

# Did the Buddha Teach *Satipatthāna*?

by Chip Hartranft

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## What drives your interest in the authenticity of the canonical meditation instructions?

The main intention is to understand as clearly as possible what the Buddha thought and taught, because what he offered had only one purpose: to come to the end of *dukkha*, liberating heart and mind. He appears to have taught that this potential—presumably the ultimate goal of personhood—will only be realized by one who fully develops body and mind to see things as they are. The central axis of this cultivation is, of course, meditation, so even a little more clarity about how to practice might be of enormous value.

Of course, the canonical teachings are widely regarded as the actual words of a teacher for whom it is easy to feel devotion. Many have a frankly worshipful attitude not just toward the Buddha, but also toward what they consider his most precious utterances, as well as the monastic traditions that conserve them. So one must proceed sensitively in any linguistic or historical approach to how the Buddha might actually have spoken.

## Are the words in the Pāli Canon not a reliable record of the Buddha's teachings?

In one sense, the Pāli texts are the closest a person today can get to the Buddha's own speech, since Pāli appears to be much nearer to the original vernacular than any of the other languages his teachings have

been passed down in—Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese. However, most scholars believe that the teachings were first passed down in the predominant language of the region, Ardha Māgadha. It is not that Pāli is radically different than Ardha Māgadha, but it is a later vernacular. So, its canon must be regarded as a kind of translation, finalized centuries later by people whom the Buddha might have had some difficulty understanding. When we read Shakespeare, who died 400 years ago, it is clear how much things can change.

In fact, the Pāli Canon embraces a wide range of linguistic fields, including usages much later than the Buddha's era as well as a good deal of archaic language that probably dates close to his lifetime. Much of the older stuff pops up in the verse sections of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, for example, or in certain sections of the *Sutta Nipāta*.

## How about the structure of the Canon itself?

There again, much has changed since the time of the First Council, when 500 fully awakened arhants are said to have convened in the capital of Māgadha a few months after the Buddha's death to recite and begin the conservation of his teachings. Although it appears plausible that the teachings were divided into *sutta* and *vinaya* at that time, few scholars today accept the canonical claim that its final *Nikāya/Āgama* format was conceived then. It makes sense, as some have proposed, that at first the discourses, or *suttas*, tended to be brief, and were simply classified as being teachings, explanations, or verse. There is good evidence that these three initial categories soon expanded to nine in the Pāli, and later twelve in Sanskrit texts—not the first or only example of mental proliferation, *papañca*, at play!

It seems most probable that these began to be grouped by topic, forming the nucleus of what eventually would become the “collection bundled by topic”—*Samyutta Nikāya*—with many other relatively short teachings arranged according to the growing fashion of lists in the “progressively numbered collection,” the *Anguttara Nikāya*. This is not to say that the *suttas* in these collections are the

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oldest or most authentic—some are clearly late, in fact—but I think they do often convey something closer to the spirit of the Buddha’s own style. He seems to have been a concise, pithy teacher whose preferred environment was silence. In fact, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he mainly offered brief utterances, or *udānas*, that later followers saw fit to position like gemstones in settings—sometimes strangely convoluted ones.

### **Is that how the Middle Length and Long Discourses came to be?**

There is every sign that this is so. The longer a text, the more likely it has been patched together from short extracts found elsewhere. Interestingly, the constituents are not always strictly compatible—in other words, there are plenty of non-sequiturs that do not seem to have bothered the compilers. Also, sometimes a bit of ideology is inserted in a Pāli text but not in its counterparts in other canons, or vice versa.

### **Did the Buddha himself utter the *Satipatthāna Sutta*?**

It seems unlikely. The *Satipatthāna Sutta* is only found in the “middle length” collection, the *Majjhima Nikāya*, although the “long text” collection, *Dīgha Nikāya*, contains an identical version augmented by a sprawling exposition of the Noble Truths that has obviously been grafted onto it from another well-known source. Thus, it should not surprise anyone too much that the *Satipatthāna Sutta* is a pastiche in other significant ways as well. The evidence suggests that it was patched together from shorter passages to create an anthology text—very useful for spreading the dharma to farflung sanghas like Kammāsadhamma, its purported setting. This area, in the Kuru country near modern Delhi, eventually became a stronghold of the Sarvāstivādan school, but at the time of the *Satipatthāna Sutta*’s composition was probably too distant from the Buddha’s original centers to possess very many remembered texts.

