

Samatha and Vipassana

In accordance with the Early Buddhist Texts Sutta Nikaya

Bhante Bernard Dhammiko

Thai Forest Tradition of Dhammayuttika Nikaya Order, Malaysia

Email; bernardsgcheah@yahoo.com

Introduction

The objective of this Sutta (discourse) sharing article is to explain the differences between Sati (attention/awareness/mindfulness) and Satipatthana (systematic introspection), consequently highlighting the distinctions between Vipassana (contemplation/ reflection/ selective thinking) and Samatha (a meditation practice ~ tranquility).

According to the discourse AN 2.31, the Buddha indicated that distinct seeing/insight knowledge is cultivated through two primary practices: Samatha and Vipassana. Further analysis, reveals that the Buddha's meditation is the First Jhana (ecstasy/a state of mental absorption), Second Jhana, Third Jhana, and Fourth Jhana – Samma Samadhi (Harmonious Equilibrium/ Right Stillness/ Concentration), all of which are integral to the practice of Samatha.

Samatha and Vipassana

Samatha and Vipassana collectively form the foundation of Bhavana (Cultivation/ Development). The practice of Samatha facilitates the development of the mind by removing the five hindrances (panca nivarana), which obstruct wisdom, when one attains the Jhanas. Conversely, Vipassana contributes to the cultivation of an individual's character, which is achieved through the application of Samma Sati (Harmonious Attention/ Right Mindfulness) and Samma Vayama (Harmonious Exercise/ Right Effort) by eliminating unwholesome states and fostering wholesome ones.

Formal meditation is typically performed while seated and with the eyes closed and/or opened, aiming to achieve higher Jhana levels. Upon reaching the First Jhana, it is said that “The monk is said to have blindfolded Mara, to have become invisible to the Evil One by depriving Mara’s eye of its opportunity.” (MN 26). This occurs as consciousness rises

above the sensual realm (kamaloka) and transitions into the realm of form (rupaloka). Consequently, the Buddha refers to the Jhanas as “Superhuman States” (Uttarimanussa Dhamma).

Vipassana is an integral part of daily life, wherein the concepts of Anicca (Instability/Inability/Impermanence), Dukkha (Painfulness/Unsatisfactory/Suffering) and Anatta (Impersonality/ No essence/ Not-Self) are grasped through the reflection on the body, feelings, mind, and Dhamma (the Buddha’s teachings); Satipatthana in developing wisdom (panna). By comprehending these three fundamental characteristics of realities of life, one begins to improve oneself by getting rid of unwholesome states of mind and developing wholesome states of mind

Sati is consistently defined in various suttas, including AN 5.14, 7.4, 7.67, 8.30, 10.17; SN 48.9, 48.10, 48.50 and MN 53. For instance, in AN 5.14, it states “And what, monks, is the faculty of Sati? Here, monks, the ariyan disciple is mindful, possessing supreme mindfulness & alertness, one who remembers and recollects what was done & said long ago.”

The Pali-English dictionary states that Sati is derived from the word Smrti, which means 'to remember.' Thus, Sati can be understood as encompassing concepts such as conscious, awareness, mindfulness, recollection, or the act of remembering/calling to mind.

Majority of authors tend to interpret the term Samma Sati as Mindfulness. However, it is essential to recognize that within the context of the Buddha's teachings, Samma Sati does not denote general mindfulness. The Pali term that more accurately represents general mindfulness is Sati Sampajanna (without the word Samma in front), as referenced in MN 119 and SN 47.35.

Harmonious Attention or Right Mindfulness (Samma Sati) is defined in SN 45.8 as follows:

“And what, monks, is right mindfulness? Here, monks, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and grief in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... dhamma in dhamma, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and grief in regard to the world. This is called right mindfulness.”

Samma Sati (Harmonious Attention/ Right Mindfulness) is characterized by the contemplation of four specific objects: the body, feelings, mind, and dhamma; Satipatthana.

