**Understanding the Satipatthana Sutta**

By Peter Carlson

The *Satipatthana Sutta* is one of the core teachings of Buddhism. The standard translation is the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse*. These notes were prepared to provide an introduction to a series of talks about this discourse, and the intention in exploring this is to facilitate making best use of the systematic presentation of Buddhist doctrine and practices in a contemporary way by a lay teacher.

Each generation has the task of revisiting this teaching through study, practice, and integration into one’s lifestyle. I have been studying this discourse since the early 1980’s and have taught it to local meditation students several times. I am sincere in my desire to understand and apply this liberating way of life; any misunderstandings reflect how much study and practice I must undertake to realize the full potential that is found in the teachings.

I intend for my main referral source to be Bhikkhu Analayo; I own and have read nearly every book he has written about Buddhism, particularly the Satipatthana Sutta, and my hope that preparing the notes for all the talks will further my understanding and perhaps be beneficial for whoever reads the notes or listens to the recordings of the talks. The book I will primarily refer to is Analayo’s *Satipatthana The Direct Path To Realization*. I don’t intend to quote his work slavishly, but rather think through my understandings and prepare the notes as the topics make sense for me. The word itself is pronounced *sah-tee-pah-tah-nah*, with accent on the *tah* syllable. The word *sutta* comes from the same origin as *suture*, that which binds a wound, and is typically translated as *discourse*. Analayo uses Nanamoli’s translation (pronounced Nyan-ah-moh-lee). A copy of this translation can be found here: <http://satipatthana.learnmindfulness.org/read/doc/satipatthanatranslatedbybhikkhunanamoliandbhikkhubodhi>

As downloaded from Wikipedia: “*Satipaṭṭhāna* is a compound term that has been parsed (and thus translated) in two ways, namely *Sati-paṭṭhāna* and *Sati-upaṭṭhāna*. The separate terms can be translated as follows:

* *Sati* - Pali; Sanskrit [smṛti](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smriti). *Smṛti* originally meant "to remember," "to recollect," "to bear in mind," as in the Vedic tradition of remembering the sacred texts. The term *sati* also means "to remember." In the *Satipațțhāna-sutta* the term *sati* means to remember the wholesome dhammās, whereby the true nature of phenomena can be seen, such as the [five faculties](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indriya), the [five powers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_Strengths), the [seven awakening-factors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Factors_of_Enlightenment), the [Noble Eightfold Path](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path), and the [attainment of insight](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pre-sectarian_Buddhism#Insight).
* *Upaṭṭhāna* (Sanskrit: upasthāna) - "attendance, waiting on, looking after, service, care, ministering"
* *Paṭṭhāna* - "setting forth, putting forward;" in later Buddhist literature also "origin," "starting point," "cause."

The compound terms have been translated as follows:

* *Sati-upaṭṭhāna* - "presence of mindfulness" or "establishment of mindfulness" or "arousing of mindfulness," underscoring the mental qualities co-existent with or antecedent to mindfulness.
* *Sati-paṭṭhāna* - "foundation of mindfulness," underscoring the object used to gain mindfulness.”

My understanding of the word *Satipatthana* is *presence of mind*, combined with *keeping in mind that which fosters Awakening*. I place emphasis on the transition between *conceptual understanding of the doctrine* and *the ability to actually put into practice and realize the mental factors that foster Awakening*. In 12-step groups, the phrase “There’s talking the talk, and walking the walk” seems to convey this intention.

The Four Foundations are: *Mindfulness of the Body*, *Mindfulness of Feelings*, *Mindfulness of the Mind*, and *Mindfulness of Mind Conditioners*. These foundations are expressed in Pali as *Kayanupassana*, *Vedanupassana*, *Cittanupassana* and *Dhammanupassana*. Each of the foundations is coordinated with the others in function, so that when a person is clearly investigating any one of the foundations in depth, the other foundations are more accessible to consciousness.

The practice for developing and realizing the potential of each of the Four Foundations follows a formula that emphasizes the application of four mental qualities: *diligence, clearly knowing, mindfulness* and *free from desires and discontentment*. *Diligence* is the persistent commitment to apply these qualities energetically. *Clearly knowing* means clear, undistorted awareness of what is in consciousness (as well as the quality of consciousness, the third foundation). *Sati*, of course is the ability to monitor this process in an ongoing way to maximize the application of wholesome mind conditioners. *Free from desires and discontentment* is the circumstantial absence of craving and clinging (this basically means setting aside the 5 Hindrances). The function of each foundation is contemplated, that is, investigated without prejudice.

