

## The Dichotomy of *Ekāyana* in the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*: Inclusive or Exclusive Meaning

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### Abstract

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Inclusivism;  
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*This paper presents the ambiguity of the term ekāyana in the Satipaṭṭhānasutta in the light of inclusivism and exclusivism perspectives. Ekāyana is a familiar term in Buddhist Studies and Satipaṭṭhānasutta is a well well-known text in the Theravada insight meditation cycle. Ekāyana can be rendered in various ways according to the subjectivity and interpretation of each translator; thus, the term is ambiguous. This paper highlights the problem of Buddhist translation studies through analytical studies on several translations of the term. According to comparative analytical studies on different translations of ekāyana in the Satipaṭṭhānasutta, the researcher finds that interpretivism in translation is inevitable because finding the real meaning of a Buddhist term is an impossible task. Understandably, a translator of Buddhist texts imposes his interpretations when translating from ancient times until the present.*

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### Introduction

In the Buddhist history of translation, there are many ambiguous terms in Pali, Sanskrit, Classical Chinese, Tibetan, and other Buddhist texts. For example, the translation of *ekāyana* in the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* (MN 10), a popular meditation text in the Pali Canon, itself has been a subject of controversy. Many scholars have translated the term with various interpretations. For instance, some monks and scholars translate this term in an exclusive sense, such as “the only way” by Venerable U Silananda (2002), “the only or sole way” by Nyanaponika (2005), “a path that leads straight and directly all the way to the final goal” by Rupert Gethin (2001), and “the path of convergence leading to unification of mind” by Bhikkhu Sujato (2012). On the other hand, two scholars have rendered this term in an inclusive sense: “a comprehensive or all-inclusive path” by Tse-Fu Kuan (2007), and “unified and integrated path consisting of various sets of practices” by Jan Nattier (2007). Furthermore, there is one translation – “direct path” – which contains both inclusive and exclusive meanings by Bhikkhu Anālayo (2006) and Bhikkhu Bodhi (2001). Despite many scholars having translated the term, the researcher has not found a scholar who has critically researched and compared these translations. This paper will clarify the term *ekāyana* by presenting, comparing, and analyzing various translations of the term with the hope that practitioners gain more insight into the *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation.

## Research Methodology

This paper will delve into the ambiguity of the term from the approach of religious studies – inclusivism and exclusivism. Inclusivism is a popular term in religion, and some scholars have applied this term in the Buddhist context (Kiblinger, 2005). In this paper, I define inclusivism as the view of accepting that diverse Buddhist practices can equally lead to enlightenment. On the other hand, exclusivism is the view asserting that one’s practice is required to attain enlightenment and one’s practice is quicker than other practices. The researcher argues that the term *ekāyana* in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is ambiguous because this term contains either inclusive or exclusive meanings towards Buddhist practices. In this paper, the researcher builds arguments based on the interpretive critique of different translators. Interpretivists assert that personal interpretation, choice, and subjectivity are inevitable in translation (Cabezón, 1995).

## Results and Discussions

From the etymological analysis, the term *ekāyana* is ambiguous; and it is difficult to uncover the real meaning of *ekāyana*. Bhikkhu Sujato (2012) explains that the exact meaning of *ekāyana* is difficult because the grammatical relation between *eka* and *ayana* is vague. For example, *eka* = “alone, solitary, single, happening only once, that one only” (<https://www.sanskritdictionary.com/?iencoding=iast&q=eka&lang=sans&action=Search>); and *ayana* = “way, progress, manner, going, walking a road path” (<https://sanskritdictionary.com/?q=ayana%22&lang=sans&iencoding=iast&action=Search>). Therefore, the compound shows that there are various possible meanings of *ekāyana*. Based on the etymology, if we translate *eka* as “that one only,” this term has an exclusive meaning in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* context. On the other hand, if we take *eka* as “solitary,” there is still room for an inclusive interpretation of *ekāyana*. Therefore, etymological analysis shows that *ekāyana* is ambiguous; and this term contains inclusive or exclusive meanings.