**There are quite a few penetrating studies of the *Satipatthāna Sutta* out there these days. What do they say about this?**

There are several wonderful books that have closely examined this text, by authors ranging from Nyanaponika Thera to Anālayo. In them the *Satipatthāna Sutta* is generally treated as a primary text, uttered by the Buddha himself and recorded more or less intact. So, one gets the sense that the *Satipatthāna Sutta* conveys the range of mindfulness teachings pretty much as the Buddha intended.

On the other hand, quite a few scholars find the evidence compelling that the *Satipatthāna Sutta* is a secondary text. Even though *suttas* throughout the canons often define mindfulness as involving four meditation objects called *satipatthānas*—body, feeling tone, qualities of consciousness, and causal mental states—the original meaning of *sati* probably did not include them, as we will see.

The stock passage that lists these four in the *Satipatthāna Sutta* is identical to the formula found throughout the *satipatthāna* section of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, along with a few other familiar pieces of the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. These were probably among the earliest surviving expressions of the four *satipatthānas* concept. It is these relatively short *samyutta* extracts—or more likely their earlier iterations in Ardha Māgadha, now lost—which appear to be the sources from which the *Satipatthāna Sutta* was assembled as a later anthology. Interestingly, almost all those extracts are given geographical settings—if they have them at all—that suggest they came near the end of the Buddha’s life, or quite possibly after. In over 100 texts in the Pāli *samyutta*, only two place the four *satipatthānas* teachings in an early period, and neither’s setting is credible.

### **What other evidence is there that the *Satipatthāna Sutta* is a later anthology?**

Aside from its siting in Kuru being historically unlikely, the *Satipatthāna Sutta/Mahā* texts are unique: no others collect those elements in the same way, particularly in the “body” section, and other versions such as the Sarvāstivādan are considerably different, although enough alike to suggest a common source that is now lost. This is frequently seen with ancient texts—for example, the synoptic Christian Gospels. Furthermore, the stitchmarks are not hard to see: elsewhere in the canons one can easily locate most of the short, memorable passages which were combined to form various sections of the

*Satipatthāna Sutta*, although never anywhere else are they stuck together in this way.

One will also notice that certain passages are not found elsewhere in the Pāli—for example, the simile where a yogi sensing each breathflow's length is compared to a turner who knows the duration of each pass on the lathe. Singularity or even oddity can suggest authenticity, of course, but when one looks for the same simile in a different canon's recension—for example, the Sarvāstivādan *Smṛti-upasthāna Sūtra*—it is absent, suggesting that the image was a Theravādan inspiration.

**Even if the *Satipatthāna Sutta* and most other middle-length and longer discourses are anthologies, should this matter to a meditator?**

As I mentioned at the outset, this is the single most important question that concerns me, and perhaps others who seek the clearest possible guidance on the path. One hears often these days, especially from academics, that meditation is over-valued among Westerners, who are guilty of cherry-picking meditation or *samādhi* techniques from the Buddhist tradition while failing to apply themselves along the ethical and philosophical dimensions—*sīla* and *paññā*—with comparable enthusiasm.

While this may be true in some respects, if anything the role of meditation in actualizing the Buddhist path—in other words, to develop *samādhi* and realize *nibbāna*—is undervalued. I would say that most of what appears to be philosophical content in the surviving canons was probably imparted by the Buddha in the context of practical meditative training. This is true, I believe, not only of the teachings concerning the aggregates, the sense spheres, and the four noble truths but also such seemingly lofty matters as dependent origination. They have only one purpose: to come to the end of *dukkha* in this very life, by attaining to the liberative vision of how things arise, the “*dhamma* eye.” Without this, the *dhamma* is mistaken for the teachings instead of what the teachings are about.

As far as I know, Gotama never claimed to have opened the “*dhamma* eye” by being especially moral, nor by thinking things through more analytically. His awakening and subsequent ethical and analytical insights were arrived at through the path of *samādhi*, and he tirelessly practiced and recommended meditation including *jhāna* for the remainder of his life. It seems to have occupied far more of his waking hours than any other activity, including teaching. How can it not be a case of ‘do as I do’?



Here the sub-topics in various versions of the Satipatthāna Sutta are listed. Darker type indicates topics included in all versions that have come down to us.

