Overview of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse

The Satipatthana Sutta is perhaps the most useful discourse found in the Pali Canon. The word Satipatthana (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah) is understood by Analayo, an authoritative scholar/teacher, to be derived thusly:

“The term satipatthana can be explained as a compound of sati, “mindfulness” or “awareness”, and upatthana…The Pali term upatthana literally means “placing near”, and in the present context refers to a particular way of “being present” and “attending” to something with mindfulness.”

The word *sutta* (soo-tah) is translated as *discourse* or *teaching*. The root word for sutta (sutra in Sanskrit) is the same as for the word suture, the way a wound is tied together to heal. The literal translation does not enumerate the foundations but dividing them into four is a logical description of their structure.

The current translation, “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness”, has been widely accepted—alternative forms are “The Four Establishments of Mindfulness” or “The Four Frames of Reference for Mindfulness”. Another, more elaborate rendition of this sutta is “The Mahasatipatthana Sutta”—*maha* is translated as *greater than*. It is much longer than the Satipatthana Sutta, with a very large and detailed commentary regarding the realizations associated with the Four Noble Truths, which is found near the end of the sutta. We can assume that the preceding teachings are preparations for insight regarding what is described in the section on the Four Noble Truths.

Another authority on the Satipatthana Sutta, Bhante Sujato, suggests that the sutta is a compilation of teachings that reached its current form around 20 BCE. His research describes 7 different renderings of the sutta, derived from various schools of early Buddhism in India and China. The different versions either include or exclude sections; the version which we read in such contemporary books as “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness” by U Silananada or “Satipatthana-The Direct Path to Realization” by Analayo have been primary resources for me over the decades of my studies and practice.

The structure of the sutta is organized to address a similar conceptual structure, the Five Aggregates of Clinging: Form, Feeling, Perception, Mind Conditioners and Consciousness. Here is a visual representation of the Four Foundations:

**FEELING**

**MINDFULNESS OF FEELINGS**

**FORM**

**MINDFULNESS OF THE BODY**

**CONSCIOUSNESS**

**MINDFULNESS OF THE MIND**

**PERCEPTIONS/MIND CONDITIONERS**

**MINDFULNESS OF MENTAL PHENOMENA**

Imagine looking down directly over the peak of a pyramid. Each of the faces of the pyramid represents one of the foundations. If there was a door in any of the faces, it would provide entry into the entire structure. The practice of mindfulness of breathing is part of the upper left quadrant in the image, but this initial target of mindful investigation provides access to awareness of the other three quadrants. Another way to conceptualize this structure involves understanding that the entirety of one’s subjective experience is the harmonic resonance of several different frequencies, and that each of the four foundations represents one of those frequencies; in this case, the practice involves selectively “tuning in” to the foundations with mindfulness and investigation in order to realize the transitory and impersonal nature of each frequency. Dukkha (dew-kah), the distress and confusion that is the result of craving and clinging, creates harmonic “dissonance” regarding one’s self-experience.

Mindfulness of the body, the first foundation, provides the most effective entry into the process because sensations in the body are so basic to subjective experience, relatively simple to investigate because they are substantial in nature. Additionally, each body sensation stimulates awareness of feelings, either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral affectively—this is the second foundation. Our cognitive processes are initiated by perceptions, which are initial mental impressions, and these are elaborated through the functions of the mind conditioners, creating the subjective experience of “selfing”, which is the operation of the fourth foundation. All of these functions are reflected in the third foundation, consciousness.

Each of the four foundations will be more thoroughly reviewed and elaborated in future talks. There is a progression of insight related to the structure of the four that is relatable to the above mentioned five aggregates: mindfulness of the body’s *form*, and, as mentioned above, is the most basic subjective experience, and, with training, provides a stable foundation for attention, from which the other foundations can be investigated. *Feelings* are more subtle and represent the urgent impulsive reactivity that is characteristic of within a moment of subjective experience. *Consciousness* is pervasive but is also a subtle and fleeting experience. The manifestation of *perceptions* and *mind conditioners* are the most fleeting and ephemeral experiences, and the innate tendency of subjective identification we all are subject to makes the effective insights into the nature of selfing more difficult. The process of Awakening involves direct experiential knowledge of the impersonal nature of the five aggregates; this will be more thoroughly reviewed during talks regarding the fourth foundation of mindfulness.

