

*The Buddha's Teachings on  
Four Foundations of Mindfulness*



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# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## Introduction

### Elements of Life and Teachings of Buddha

- Siddhartha Gautama: Lived c. 563 – 483 BCE
- Born in Lumbini, current day Nepal
- Noble wealthy family, life of luxury, ease
- Sense of something missing (*dukkha*)
- Leaves home, enters homeless life (age 29)
- Studies, practices asceticism for six years

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## Introduction

### Elements of Life and Teachings of Buddha

- Finds ‘middle path’—awakening under *Bodhi Tree*
- First teaching—on Four Noble Truths
- Forms monastic community (*sangha*)
- Teaches for 45 years in northern India
- Dies at 80... Teachings spread through Asia and beyond— south (*Theravada*) north (*Mahayana*) and to Tibet/Mongolia (*Vajrayana*)

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## Introduction

- The Buddha shared his major teaching on mindfulness in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, or discourse on the foundations of mindfulness
- According to scholar and translator Maurice Walshe, this discourse is ‘generally regarded as the most important sutta in the Pali Canon,’—the authoritative teachings of the Buddha in the Theravadan tradition
- The Buddha described mindfulness as the direct path to liberation

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## Introduction

- The *Satipatthana Sutta* is a discourse with detailed instructions on bringing mindfulness—bare, non-judging awareness—to our individual experience in four domains or areas: 1) mindfulness of the body; 2) mindfulness of the ‘feeling tone’ of experience; 3) mindfulness of mind states; and 4) mindfulness of *dhammas*, or our experience through the lens of key Buddhist teachings
- In this discourse, the Buddha provides 13 different meditation practices within these four domains (body, feelings, etc.) that can take the practitioner to full liberation—complete freedom from suffering (*Nirvana/Nibbana*).

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## Introduction

### The meaning of *Satipatthana*

- *Sati* means mindfulness or awareness and *upatthana* means ‘placing near’ or ‘attending’ to something with mindfulness, according to Ven. Analayo
- *Satipatthana*, he argues, can best be translated as ‘attending with mindfulness,’ (to the body, etc.) or ‘presence of mindfulness’—with a balanced attitude and with mindfulness being ‘present’

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## Introduction

### Main Elements and Structure of the Discourse

1. This is a talk that the Buddha gave to the Kurus at Kammasadhamma—according to Ven. Analayo it was a later teaching given to advanced practitioners in the Delhi area
2. The Buddha said, ‘this is the *direct* path’ (*ekayano*) that leads all the way to freedom, to *Nirvana*, complete freedom from suffering
3. A ‘bhikkhu’—monk or practitioner—abides contemplating the body (feelings, etc.) with these four qualities of heart and mind:

(over)

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## Introduction

### Main Elements and Structure of the Discourse

- ***diligent***—bringing a balanced and sustained energy to one's contemplation, not rigid but determined
- ***clearly knowing***—practicing with wisdom, fully grasping and comprehending what is taking place
- ***mindful***—cultivating a non-judging awareness of one's own experience
- ***free from desires and discontent in regard to the world***—letting go of the hindrances that make it difficult to be mindful, to practice, and with the mind concentrated on the task.

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## Introduction

### Main Elements and Structure of the Discourse

4. There are 13 practices of mindfulness in the *Satipatthana Sutta*—six related to the body, one to feelings, one to mind states, and five to *dhammas*. Regarding mindfulness of breathing, the Buddha instructs the practitioner to:

- Find a suitable place to meditate and establish an appropriate posture
- Bring awareness to the breath (in-breath and out-breath)
- With awareness of the breath, experience the whole body
- With awareness of the breath, calm the body

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## Introduction

### Main Elements and Structure of the Discourse

5. After each of the thirteen mindfulness practices, the Buddha repeats a 'refrain': The meditator abides contemplating the body:

- 'internally, externally, and both internally and externally'
- Contemplates the nature of arising in the body, the nature of passing away, and both arising and passing away
- Mindful that 'there is a body' is established to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuing mindfulness
- He/she/they abide 'independent, not clinging to anything in the world'

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## Introduction

### Main Elements and Structure of the Discourse

6. Then, for the other twelve practices of mindfulness, the *definition* of how one practices (diligent, clearly knowing, etc.) applies to each of these meditations—though it is not repeated—and the *refrain* is repeated after each one (body, postures, activities, etc.)