There is a progression in the contemplative practice that follows the sequence in which they are presented. Mindfulness of the Body is the most easily accessed and utilized, as basic stimulation is primarily involved in experience. Mindfulness of Feelings is more subtle, related to what modern psychology terms *affect*, that is, *an urgent potency of sensation in the mind* (not emotions, as we typically render feelings). A pleasant feeling is called affect approach, an unpleasant feeling is affect avoidant, and a neutral feeling is affect neutral. Mindfulness of the Mind is about the receptivity of conscious awareness, that is, alert or dull, etc. Mindfulness of Mind Conditioners is the most subtle, involving beliefs, impressions, thoughts, and so on. In my experience, these mental phenomena are the most ephemeral and transient, yet are the most compelling and demanding of belief—I think it, so it must be so—of course, this is not possible.

A way to understand graphically the cooperative and integrative function of the Four Foundations can be to visualize a pyramid from an altitude suspended directly over the peak:

**FEELINGS**

**BODY**

**MIND CONDITIONERS**

**MIND**

Whichever face of the pyramid is focused on and entered into, you are still inside the pyramid. No matter which of the Four Foundations is investigated, the process of selfing is revealed. Ultimately, the culmination of the practice involves a more sophisticated and penetrating understanding of the Fourth Foundation, as this is the quality of conscious awareness through which one realizes the three characteristics of reality: impermanence, the absence of an autonomous and enduring self and the distress and confusion that arises due to greed, aversion and ignorance.

During future talks, each of the foundations will be reviewed. Mindfulness of the Body has extensive subordinate categories, and some of the categories have little relevance to current life experience, so those will be briefly reviewed. Within each foundation there is a *refrain.* Beginning on page 92 of the book, Analayo writes extensively about this refrain as it is repeated in each of the foundations. Within each refrain there are variations in wording, reflecting the particular focus of that foundation. Here is an example from the first foundation (italics are inserted to emphasize important focal points):

“In this way he 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 nature of

*arising*, or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of *vanishing*,

or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of *both arising and*

*vanishing*. 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.”

There are specific, intentional aspects of the refrains that are worth investigating more closely:

*Internally, externally, both internally and externally*: Reference to *internally* is obvious. Investigating physical sensations as internal experiences is important, as all sensations are processed internally. The mind may “place” the origination of a sound as outside of the body, but the experience is essentially internal. What about *externally*? Analayo references different commentarial suppositions regarding this; here are my thoughts: *Externally* might refer to how the mind “places” the source of the sound, for example, the internal experience of tinnitus vs. the externally generated sound of a bird singing (tinnitus is persistent ringing in the auditory experience). *Externally* might refer to how one infers another person’s embodied experience. The more internal awareness of one’s own embodied experience is understood, the more likely any inference about another’s experience might be valid—I have experienced frowning at an unpleasant visual experience, so I can infer that another’s frown as the same. However, this is just an assumption—the other person’s frown may be due to some other cause. Regarding *both internally and externally*, as far as I am concerned, this emphasizes investigation of the dynamic transformation of what originates externally into one’s internally processed self-organizing process. I also believe that we co-create each during relationship experiences, and it I important to be mindful of that consideration as well.

*The nature of arising, the nature of vanishing*, and *the nature of both arising and vanishing*: This obviously refers to mindfully observing impermanence, one of the three characteristics of reality. To be mindfully aware of impermanence isn’t always obvious, however, as there are many embodied stimulations that seem to be enduring, such as tinnitus, mentioned above. The key focus in this aspect of the refrain is to diligently investigate how the mind’s awareness of and interpretation of that ringing happens. I experience tinnitus, and it is highly variable in pitch and I am more or less acutely aware of it during the day. Being aware of the nature of both arising and vanishing becomes more important as a contemplation regarding the 2nd, 3rd and 4th foundation processes.

*Bare knowledge and mindfulness*: Here is what Analayo writes about this, on pages 112-113: “...awareness of the body, feelings, mind and dhammas should take place merely for the sake of knowledge and continued mindfulness. This instruction points to the need to observe objectively, without getting lost in associations and reactions…in particular to avoiding any form of identification. Freedom from identification then enables one to regard any aspect of one’s subjective experience as a mere phenomenon, free from any type of self-image or attachment.

*And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world*: Once again, on the face of it, this is obvious. The goal of cultivating the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is just this, abiding, functioning in socially appropriate and benevolent ways, with great thoughtfulness, kindness equanimity.

These refrains are repeated because for several centuries the Satipatthana Sutta was passed on from generation to generation through memorization. Because of this necessity, all the suttas have this prosaic, repetitive quality, suitable for chanting. What is remarkable is the depth of understanding and rigorous conceptual thought that is embedded in the suttas.