

## Third Foundation: The Mind

By Rebecca Dixon

Alameda Sangha, Dec. 1, 2019

Most people expect this to be the most interesting of the 4 Foundations. That's probably because it's about looking into the depths of the mind where hidden forces lurk. And it is fascinating, but that's hard to tell from a quick reading of the sutta. The Mind doesn't even get a full page. It's just 2 paragraphs long.

The first paragraph is a list of 8 states of mind and their opposites. The second paragraph contains the usual refrains about not clinging to anything, and "knowing" each mindstate either internally or externally or both. This Foundation instructs us simply to know if the mind is in one of these 8 states, or not. The list starts out even simpler: is the mind greedy, hateful, deluded – the 3 roots of suffering – or not. Then the 4<sup>th</sup> is whether the mind is distracted or contracted, which Analayo says means whether it's restless or dull.

According to many commentators, the final 4 states on the list relate to what's called the "higher attainments" of concentration practice – the jhanas. Other commentators say these final 4 states of mind relate progress toward full liberation. Either way, our attention is directed to the development of our practice, monitoring our own growth.

Most Introduction to Meditation courses run sort of alongside the Four Foundations. They start out with the Body, with a week on the breath, then a week's general awareness of the full body. New students are usually spared the gore in the last 2 objects of the Body Foundation. Then "thoughts and emotions" are covered, with a week each; these are somewhat related to Vedana, or likes and dislikes. Week 5 is often called "the Mind," covering mood, attitudes, assumptions, etc. Then week 6 is Daily Life practice.

Dharma talks addressing the Four Foundations likewise run vaguely alongside the Satipatthana Sutta on Body and Vedana. Then they tend to veer away from the sutta on the Mind and possibly just skip Dharma, or maybe give it a very general description, like "seeing the dharma in our experience." With this course I wanted to reveal the teachings in the sutta and make them relevant to lay people's daily lives as the meditation courses and dharma talks are trying to do.

What all these approaches have in common is a way to de-personalize the mind by paying close, immediate attention to the actual experience of mental states. Doing this requires us to develop what I call "unguarded awareness," or allowing whatever enters 'our' awareness to come into focus without our reactively hiding it or judging it. This ability is best developed, I believe, with a large, intentional dose of metta for ourselves, like a horse whisperer saying over and over, "It's OK. You're OK. Don't be afraid of seeing this."

Analayo says we need to make ourselves receptive to how mental activities are actually experienced, “because of one’s instinctive tendency to ignore whatever contradicts or threatens one’s sense of importance and personal integrity.” I’ve seen this in myself and others: we use distractions, denial and ‘alternative realities’ – lies – to avoid seeing mental activity that clashes with how we want to see ourselves. This is how we suppress unwanted thoughts or emotions, etc. – usually unconsciously and unintentionally. In contrast, when we use Wise Effort to re-direct our thinking, that’s not suppression because we can do this only *after* we consciously recognize and acknowledge those thoughts in the first place.

When I began my practice I found it very helpful to hear that I am not my thoughts and they are not “mine.” I repeated this recently in another sangha and someone asked, “Well, whose thoughts are they?” That answer is simple: they aren’t anyone’s. The brain is like that machine that chucks out tennis balls so you can practice your swing. Or a bubble machine. Its job is to offer thoughts up out of the depths of our subconscious. Some of them are good ideas, possibly the solution we’ve been looking for. Others are real stinkers that should not be given any more attention than it takes to recognize them. A lot of thoughts are just silly, some are mere fragments of thought that drift around our consciousness like background noise. Or litter blowing in the wind.

The idea that we are the sum total of our thoughts is not just wrong, it’s kind of insulting, since so many thoughts are nonsense. One of my first writing teachers, back in high school, taught us that creativity is not the art of having good ideas, but of recognizing them. We need to be able to see and assess our thoughts to avoid writing drivel – or acting on foolish notions.

Identifying with our mental activity is like getting all tangled up in a sticky web so our range of thinking is progressively contracted. It can lead to a lot of anxiety, too, because our sense of reality is constantly challenged by conflicting experience and thought. It’s so much easier to recognize that thoughts just float into our awareness and if we give them no attention, they pass away.

This is the great benefit of intentionally concentrating on a single object for a fair amount of time. We actually see this happen. We haven’t chosen to think these thoughts. In fact, we’ve made a conscious decision not to. But still, they happen. No one invited them to occur, so there’s no one to blame for them. Most people report that when they settle into a fairly deep state of concentration, they can observe thoughts arising, floating around like bits of debris and then passing out of their awareness. They don’t stick to anything in the mind because, “No me, no problem.”

This is the nature of all mental events, including the moods we wake up in or fall into during the day. The Mind can serve up all the stored mental actions made consciously or unconsciously, like assumptions, values, opinions, beliefs, etc. These mindstates may have been part of our mental baggage for a long time, but they were generated the same way, by the mechanics of our nervous system interacting with the environment. There may have been some conscious activity at various points in the development of these mental habits, but this is a new moment and that old baggage doesn't need to determine the future any more.

