

Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Insight Meditation South Bay

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Key points

- These four foundations (body, feeling, mind, and physical and mental processes) are also called four frames of reference or four establishments of awareness. These four arenas for mindfulness are frequently applied in conjunction with breath meditation, and any experience of the breath includes all four foundations.
- The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) and *Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (DN 22) offer multiple ways of contemplating and practicing with the four foundations that can lead directly to liberating insight. For each foundation, there are three general modes of practice:
 1. Remaining focused “internally on the body (feeling, mind, physical and mental processes) in and of itself, or externally on the body in and of itself, or both internally and externally on the body in and of itself.”
 2. Remaining focused on “the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body (feeling, mind, physical and mental processes), on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to the body.”
 3. Maintaining mindfulness “that ‘There is a body (feeling, mind, physical and mental processes)’ [simply] to the extent of knowledge and recollection.”
- Developing the four foundations removes conceptual constructs until the meditator sees things as they actually are, namely, impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self.

The Four Foundations	Notes (see also <i>The Noble Eightfold Path</i> list under Right Mindfulness)	Contemplations from the <i>Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta</i>
1. Body— <i>kāya</i>	This foundation centers on the experience of the body and frequently includes the physical breath.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-and-out breathing (<i>ānāpānasati</i>) • The four postures (sitting, standing, walking, lying down) • Bodily activities • The 32 parts • The four elements (earth, water, fire, air) • The nine cemetery contemplations (corpses in decay)
2. Feeling— <i>vedanā</i>	<p><i>Vedanā</i> refers specifically to the quality of a sensory experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral (neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant). <i>Vedanā</i> does not refer to emotions, but highlights the rudimentary feeling tone associated with all mental and physical experiences.</p> <p>This foundation of mindfulness is especially important because it correlates with a relatively weak link in the twelve-fold chain of dependent co-arising (between feeling (<i>vedanā</i>) and craving (<i>taṇhā</i>)), thereby presenting an opportunity to intervene in the cycle of suffering.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings that may arise with bodily, mental, carnal, sublime, or supramundane experience.

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3. Mind— <i>citta</i>	<p>This foundation concerns watching one’s general mental state, focusing on the ethical qualities of the mind – whether the mind contains any degrees of lust (<i>rāga</i>)/greed (<i>lobha</i>), hatred (<i>dosa</i>), or delusion (<i>moha</i>).</p>	<p>Is the mind...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constricted • Scattered • Developed • Undeveloped • Surpassed • Unsurpassed • Concentrated • Not concentrated • Released • Not released
4. Physical and mental processes— <i>dharmas</i>	<p>This stage integrates the previous three stages so that finally one watches the totality of physical and mental processes. This final stage is equivalent to watching the five aggregates, so that one’s world is seen as consisting in the interplay of five groups of physical and mental processes.</p> <p><i>Dhammas</i> are the physical and mental processes and events that constitute sentient experience, and in this sense one’s “world.” They continually arise and pass away in conjunction with each other and subject to multiple causes and conditions. At the most fundamental level, <i>dharmas</i> are all that there is. Thus, to understand the Buddha’s teaching/s (<i>Dhamma</i>) is to see things in terms of <i>dharmas</i>.</p> <p>As the meditator contemplates the world of <i>dharmas</i> one’s mind eventually settles in a state of concentration that involves an initial direct seeing of the four truths. In practice, then, this foundation encompasses the contemplation of functions, interactions, and causes related to various other lists, categories, models, or frameworks developed throughout the teachings. It points the meditator toward a direct experience of the nature of reality (another meaning of the term <i>dhamma</i>).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Five Hindrances – understanding their presence, absence and how they arise, cease, and are prevented from arising again in the mind • The Five Aggregates – understanding their origination and disappearance • The Six Sense Media – understanding how clinging arises and ceases for each sense base and its object • The Seven Factors of Awakening – understanding their presence, absence, and how they arise, cease, and are fulfilled by development • The Four Noble Truths