

Discourses on Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta

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Condensed from the discourses during a
course in *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*



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Introduction

S.N. Goenka, or Goenkaji as he is widely and respectfully referred to, is well known in numerous countries of the world as a master teacher of meditation. He received the technique that he teaches in the 1950's from Sayagyi U Ba Khin of Burma, who in turn received it from Saya Thet, who received it in turn from the venerable monk, Ledi Sayadaw, who in turn received it from his own teacher in a long line of teachers descended directly from the Buddha. The achievement of this line of teachers in preserving the technique through such a long period of time is extraordinary, and a cause for gratitude in those who practise it. Now, in a world hungry for inner peace, there has been an extraordinary spread of the technique in Goenkaji's lifetime: at the time of this writing meditation courses are given in 55 meditation centres as well as many temporary campsites in India and around the world, attracting about 40,000 people annually, a number which is growing each year.

In spite of his magnetic personality and the enormous success of his teaching methods, Goenkaji gives all credit for his success to the efficacy of Dhamma itself. He has never sought to play the role of a *guru* or to found any kind of sect, cult or religious organisation. When teaching the technique he never omits to say that he received it from the Buddha through a chain of teachers down to his own teacher, and his gratitude to them for the benefits that he has personally gained in his own meditation is evident. At the same time, he continually emphasises that he does not teach Buddhism or any kind of "ism," and that the technique that he teaches is universal, for people from any religious or philosophical background or belief.

The standard meditation course in this tradition is a residential course of ten days' duration. Participants commit themselves to

staying on the course site for the full ten days, observing a rigorous timetable, maintaining complete silence among themselves for the first nine days. At the beginning of the course, they take the five precepts as given by the Buddha to householders: to refrain from killing, to refrain from stealing, to refrain from telling lies, to refrain from sexual misconduct (which involves the maintenance of complete celibacy for the duration of the course), and to refrain from taking any intoxicants. They start with the practice of *Anāpāna* meditation, that is, the observation of the natural breath. On the fourth day, when some concentration has been gained, they switch to the practice of Vipassana, the systematic observation of the entire mind-matter phenomenon through the medium of bodily sensations. On the last full day, they practise *Mettā-bhavana*, that is, loving kindness, or sharing the merits that they have gained with others.

Although his family was from India, Goenkaji was brought up in Burma, where he learnt the technique from his teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin. After being authorised as a teacher by U Ba Khin he left Burma in 1969 in response to his mother's illness, to give a ten-day course to his parents and twelve others in Bombay. The inspiration that he imparted and the extraordinary results of his teaching led to many more such courses, first in campsites around India and then later in centres as these began to spring up. From 1979 onwards he also started giving courses outside India, notably in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal, France, England, North America, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. All of these areas today have one or more centres.

Unfortunately around this time confusion arose among some meditators as to how to practise Vipassana. The question arose as to what was Vipassana and what was *Satipaṭṭhāna*. In fact Vipassana and *Satipaṭṭhāna* are synonymous. They are the same.

In order to enable meditators to work directly with the Buddha's words and to dispel this confusion, Goenkaji gave the first *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* course at Dhammagiri, the main centre near Bombay, from 16 to 22 December 1981. The discipline and timetable of a ten-day course remained, but the participants could

study the text of the *Sutta* in the break periods, if they wished. Goenkaji's evening discourses explained and expanded on the *Sutta*. In this way *pariyatti* (the theoretical study of Dhamma) and *paṭipatti* (the actual practice of Dhamma) were most beneficially combined.

Each of the chapters of this book is a condensed version of the daily evening discourse given by S.N. Goenka during a *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* course held at Dhamma Bhūmi, Blackheath, Australia, in November, 1990. The book is intended as a companion volume to the *Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, The Great Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness* (VRI, 1998), with its introduction and notes, published by the Vipassana Research Institute. That volume contains the full text of the *Sutta* and is used as a handbook by meditation students who are attending the course. The condensed discourses in this book contain only short excerpts from the *Sutta*, and it is not intended to be used on the course, where students are able to hear the original discourses directly by means of videotape. It may, however, serve as an aid to meditators after the course as a review of the content, as an aid to further study of the texts for scholars, and to assist with translation and better understanding for the benefit of those whose mother tongue is not English.

“Liberation can only be gained by practice, never by mere discussion.” These words of Goenkaji give a fitting background to the origin and reason for these discourses and for the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* course itself.

Goenkaji has always emphasised the importance of the actual practice of meditation; theory and study are understood as a support to the practice. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourses he warns of how unfortunate it would be if a centre became devoted only to the study of theory. On *Satipaṭṭhāna* courses, as with the ten-day courses, the full meditation timetable is followed, the discourses being restricted just to one period in the evening. This means that the participants can use the theory as a foundation from which to investigate and experience realities inside themselves directly, rather than being tempted to get caught up in mere intellectual

debates about it. Not that intellectual study is discouraged, but as Goenkaji emphasises, theory and practice should go together. Similarly, on a ten-day course, the teachings in the discourses proceed from *sīla* (morality), to *samādhi* (mastery of the mind), to *paññā* (wisdom through insight) as the meditators are introduced to each at a practical level.