When we recognize an old opinion arising and prompting a certain response to some event, there's a chance to re-evaluate that opinion. Is it still valid? In *these* circumstances, what is the best thing to do? Perhaps there's a fallback mood that dominates many of our days. Being able just to notice, "Ah, this same mood is back," provides space to decide to regard things differently. Can we focus on other factors in *this* situation? I'm not talking about eureka moments that instantly transform our lives, but these moments of clarity do often have a touch of exhilaration when we see the possibility of freedom they offer.

Seeing how the mind works is profoundly liberating. Recently I found myself speaking in a voice I recognized from my professional life, when I was "the boss." It took a few minutes to realize where that voice had come from and how inappropriate it was under the circumstances. It gave me a chance to apologize and explain that I'd been possessed by a ghost from the past that had nothing to do with the person I'd spoken to. Now that I have that ghost's number, it might not get away with hijacking my behavior again.

In Touching the Infinite, Rodney Smith says the Satipatthana Sutta points us toward the realization that every *thing*, including our sense of self, is Empty of independent reality. Our bodies are bits of this and pieces of that, our responses to events – our likes and dislikes – are dependent on the moment in which they arise, and *anything* we point to in our mental experience is equally impermanent, without any substance of its "own." Every impression we have of solid continuity is an illusion, a trick of the mind from which we can free ourselves by simply not believing it anymore.

Well, that's easier said than done, if the mind hasn't been re-conditioned and made ready to see this truth, because the delusions we cling to are very powerful. It feels like the threat of death to let these illusions go. So if we're not there yet, if all my reasonable words and similes and Analayo's interpretations of Pali and all other teachers' explanations haven't softened your mental habits, then, well, the Satipatthana Sutta has another way to approach the problem. It says, "Just watch."

The Sutta takes a simple, pragmatic, "show me" approach. It takes four mental states that trap us in suffering and four that set us free from it, and sets us the task of noticing and

contemplating them so we come to *know* their nature. We're told to spend time being on the lookout for this short list of mental states, and for moments when they're not present. Doing this practice leads to the direct experience of *anatta*, seeing for ourselves that mental events are empty of self, whether or not that's our conscious goal. This practice lets us see Emptiness, and the realization that sets us free.

The sutta's list of four states of mind that cause suffering are a combination of the three causes of suffering, and the first four of the Five Hindrances: craving, aversion, restlessness and "sloth-and-torpor." In the Third Foundation, restlessness and dullness are combined, and delusion is added. As Hindrances, these states can be worked with in various ways depending on how we're practicing when they come up and hinder our practice. What the Satipatthana Sutta tells us to observe is 1) wanting or greed, etc., 2) not wanting or hatred, etc., 3) delusion, and 4) restlessness or dullness.

These states of mind just need to be recognized and observed according to the refrains repeated so often in the sutta: internally and externally, and free of clinging – to anything. So we acknowledge *externally*, "The mind is possessed by thoughts or emotions that are forms of desire, aversion, or delusion, or it's restless or dull." And we let ourselves experience that internally by observing how it feels, whether it's pleasant or not, and observe how it affects other mental states. And we let go of the clinging that holds us enslaved by these states of mind so they can pass away. We keep a lookout for these mindstates, getting to know their true nature, freeing ourselves from them.

Without using reason or similes, we come to understand, as a result of this knowing, that these states of mind are not "me or mine" and that they have no substance of their own. There's nothing personal to them. So there's nothing to be embarrassed about when we feel a yearning for something, or a distaste. Or when we space out or the mind jumps around like a grasshopper. Or when we realize we're deluded, telling ourselves an old story that just isn't true *now*. Recognizing these mindstates for what they are shrinks our clinging to them, and we can just let them pass.

There are several reasons why this process of de-personalization is helpful, not least of which is that we don't get ego-attached to our practice, in either its tribulations or its progress. The next four states of mind on the sutta's list are often called, "higher attainments," which even sounds like an invitation to vanity. When the mind calms and sees clearly, or when it's concentrated, or liberated, this practice lets us recognize that even this refined mindstate isn't a quality of "me." It keeps us humble. Another purpose in observing these states of mind is to know how our practice is going.

Wherever we are in our practice, it's invaluable to work with the Third Foundation. Getting to know what I call "the geography of the mind" gives us so much more freedom and options than being blindly pushed around by whatever seizes our attention. The main point of this short Foundation is to look into the mind – formerly called "your" mind – like snorkelers poking their masks below the water's surface to see the fish swimming by. Having a list of what to look for helps enormously. This short list of four states of mind is a good place to start. They actually cover just about everything.

Every bit of relief from self-attachment that my practice has brought has made life better, and taken my practice deeper. So, I wish you happy snorkeling.

Thank you.