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The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Satipaṭṭhāna: The Buddha's Direct Path for the Purification of Beings and the Realization of Nibbāna



CORE CONCEPT

What is Satipaṭṭhāna?

- **Sati (Mindfulness):** Remembering, bearing in mind, non-judgmental presence
- **Upaṭṭhāna (Establishment):** Setting up, fixing, placing near
- **The Practice:** Setting up the witnessing mind to observe physical and mental phenomena exactly as they are

The Direct Path (Ekāyano Maggo)

"This is the one-way path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the passing away of pain and displeasure, for the achievement of the true method, and for the realization of Nibbāna..."

— Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10)

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THE FOUR DOMAINS

The Map of Human Experience

1. Kāyānupassanā

Body

Breath, posture, elements, and physical form.

2. Vedanānupassanā

Feeling Tones

Pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral raw sensations.

3. Cittānupassanā

Mind

States of consciousness, emotions, and mental qualities.

4. Dhammānupassanā

Phenomena

Core principles: hindrances, aggregates, and truths.

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FOUNDATION 1

Kāyānupassanā: Mindfulness of the Body

The Physical Anchor

The body is the grossest, most accessible object of meditation. It keeps the mind grounded in the present moment rather than lost in past memories or future fantasies.

The Buddha outlines 6 distinct ways to observe the body...

The Refrain of Insight

After each exercise, the text repeats the core insight formula: The practitioner observes the body internally, externally, arising, and passing away. They establish awareness simply to the extent necessary for bare knowledge—independent and not clinging to anything in the world.

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Mindfulness of Breathing (Ānāpānasati)

The Primary Anchor

The practitioner goes to a secluded place, sits down, and establishes mindfulness in front of them, focusing purely on the inhalation and exhalation.

- Breathing in long, one discerns: *"I am breathing in long."*
- Breathing in short, one discerns: *"I am breathing in short."*
- Experiencing the whole body, one breathes in.
- Calming the bodily formation, one breathes in.

The Four Postures



Walking



Standing



Sitting



Lying Down

Noting: "When walking, one discerns, 'I am walking.'" Extending meditation seamlessly into every physical state.

Clear Comprehension (Sampajañña)

Mindfulness in Motion

Awareness is applied to the micro-movements of daily life. The practitioner maintains clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) in all activities:

- Looking forward and away
- Bending and stretching limbs
- Wearing robes and carrying bowls
- Eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting
- Defecating and urinating
- Falling asleep and waking up

The 32 Parts of the Body

Deconstructing Vanity

The practitioner visualizes the body enclosed by skin, full of impurities. This practice (*Asubha*) removes sensual lust and ego-identification.

"Head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver..."

The Bag of Grains Simile

Just as one unties a bag of mixed grains and identifies: "These are rice, these are beans, these are sesame seeds," the meditator impartially observes the bodily components.

Elements & Mortality

The Four Elements

Dissolving the concept of "person" into raw physics. Like a butcher carving a cow, the meditator sees the body only as:

- Earth (Solidity/Hardness)
- Water (Cohesion/Fluidity)
- Fire (Heat/Temperature)
- Wind (Motion/Breath)

The 9 Charnel Ground Contemplations

Visualizing the decay of a corpse from a swollen day-old body down to crumbling dust.

Insight: "This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate."

Vedanānupassanā: Feeling Tones

The Flashpoint of Reactivity

Vedanā is not emotion. It is the immediate, raw somatic evaluation of sensory input before thoughts begin. It is the crucial link in Dependent Origination where we can break the chain of suffering before craving arises.

The Three Basic Tones

Pleasant (Sukha)

Agreeable sensation. Triggers the latent tendency of lust and craving (*lobha*). The practice is to feel it without clinging.

Unpleasant (Dukkha)

Disagreeable or painful. Triggers the latent tendency of aversion and anger (*dosa*). The practice is to feel it without resisting.

Neutral (Adukkhamasukha)

Neither pleasant nor painful. Triggers the latent tendency of ignorance and spacing out (*moha*). The practice is to stay alert.

Worldly vs. Unworldly Feelings

Worldly (Sāmisa)

Feelings tied to sensory desires, material acquisition, or ego.

