



Early Buddhist Meditation, Part 3: The Establishments of Mindfulness

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This is the third in a series of five explorations of the topic of early Buddhist meditation, with the present instance taking up the four establishments of mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthāna/satipaṭṭhāna*) from a practice-related perspective. These four involve the cultivation of mindfulness in relation to the body, feeling tones (in the sense of the hedonic tonality of experiences as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), mental states, and dhammas (Anālayo 2018).

The implications of the fourth, contemplation of dhammas, are not necessarily straightforward. The import of those practices that are described similarly in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels, as well as the instructions on how to undertake the fourth establishment of mindfulness in relation to the breath, can be relied on to provide a perspective. This makes it reasonable to propose that the main thrust of contemplation of dhammas would call for relying on the Dharma—the teachings of the Buddha as applied to meditation practice—in order to foster progress toward the realization of Nirvana as the culmination point of the Dharma (as understood in early Buddhism).

The reference above to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels intends to signal that there are different versions of this discourse, transmitted by distinct lineages of ancient Indian reciters in an oral setting that at that time did not employ writing for preserving such instructions. Differences between these versions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* are at times fairly significant (Anālayo 2013). For an attempt at reconstructing early Buddhism, of particular relevance are instructions found similarly in the extant versions.

Contemplation of the Body

The parallel versions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* agree in mentioning three body contemplations, which examine the human body from the viewpoint of its anatomical constitution, its

material constitution (in terms of four elements), and its nature to decay after death.

The instruction for contemplation of the anatomical constitution of the body gives a list of bodily parts—such as hair, nails, skin, bones, various organs, and liquids—followed by enjoining an explicit evaluation of these as not inherently attractive. This is remarkable, as the general instruction given at the outset of the discourse calls for a cultivation of mindfulness free from reactivity by way of desire or dejection, and such a non-reactive stance is indeed characteristic of mindfulness practices in general. In the present case, the idea would be to foster a broadening of perspective beyond the tendency of relating to other bodies from the viewpoint of sexual attractiveness, by way of presenting a different, and perhaps also more realistic, perspective. Nevertheless, teaching this practice in the contemporary setting can preferably proceed by allowing the individual practitioner to decide to what extent evaluations, if any, are considered appropriate and then adopted. It can also be helpful to simplify the list of anatomical parts to just skin, flesh, and bones. Needless to say, individual practitioners are free to add more detail in line with the instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, if they so desire.

In the approach to practice presented here, skin, flesh, and bones as three main aspects of the human body can be explored with the help of body scans. The practice of scanning the body as such is not found in early Buddhism and only emerges in later times (Anālayo 2020a). Nevertheless, a body scan can offer a convenient approach for training practitioners in overall bodily awareness as an important tool for cultivating continuity of mindfulness during formal meditation and daily life activities. In the present case, such repeated scanning of the body should be combined with awareness in particular of skin, then the flesh, and then the bones.

The idea of any such scan is not to make sure with absolute certainty that the respective anatomical part is felt distinctly and completely, which would be rather challenging. Instead, the instructions are simply to pass attention through the body, from the head down to the feet, in the awareness that the body is enclosed by skin. The next body scan can begin where the previous one ended, at the feet, and move up to the head in

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the knowledge that the body contains flesh, be it muscles, tendons, or organs, all of which are subsumed under the heading of flesh. A third scan from head to feet can then be combined with the understanding that there are bones in the body, from the skull down to the bones in the feet. At times it may indeed be possible to sense some of these directly, but this is not the main purpose. Instead, the main task is simply to maintain continuity of mindfulness throughout the body scan and combine this with the recognition that the human body is, after all, just bones covered by flesh and enclosed in skin.

The same scanning procedure can be employed for the next body contemplation, which instead takes up the four elements as basic constituents of matter in general and the human body in particular. These four are earth, water, fire, and wind, which represent the qualities of solidity or hardness, cohesion or wetness, temperature, and motion. Similar to the case of the previous exercise, the task is not to strive to sense distinctly each of these four qualities in every part of the body. Instead, the instruction is to undertake a body scan combined with the understanding that there is solidity in the body, found throughout the body but particularly evident in the skeleton, followed by three body scans for wetness/cohesion, temperature, and motion. These are similarly found throughout the body, being particularly prominent with the liquids found in the organs (= water), the felt sense of temperature at the skin level (= fire), and the constant process of breathing (= wind). A central purpose of this practice is to reveal the similarity between one's own body and the bodies of others as well as of nature outside. The practice has considerable potential to enable establishing a closer, directly felt relationship to nature and thereby provide a grounding for attempts at environmental protection and confronting climate change (Anālayo 2019).

According to the instructions for the third body contemplation, practitioners in the ancient Indian setting should view a corpse in various stages of decay from the perspective that their own bodies are bound to fall apart as well. A chief implication of the practice would be to drive home the fact of mortality.

