

# Four Foundations of Mindfulness - 4 *satipaṭṭhānā*

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The four foundations of mindfulness (*4 satipaṭṭhānā*) are presented in detail in the Mahā-Satipaṭṭhānā Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 22. In a somewhat shorter version, we find this discourse as the Satipaṭṭhānā Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 10.

The four foundations of mindfulness present the objects for the practice of mindfulness according to the noble eightfold path (*sammā sati*).

Mindfulness (*sati*) is a mental factor that is very important for Buddhist *vipassanā* meditation.

For general explanations of mindfulness (*sati*), see:

<https://www.cetovimutti-theravada.org/diverse-Artikel>

The four foundations of mindfulness (*sati + paṭṭhānā*) are:

1. contemplation of the body (*kāyānupassanā*),
2. contemplation of feeling (*vedanānupassanā*),
3. contemplation of consciousness (*cittānupassanā*) and
4. contemplation of mind-objects (*dhammānupassanā*).

## 1. Contemplation of the body

The contemplation of the body is explained in six ways:

- Mindfulness of in- and out-breath (*ānāpāna-sati*)
- Contemplation of four postures (*iriyāpatha*)
- Mindfulness and clear comprehension (*sati and sampajañña*),
- Contemplation of 32 bodyparts as impure (*asuci*),
- Analysis of four elements (*dhātu-vavatthāna*),
- Nine charnel ground contemplations (*asubha*).

## 2. Contemplation of feeling:

The contemplation of feeling is explained in three ways:

- pleasant feeling,
- unpleasant feeling,
- neither unpleasant nor pleasant feeling.

Then these three types of feelings are further distinguished as worldly and spiritual.

## 3. Contemplation of consciousness

Contemplation of consciousness is sixteenfold:

- consciousness (*cittaṃ*) with lust (*rāga*),
- consciousness (*cittaṃ*) without lust (*rāga*),
- consciousness (*cittaṃ*) with aversion (*dosa*),
- consciousness (*cittaṃ*) without aversion,
- consciousness (*cittaṃ*) with delusion (*moha*),
- consciousness (*cittaṃ*) without delusion,
- contracted consciousness,
- distracted consciousness,
- exalted consciousness (*mahāgatta citta*),
- unexalted consciousness (*amahāgatta citta*),
- surpassed consciousness,
- unsurpassed consciousness,
- concentrated consciousness,

- unconcentrated consciousness,
- liberated consciousness,
- unliberated consciousness.

#### 4. Contemplation of mind-objects (*dhamma*)

Contemplation of mind-objects is explained on the basis of five groups:

- five hindrances (*nīvarana*)
- five groups of existence (*khandha*)
- twelve bases (*āyatana*) and how the fetters are caused by them,
- seven factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅga*),
- four noble truths (*sacca*).

At the end of each sub-chapter of all four foundations of mindfulness, *vipassanā* meditation is instructed as follows:

*"In this way he (she) abides contemplating the body as a body internally,  
or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally,  
or he abides contemplating the body as a body both internally and externally.*

*Or else he abides contemplating in the body its arising factors,  
or he abides contemplating in the body its vanishing factors,  
or he abides contemplating in the body both its arising and vanishing factors.  
Or else mindfulness that 'there is a body' is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness.  
And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body."*

In the same manner contemplation of feeling, consciousness and mind-objects are instructed.

In summary, *vipassanā* meditation is thus instructed to examine all the listed four groups, body, feelings, consciousness and mind-objects, both internally, i.e. in oneself, and externally, i.e. in other beings, and then observe the arising and passing away of these things. There is causal arising and passing away and momentary arising and passing away. Both types should be investigated. Causal arising and passing away involves the practice of conditional arising (*paṭīccasamuppāda*). So this should also be practised when practising the four foundations of mindfulness.

The four foundations of mindfulness, as they should be developed for awakening, also include the whole *vipassanā* meditation with seeing the impermanence of all things listed, which includes momentary arising and passing away. If one contemplates impermanence (*anicca*) long enough, the other two characteristics of things, namely unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and selflessness (*anatta*) also become clear.

At the beginning of the sutta, mindfulness of inbreath and outbreath (*ānāpāna-sati*) is explained. With this *samatha* meditation, one can attain the first to fourth *jhāna*.

In the explanation of right concentration (*sammā samādhi*) as a factor of the noble eightfold path in the section on the four noble truths, it is defined as the attainment of the four *jhānā*. Thus, when practised correctly according to this sutta, *vipassanā* meditation is based on *jhāna* concentration.

At the end of the sutta it is said:

*"Bhikkhus, if anyone should develop these four foundations of mindfulness in such a way for seven years, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now, or if there is a trace of clinging left, non-return."*

*"Let alone seven years, bhikkhus. If anyone should develop these four foundations of mindfulness in such a way for six years...for five years...for four years...for three years...for two years...for one*

*year, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now, or if there is a trace of clinging left, non-return.”*

*”Let alone one year, bhikkhus. If anyone should develop these four foundations of mindfulness in such a way for seven months...for six months...for five months...for four months...for three months...for two months...for one month...for half a month, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now, or if there is a trace of clinging left, non-return.”*

*”Let alone half a month, bhikkhus. If anyone should develop these four foundations of mindfulness in such a way for seven days, one of two fruits could be expected for him: either final knowledge here and now, or if there is a trace of clinging left, non-return.”*

*”So it was with reference to this that it was said:*

*’Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings,*

*for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation,*

*for the disappearance of pain and grief,*

*for the attainment of the true way,*

*for the realisation of Nibbana - namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.”*

We see from this sutta, which is fundamental to Buddhist mindfulness practice, that this, Buddhist mindfulness practice, is essentially different from modern therapeutic worldly mindfulness practices. In order for mindfulness (*sammā sati*) to establish in the stream of consciousness, some elements mentioned in this sutta are necessary. With regard to the body, these include contemplating it according to the 32 parts and regarding these as impure (*asuci*). They also include contemplating one's own death and corpses in various stages of decay. Regarding the mind objects, the hindrances which include recognising any craving, aversion, laziness and doubt (towards the Buddha's teachings) are to be observed. In addition, in the chapter of mind objects, the six sense doors with their objects should be closely observed, and in relation to them, the fetters that bind to existence. The fetters are personality view, doubt, attachment to rules and rites, sensual lust, malice, desire for fine-material existence, desire for non-material existence, conceit, restlessness, ignorance. Here too with the fetters, their appearance, as well as their overcoming, as well as their no longer appearing after overcoming, should be observed.

The four noble truths are also part of the programme of mindfulness practice. This means that *dukkha* should be observed in all groups of existence (*khandha*) and its cause, desire, should also always be examined and overcome.

One can clearly see here that both, the practice and the goal, are not in harmony with modern approaches to mindfulness. Buddhist mindfulness practice is not about taking care of the body or about being healthy, but about overcoming attachment to the body and to life as such. Maintaining health is secondary and should be seen as a by-product on the path of overcoming attachment. Since the objective is quite different, one cannot speak of gradual training as a preparation for higher levels through worldly mindfulness practice.