

# The Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness

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*dhammesu dhamm-ānupassī*

*viharati ātāpī sampajāno*

*satimā vineyya loke*

*abhijjhā-domanassaṃ*

*One abides contemplating mental objects as mental objects, ardent, fully aware, mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.*

*—Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*

*The Bhāvana Program is a seven-day vipassana retreat of sitting and walking practice which includes a textual study session each morning. This new model, unique to BCBS, allows for an in-depth investigation of the Dhamma using both intellectual and meditative tools of inquiry. It is usually co-taught by a meditation teacher and a scholar.*

In order to better understand what these foundations of mindfulness [discussed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*] are all about, let's begin by going over the Buddha's basic psychological model of perception and awareness. As you may recall, every moment of experience involves an organ of perception, an object of perception and also a moment of consciousness by means of which the organ is aware of the object. So whether we talk about a moment of seeing or hearing or tasting or smelling or feeling (bodily sensations), this

triangulation always occurs. Thus, in every moment of sensory experience, consciousness is always present. If this consciousness were not present, you would be in deep sleep or a coma or you would be an inanimate object.

And the same is true for thinking: the organ is the mind, the object is a thought or memory or daydream, and there is a moment of mental consciousness through which we can say we are aware of the mental object. The fundamental awareness of cognizing an object—whether it be a sensory object or a mental object—is the very medium of all our experience and is thus always present. It manifests in six different modes, or six flavors, if you will, corresponding to the six doors of experience (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind). Built upon this event and interdependent with it are a number of other factors such as feeling and perception and intention, yielding the notion of the aggregates of experience.

Mindfulness, that quality of mind we develop in *vipassanā* [insight] meditation, is not necessarily part of this equation. Mindfulness may or may not be manifesting in any given moment of consciousness. You might be totally lost in a reverie, or driven by incessant, compulsive thoughts, or deviously plotting the downfall of an enemy—there is no mindfulness in such states, even though they exist in the stream of consciousness.

So mindfulness is not referring to the foundational level of mental awareness, but to a mental factor that may or may not be present in any particular moment. It is considered one of the formations (*saṅkhāras*) rather than a form or a mode of consciousness. As such mindfulness is something constructed in the moment, something learned as a habit over time, something as ephemeral as all other arising and passing phenomena. A moment of experience might be organized around mindfulness, or it may not.

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THE FOURTH FOUNDATION

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And even when mindfulness manifests in a moment's constructed experience,

it may or may not persist. It can come and go as much as anything else, and when it does so it is not stable, it is not well established. A few moments of mindfulness, dispersed among any number of moments of discombobulated association driven by the forces of conditioning, are not particularly helpful to the enterprise of seeing things clearly. In fact mindfulness is bound to arise from time to time in almost any set of conditions.

The whole enterprise of this text, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, is training the mind so that mindfulness is one of the factors constructed moment after moment in the mind. And that's hard to do. Mindfulness is not so much about the quality of this particular moment as it is about the quality of the series of moments. The presence of mindfulness in one mind moment is good, but as soon as it arises it will pass away. What about the next mind moment, and the next one, and the next one? When mindfulness arises again and again, then mindfulness can be said to have become established. This is what the text is trying to train us to do.

And because the flow of experience involves a huge range of objects and all six of the organs, *vipassanā* practice is not about fixing the mind in a certain mode. When the quality of experience involves the factor of mindfulness, the objects of experience become almost irrelevant. It does not matter whether one is hearing the sweet song of a bird or the raspy breathing of one's fellow yogi; whether one is feeling the balm of pleasure pervading the body or the gnawing pain in the back; whether one is thinking a sublime thought of loving kindness or the harsh aversion of a moment's jealousy. The practice is more about recalling the intention of being present with whatever is arising in an series uninterrupted by the shifting phenomena of mind and body.

From this perspective, let's try to better understand what the foundations of mindfulness are all about. What exactly are these texts telling us to do?

The first foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of the body, is basically trying to get us experientially into the fifth sense door, the door through which we experience the physical sensations of the body. Normally we are

bopping all over the place all the time, cycling between the various sensory and mental gateways seemingly at random—though if we could look more closely we would see the subtle matrix of conditioning driving our attention from one door to another. In fact humans spend most of their time in the mind door. We tend to experience something directly very little of the time, and spend a vast amount of our time thinking at the mind door about what we experienced through a sense door.

The commentaries say that mindfulness of the body is a great antidote for too much thinking. Perhaps this is why it is so popular in modern America—so many of us think too much. Developing mindfulness of the body can be a great relief from this, and training in it has the effect of bringing some order, some discipline, to an otherwise chaotic experience. What we are actually being asked to do by our meditation teacher is to bring attention to a particular sliver of over-all experience: the physical sensations that arise and pass away in the sense door of the body. The eyes, ears, nose, tongue and mind are still active, but each time an experience presents itself through these other avenues we are asked to gently let it go and attend rather to the physical sensations. As we gradually habituate ourselves to doing this, with the help of concentration, it becomes easier and gains some momentum.

The second foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of feeling, invites us to shift attention away from the sense door of the body, and in fact away from any of the sense doors as such. Instead we focus on the feeling tone or affect tone of all experience, its manifestation as pleasant, unpleasant or neither. In classical terms, we have shifted here from a sense door to an aggregate, from the content of physical experience (pressure, burning, sharp, dull) to the quality of our response to all experience (liking, not liking, can't tell). Insofar as this requires a shift from something quite concrete (a physical sensation) to something more mental (an evaluative, if intuitive, response) it can be considered a move to greater abstraction, from the physical to the mental.