**Mindfulness is usually understood as something apart from *jhāna*, though, isn't it?**

It often is, but not by the Buddha. For one thing, those few canonical passages where he gives an account of his own awakening all emphasize that it was his progression through the *jhānas* that led to clear seeing, or *vijjā*. For another, *samādhi* is one of the seven “awakening factors,” which are included in every single enumeration of the fourth *satipatthāna*, the *dhammas* or “causal mental states”—more on those in a moment. When the Buddha or his followers listed the five faculties and strengths, *samādhi* always preceded *paññā*—wisdom—and was preceded by *sati*—mindfulness. And in fact, there was a conscious effort either by the Buddha or more probably by later followers to equate the four *satipatthānas*—body, feeling tone, qualities of

# Sutta

## Mind - citta

affected/unaffected by lust, hate, delusion  
contracted/distracted, exalted/unexalted  
surpassed/unsurpassed, concentrated/unconcentrated  
liberated/unliberated

## Mind-objects - dhammā

Hindrances  
(desire, ill will, sloth/torpor, restlessness/remorse, doubt)

Aggregates  
(form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness)

Internal/External Sense Bases  
(eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind)

Seven Factors of Awakening  
(mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture,  
tranquility, concentration, equanimity)

Noble Truths  
(suffering (*dukkha*) origin of *dukkha*, cessation, way)

Other topics appear in some but not all versions (in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese).

consciousness, and causal mental states—with the four tetrads of *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness of breathing), which in practical terms is kind of a stretch.

### They don't match up?

It is not at all clear that the Buddha himself claimed a perfect one-to-one correspondence between the four tetrads and the four *satipatthānas*. It seems more likely to me that later scholastic monastics—perhaps without much personal grounding in practice—might have tried to correlate them because they rightly supposed that *samādhi* and *satipatthāna* were related, and the fourfold structures invited comparison.

One of the most intriguing oddities that is called into question as one drills down into the earliest strata of teachings is this effort to not just match up

but synonymize the tetrads with *satipatthāna*, most famously in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*. Apart from that instance in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, though, I find only a single similar passage, repeated four times, in the entire *Samyutta Nikāya*, and it appears to be the source rather than any sort of confirmation for this attempt to align the two. Nonetheless, even if the attempt is not very convincing, it reflects the fact that in teachings both early and late, the Buddha's mindfulness generally involves the breath.

Does that include all four *satipatthānas*—body, feeling tone, qualities of consciousness, and causal mental states? Or only the first category, body, mentions breathing?

Actually, even the “body” category probably did not mention the breath in the original version. Surprisingly, one of the earliest expressions of the four *satipatthānas* concept occurs in what is usually assumed to be a later text, the *Vibhanga* from the Pāli *Abhidhamma*. In the *Vibhanga* there is no geographical setting—standard for an analytical text—but neither is there any instruction to sit down, cross the legs, become sensitive to the breath, nor observe and relax the whole body. The only instruction familiar from the *Satipatthāna Sutta*'s “body” section is the stylized contemplation of the various parts of the body—quite a different practice! Furthermore, when one gets to the section on *dhammas*, there are no noble truths, aggregates, or even sense spheres—only the hindrances and the awakening factors. Now here is the kicker: it is assumed that one contemplates the four *satipatthānas* after attaining the first *jhāna*, presumably by practicing *ānāpānasati*.

### Isn't that atypical?

In the case of the Pāli *Vibhanga*, one might well wonder if a late *abhidhamma* text can tell us much about earlier teachings. As it happens, though, this text appears to be based on a very early teaching, now lost, and may be even closer to the Buddha's time than the *samyutta* extracts mentioned earlier.

More importantly, there are echoes of these understandings in all other canons' versions of the *satipatthānas* [preserved in Sanskrit and Chinese]: only the hindrances and the factors are common to every list of the *dhammas*, and most versions apart from the Theravādan include the *jhānas* in either the body or *dhammā* sections. Likewise, the preparatory

## ***The oldest iterations of satipatthāna and ānāpānasati suggest that bracketing attention (manasikāra) in breath-by-breath frames is a prerequisite for attaining true vision***

passage about meditation—the familiar part about going to the forest, sitting down, crossing the legs, watching the breath and relaxing the body—is never found in the *satipatthāna* bundle of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, nor in the comparable version in the [Sanskrit] *Ekottara Āgama*, a collection possibly surviving from the Mahāsaṅghika school.