Furthermore, Pali commentators also present the ambiguity of *ekāyana*. Silānanda (2004), Gethin (2001), and Anālayo (2006) elaborate the five definitions of *ekāyana* from Pali commentaries: 1) “single way,” without branch, 2) a lonely way, 3) “way of the Excellent One [Buddha],” 4) a way found in only one place, and 5) the only way that leads to nirvana. The commentators show that the term *ekāyana* is ambiguous, and they provide space for the translators to interpret the term. The fourth and fifth definitions of commentaries contain exclusive meanings in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* context; while the first, second, and third are subject to further interpretations of either inclusive or exclusive meanings. Again, Pali commentaries show the ambiguity of *ekāyana*. Moreover, the commentaries allow flexibility for translators to render the term in inclusive or exclusive meanings. One can also see the ambiguity of *ekāyana* from other Pali texts, the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*, *Tevijja Sutta*, *Dhammapada*, and *Jātaka*. These sources present that *ekāyana* has some meanings – “direct,” “only” (Anālayo, 2006), “narrow path” or “one charge” (Gethin, 2001). For example, the “direct” can contain both inclusive and exclusive meanings, depending on translators’ interpretations. However, “only” shows exclusiveness within the *Satipaṭṭhāna* context. Thus, the other Pali texts also present the ambiguity of *ekāyana* which can comprise either inclusive or exclusive meanings. Moreover, the various renderings of *ekāyana* in early Chinese Buddhist texts inform us of the ambiguity of *ekāyana*. Nattier (2007) provides various Chinese translations of *ekāyana* and references to early Chinese Buddhist texts: 1) “one vehicle” (*yisheng*) in six different *Samyuktāgama*, which mentions the four *ṛddhipādas*, three practices of *prātimokṣa*, four *jhānas*

and four noble truth, six *anusmṛtis*, and four *smṛtupasthānas*; 2) “one vehicle correct dharma” (*yisheng zhengfa*) in the *Renxianjing*, which refers to the four *smṛtupasthānas* and practices of eightfold path; 3) “the one or single way” (*yidao*) in the *Madhyamāgama*, which denotes the four *smṛtupasthānas* and right concentration together with other seven components of Noble Eightfold Path; 4) “the only one way” (*weiyoyidao*); 5) “the way single leading” (*daoyiqie*) in the *Samyuktāgama*, which refer to the four *smṛtupasthānas*; and 6) “single entry way” (*yirudao*) in the *Ekottarāgama*, which also pertains to the four *smṛtupasthānas*. Among these six different meanings of *ekāyana* in early Chinese Buddhist texts, the first three Chinese terms cover various practices of *ekāyana*, which informs us of the inclusiveness of the term. On the other hand, the fourth, fifth, and sixth translations limit the practice of *ekāyana* exclusively to the four *smṛtupasthānas*. Thus, these six Chinese renderings tell us that *ekāyana* is ambiguous. In fact, according to Chinese sources, *ekāyana* contains either inclusive or exclusive meanings towards Buddhist practices.

In addition to etymology, Pali texts and commentaries, and Chinese sources, the non-Buddhist texts also demonstrate the ambiguity of *ekāyana*. Based on Gethin, Sujato, and Nattier’s research on *ekāyana* from non-Buddhist texts, there are diverse meanings of *ekāyana*. There are two usages of *ekāyana* from the *Upanisads* and Epic: 1) “a lonely place – a place where only one person goes” and 2) “a meeting place, a place where people or things become one; an assembly, gathering together be one, or the practice that brings this about” (Gethin, 2001). Nattier (2007) adds two other definitions of *ekāyana* according to Monier Williams’s *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*: “narrow path or only way,” and “absorption in one or unity,” as in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Chandogya Upaniṣad*. Finally, Sujato (2012) summarizes the meaning of *ekāyana* in the Brahmanical context: “the source from which the things of the world spring, and the place of convergence, where the diversity of external phenomena come together in a profound unification”. Except for “only way,” the other definitions are open for interpretations either as inclusive or exclusive meanings in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* context. Again, the non-Buddhist sources support that the term *ekāyana* is ambiguous in meaning because this term can be interpreted in either inclusive or exclusive meanings in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.

