

## The 4 focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*)

Excerpt from *SD 60.1b Samatha, Vipassanā, Kammatṭhāna* by TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) © 3<sup>rd</sup> rev ed 2023.

**8.2.2.0** The phrase *sati'paṭṭhāna* is resolved as *sati* [8.2.1] + *upaṭṭhāna* (that is, *paṭṭhāna* in the dual senses of “setting up” and “application”) and “foundations,” that is, of mindfulness (*sati*). The translation “focus of mindfulness” is a colloquial phrase to reflect both these senses, that is, of focusing or directing our mind (the attention) to the mind-object for the setting up or arising of mindfulness, the foundation or basis for mindfulness.<sup>1</sup>

The 4 focuses of mindfulness form a complete system of meditation practice for the cultivation of calm and insight. The method is presented in **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), but elaborated with a detailed exposition of the 4 noble truths in **the Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (D 22). The method is also given in a collection of connected suttas, **the Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta** (S 47).<sup>2</sup>

**The 4 focuses of mindfulness** have a single idea and goal, that is, the mindful contemplation of phenomena. They are differentiated only for the purpose of applying mindful contemplation to 4 objects: the body, feelings, the mind (states of consciousness) and dharmas (mental objects and truths). The latter comprises such factors as the 5 hindrances, the 5 aggregates, the 6 sense-bases, the 7 awakening-factors, and the 4 noble truths.<sup>3</sup> The practice of the 4 focuses of mindfulness is the same as **right mindfulness**, that is, the 7<sup>th</sup> limb of the noble eightfold path.<sup>4</sup>

**8.2.2.1 (1) Contemplation of the body (*kāyānupassanā*)** [5.8.1]. This contemplation consists of the following 6 exercises:

- mindfulness of the in- and out-breath *ānāpāna, sati*
- minding the 4 postures *iriyā, patha*
- mindfulness and clear comprehension *sati, sampajañña*
- reflection on the 32 parts of the body *kāya, gata, sati* or *asubha* (the impurities)
- analysis of the 4 primary elements *dhātu, vavatthāna*
- cemetery meditations. *sīvatthikā*, ie, the 9 or 10 stages of bodily decomposition.

Basically, **mindfulness** concerns knowing what we are doing, while **clear comprehension** refers to applying the right attitude or strategy to that doing [8.2.3]. For example, *mindfully* we watch the in-breath, the out-breath, and so on. *Clearly comprehending*, we progressively apply the counting, then end it, then watch the rise and fall of the breath, then switch to watching the mental sign, and so on. [8.2.3]

<sup>1</sup> For details, see SD 13.1 (3.1.2).

<sup>2</sup> For a copy, see Soma Thera, *The Way of Mindfulness*, Kandy: BPS, 1981 (dated). The best modern copies are Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, London: Rider, 1962, or U Silananda, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, Boston: Wisdom, 1990. In case of any difficulties, refer back to SD 13 (full n).

<sup>3</sup> On “contemplation of dharmas” (*dhammānupassanā*), see SD 13.1 (5D). On all these teachings constituting the 37 limbs of awakening (*bodhi, pakkhiya, dhamma*), see SD 10.1.

<sup>4</sup> To begin with (if we have not done so), read M 10 (the Sutta first, SD 13.3; then repeat, the Sutta and the nn, SD 13.3). On right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), see SD 10.16 (7).