A prerequisite for the *Satipaṭṭhāna* course in this tradition is the completion of three ten-day courses, regular daily practice, and at least a minimum maintenance of *sīla*, by keeping the five moral precepts. It is noteworthy that the *Sutta* itself contains no mention of *sīla*. Goenkaji explains the background in the opening discourse given on Day Two: the *Sutta* was given to the people of Kuru, who already had a strong background of *sīla*, going back generations. To talk of *sīla* to them was unnecessary; its importance was already understood and assumed. It is also important today that meditators taking this course and working with this *Sutta* have at least a basic understanding and practice of *sīla*. Without this foundation of morality, it is impossible for them to go to sufficient depth in their practice to work effectively with the teaching in the *Sutta*. Many of the original audience of the *Sutta* were already highly developed in their own meditation, needing very little guidance to be able to reach higher stages. While such attainments are not necessarily expected today, a requirement of the course is that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* students at least have some solid experience in this meditation, as well as familiarity with the ten-day discourses.

It was also no coincidence that Goenkaji's teaching of the first course in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* at Dhammagiri was immediately followed by his teaching of a one-month Vipassana course. The further understanding gained from attending a *Satipaṭṭhāna* course forms an essential base for practice during a long course, and is in fact a requirement for taking long courses in this tradition. This understanding forms a very important and helpful guide for the meditator during the extended solitude spent in practice during a long course. Additionally, the long course discourses refer frequently to the teachings of this important *Sutta*, which are also echoed in many other *suttas*.

All the thousands of discourses given by the Buddha have a particular meaning and inspiration. Each was uniquely tailored by the Buddha to its specific audience, to suit their situation and level of understanding at that time. The understanding of even one or a few discourses was often sufficient for a meditator to reach the final goal. Nevertheless, this particular discourse has been singled out for intense study because, due to the developed nature of its original audience, it can dispense with many preliminaries and deal in detail with the technique of meditation itself. As such, it is particularly helpful to older students who wish to study and understand the technique more deeply at the theoretical level, in order to strengthen their practice.

The first *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* course lasted only seven full days, because this was the time Goenkaji needed to expound and explain it in the evening discourses. This remains its standard length today. The emphasis therefore is on understanding the *Sutta* and, at a practical level grasping its implications by at least some practice. This practice is then further developed in the long courses after it has been solidly anchored in a deeper knowledge of the theory.

It is a source of great inspiration to students on the course to hear the direct words of the Buddha, in a context where they can work with them directly. Many meditators, having practised even a little, are thrilled when they first hear the Buddha's words, and straightaway start to understand them in a way that is simply not possible for those who have not practised, because the experiential level is missing from their comprehension. Many meditators report that they feel as if the Buddha is speaking to them personally, as if his words were meant for them. It is a characteristic of an enlightened person's teaching that they seem to directly address the experience of every meditator.

In the original *Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and frequently in other *suttas* as well, the Buddha used repetition both for emphasis and clarity. In his discourses on the *Sutta*, Goenkaji recites each passage in Pāli in its entirety with the same effect. The resonance of the Buddha's original words, especially when recited by a master

teacher of Vipassana such as Goenkaji, directly invites the listener to deeper meditation. However to produce a written version which included all the Pali then recited would risk presenting an unnecessary mass of material which might create difficulties for a reader. This volume therefore separates the discourses and the full text. The discourses contain only excerpts from the *Sutta*, which are then followed by Goenkaji's commentary. It should also be noted that, for the convenience of the reader, many repeated passages within these excerpts have been omitted and are replaced by ellipses (...).

The complete Pāli text and translation may be found in the companion volume, the *Mahā-satipatthāna Sutta, The Great Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness* (VRI, 1998). In this way, the *Sutta* can be read in its entirety with the background and understanding gained by first reading these discourses. Those who wish to gain the inspiration of hearing the Pāli in full while actually practising, are referred to Goenkaji's own original discourses or recitation.

No summary of this kind can ever capture in full the flavour and impact of the original discourses. To have been present and to have heard such discourses in person is a great privilege and a source of extraordinary inspiration. Therefore these condensed discourses attempt to retain this flavour and atmosphere. While cleaving to Goenkaji's original words where possible, they attempt to distil and crystallise the meaning of each of his points with maximum clarity. If they can serve as an inspiration to all who read them to meditate at deeper levels on the path to liberation, their purpose will have been achieved.

—Patrick Given-Wilson
May, 1998, *Dhamma Bhūmi*,
Blackheath, Australia