The bottom line: the original formulation of the four *satipatthānas* did not include any mention of the breath, but not because it was not part of “body observation,” or *kāyānupassanā*. Meeting experience one breath at a time actually may have applied to all four.

### **How does that work?**

Rather than a one-to-one match between the tetrads and the four *satipatthānas*, it would seem as if the Buddha simply taught others to meditate as he had done: using the fact of breathing to develop a deeply collected, one-pointed mind, *samādhi*. For many yogis, this can be done by “yoking” to the *prāna* or “aliveness” of the body, which the Buddha and his contemporaries seem to have related both to respiration and to sensation in general.

*Ānāpāna* is about more than that, however: the Buddha seems to have recommended that each new breath flow be used as a unique, individual frame during which some aspect of reality is observed arising and passing away. This temporal “framing” may be operative even as the yogi approaches the precipice of cessation and *nibbāna*, so it can hardly be thought of as intended for the beginning stages only. Furthermore, it implies a recognition of the fact that for some yogis the “path moment” of stream entry will arise from a collectedness of mind less quiescent than the fourth *jhāna*, in which the movements of breath have grown imperceptible, negating their utility as frames.

One can see an evolution in the concept of *sati*, or mindfulness. The Brahmins had used the word to refer to remembering the Vedas, a usage close to its everyday meaning, “memory.” Since the only practical way to record words and events in these largely pre-literate times was to memorize them, remembering went hand in hand with paying close attention. The Buddha or perhaps other ascetics appropriated *sati* to mean remember the

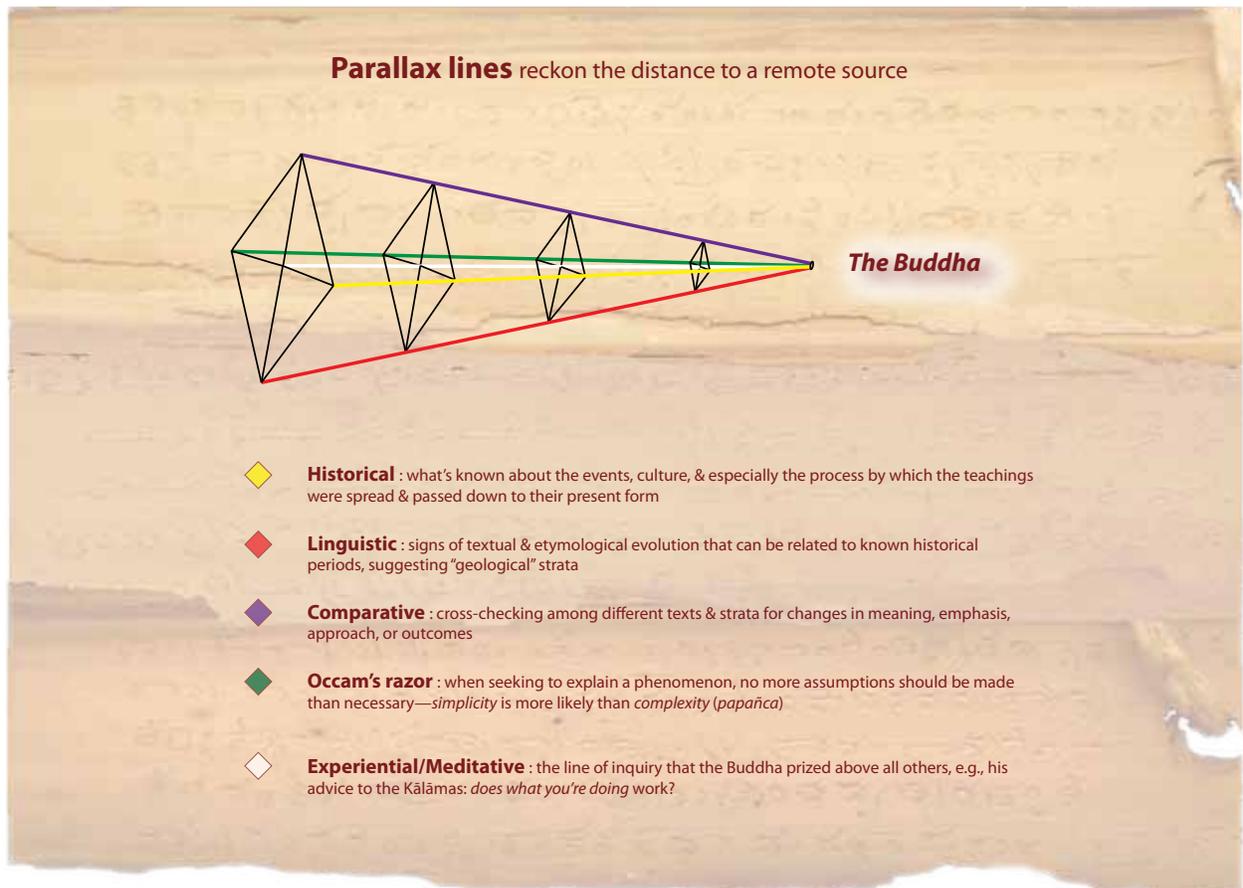
meditation object, and this meaning at first may have applied mainly to the cultivation of deeply absorbed, secluded states of mind. Likewise, some ascetics appear to have retooled a Vedic term for “worship,” *upāsana*, as a meditation term closer to its root meaning, “sitting/abiding close by.” Notice that *upāsana* is not only synonymous but also fairly homonymous with *upatthāna*, “standing/staying close by.” It would have been quite natural for the phrase *satipatthāna* (*sati* + *upatthāna*) to have emerged in this way, especially as *sati* evolved beyond the simple yogic imperative, remember the object, and came to signify remember to attend, opening onto an ever wider field during the breath “frame.”

