

## The First Foundation of Mindfulness: Body

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Even though the four dharma talks in this course will delve into the Satipatthana Sutta, I still can't possibly cover, even touch on, all that's in the sutta. The goal is to reveal more aspects of this vast teaching and provide you with a broader field of understanding and practice than can be conveyed in one dharma talk.

### Contemplation

Before we enter into the sutta, please abandon the notion that meditation is solely about watching the breath and that "thinking" is prohibited. There's plenty of watching the breath, but there's so much more. It's impossible to get the benefit of the Satipatthana Sutta without an expanded field of attention, beyond being aware of just the breath. When the sutta talks about observing the breath, it starts out very particular about the qualities of each breath, then quickly expands into "the whole body," engaging purposefully in *contemplation*.

We need to be able to keep the mental eye on more than one ball at a time. We need this in daily life or we couldn't function as people in a human society. I just took a driving test at the DMV and studied the handbook that talked about keeping your attention on the space around you while you drive. That space is tremendously complex and let's face it, most of us drive and pay attention to a lot of other things, too. So, clearly, we are able to hold attention on several things.

That's because the brain works so quickly, in what the Abhidharma calls "mind moments," faster than anyone can even imagine. We can think of the expanded attention required for contemplation as a split screen, like on a TV or a video conference with two or more people, where you might look back and forth more quickly than you realize. Having two objects to observe pares it down a lot from the complexity of driving, more like what we're doing in contemplation. We're giving our mental focus a little more leeway, but still paying close attention to these few selected things, one of which remains the experience of the body, usually the breathing.

Contemplation requires enough concentration to closely observe or repeatedly look at something, as in what Webster's dictionary calls "quiet contemplation of the scene." This is a mental activity we've all experienced, where attention is held on a particular subject with an attitude of curiosity. It's like a light touch of investigation that's part direct experience and part "knowing." We *feel* our way through a subject with the aid of memory and discernment. For example, we might recall a teaching and compare it to what we're feeling. If so, we now

know what that teaching means. If not, we have another question to keep in mind or ask a teacher.

On rare occasions contemplation can get logically analytical, but that can be a trap for many who get caught in this mental habit and lose the meditative aspect of contemplation. That kind of discursive thought is what most teachers mean when they say to avoid “thinking.” When we contemplate parts of the Satipatthana Sutta, we should be cautious with reasoning things through, which can exert an excessive pull on our minds. Keep the mental activity simple.

### **Into the Sutta**

So, now let’s go into the sutta. The first thing it tells us is that we’re about to learn the path to overcoming internal suffering – dukkha – and to eliminating all causes of it, which is Nibbana. Then we’re told there are four foundations, or crucial *objects* of mindfulness for us to contemplate: Body, Mind, Vedana (or preferences), and Dharma.

Even in the process of listing these objects, the sutta adds after each – for unmistakable emphasis – this phrase to describe *how* we should contemplate them: diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. This distinguishes our contemplation from idle daydreaming or drifting thought. We’re bringing some intention and energy to this, *knowing* what goes on in our minds and hearts.

Furthermore, we’re holding a special attitude during this contemplation, one I discussed in my last talk, “Tending our Inner Gardens.” It’s an attitude, “free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.” This is a 2-sided freedom. We’re not being controlled by craving on the one hand or aversion on the other, not sticking to pleasure or fighting negative feelings. I sum this up as “unguarded awareness.” Desire and discontent can enter the mind, but the mind lets them pass through without grasping onto them because it’s free from them.

This doesn’t mean we have to be enlightened before we can even try this practice. It *is* a practice, so of course it may be hard at first. When something with an emotional charge comes to mind, the mind and body will have a positive or negative response. But we have adopted this attitude that it’s OK, that response can enter our awareness, but it’s our *intention* not to get absorbed by those responses. It may take repeated attempts to do this at all, and then get easier. That’s how practice works.

Every time we try to practice with this attitude, we gain a bit more freedom from dukkha. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Noble Truth tells us dukkha is caused by excessively wanting or disliking things – both of which are forms of clinging. This exercise in trying not to cling will strengthen the mind’s

ability to let go, or even not to cling at all. So don't be intimidated by the way this practice sounds at first. Just try it. It's like riding a bicycle when you were a kid. It feels awkward at first, but then you get the hang of it and you really like it.

## The body

So we know that we're going to be *contemplating* things with the *intention* not to cling to whatever arises in the mind. The first thing we're going to contemplate is the Body. We're going to look at it in many different ways. The Body forms by far the largest part of the sutta, which is appropriate because it's so important. The body contains 5 of the 6 gateways to our consciousness: the physical senses. The sixth gateway is the mind, generating memories, thoughts, emotions, etc. We'll deal with that in December.

