

Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta: Investigation of the Four Noble Truths

By Seth Evans

Abstract

This article explores the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as expounded by the Buddha in the Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya. The emphasis is on the objects of meditation within the dhammā-nupassanā, the Fourth Foundation, and its object of the Four Noble Truths.

The article posits that the meditator can access the Four Noble Truths in their true nature as eternal laws of the Dhamma. By accessing these eternal laws the meditator can understand the truth of suffering in itself, giving them a better understanding of what the true nature of suffering is and thus, giving the meditator a better understanding of how to react to suffering with true compassion.

Introduction

Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta is one of the most important discourses in the Pāli Canon. It describes the four foundations of mindfulness and what to investigate within meditation. If practiced correctly, the Buddha taught that one may see oneself liberated in seven days.¹

T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids explain the importance of this teaching in the introduction to the Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta in their translation of the Dīgha Nikāya:

The doctrine here expounded is perhaps the most important, after that of the Aryan Path, in early Buddhism; and this tract, the oldest authoritative statement of the doctrine, is still in frequent and popular use among those Buddhists who have adhered to the ancient faith. The two doctrines are closely connected. The exposition here of mindfulness (Sati) includes that of the Path, and no exposition of the Path is complete without the inclusion of mindfulness.²

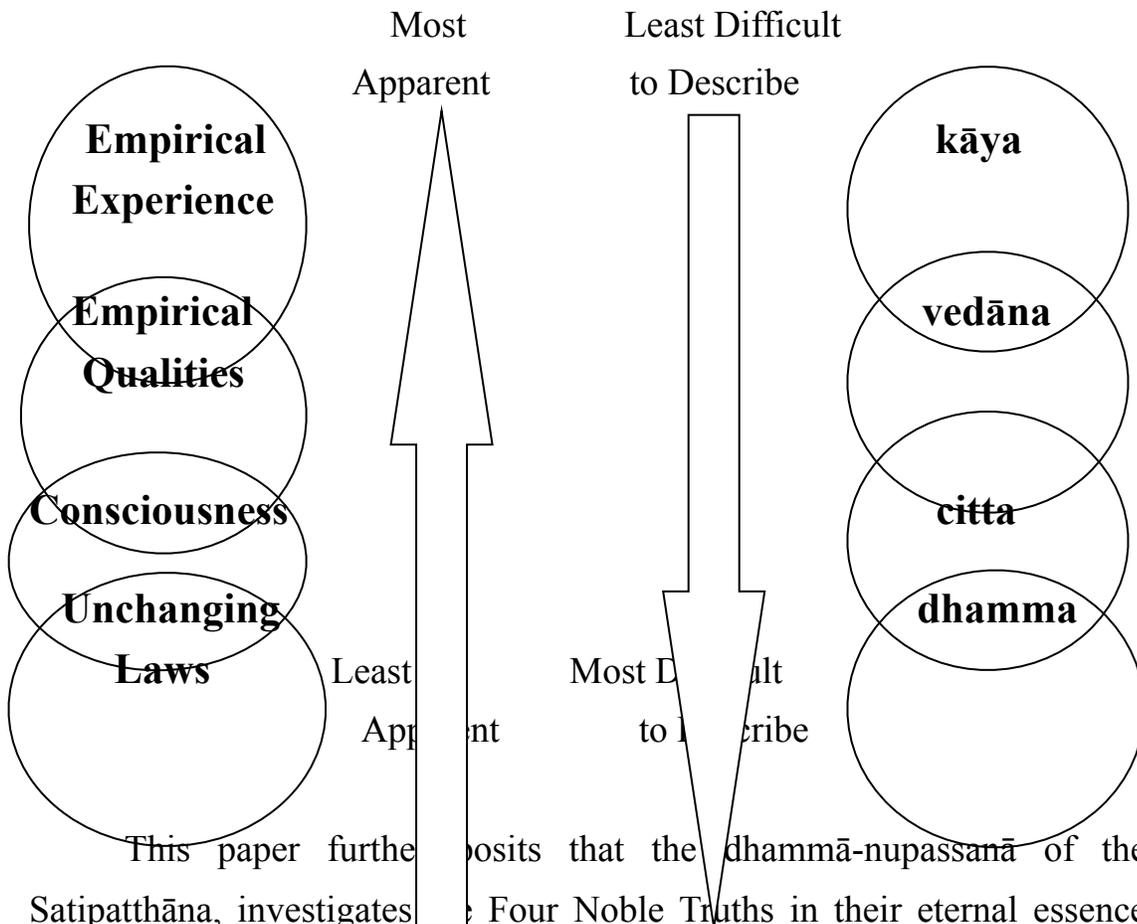
The purpose of this paper is to show the possibility that the investigation within dhammā-nupassanā examines the least apparent objects, these objects also being the most difficult to describe. These objects may be least apparent because they are not normal objects of consciousness rather laws of consciousness itself. The meditation within the method described in the Mahā Satipatthāna grants the