This indicates a deliberate attention or specific mindfulness on these four objects. In the suttas SN 47.6 and SN 47.7, the Buddha describes these four objects as a monk's personal refuge and ancestral domain; forms, sounds, odours, tastes, tactile objects, i.e. the five objects of sensual pleasure, are the domain of others; and if a monk strays outside his own domain into the domain of others, Mara will gain access and will get a hold on him. The practice of Samma Sati requires a conscious effort to deliberately direct/ reflect one's attention solely to the body, feelings, mind, and dhamma, while consciously avoiding the distractions or aware of the distractions posed by external sensory experiences that represent Mara's bait.

The practice of Samma Sati as 7-Factors of Enlightenment (Satta Bojjhanga)

SN 46.3

“ Monks, those monks who are accomplished in virtue, accomplished in concentration, accomplished in wisdom, accomplished in liberation, accomplished in the knowledge and vision of liberation: even the sight of those monks is helpful, I say; even listening to them ... even approaching them ... even attending on them ... even recollecting them ... even going forth after them is helpful, I say. For what reason? Because when one has heard the dhamma from such monks one dwells withdrawn by way of two kinds of withdrawal - withdrawal of body and withdrawal of mind.

Dwelling thus withdrawn, one recollects that dhamma and thinks it over. Whenever, monks, a monk dwelling thus withdrawn recollects that dhamma and thinks it over, on that occasion the enlightenment factor of mindfulness (Sati) is aroused by the monk; on that occasion the monk develops the enlightenment factor of mindfulness; on that occasion the enlightenment factor of mindfulness comes to fulfillment by development in the monk.”

It is evident that the practice of Samma Sati, which encompasses listening, reflecting on the dhamma, and contemplating its teachings, serves as a pathway to enlightenment. This aspect is indeed the most crucial, as the subsequent factors of enlightenment are derived from this foundational practice, as illustrated in the above sutta passage. Likewise, within the framework of the Noble Eight-fold Path, the Samma Ditthi - attained through attentive listening to the original/true dhamma (as noted in MN 43) is the primary and most significant factor that paves the way for the other factors of the path, as referenced in MN 117.

According to MN 117, the practice of Samma Vayama is fundamental to achieving

Samma Sati. Samma Vayama consists of the commitment to prevent the rise of unwholesome states and to eliminate those that have already occurred, while also nurturing and maintaining wholesome states. This process requires attentive awareness of one's physical actions, speech, emotions, thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes, as well as adherence to the Buddha's teachings (Dhamma). Therefore, the practice of Samma Vayama is inherently linked to Samma Sati, and their combination is known as Vipassana, which should be incorporated into daily living. The Dhamma serves as a guiding compass, directing us toward the harmonious/right path, as we reflect on our actions, speech, and mental states, thereby cultivating/developing (bhavana) our minds and character.

AN 2.31

“ Monks, these two things give rise to knowledge / insight. What two? Samatha (tranquility) and vipassana (contemplation).”

This sutta illustrates that when we engage in Vipassana with a stillness of mind, distinct seeing emerges. This is further validated by the subsequent sutta.

SN 46.38

“When, monks, a noble disciple listens to the dhamma with eager ears, attending to it as a matter of vital concern, directing his whole mind to it, on that occasion the five hindrances are not present in him; on that occasion the seven factors of enlightenment go to fulfillment by development.”

From the examination of the suttas and vinaya (monastic code of conduct/protocol/etiquette), it is evident that a significant number of people, amounting to thousands, reached the first fruition of liberation ~ a stream-entry (sotapanna) and various other paths and fruitions by engaging in attentive listening to the Dhamma with a certain level of realization. The standard formula for stream-entry is presented in the subsequent sutta.