The ambiguity of *ekāyana* leaves room for each author to render the term based on their methods of translation. Some authors – Silānanda, Nyanaponika, Anālayo, Bodhi, and Sujato – translate the term with more inclinations towards sources within their traditions. Silānanda, Nyanaponika, and Anālayo focus on Pali texts and commentaries. These sources and their traditional backgrounds as *Satipaṭṭhāna* teachers might shape their translations and exclusive interpretations of *ekāyana*. Contrary to Anālayo, Bodhi is a Pali translator; and although he has the same translation as Anālayo, Bodhi has a different interpretation of *ekāyana*. Furthermore, Sujato, a follower of the Ajahn tradition, translates *ekāyana* by reading Pali texts, commentaries, and non-Buddhist sources. Accordingly, Sujato’s translation is also different from previous authors. Indeed, the ambiguity of *ekāyana* provides flexibility for inserting a translator’s preferences on methods of translation. Various choices of sources and authors’ traditional backgrounds may lead to diverse translations and interpretations of *ekāyana*, which contain either inclusive or exclusive meanings of Buddhist practices. Each author selects various sources and interprets them, which leads to diverse translations of *ekāyana*. Silānanda, Nyanaponika, Anālayo, and Bodhi are Theravada monks, and they are inclined to Pali texts and commentaries. Their translations of the term are efficient phrases and two words. Furthermore, their backgrounds within tradition might influence their translations and

interpretations. Among the five definitions of *ekāyana* from the commentary, Sīlānanda (2004) prefers the fifth to translate the *ekāyana* as the “only way,” asserting that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* is the only way to attain nirvana, to end suffering, and to eliminate mental afflictions. Similarly, Nyanaponika (2005) translates *ekāyana* in an exclusive sense – “the only or sole way” – because he states that all Buddhist methods of mental training and meditation ultimately converge in the “Way of Mindfulness” (*Satipaṭṭhāna*). Both Sīlānanda and Nyanaponika have connections with Mahasi Sayadaw, a Burmese meditation teacher, who propagates *Satipaṭṭhāna* as the only way to attain nirvana, without the prerequisite of calm abiding (*samatha*). Sīlānanda’s (2004) book is the commentary of *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* following Mahasi Sayadaw’s explanations, and Nyanaponika’s (2005) book is about the *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. We can infer that their missionary intentions and motivations for writing their books shape their exclusive translations and interpretations of *ekāyana*. Thus, their personal choices on the commentaries and traditional backgrounds lead to their exclusive translations of *ekāyana*.

Like Sīlānanda and Nyanaponika, Anālayo and Bodhi’s sources within the tradition may dictate their translations and interpretations. Anālayo and Bodhi are Theravada monks, who read Pali texts. Contrary to the fifth explanation of commentaries used by Sīlānanda and Nyanaponika, Anālayo (2006) renders the term based on the first explanation of commentaries – “direct path” – to show the significance of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation as leading “directly” to the attainment of nirvana. In translating the term, Anālayo (ibid.) discusses the expression of *ekāyana* based on the Pali commentaries, *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*, *Tevijja Sutta*, and *Dhammapada*. Like Anālayo’s translation, Bhikkhu Bodhi (2001) also follows the first explanation of commentaries and translates the term *ekāyana* as “direct path,” to preserve this explanation in an efficient phrase. In translating the term, due to not finding the “exact precedent” of this term in the Pali texts, Bodhi follows his teacher, Ñāṇamoli’s interpretation, based on his unpublished translation. Thus, their sources of translation result in their translations.