In teaching the present approach to the four establishments of mindfulness, this exercise stands out for being by far the most challenging but also the most transformative of the entire set. In residential retreats, the day of introducing this third body contemplation witnesses a particularly high frequency of practitioners being late for meditation or mealtimes and being overall more distracted, to the extent of at times misplacing personal items, etc. It is highly recommended that this particular practice be introduced with a lot of gentleness and softness, keenly aware of the needs of individual participants to be guided slowly into facing what in contemporary society is regularly suppressed and avoided: the indubitable fact of one's own mortality. The same need also emerges from recent research conducted on the approach to the four establishments of mindfulness presented here, where participants were offered the option of skipping this particular exercise (Sedlmeier et al. 2023).

For actual practice, a recommendation would be to rely on awareness of the natural process of breathing, which to some extent has already come up with the previous contemplation in relation to the wind element. The instruction is to decide the extent to which it may be helpful to bring to mind some image, such as that of a skeleton, while remaining well rooted in whole-body awareness, and to combine each inhalation with the understanding that this could be the last breath, and each exhalation with letting go and relaxing.

This form of cultivating mindfulness of death is challenging, no doubt, but also very much needed. The fact of death is undeniable, yet most human beings maintain a denial of it and then react strongly when this denial can no longer be upheld. Yet, death is the final exam of life, wherefore there is a dire need to prepare for it while there is still time. Therefore, instead of continuing the ingrained pattern of denial, the present practice offers a gradual approach for allowing death to be part of life. Through that allowance, practitioners regularly find they are actually becoming more alive, in a way. Training in the art of dying is training in the art of living more fully and consciously.

Contemplation of Feeling Tones and Mental States

The second establishment of mindfulness directs attention to the affective or hedonic quality of experience. Practitioners need to stake out for themselves three ranges in relation to such feeling tones, which in principle can be anywhere between the highest peaks of pleasure and the bottomless pit of pain. Proceeding from the highest peaks to subtler forms of pleasant feeling tones, at a certain point in the continuum of hedonic tonality the category of being neutral fits the case better, in the sense that such feeling tones no longer stand a reasonable chance of triggering desire and can lead more easily to boredom or disinterest. Continuing further along the continuum, there comes a point at which feeling tones no longer fit the category of being neutral, as they begin to be so unpleasant that they can activate the mind's tendency to resistance and irritation. Based on such direct, personal exploration as an implementation of mindfulness, practitioners will be able to apply the three categories of pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant feeling tones in a meaningful way to their own experiences.

A starting point for such application can again be a body scan, in the sense of beginning the meditative exploration with the hedonic quality of physical sensations, in order to then broaden the scope of meditative investigation to include mental feeling tones as well. Throughout, the task is to notice the hedonic tonality of the present moment as it is—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—without reactivity.

The same basic task continues with mental states, the third establishment of mindfulness. Here, the challenge is to penetrate beneath the surface appearance of thoughts and

associations in order to detect the underlying state of mind. This requires sustained presence of mindfulness, without getting involved in the content of a particular thought or association, that is, without getting carried away by it. Such sustained presence enables recognizing, for example, that a recurrence of irritated thoughts, combined with unpleasant feeling tones, reveals that the mind is at present under the influence of anger.

The scope of investigation is not confined to the presence of a defiled condition like anger, but also includes its absence. This goes to show that being mindful of what is absent forms an integral part of the cultivation of this establishment of mindfulness (Anālayo 2022a). With mental feeling tones and states of mind, the mode of practice also gradually becomes less structured than the previous exercises, exemplifying a general pattern applicable throughout. Even more structured forms of establishing mindfulness should not become self-serving tools that result in going on autopilot while executing the instructions. Instead, they are best taken as a type of scaffolding meant to lead up to just being mindful of the present moment without any further reliance on specific procedures. This is, in the end, a chief task of mindfulness: monitoring what takes place without getting directly involved.

Contemplation of Dharmas

Central for contemplation of dharmas are the awakening factors, to which the hindrances can be added. These five hindrances cover sensual desire, aversion, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness-and-worry, and doubt. The count of five comprises seven distinct mental conditions, where the states of sloth or boredom and torpor or physical fatigue have been taken together due to their similar impact on the mind; the same holds for restlessness as a baseline condition of agitation and the more specific worry in the sense of apprehensions related to a specific problem. The resultant set of five states identifies those mental conditions with a particular propensity at *hindering* the proper functioning of the mind, something that holds for study and learning just as much as for meditation (Anālayo 2022b).

The task of mindfulness is above all a clear recognition of the presence or absence of a hindrance, which can lead on to investigating the causes for such presence or absence, thereby providing support to the task of overcoming them. Such overcoming itself, however, is the domain of right effort, another factor in the eightfold path of practice that sets the context for early Buddhist meditation. Mindfulness as one of the factors of this path just monitors what is taking place without actively intervening. Nevertheless, particularly when the hindrances are weak, mere mindful recognition can often suffice for them to go into abeyance. In terms of the approach to practice presented here, the recommendation is to examine the mind for the presence of any of these five

hindrances and, whenever these are absent, to rejoice in the wholesome condition of the mind.