MN 56

‘Then the Blessed One gave the householder Upali progressive instruction, that is, talk on giving, talk on virtue, talk on the heavens; he explained the danger, degradation, and defilement in sensual pleasures, and the blessing of renunciation. When he knew that the householder Upali's mind was ready, receptive, free from hindrances, elated, and confident, he expounded to him the teaching special to the Buddhas: suffering, its origin, its cessation,

and the path. Just as a clean cloth with all marks removed would take dye evenly, so too, while the householder Upali sat there, the spotless immaculate vision of the dhamma arose in him: “All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation.” then the householder Upali saw the dhamma, attained the dhamma, understood the dhamma, fathomed the dhamma; he crossed beyond doubt, did away with perplexity, gained intrepidity, and became independent of others in the Teacher’s Dispensation.

Samma Sati is experienced in Samma Samadhi

Samma Sati attains its truest form in the states of Samma Samadhi, where it is attentive on a single object without any scattering. The complete experience of Samma Samadhi includes the four jhanas. In the second jhana, all thoughts are extinguished (SN 36.11), resulting in a state of noble silence/stillness (SN 21.1), which is the essence of 'bare attention'.

MN 39

“ Again, monks, with the fading away as well of delight (piti), a monk abides in equanimity, and mindful (sato) and fully aware (sampajano), still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third jhana, on account of which the ariyans say: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful (satima)’ ...

Again, monks, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and the previous disappearance of joy and grief, a monk enters upon and abides in the fourth jhana, which has neither pain nor pleasure and complete purity (parisuddhi) of mindfulness and equanimity ...

When his concentrated mind is thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to the knowledge of recollection of past lives, that is, one birth, two births, ... ten ... hundred ... thousand ... hundred thousand births, many aeons ... ”

The above sutta passage presented indicates that Samma Sati is experienced in the fourth jhana. This experience allows the monk/nun to access memories of his/her many past lives, thus confirming the definition of Samma Sati as the ability to recall/recollect of specific past events. It follows that Samma Sati is indispensable in both Vipassana and Samatha practices, and the practice of both fosters knowledge and distinct seeing, ultimately leading to Wisdom.

Satipatthana

Although there is a well-defined explanation of Samma Sati in the suttas, the suttas lack a comparable clear definition of Satipatthana. Its usage appears to mirror that of Samma Sati, specifically concerning four specific objects of Samma Sati. However, it is crucial to recognize an important difference between the two. A careful study of various suttas in the Satipatthana Samyutta (Chapter 47 of the Samyutta Nikaya) and additional suttas reveals this distinction.

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”

As indicated in the preceding text, the practice of Satipatthana requires one to be mindful of the four objects, akin to the practice of Samma Sati. We shall now reference an important sutta that follows.

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.”

In this sutta, it is evident that the man must apply intense, persistent, and focused attention to the bowl of oil, as his life depends on preventing it from spilling. This serves as a representation of how Samma Sati should be practiced in relation to the body, known as Satipatthana. Therefore, Satipatthana is interpreted as 'intense, persistent, unification/awareness/consciousness' or, more simply, 'intense awareness./consciousness.' This interpretation is further supported by MN 118.

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. ... ”

In the Anapanasati sutta, Satipatthana is described as 'unremitting mindfulness.' Additionally, this sutta reveals that Anapanasati, which refers to the meditation on the breath, fulfills the four Satipatthana. This suggests that when one engages in focused and persistent awareness on the breath, one also becomes cognizant of the shifting states of the body, feelings, mental conditions, and Dhamma. This notion is echoed in MN 111, where the Arahant Sariputta expresses his awareness of these changing states while experiencing various Jhanas, or states of deep stillness.

The subsequent sutta demonstrates that the practice of Satipatthana leads to enhanced states of stillness of mind.

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 corruptions (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 corruptions 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.”

The sutta discussed reveals that a monk who is foolish, unskilled, and incompetent in his practice of Satipatthana will not achieve stillness of mind. This failure leads to the continuation of hindrances, preventing him from realizing the pleasant states of Jhana, which are essential for attaining Samma Samadhi. Additionally, he fails to develop Sati Sampajanna in this lifetime.