Because the body contains our senses, it's the source of all our information about our immediate physical experience, what you might call our "reality." It also tells us about what it feels like to be in this body, to be embodied awareness. This is all important information. It's also always right here and right now, unlike data that comes from the mind. Being aware of the body holds us in the present moment, like an anchor holding a ship in the water.

With some of our attention held on the body, we're able to observe the activity of the mind at a little bit of a distance – enough to remember that what the mind tells us isn't always true. However, the body also responds to what the mind tells us. It is the orchestra that plays our emotions, the way chimes outside your window *play* the wind. As a result, **all** of our experience happens here in this body. It's all *right here*, walking around as "us." That's why the Buddha said that all the dharma can be found here in this fathom-long body.

Analayo, who wrote the book [Satipatthana](#), points out that paying attention to the body can help us relax and be more receptive to a clear understanding of our experience. If you followed Amma Thanasanti's guided meditation last week, you witnessed how closely observing the body has a powerfully calming effect. You can listen to that guided meditation on You Tube.

Once the body relaxes, any amount of tension registers clearly and we can notice it, usually on a continuum from the first tiny frisson of distress to sweats and shakes. Then we can recognize the cause and effect relationship between thoughts and emotions – and witness the Second Noble Truth in action. We can also respond wisely by turning attention away from distressing states of mind to wholesome ones like metta, delight, generosity and sympathetic joy. Or just come back to concentrating on the breath for a while.

## The Breath

The Satipatthana Sutta has us start by arranging the body into a posture that supports us with ease, and bringing mindfulness to breathing. The contemplation is simple; we just know that when the body breathes in, that's what it's doing, and same with the exhale. Like a non-verbal awareness, "In, Out." Then the complexity goes up just a notch to knowing whether each inhale or exhale is short or long.

Then it gets slightly more complicated, and fun. We form the intention to breathe in and out while experiencing the whole body. Amma Thanasanti's guided meditation started with having you stand up and, while aware of the sensations of breathing, also be aware how the body feels from feet to head in the muscles, the posture, and any tension.

The sutta says to do this sitting, and after experiencing the whole body this way, we then breathe in and out with each breath *calming the body*. This is a visualization that's a great gift to ourselves. Whenever I do this I'm always surprised at how delightful this part of the practice is. It's one of those joys that is unconditional and depends on nothing else in the world so there is nothing to cling to.

The Satipatthana Sutta has us explore in the same way the various postures we arrange the body into: sitting, standing, lying down. There's another refrain that's repeated in every progression of the sutta. It has us contemplate the body *internally and externally* as we observe experiences *arise and pass away*.

There are many explanations about what externally and internally means. I have yet to encounter one that makes sense to me without taking more time to explain it than we have tonight, so I'll leave that alone for now. As for our contemplating phenomena arising and passing away, this gives us front-row seats to observe impermanence. This is impermanence not just with things of the world, but of many internal phenomena that we think of as "us."

The last subject of the sutta that we'll cover tonight is activities. This is daily life practice at its most elemental. It has us maintaining this "bare knowledge" of the body as it executes the tasks it does "for us." We remain mindful internally and externally as we experience the body: moving the arms and legs, wearing clothes, walking, carrying things, eating, drinking and tasting, sitting, standing, urinating, defecating, talking or keeping silent, falling asleep and waking up. In other words, every experience of the body is something to study in this semi-meditative way.

This has been the mainstay of my practice for many years now. As an object of contemplation, the body is wonderfully convenient because it is always there. You never run out of body to

observe. It can be pleasant or unpleasant, and I get to watch my desire or aversion arise and maintain the intention to let that go, and go on watching this body moving around in this amazing world.

Especially when I'm on a retreat in the woods, I stay mindful of all the sights, sounds, smells, and other sensations as this body goes through the tasks of occupying a camp site. It helps to be alone, but this practice is possible when others are around too, observing my posture when I listen or talk, how my emotions feel inside this body. It's a practice that's always available.

## Summary

So now we've covered 2 of the 8 pages that the sutta occupies in Analayo's book, Satipatthana. His book is 318 pages long, so you know I've still just touched the mountaintops. I hope now you know the way to contemplate the Four Foundations and the attitude to do that with: a relaxed, multi-pointed mindfulness, with the intention to not cling to anything, to let go of whatever desires or aversions enter the mind.

It's also crucial to appreciate the incomparable importance of the body, containing our awareness, responding to events in the world. Breathing is the beginning of the survey that includes the whole body in every one of its positions, movements and activities. The practice guides that are on the table by the dana basket suggest ways for you to explore these practices during the coming week (and the rest of your lives). You can contact me if you want to talk by phone during this course to review your practice. The text of this talk and the guides will be on our website tomorrow, and the audio will be posted in a few days.

Next week we'll finish the sutta's examination of the body, and go on to Vedana, the roots of what we like, don't like, or feel neutral toward. The Mind and the Dharma await us in December.

Thank you