Joy is one of the seven awakening factors, and in the present case its arising is based on the presence of *mindfulness* and a process of *investigation* when checking for the hindrances, which has been carried out with sufficient *energy* to ensure that these are indeed absent. In this way, the first four of the seven awakening factors have already been aroused, and the presence of *joy* can lead on to the mind becoming *tranquil* and *concentrated*, eventually culminating in *equipoise*.

The case of the seven awakening factors—mindfulness, investigation-of-dharmas, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equipoise—requires in principle the same basic monitoring with mindfulness as the hindrances, in the sense of noting presence and absence, together with discerning the respective causes, whenever possible. However, unlike the hindrances, which are to be overcome, the awakening factors are to be nourished and cultivated. Particularly when the mind is slightly sluggish, three awakening factors with a more energizing nature are commendable: investigation, energy, and joy. Should the mind be slightly agitated, however, three awakening factors with a more calming nature are apposite: tranquility, concentration, and equipoise. The one out of the set of seven that is required and commendable at all times is mindfulness: it forms their foundation and, by dint of continuously monitoring, ensures that the other six are cultivated in a balanced way, in order to progress to the eventual breakthrough to awakening.

The Four Establishments

The above approach to practice presents a way of bringing together essential aspects of each of the four establishments of mindfulness in a single practice, rather than selecting only one or two out of the set of four. Various references to these four among the early Buddhist discourses indeed give the impression of intending a single approach with four interrelated facets. This single approach can in principle be applied to any situation in daily life. Whatever happens, a bodily dimension will be there, together with a hedonic tone in terms of being pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant, and of course a particular state of mind as well. Being mindfully present to these three dimensions provides a remarkably effective way of arriving at a full apprehension of the situation at hand. From the viewpoint of early Buddhist soteriology, these three can then be complemented by relating the same situation in some way to the teachings, the Dharma, and to progress on the path to liberation.

Throughout any of its possible applications, the scheme of four establishments of mindfulness requires combining a set of qualities; the instructions are clearly not just about mindfulness as such, but rather about mindfulness operating in collaboration with these other qualities. One of these qualities is clear knowing

or clear comprehension (Anālayo 2020b). A good example of this would be the evaluation commended in relation to the anatomical constitution of the body. Another example is the reflection that one's own body is bound to die and fall apart just like the corpse of another person. With such exercises, the presence of mindfulness comes in combination with a substantial input of a more reflective type provided by clear knowing or clear comprehension.

Another such quality is diligence, at times even translated as ardency. A related quality appears among the awakening factors in the form of energy. All of this points to the need for wholehearted dedication over a long period of time in order for the transformative path of the establishments of mindfulness to bear all of its potential fruits. Of course, even a moment of mindfulness can be beneficial. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of traditional Buddhist training in mindfulness, the common assumption that teaching neophytes a short mindfulness intervention over a few weeks should yield clear results is somewhat baffling. It could be compared to attempting to evaluate the teaching quality of different universities by interviewing students in the first week of their first semester. Of course, even at that time some differences may manifest, but a proper evaluation would require much rather interviewing students who have at least successfully completed a degree.

Yet another quality is the need to remain free from reactivity by way of desire or dejection. At times, this has been referred to as a non-judgmental dimension of mindfulness. The employment of this term could hardly mean that there is no longer any place for evaluations, which can precisely be the task of clear knowing or clear comprehension. The point would be rather that the main task of mindfulness is one of uninvolved observation. This requires reining in, at least for the time being, the mind's ingrained tendency to react impulsively. Establishing mindfulness in this way allows a crucial pause before taking action, in order to enable a full apperception of the situation and a sober evaluation of the appropriate way to respond to it. This is vital.

Another key dimension of the four establishments of mindfulness is the need to undertake their cultivation in an internal and external manner (as well as combining both). The significance of this distinction has unfortunately become obscured due to textual developments within the Buddhist traditions (Anālayo 2020c, d). The resultant lack of clarity has in turn combined with an already pronounced tendency toward individualism in contemporary Westernized societies, as a result of which a considerable portion of mindfulness practice nowadays has become confined to the inner world of the practitioner. However, the external dimension as an integral part of the four establishments of mindfulness has an intrinsic relational quality, by way of directing mindfulness to the condition of others. Recognizing feeling tones and mental states of others based on their posture, facial expression, and tone of voice is an ability already possessed by an infant, put to good use in its relationship with its mother. The same ability can be developed further with the help of mindfulness, opening up the vista to a potential that has up to now not yet received

the recognition it deserves. This exemplifies that already in early Buddhism the potential prosocial benefits of the four establishments of mindfulness extend beyond their primary purpose of providing a direct path to the realization of Nirvana.

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Data Availability Guided meditation instructions corresponding to the practices described in this article are freely available at <http://agama.research.dila.edu.tw/bhikkhu-analayo-meditation-instructions>.

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