After the final practice—exploring one’s experience through the framework of the four noble truths—and the final repetition of the refrain, the Buddha makes a prediction (*over*):

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## Introduction

### Main Elements and Structure of the Discourse

The Buddha's 'prediction': 'If anyone should develop these four *satipatthanas* in such a way for seven years (down to seven days), one of two fruits could be expected of them: 'final knowledge here and now' or 'if there is a trace of clinging left, non-returning'—the two highest stages of freedom

The Buddha concludes that this is the 'direct path ... for the disappearance of *dukkha* and discontent ... for the realization of *Nibbana*', the end of suffering

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

- The goal of each of the four main practices in the *Satipatthana Sutta*—bringing mindfulness to the body, feelings, etc.—is to gain liberating insight into the truth about life and free ourselves completely from the clinging that leads to suffering.
- They can be seen as four gateways, each leading to the same goal—freedom from suffering
- Mindfulness of the body was seen by the Buddha as of exceptional importance on the path of awakening

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

“There is one thing that when cultivated and regularly practiced leads to deep spiritual intention, to peace, to mindfulness and clear comprehension, to vision and knowledge, to a happy life here and now, and to the culmination of wisdom and awakening... Mindfulness centered on the body.” (Buddha)

“If the body is not cultivated, the mind cannot be cultivated. If the body is cultivated, the mind can be cultivated.” (Buddha)

“Within this fathom-long body, with its perceptions and inner sense, lies the world, the cause of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path that leads to the cessation of the world.”  
(Buddha)

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

The original teachings (discourses) of the Buddha emphasize the great value of mindfulness of the body.

Those who do not practice mindfulness of the body do not “partake of the deathless.”

Mindfulness of the body is a source of joy and can be considered one’s best friend. Ven. Analayo cites a monk who reflected that if he were granted only one wish, it would be that the whole world might enjoy unbroken mindfulness of the body. (Analayo, pp. 124-125)

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

Six practices are listed under the first *Satipatthana*—mindfulness of the body:

1. Awareness of *breathing*
2. Awareness of *bodily postures*
3. Clear knowledge in regard to *bodily activities*
4. Analysis of the body into its *anatomical parts*
5. Analysis of the body into its *elementary qualities*
6. *Contemplation of a dead body* in nine consecutive stages of decay

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

### (i) Mindfulness of Breathing

Mindfulness of breathing is the most widely practiced of the body contemplations. The Buddha awakened practicing mindfulness of breathing. It has a number of positive features:

- The breath is always available—unlike sounds, sensations, emotions—which may come and go
- It is a relatively neutral object—typically not inducing excitement or negativity and potentially helpful from the standpoint of meditation
- It has the quality (often) of calming and stabilizing the body and mind—and is closely connected to our feelings of ease and well-being and stress and difficulty (tightness, shortness of breath...)
- The breath can be a path of deep concentration and create conducive conditions for insight to arise

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- Mindfulness of breathing can be a path to deep concentration and create conducive conditions for insight to arise

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

### (i) Mindfulness of Breathing

The Buddha provides two pairs of instructions on mindfulness of breathing

- “Breathing in long, the practitioner knows ‘I breathe in long.’ Breathing out long, they know, ‘I breathe out long.’ Breathing in short, they know ‘I breathe in short.’ Breathing out short, they know, ‘I breathe out short.’”
- “The practitioner trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body.’ They train thus: ‘I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.’ They train thus: ‘I shall breathe in calming the bodily formation.’ They train thus: ‘I shall breathe out calming the bodily formation.’”

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

### (ii) Mindfulness of Postures

The instructions for bringing mindfulness to *postures* focus on the four main postures of Buddhist meditation: walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. The main difference between engaging in these activities on an everyday level and practicing mindfulness of the body in these postures lies in the ‘knowing’—aware as we are engaged in the activity

- When walking, they know ‘I am walking’; when standing, they know ‘I am standing’; when sitting, they know ‘I am sitting’; when lying down, they know ‘I am lying down’; or they know accordingly how their body is disposed

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

### (iii) Mindfulness of Activities

The instructions for bringing mindfulness to *activities* focus on a range of everyday activities that the practitioner is instructed to engage in mindfully—'clearly knowing' when they are engaged in:

- going forward and returning
- looking ahead and away
- flexing and extending the limbs
- wearing robes, carrying the robe and bowl
- eating, drinking, tasting food
- defecating, urinating
- walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, keeping silent.'