Similarly, Anālayo and Bodhi’s traditional backgrounds may also dictate their interpretations of *ekāyana*. Although Anālayo and Bodhi have the exact translation of *ekāyana*, they have dichotomous interpretations of exclusive and inclusive meanings. Anālayo (2006) says that the term *ekāyana* only appears in the *Suttas* almost exclusively as the attribute of *Satipaṭṭhāna*, and the *Satipaṭṭhāna* is an essential requirement for liberation. Anālayo’s (ibid.) translation contains an exclusive efficiency and efficacy towards Buddhist practice since he asserts that *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice is indispensable for attaining nirvana, and this practice also brings its result immediately. However, Bodhi (2001) still accepts the efficacy of other meditative practices, such as absorption (*jhāna*) or sublime states (*brahmavihāra*). Again, Anālayo’s (2014) background as a *Satipaṭṭhāna* teacher might lead to his exclusive interpretation of *ekāyana*. On the other hand, Bodhi – a Pali translator (<http://www.wisdompubs.org/author/bhikkhu-bodhi>) – may not have an interest in the propagation of *Satipaṭṭhāna*; thus, Bodhi’s interpretation is inclusive. Once again, translators’ traditional backgrounds can dictate their renderings and interpretations. Furthermore, Sujato’s methods of translation by involving – Pali texts and commentaries, non-Buddhist

sources, his traditional backgrounds, and his motivation on translation – may lead to his exclusive interpretation of *ekāyana*. However, Sujato has a different translation from the

previous authors. In translating *ekāyana*, Sujato (2012) examines the term in the *Upaniṣad* and *Mahā Bhārata* and concludes that *ekāyana* in those sources contain the meaning of “convergence” and “going to one”. Furthermore, Sujato (ibid.) explains, “‘one’ in the Suttas’ meditation vocabulary are the terms ‘one-pointedness’ (*ekaggatā*) and ‘unification’ (*ekodibhāva*), which are standard synonyms of *jhāna* or *samādhi*.” From these Brahmanical and Pali sources, Sujato (ibid.) contends that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice is essential in bringing the mind particularly to oneness or concentration of mind (*jhāna*). Sujato (ibid.) says that the *ekāyana* should be translated as “the path of convergence leading to unification of mind.” Also, Sujato’s (ibid.) translation contains exclusivity; because even though he agrees that all seven sets of factors to enlightenment have an association with *samādhi*, he stresses on the indispensability of *Satipaṭṭhāna* in bringing this unification of mind. Sujato’s exclusivity here does not mean that the goal of nirvana is reserved merely for *Satipaṭṭhāna* practitioners, but exclusivity is narrower in the scope of bringing the achievement of *jhāna*. Thus, Sujato’s methods of translations of preferring Pali texts and commentaries and non-Buddhist sources might result in his exclusive translation and interpretation of *ekāyana*.

From his background and motivation to write his book, we can also speculate the reason for his exclusive translation and interpretation. Sujato (ibid.) is a monk who follows the forest tradition of Ajahn Chah ([https://dhammadawiki.com/index.php?title=Ajahn\\_Sujato](https://dhammadawiki.com/index.php?title=Ajahn_Sujato)), who practices the pair of *samatha* (or *jhāna*) and *vipassanā*, in contrast to contemporary *Satipaṭṭhāna* teachers, who emphasize on *vipassanā*. Moreover, Sujato’s (ibid.) motivation to write his book is to study the Theravada meditation theory, which he claims to include both *samatha* and *vipassanā*. Before he discusses the meaning of *ekāyana*, he argues that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* is not merely *vipassanā* practice, as held by some 20th-century meditation teachers, who exalt the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Sujato’s traditional background as a follower of Ajahn tradition and his intention to write his book as a response to the contemporary *Satipaṭṭhāna* teachers might shape his exclusive translation and interpretation of *ekāyana*. Once again, the ambiguity of *ekāyana* leaves room for the authors to render the term based on their methods of translation. The methods of translation by using various sources and involving their lineages of practices may direct each author’s translations and their exclusive or inclusive interpretations of *ekāyana*.