In this 1<sup>st</sup> stage of the satipaṭṭhāna practice, we need to work on focusing the mind so that it is able to settle the body to free itself from the distracting sense-activities (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touch),<sup>5</sup> so that it is able to focus on itself. This may be done, for example, by keeping the mind focused on the smooth flow of the breath, until both breath and body merge to become one: this is called mental unification.<sup>6</sup> [7.3.1]

**8.2.2.2 (2) Contemplation of feelings (*vedānānupassanā*)** [5.8.2] is the 2<sup>nd</sup> focus of mindfulness, on our hedonic reactions to various perceptions. As each feeling arises in us, we simply see it as being pleasant or unpleasant, of the body or of the mind, sensual (mundane) or supramundane, or simply neutral.<sup>7</sup> “Feeling” is a hedonic impression or affective reaction (*vedānā*), not an emotional reactivity which is called “formations” (*saṅkhārā*). When we are not mindful of the feeling tones, we may grasp what we feel as pleasant (feeding lust), push away what we experience as unpleasant (feeding aversion), or ignore any neutral feeling (feeding ignorance). [7.3.2.3]

The mindfulness of feeling frees us from the measuring or agitation that comes with the pull of lust and push of aversion. An untrained mind reacts for or against the feeling tone, but when mindfulness arises, we will remain present and attentive with any feeling without being compelled by attraction, rejection or ignorance.

When we cultivate mindfulness of feeling, we see it as a mirror-like mind (or heart) that is a calm equanimous presence, free of endlessly reacting to pleasant feelings, avoiding painful ones, ignoring neutral ones. We notice only the *arising* of feelings and their *ending*.<sup>8</sup> [5.7.1.3]

**8.2.2.3 (3) Contemplation of the mind (*cittānupassanā*)** [5.8.3]. The 3<sup>rd</sup> satipaṭṭhāna, that of mindfulness of the mind itself or mental states, directs the attention to the mind, examining it as it is coloured by emotions such as love, joy, anger, hatred, interest, boredom, tranquility or fear. We become aware of mental phenomena, but neither indulging nor wallowing in any emotional reactivity.

We do not take any mental state personally, as it were: we only notice what is *present*, what is *absent*. Any time we notice that our attention is entangled in a story, we let go of the thoughts, and notice instead the quality of the mind. Sometimes, we may see restless agitation, and although we try to return to our meditation-object, our attention falls off again.

We keep pulling our attention back, like holding on to the leash of a frisky puppy at its other end. Mindfulness grows with unrelenting practice: the frisky puppy gives in. As mindfulness becomes stronger, we begin to notice the mind’s inner workings. We begin to notice *zest*, *happiness*, *oneness of the mind*, *samadhi*.<sup>9</sup>

**8.2.2.4 (4) Contemplation of dharmas (*dhammānupassanā*)** [5.8.4]. The 4<sup>th</sup> focus of mindfulness is when we look into the calm mind and see what it really is: we see its

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<sup>5</sup> “Touch” (*phoṭṭhabba*) refers to what is tangible, tactile, “touchable”; **feeling** in a cognitive sense, not *conative* (willing) sense of differentiating (pleasant, unpleasant, neither) of hedonic tones (like, disliking, neutral). [Table 12.8]

<sup>6</sup> On *kāyānupassanā*, see M 10,A + SD 3.13 (5A). See SD 17.2a (9.6).

<sup>7</sup> Catherine is inaccurate here in saying that “feelings” “refers to a bare impression of the pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality of any present experience.” (2011:44).

<sup>8</sup> On *vedānā’nupassanā*, M 10,B + SD 3.13 (5B). On feelings, see *Vedanā*, SD 17.3.

<sup>9</sup> On *cittānupassanā*, M 10,C + SD 3.13 (5C). On the mind, see *Viññāṇa*, SD 17.3 (1).

functioning as mental states. We may notice a mental hindrance just as it is; or, how faith keeps harmonizing with wisdom; how effort supports concentration; how craving brings forth pain.

As our application of mindfulness grows beyond the mere ability to return to our meditation-object, we may notice the context, connections, interactions, conditioned links, and functions of mental states. This satipatthana gives us a dynamic vision and understanding of phenomena, how things arise and end, how they prevent or support the mind's development. With this mindfulness comes *clearer* comprehension, *fuller* knowing.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> On *dhammânupassanā*, M 10,D + SD 3.13 (5D).