain higher states of wisdom. It is also the link between the seventh and eighth factors of the Ariyan Eightfold Path. Thus the practice of satipatthana is samatha (tranquility) meditation.

Vipassana and samatha are both necessary for liberation. This is evident in the AN 4.170.