¹ T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), **Dialogues of the Buddha**, Vol 2, (Bristol: PTS, 1899), p. 346.

² *ibid.*, p. 322.

meditator access to these eternal laws of the Dhamma, particularly the Four Noble Truths.

Below is a table that illustrates the different qualities of reality that are explored through meditation as explained by the Buddha in the Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta. The different aspects of experience that are investigated range from most apparent, which is least difficult to describe, to least apparent, which is most difficult to describe.



This paper further posits that the dhammā-nupassanā of the Mahā-Satipatthāna, investigates the Four Noble Truths in their eternal essence, and as such, one can see the true nature of the Truth of suffering, the Truth of the cause of suffering, the Truth of the cessation of suffering, and the Truth of the Way to the cessation of suffering. The reason seeing the true nature of the Four Noble Truths is so important is that one will also see the true nature of compassion in the Eight-

Fold Path found in the Fourth Truth. In investigating these dhammas, one becomes more articulate in seeing suffering and applying compassion, not just as a cognitive response, but as an act that participates in these eternal Truths of the Dhamma itself.

Unchanging Laws and dhammā-nupassanā

The objects investigated in the dhammā-nupassanā is the least apparent, and as such the most difficult to describe. The investigation of these objects involves laws that are not found in the normal mode of experience. One must become reflexive of the laws of cognition itself, not just of concepts of cognition

T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids discuss the difficulty in translating dhamma in the introduction to the Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta in their translation of the Digha Nikaya:

Now it is always difficult to make any English term coincide with either dhamma. Here, as elsewhere in Buddhist diction, it is chiefly the context that must be the guide to meaning. The Suttanta is a discipline—the supreme discipline—in ethical introspection. And in Buddhist introspective analysis, dhamma (elsewhere translatable now by 'things,' now by 'qualities ') are, more especially, 'cognoscible objects,'.... [or] content of consciousness... transverse cuttings, so to speak, of our subjective experience.³

³ *Ibid*, p. 325.

This article takes dhamma to mean content of consciousness, more specifically, mental phenomena. Mental phenomenon can be both consciousness itself or objects of mental consciousness, such as concepts. Qualities of consciousness can also be objects of consciousness. For example, when we focus on *vedāna*, or feeling, we are focusing not on a physical entity but on a quality of the mind as the object of meditation. In this way it can be understood that laws of cognition may be objects of meditation as well

The fourth foundation of the method of the Mahā- Satipatthāna includes, at least in part, an investigation of unchanging laws taught by the Buddha, particularly the Four Noble Truths. These truths are eternal and always present transcending change and time. As such, they may be understood as laws of cognition itself rather than things that are objects of cognition: thoughts, concepts, etc. They govern existence and experience itself. Though these truths are always present in experience, they are not experienced in the ordinary mode of perception.