On the other hand, the method of translations without involving lineages of practices may have different results in the translations and interpretations of *ekāyana*. Contrary to Silānanda, Nyanaponika, Anālayo, and Sujato, Gethin, Nattier, and Kuan are not monks. Therefore, they may not have the personal intention to promote their lineages of practices. However, Gethin, Nattier, and Kuan still have different translations of *ekāyana*. We can speculate that their preferences for sources and backgrounds on scholarship might influence their translations and interpretations of *ekāyana*. Gethin’s preference for Pali text and his background as a scholar specializing in Pali Buddhism (<http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/en/persons/rupert-m-l-gethin%287c32c26a-8f6f-42f8-aaae-a4fd97124ed5%29.html>) may determine his translation and interpretation. Gethin (2001) consults the Pali texts (*Niddesa*, *Mahāsihanada Sutta*, *Jātaka*) and commentaries, *Upaniṣad* and *Epic* to translate the term *ekāyana*. He arrives at two possible definitions of *ekāyana*: 1) “a place where one only goes [alone]” and 2) “going to one”. Gethin (ibid.) prefers the second definition, which is more suitable within the *Satipaṭṭhāna* context. By considering the result of *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice – “the knowledge and state of non-return” – at the end of *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Gethin associates “one” here with the nirvana; and he identifies *ekāyana* as the four

*Satipaṭṭhānas*. Unlike Sujato (2012), who construes “one” as the mundane concentration of *jhāna*, Gethin’s “one” is concerned with the final goal of *Satipaṭṭhānas* practice. Gethin’s “one” here is different from Sujato’s because Gethin assigns “one” here in the context of *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, not in the other Suttas or Brahmanical sources used by Sujato. Again, we can see that the difference in interpretation between Gethin and Sujato is due to their preferences for sources. Gethin concludes that *ekāyana* is “a path that leads straight and directly all the way to the final goal.” Gethin’s translation still has an exclusive meaning because he affirms that the four *Satipaṭṭhānas* are important Buddhist practice for awakening; and thus, they are straight and direct. Gethin’s rendering of *ekāyana* relies more on the *Satipaṭṭhānas* context. Accordingly, we may infer that Gethin’s reliance on *Satipaṭṭhānas* context and his background on Pali scholarship defines his translation and interpretation of *ekāyana*.

In addition, one can also see that the methods of translation by reliance on different textual sources might influence the result of translation and interpretation. In the case of Kuan (2007), I speculate that his inclusiveness on secondary sources – Gethin, Sujato, and Nyanaponika’s works – may shape his interpretation and translations. Here, Kuan (ibid.) reinterprets Sujato’s *Upaniṣadic* passage of “point of convergence” in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* context – “the four *Satipaṭṭhāna* constitute the path where various strands of practice converge.” Kuan (ibid.) also finds that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* covers calm abiding and insight meditation in the Early Buddhist texts, and the early teachings on these two meditations are only general guidelines. Thus, the four *Satipaṭṭhānas* cover different practices because the four *Satipaṭṭhānas* are also general guidelines. Furthermore, Kuan quotes Nyanaponika’s statement, “*Satipaṭṭhāna* is convergence of all Buddhist meditation methods” and Gethin’s argument, “*Satipaṭṭhānas* are most versatile and universally applicable [meditation] practices.” Based on these contentions, he suggests the inclusive definition of *ekāyana*: “a comprehensive or all-inclusive path, which characterizes the four *Satipaṭṭhāna* as the basic general instruction of various Buddhist practices.” Thus, we can see that Kuan’s choices on some secondary scholarships from Gethin, Sujato, and Nyanaponika as his sources might shape his inclusive translations. Again, we might speculate that Kuan’s translation and interpretation are inseparable from his preferences for sources.