Taken together, the oldest iterations of both the “four *satipatthāna*” and *ānāpānasati* concepts suggest that the Buddha or perhaps his immediate successors came to regard the bracketing of attention (*manasikāra*) in the breath-by-breath frames of *ānāpānasati* as a prerequisite for attaining true vision. In practice, it enables two important forms of progress. First, it repeatedly “yokes” the yogi to the present moment, lessening identification with mentally fabricated scenarios involving past and future. Second, staying connected to the life force, *p(r)āna*, keeps attention in the neighborhood of the body, an arena in which any reactivity in the form of afflictive volitions—clinging—will usually be reflected.

So, there are convincing practical reasons why framing experience breath by breath was probably a feature not only of the four realms of experience called the *satipatthānas*, but also for the other, earlier differentiations of name-and-form into the six sense spheres and five aggregates, as well as dyadic formulations such as internal/external and body/external name-and-form. Later on, the compilers sought to equate breath meditation with mindfulness in a literal way by matching the *ānāpānasati* tetrads to the four *satipatthānas*.

### **Why do you think these four *satipatthāna* categories became important?**

If the Buddha himself went beyond these early conceptions of mindfulness, or *sati*, and developed the fourfold schema—and I am not sure he did, owing to its lateness—one might regard it as one



Given the age and complexity of the texts, it is hard to know which Pāli texts are the oldest, what was likely added later on, and to uncover earlier meanings, but converging lines of inquiry, similar to the visual phenomenon of parallax, can help. See the BCBS website for more on this.

of several such ways for a meditator whose vision is coming clear to classify and relate to experience.

As body and mind settle into tranquility, or *samatha*, the four *satipatthānas* and other such classifications such as the aggregates and sense spheres become increasingly self-evident and useful. Growing attuned to any of them promises to loosen the grip of identification, as in the case where the yogi correctly perceives this is a consciousness colored by wanting instead of I want. Whether one breaks down the experience stream with a special sensitivity to the varieties of mentality, as in the aggregates and four *satipatthānas*, or of physicality, as in the sense spheres, one is seeing one's life as an unfolding mosaic of separate, caused events rather than a self. This, the Buddha tirelessly repeated, is a decisive step toward liberation. Furthermore, the body (*kāya*) is the foundational arena for all of these. But it is noteworthy that the Buddha or his successors only included the four *satipatthānas*, and not the aggregates or the sense spheres, in the essential teachings known as the "wings to awakening." My sense is that, more than those other

perspectives, the four *satipatthānas* sensitize the yogi to the causality of identity that must be disrupted if one is to "do what needs to be done" and attain true vision. The interruption of this causality, mapped more comprehensively in the teaching on "dependent origination," is the sine qua non of liberation. As it happens, the oldest formulation of the four *satipatthānas*—body, feeling tone, qualities of consciousness, and the causality of states to awaken or hinder—matches this emphasis on causation very well.