Narada Thera explains the eternal nature of the Four Noble Truths in *The Buddha and His Teachings*:

This interesting passage refers to the four Noble Truths which the Buddha Himself discovered by His own intuitive knowledge. Whether the Buddhas arise or not these Truths exist, and it is a Buddha that reveals them to the deluded world. They do not and cannot change with time because they are

eternal Truths. The Buddha was not indebted to anyone for His realization of them. He Himself said: “They were unheard before.”⁴

In the Mahahatthipadopama Sutta the Buddha teaches that “all wholesome states can be included in the Four Noble Truths.”⁵ This would mean that all necessary mental phenomenon to become enlightened included in the Four Noble Truths. This would include the *brahma-vihāras*, that being *muditā*, *karunā*, *metta* and *upekkā* as well as the Eight Fold Path itself. It would seem that the fourth foundation of the method of the Mahā-Satipatthāna grants access to the investigation of the path of liberation.

The Buddha explains investigation of the First Noble Truths within the fourth foundation in T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids’ translation of the Mahā-Satipatthāna Sutta:

And moreover, bhikkhus, a brother, as to ideas, continues to consider ideas from the point of view of the Four Aryan Truths. And how does he do this? Herein, O bhikkhus, a brother at the thought : This is ill [suffering]! is aware of it as it really is ;—at the thought: 'This is the coming to be of ill!' is aware of it as it really is ;—at the thought ' This is the cessation of ill!' is aware of it as it really is;—at the thought : This is the way leading to the cessation of ill!⁶

⁴ Narada Thera, **The Buddha and His Teachings**, (Colombo: Karunaratne and Sons, 1973), p. 241.

⁵ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (tr.), **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya**, (Somerville, Wisdom Publications, 1995), p. 1169.

⁶ T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids , *op. cid.*, p. 337.

Here the Buddha teaches that the meditator can see suffering “as it really is”. In seeing the true essence of suffering one does not simply just see suffering, one experiences the eternal nature of the Truth of suffering. In the same way one experiences the eternal nature of the Truth of the Cause of suffering, the eternal nature of the Truth of the cessation of suffering, and the eternal Truth of the Way to the cessation of suffering.

T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids’ translation of the Mahā-Satipatthāna Sutta further discusses the fourth Truth:

And what, bhikkhus, is the Aryan Truth concerning the Way that leads to the Cessation of Ill [suffering]? This is that Aryan Eightfold Path, to wit, right view, right aspiration [thought], right speech, right doing, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right rapture.⁷

In experiencing the true nature of the Eight-Fold Path in the investigations within the dhammā-nupassanā, the meditator experiences the essence of right thought and right action. This grants the meditator access to the true nature of compassion and thus the meditator participates in the eternal laws of the Eight-Fold Path.

The Buddha explains right aspiration [thought]:

⁷ *Ibid* p. 343.

And what, bhikkhus, is right aspiration? The aspiration towards renunciation, the aspiration towards benevolence, the aspiration towards kindness. This is what is called right aspiration.⁸

With access to investigate the true nature of benevolence and kindness the meditator is able to become more proficient in applying compassion to other beings who suffer and in doing so furthers his own development of understanding the Way to the cessation of suffering.

Conclusion

This investigation of the Four Noble Truths that happen within the fourth foundation of the method of the Mahā- Satipatthāna appears to be investigation of these eternal laws themselves rather than simply investigating concepts that represent the laws. If this is the case, when meditating in the fourth foundation and investigating the Four Noble Truths, one is participating in the essence of all that is wholesome, not just thinking about what may be wholesome. In participating in these eternal laws one sees the reality of the *brahma-vihāras* in themselves. In this way, one sees compassion in its eternal nature, not just a concept or momentary cognition of compassion. This eternal nature of compassion is within experience but transcends ordinary experience. One must be in the dhammā-nupassanā to see compassion as it is. When one sees the eternal nature of compassion and investigates it, one is investigating compassion itself rather than just a concept in the ordinary sense.

⁸ *Ibid* p. 344.

References

Bodhi, Bikkhu. **A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma**. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2012.

Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu (tr.). **The Path of Purification, Visuddhimagga**. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society. 2011.

Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu and Bodhi, Bhikkhu (tr.) **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya**. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1995.

Rahula, Walpola . **What The Buddha Taught**. New York: Grove Press, 1969.

Rhys Davids, T.W. and C. A. F. (tr.). **Dialogues of the Buddha**. vol. 3. Bristol: Pāli Text Society, 1899–1921.