Finally, the method of translation by heavy reliance on early Chinese Buddhist texts and the translator’s intention might change the result of translation. Compared to previous authors, Nattier (2007) with her background as a scholar, who works on Chinese sources, may set her translation and interpretation on *ekāyana*. Nattier (ibid.) says that *ekāyana* is a rare term in Pali; hence, Chinese texts can be a great help in clarifying the meaning of *ekāyana*. Based on Nattier’s extensive research on the Chinese *Āgamas*, Pali, and Sanskrit, she finds that *ekāyana* covers not only the four *Satipaṭṭhāna* practices (which occur in the three Gunabhadra *Samyuktāgama*, Saṃghadeva’s *Madhyamāgama*, archaic An Shigao *Samyuktāgama*, *Ekottarāgama*, *Dirghāgama*, *Janarṣabha-sūtra*, and Pali Suttas), but also “1) four *iddhipāda* (T99[561]), 2) three practices of morality, four *dhyānas*, and knowing the Four Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path (T9 and T26[189]), 3) a set of three dharma teachings (T9), 4) the six *anusmṛtis* (T99[550], with parallel from a Sanskrit fragment), and 5) thirty-seven of *bodhipakkhiyā dhamma* (Pali *Niddesa*).” Here, we can see that Chinese sources denote *ekāyana* not only for the four *Satipaṭṭhānas* but for other practices as well. Based on her dependence on Chinese sources, she suggests that the meaning of *ekāyana* should be inclusive, which is “unified and integrated path consisting of various sets of practices,” not only the four *Satipaṭṭhāna* practices, but also other practices, such as the four *ṛddhipādas*, Noble Eightfold Path, et cetera. Hence, Nattier’s heavy reliance on early Chinese Buddhist texts may determine her inclusive interpretation and translation.

Nattier's intention of doing translation might also reflect her inclusive interpretation. She aims to clarify the unclear meaning of the Pali term *ekāyana*, which is often translated in the exclusive sense of "sole, one, or only way or path for salvation." She also rejects the translation of *ekāyana* in an exclusive term, which only associates the *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice as "one thing needed to attain nirvana." Thus, we could infer that her inclusive translation and interpretation are due to not only her heavy reliance on Chinese sources but also her intention to translate the term. Once again, the method of translation by heavy reliance on a type of source and the author's intention on translation can influence the result of translations and interpretations.

## Conclusion

In this way, the ambiguity of *ekāyana* allows each author to render the term based on their methods of translation by inserting their personal preferences. This research has shown us the difficulty of translations without bringing up the authors' preferences, motivations, and interpretations. Thus, we need to question the positivist goal of translation that we cannot uncover the original meaning of *ekāyana* in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In the case of *ekāyana* in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we have seen that from their preferences on textual sources, personal background, and intention of translation, the eight authors demonstrate interpretivism. Indeed, the term *ekāyana* itself is ambiguous from etymological analysis, commentarial definitions, Pali texts, Chinese sources, and non-Buddhist evidence. Therefore, it is difficult to translate *ekāyana*, without inserting personal preferences.

From my research on the eight authors and seven different translations on *ekāyana*, there are both five exclusive and three inclusive translations. From these five exclusive translations, four interpretations of *ekāyana* from Silānanda, Nyanaponika, Anālayo, and Sujato are subject to their traditional backgrounds. Nevertheless, I contend that their translations still have great value in supporting and promoting their lineages of *satipaṭṭhāna* practices. Furthermore, inclusive interpretations and translations of *ekāyana* are a valuable basis for supporting non-sectarianism and inclusivism within Buddhist communities. Indeed, the various translations of *ekāyana* in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* show multifarious usages of the term and the flexibility of Buddha's teachings to adapt to his audiences. Hence, interpretivism translations support the skillful means of Buddhism. Accordingly, we should consider having interpretivism as the goal of Buddhist translations.

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