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

### (iv) Mindfulness of Anatomical Parts of Body

The instructions for bringing mindfulness to different parts of the body encompass a list of thirty-one parts, organs, and fluids of the body—'up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, enclosed by skin' and ranging from head-hairs to 'sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.'

The purpose of contemplating these constituent parts of the body is not to build aversion or hatred toward the body, but to lessen infatuation and enchantment with the body that lead to suffering.

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

### (v) Mindfulness of the Elements of the Body

The fifth practice of mindfulness of the body—contemplation of the elements—helps us to see the impersonal nature of the body and all experience. There are four elements in this ancient scheme, and they relate to our experience in particular ways—earth/solidity, air/movement, fire/temperature, and water/liquidity. We can experience:

- The *earth* element when we feel the hardness or softness of what we are sitting on or in contact with
- The *fire* element in the heat on our skin or the warmth in our stomach
- The *water* element in swallowing, digesting, or feeling blood in our veins
- The *air* element in the movement of the breath

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

### (v) Mindfulness of the Elements of the Body

The idea is not to say that all experience can be understood in terms of these four elements, but to gain insight into all phenomena through approaching our experience in this more impersonal way.

- ‘In this way, a healthy degree of detachment develops, counteracting the grasping at what is, in the end, merely a combination of material qualities.’ (Analayo, 151)
- ‘Contemplation of the four elements has the potential to lead to a penetrative realization of the insubstantial and selfless nature of material reality.’ (Analayo, 151)

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

### (vi) Mindfulness of a Corpse in States of Decay

The final body contemplation is of a corpse in varying stages of decay. Unlike at the Buddha's time, we don't have a lot of bodies lying around decaying or being eaten by animals and we don't have much interest in investigating death close up in our culture.

For the Buddha and his sangha this was an important practice—it helped counteract sensual desire. If a monk was feeling lustful, what better practice than to meditate on a corpse? It was and is an important teaching on impermanence—just as this body is decaying, so will mine—providing insight into the inevitability of death.

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 2. Mindfulness of Feeling Tone

The Pali term for 'feeling' is *vedana*, which means both 'to feel' and 'to know'. *Vedana* does not mean 'feelings' in the sense of emotions—which are included in the third foundation: mindfulness of states of mind. *Vedana* is best understood as the 'feeling tone' of experience.

In Buddhist teachings, it is understood that all feelings—mental, physical—are experienced as 'pleasant', 'unpleasant', or 'neither pleasant nor unpleasant' (neutral).

When we stay with the immediate and direct experience—without mental proliferation—this helps us develop detachment and leads to freedom from suffering/*dukkha*

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 2. Mindfulness of Feeling Tone

‘[C]ontemplation of feelings is a meditation practice of considerable potential. This potential is based on the simple but ingenious method of directing awareness to the very first stages of the arising of likes and dislikes, by clearly noting whether the present moment’s experience is felt as ‘pleasant’ or ‘unpleasant’ (Analayo, p157)

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 2. Mindfulness of Feeling Tone

The instructions in the discourse are simply to be aware of the feeling tone of experience:

- When feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows, ‘I feel a pleasant feeling’
- When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows, ‘I feel an unpleasant feeling’
- When feeling a neutral feeling, one knows, ‘I feel a neutral feeling’

The same direct awareness is brought to worldly (pleasant, etc.) feelings—those connected with desire/clinging; and unworldly (pleasant, etc.) feelings—those linked to renunciation and letting go

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 2. Mindfulness of Feeling Tone

A key understanding in relation to feeling tone/*vedana* is:

- Without mindfulness, pleasant feelings tend to give rise to clinging—wanting more of the things we like; unpleasant feelings tend to lead to aversion—pushing away or resisting what we don't like; and neutral feelings create the conditions for disconnection or boredom
- With mindfulness, we can stay with the direct experience without proliferation—and notice when the mind moves towards clinging, aversion, or checking out and come back to the body and to our immediate experience of the feeling tone

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## 2. Mindfulness of Feeling Tone

We can practice working with feelings as though they were winds in the sky. ‘Sometimes they are pleasant, sometimes neutral, and sometimes unpleasant...’

‘Contemplating in this way, one becomes able to establish a growing degree of inner detachment with regard to feelings. A mindful observer of feelings, by the very fact of observation, no longer fully identifies with them and thereby begins to move beyond the conditioning and controlling power of the pleasure-pain dichotomy’ (Analayo, p160)

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