The third foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of mind, continues this

movement and suggests we look at the quality of every mind state. The shift is back to a particular doorway of experience, this time the mind door. But the text does not speak of simply being aware of the object that presents itself at this door, but of becoming aware of the nature of the organ of perception itself—the mind. It is not just a matter of noticing “this thought of lunch” or “this memory of yesterday.” Rather the instruction requests that we notice whether the mind discerning the thought or memory is laced with attachment or not, pervaded by aversion or not, rooted in confusion or not. We are being guided from content (the physical sensation) to texture (feeling tone), and now to quality or to an intuitive assessment of the mind’s consistency. The training in awareness is becoming far more refined, and is moving towards a training in wisdom.

So given this model, what is happening in the fourth foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of mental phenomena? Attention is being directed toward the content of the thinking process, to the “mental objects” that interface with the “mental organ” (mind) and “mental consciousness” (thinking) to reveal the details of our inner mental life. But crucial to this process is the recognition that it’s being done with a cultivated mind, and is being directed not to random thoughts but to the prime components of the Buddha’s teaching, the *Dhamma*.

There is a huge difference between accessing the mental life on the near side of the training versus accessing the mental life on the far side of the training. Imagine going to a meditation retreat and having the teacher tell you to just focus on your thoughts: “Is that physical sensation of breathing in your abdomen interfering with your thinking about what is happening? Let go of that direct experience and gently return you awareness to the inner chatter of your mind.” That is not likely to happen. This would be attending to the miscellaneous conditioned activity of the uncultivated mind, which is not what the foundations of mindfulness are all about.

The reason we spent the entire day yesterday just doing mindfulness of

the body was to quiet down some of that kind of thinking. And now we will be slowly opening up to a wider range of experience, especially mental experience; but it is a cultivated mind's attention we will bring into contact with mental objects. And this is the kicker: these are not going to be random mental objects. The fourth foundation of mindfulness is not telling us to just be aware of thinking as thinking, to just be mindful when you are daydreaming or thinking about lunch or whatever. It is not just a matter of looking at whatever mental object happens to come up, notice that, let go of it, and move on the next mental object that happens to arise. That would not be transformative.

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## OF MINDFULNESS

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According to the text in front of us, the fourth foundation of mindfulness involves following a very detailed curriculum of regarding our experience in terms of hindrances, aggregates, sense spheres, factors of awakening, and noble truths. We will be doing a very disciplined mindfulness of mental objects, which is quite different from a free-for-all noticing of mental objects.

This is where I think some of our contemporary training in this practice might not go far enough. We often hear so much emphasis placed on mindfulness of the breath and of bodily sensations (the first foundation), but when we get to the third or fourth foundation the instructions become a bit fuzzy. “Thinking is part of experience too, so be mindful of thinking—but not in a conceptual way, of course, because the intellect is not good, not intuitive enough.” (I know this is a bit of a caricature.)

I just don't think this approach is really telling us much. The teachings of the Buddha, i.e. the *Dhamma*, is a magnificently subtle and profound intellectual construction, and here we find its core components at the heart of the text giving instruction in *vipassanā* meditation. I think this is because the practice is ultimately about wisdom. Mindfulness is not an end in itself but is

a tool to be used to access that wisdom.

Here is an analogy that came up the other day in a discussion of the relationship between practice and study, between mindfulness meditation and penetration of the *Dhamma*. The Buddha often refers to greed, hatred and delusion like three great fires raging in our hearts and causing us much suffering. The goal is to put out these fires, and this can be taken as the most basic definition of nirvana—the extinguishing of the fires.

So picture a fireman standing with his hose, poised to fight these raging fires. The water that comes from the hose to extinguish the flames is mindfulness, and according to the *Abhidhamma* the unwholesome roots cannot co-exist in a mind moment suffused with mindfulness. But the flow of water must also be very skillfully directed, or all that water will have no effect. It is not enough to stand there with a lot of water coming out of the hose, if you don't know where to point it. If you're facing the wrong direction and watering the garden with that water, you're not going to put out the fire. Neither does it do any good to stand aiming right at the fire with this hose with only a little dribble of water coming out. That's not putting out the fire either.

I know this is an awkward analogy, but bear with me. In one case we have someone who may be intellectually very well trained in Buddhism, perhaps being able to say “Everything changes, is wrapped up in suffering, and is essentially without self” in four different ancient languages. They are pointed in the right direction, but without well-developed mindfulness it becomes a rather shallow conceptual object. That's like a skillful firefighter standing there with no water coming out of his hose.

But equally unfortunate is having this powerful stream of mindful awareness that is not being carefully directed at the heart of the problem. If one remains forever mindful of whatever happens to be arising in one's body or mind, without that mindfulness being skillfully guided to the underlying processes that fuel the fires, one is equally unlikely of attaining the desired end.

I think the Buddhist tradition clearly calls for a coupling of mindfulness with wisdom, and it does so most dramatically at this point in this text. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* begins with mindfulness of the body and feelings, and without the establishment of this mental factor in the unfolding flow of experience one is unlikely to see much of what's really going on. But with the third and especially the fourth foundation of mindfulness the meditator is being shown exactly where to direct that mindfulness.

And I also think in doing so we will discover that intelligence, a certain quality of intellectual intuition, is not an obstacle to mindfulness, but is its natural consummation. Only in the first two foundations of mindfulness are mental activities an interference from the primary object of meditation; in the third and fourth they become that very object, and it is through the skillful engagement of the intellect that wisdom begins to ripen.