- *Worldly pleasant:* Eating cake, getting praised.
- *Worldly unpleasant:* Losing money, being insulted.

Unworldly / Spiritual (Nirāmisa)

Feelings tied to the Dhamma and renunciation.

- *Unworldly pleasant:* Joy from deep meditation (Jhāna).
- *Unworldly unpleasant:* Sorrow over not yet achieving liberation.

Cittānupassanā: Mindfulness of Mind

The Mirror of Consciousness

Observing the overall state or "climate" of the mind (*Citta*). The meditator acts as a clear mirror reflecting the current state of consciousness without getting entangled in the content of the thoughts.

Tracking the States of Mind

Mind with Lust ⇄ Mind without Lust	Mind with Hate ⇄ Mind without Hate
Mind with Delusion ⇄ Mind without Delusion	Contracted Mind ⇄ Distracted Mind
Exalted Mind ⇄ Unexalted Mind	Concentrated ⇄ Unconcentrated

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INSIGHT SHIFT

The Power of De-identification

The Untrained Reaction

"I am angry." or "I am scattered."

The ego fuses completely with the passing mental state, claiming it as a solid, permanent identity, multiplying suffering.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Shift

"There is an angry mind state present."

The observer steps back. The mind state is seen simply as a transient phenomenon passing through awareness, incapable of being "me."

FOUNDATION 4

Dhammānupassanā: Mental Objects & Truths

The Ultimate Framework

The highest refinement of mindfulness. Here, the meditator observes experience explicitly through the lens of the Buddha's core liberating principles.

The Sutta lists 5 categories for contemplation:

The Five Hindrances (Nīvaraṇa)

Sensual Desire

Pull toward sensory pleasure (kāmacchanda).

Ill-will

Anger, aversion, and resistance (vyāpāda).

Sloth & Torpor

Lethargy, dullness, sleepiness (thīna-middha).

Restlessness

Agitation and anxious worry (uddhacca-kukkucca).

Doubt

Skepticism and uncertainty in the path (vicikicchā).

Practice: Recognize when a hindrance is present, when it is absent, how it arises, and how it is abandoned.

The Five Aggregates (Khandhas)

Deconstructing the Self

Observing the arising and passing away of the five building blocks of experience to break the illusion of a solid self.

- 1. Form (Physical body)
- 2. Feeling (Sensation tone)
- 3. Perception (Recognition/Labels)
- 4. Formations (Volitions/Thoughts)
- 5. Consciousness (Bare awareness)

The Six Sense Bases (Āyatana)

Internal & External Organs

- Eye & Sights
- Ear & Sounds
- Nose & Smells
- Tongue & Tastes
- Body & Touch
- Mind & Thoughts

Observing the Fetters

The meditator understands the eye, understands sights, and understands the **fetter** (craving or aversion) that arises dependent on both. They know how the fetter arises, and how it is permanently abandoned.

The Seven Factors of Awakening (Bojjhaṅga)

1. Sati
Mindfulness

2. Dhamma-vicaya
Investigation of Reality

3. Viriya
Energy / Effort

4. Pīti
Joy / Rapture

5. Passaddhi
Tranquility / Calm

6. Samādhi
Concentration

7. Upekkhā
Equanimity

The Four Noble Truths (Ariya Sacca)

1. Dukkha	Observing the truth of suffering exactly as it occurs.
2. Samudaya	Observing the arising of craving as the origin.
3. Nirodha	Observing the fading away and cessation of craving.
4. Magga	Observing the cultivation of the Eightfold Path.

DAILY LIFE

Integrating the Four Foundations

- **Body:** Walk to meetings with full awareness of steps
- **Feelings:** Notice the physical discomfort of criticism
- **Mind:** Note "anxiety is present" before speaking
- **Dhammas:** See a craving as a temporary hindrance

THE SUTTA'S GUARANTEE

The Promise of Awakening

> *"Monks, if anyone should develop these four foundations of mindfulness in such a way for seven years... let alone seven years... 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."*
>
> **— Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta Conclusion**

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Ardent, Clearly Comprehending, and Mindful

Establish the witness. Observe the body, feeling, mind, and phenomena. Walk the direct path to freedom.