The structure of all the suttas is repetitive and the terms are, from a contemporary perspective, archaic. It’s important to understand that, for almost the entirety of the history of Buddhism, those who studied the concepts were illiterate. The suttas were not written down until about 500 years after the death of the Buddha. The repetitious, almost poetic language was structured to be more easily memorized and chanted. To this day, renunciates and devoted secular Buddhists memorize and chant the suttas. This provided a continuity of the teachings over generations but is also vulnerable to misunderstandings over the centuries.

Sometime early in the decades BCE, the teachings began to be written down and this stabilized the contextual understanding between generations. Over the centuries, it has been the responsibility of subsequent generations of Buddhist practitioners to carefully review what has been handed down and make appropriate changes to the teachings, being very thorough in validating the core principles and practices through dedicated meditation training, in such a way as to provide liberation in ways that were more culturally understandable. This is our responsibility during this era, and this investigation has been radically amplified as a result of the internet, which enables us to study, for example, the early Buddhist teachings in the different schools, sort out what seems to be consistent with our current understandings, validated by neuroscientific research and dedicated meditation practice.

There are some concepts that are common to the various renditions of the Satipatthana Sutta. A major resource for me in my studies of this discourse is found in several books written by Analayo, a German Theravadin monk who lives, writes and teaches at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Massachusetts. He describes a variety of “refrains” that are repeated in regard to the four foundations. Key components of one of the refrains are *atapi* (ah-tah-pee), translated as *diligence*, *sampajanna* (sahm-pah-jahn-yah), translated as *clearly knowing*, and *sati* (sah-tee), translated as *mindfulness*. Here is a quote from the sutta that describes these concepts:

“What are the four [satipatthanas]? Here, monks, in regard to the body a monk abides contemplating the body, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to the mind he abides contemplating the mind, diligent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent regarding the world. In regard to *dhammas* he abides, diligent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent regarding the world”

Dhammas are the cognitive fabrications that I call “the selfing story”, composed of thoughts, expectations, beliefs, etc., that stream through the mind, subject to being misperceived as constituting an enduring and autonomous self.

On page 39 of the above-mentioned book, Analayo summarizes the meaning of *atapi:* “…*to be “diligent” then amounts to keeping up one’s contemplation with balanced but dedicated continuity, returning the to the object of meditation as soon as it is lost*.” An alternative interpretation is *ardent*, which suggests an enthusiastic determination to investigate what is happening in the mind/body process.

Regarding *sampajanna*, *clearly knowing* has a nuanced application: at one level, to be immediately and dispassionately aware of how the process of “selfing” is forming, and on another level, to be directly aware of the three characteristics—the transient nature of subjective experience, the absence of an enduring/autonomous self, and the distress and confusion that occurs as a result of craving and clinging. In this way, sampajanna is functionally equivalent to another important concept, *Dhamma Vicaya* (dah-mah vih-chah-yah), one of the Seven Awakening Factors, the *Investigation of Mental Phenomena*.

The word *sati* is, of course, a key term in all of Buddhism, meaning *to be immediately aware of what is occurring in the mind without being affected by craving and clinging*. In effect, the entirety of the satipatthana involves a progression of more sophisticated insights regarding how the interaction between the mind and the body creates the experience of a self, and then progressively deconstructing that process of identification. This deconstruction is not intended to create a dysfunctional personality in relationship to the world—after all, after his experience of total Awakening, the Buddha continued to fully participate in life for over four decades, teaching what is arguably the first cogent human psychology and establishing one of the world’s earliest enduring religions.

Contemporary scholars have been debating what satipatthana development was originally intended to produce. Some scholars, following Right Mindfulness within the structure of the Noble Eightfold Path, find evidence that supports the belief that the original goal in the cultivation of satipatthana/Right Mindfulness was to establish the most beneficial conditions in the mind for the cultivation of Right Concentration, which follows Right Mindfulness in the listing of the eight “stations” on the path. Right Concentration in that context means the cultivation of exalted states of consciousness called Jhana (jah-nah), followed by insights into the above-mentioned three characteristics, producing the experience of Nirvana. Other scholars use what is in the suttas and subsequent commentaries that developed over many centuries of study and practice to support a belief that Right Concentration represents the unified application of the Seven Awakening Factors, the final conceptual structure of the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness before descriptions that portray the realization of the Four Noble Truths. The perfection of the Seven Awakening Factors, in this view, will manifest the experience of Nirvana.