#### What can the meditator take away from all this?

First of all, meditation might begin for most as a simpler, more organic, energy-based kind of yoga. To the Buddha, *sati* or mindfulness did not start out as a species of choiceless, non-judgmental awareness of whatever is happening in the mind, as some define it today, but rather a liberative human capacity, attuning to aliveness, that most definitely involves choosing and judging at first. In practical terms, it means applying the attentional faculty of mind,

*manas*, toward a skillfully chosen aspect of real-time experience, and evaluating the states, or *dhammas*, that develop. For the Buddha himself and many of his followers, not all aspects of experience are created equal: the aggregation of bodily energies and events, *kāya*, is first among equals, and other aspects of form—what is seen or heard—can also serve powerfully as “objects.”

As the events of the energetic body—one of the “bodies in the body”—unfold in real time, the yogi “remembers to abide close by”—*sati-upatthāna*—holding the intention to meet unfolding experience with a non-ordinary vigilance toward the conditioned patterns of resistance that arise. The Buddha rightly recognized that the body is generally involved in what he called “clinging” (*upādāna*), a very physical word. In practice, getting clear about and letting go of all bodily expressions of volition—*kāya-sankhāra*—is essential to correctly perceiving mentality and letting go of identification with its volitional expressions such as labelling, conceptualizing, wanting, not wanting, and so forth. In other words, it is through the intention to stay “close” to physicality/*rūpa* that the yogi may begin to discern and further cultivate mentality/*nāma*.

A fresh reading of the meditation instructions might also help the meditator to understand that the seeming rigidity of the meditation instruction sequences in the *ānāpānasati* tetrads, the four *satipatthānas*, and the *jhānas* is largely an artifact of how the original instructions were memorized and passed down. In practice, they can be used flexibly and out of order. For example, one can hardly wait until the breath grows “short” to begin relaxing bodily activity—it will only become subtle to the extent that one has already been relaxing. It is not to say that a still deeper pacification will not be possible later, just that the instructions are nested rather than strictly runged. This is also true for the fourth tetrad: it is not just that the practice of breath by breath relinquishing is not confined to the later stages of *ānāpānasati*, but that the later stages may not arrive unless that intention has already arisen. To paraphrase, different strokes for different sets of conditions.

One more thing: the Buddhist path outlined in the canons and especially commentaries such as the *Visuddhimagga* can seem like a ladder stretching to infinity: there is always another level the yogi has to attain before reaching *nibbāna*. It is quite understandable how this kind of curricular thinking might have arisen as Buddhism became increasingly

monastic, textual, and hierarchical, but the traditions have been good enough to also record many instances where awakening was right around the corner. Certainly many of those who personally encountered the Buddha attained vision almost immediately, and even the technique-laden *satipatthānas* of two surviving traditions promise the attainment of “non-returner” status after just one week of diligent practice!

**It has been said that the Buddha himself had no word for “meditation,” and that what matters most in Buddhism is not anything as indulgent as cultivating inner tranquility but rather the Buddha’s analysis of reality and ethics. From your study and practice, what would you say about that?**

As the Buddha expressed it, wisdom is predicated upon “collecting the mind”—*samādhi*. If one sets down a bowl of muddy water and carefully keeps it from being disturbed, whatever energy had kept all the particles of sediment suspended will play out, and they will settle. When they do, they reveal something fundamental about the water: it was already clear and just required a bit of care in order to reveal its elemental nature (*yathā-bhūta*). In a sense, the path of self-development, or *bhāvanā*, is largely a process of purifying one’s inner ecology, which many in the Buddha’s day understood to be indivisible from the larger ecology.

That has a great deal to do with what it means to be a Buddhist: one tends to one’s garden, which includes not letting it overgrow into a thicket of views. The Buddha himself always connected one’s ecology to what he called *jhāna*, from the verb *jhāyati*—“one meditates.” Although there is considerable evidence that what the Buddha meant by *jhāna* is different than what others came to mean after many centuries of further experimentation—for example, in the *Visuddhimagga*—it is clear that he himself regarded the tranquility and clarity of *jhāna* as the platform from which a “purified” mindfulness arises. This special mindfulness is a secure and uncontrived knowing that is malleable and bright enough to spontaneously open out onto the entire six-fold stream of momentary experience with no loss of equanimity, and to abide there without volitional support or resistance. This sets the stage for the possibility for clear, uncontaminated vision, when *nibbāna* is at last known “with one’s own eyes.” The rest is commentary.

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