On the other hand, should a wise and skilled monk/nun undertake the practice of Satipatthana, his/her mind will become still, the hindrances will be set aside, and he/she will enjoy blissful states of existence and experience in this life, accompanied by Sati Sampajanna.

This clearly demonstrates that proper practice of Satipatthana leads to the attainment of the Jhanas, which in turn facilitates the abandonment of hindrances. In essence, Satipatthana serves as the method or foundation for achieving the Jhanas. This is explicitly articulated 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 serve as the foundation for stillness, indicating that the practice of Satipatthana is essential for achieving stillness. In essence, Satipatthana can be equated with Samatha practice. This relationship is also affirmed in MN 125, which cites Satipatthana 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. ”

Generally, after a monk/nun has abandoned the five hindrances, he/she enters the first jhana, as described in multiple suttas, including MN 51. In this particular case, Satipatthana is mentioned, followed by the second, third, and fourth Jhanas. Clearly, in this context, Satipatthana is synonymous with the first jhana.

The practice of Samma Samadhi, particularly through the attainment of Jhana states, is fundamental for the development of psychic powers but not absolutely. One may not achieve such powers without first mastering the four Jhanas; but may not be necessary an Ariyan or a noble being. Arahant Anuruddha, who was the foremost disciple of the Buddha and possessed the divine eye, had the ability to see numerous world systems, perform psychokinesis, utilize the divine ear, remember many cycles of past lives, and read the minds of other beings. In several suttas, he attributed these psychic abilities to the cultivation of the four Satipatthana, as indicated in SN 47.28, SN 52.3, SN 52.6, and SN 52.11 to SN 52.24.

Below is an excerpt of 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 Samma Sati, which constitutes the seventh factor of the Noble Eight-fold Path, involves maintaining awareness of the body, feelings, mind, and Dhamma in daily life. This practice requires one to remain undistracted and not swayed by sensory experiences such as forms, sounds, odors, tastes, and tangible objects, which serve as distractions from Mara. It should be undertaken in conjunction with Samma Vayama, the sixth factor of the Noble Eight-fold Path, to eliminate unwholesome states and cultivate wholesome ones. This approach embodies the core of the spiritual journey. The synergy of Samma Sati and Samma Vayama is referred to as Vipassana.

The practice of Satipatthana, which reflects an intense state of Samma Sati, is designed to foster stillness; Samma Samadhi - the eighth factor of the Noble Eight-fold Path to overcome the hindrances and attain higher states of wisdom. Additionally, it acts as a bridge between the seventh and eighth factors of the Noble Eight-fold Path. Therefore, Satipatthana is identified as Samatha practice, which eventually would lead to Vipassana

practice. With reference to a sutta, the Buddha mentioned that an individual may begin in these four ways: Samatha then Vipassana, Vipassana then Samatha, both Samatha and Vipassana and Anatta. The result of Samatha practice is tranquility that develops the mind, which leads to the abandonment of passion; Liberation of the Mind. As for Vipassana, the result of the practice is distinct seeing that develops into wisdom, which leads to the abandonment of ignorance; Liberation by Wisdom. Therefore, Vipassana and Samatha are both necessary for any levels of liberation.

Reference:

Tipiṭaka the Three Baskets of the Buddhist canon. SuttaCentral *Early Buddhist texts, translations, and parallels*. <https://suttacentral.net/?lang=en>

The Buddha's words. SuttaCentral *Early Buddhist texts*.

<https://suttacentral.net/introduction?lang=en>

The Noble Quest. Pāsarāsisutta—Bhikkhu Sujato

<https://suttacentral.net/mn26/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none¬es=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin>

Getting Started. SuttaCentral *Early Buddhist texts*, <https://suttacentral.net/start?lang=en>
<https://readingfaithfully.org/>