

Satipaṭṭhāna (69) The Four Foundations Together

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For these last four months, we have gone through the Four Foundations for Awakening Awareness. These four areas for developing awareness can work together cooperatively and support each other. They bring a very interesting and useful perspective to our lives.

Often when we pay attention and perceive the world around us or inside of us, it is all too easy to do so with preconceived ideas and agendas oriented to certain areas that we think are important. Not to automatically dismiss those, but even if the way you are looking at things is useful, sometimes it can be helpful to find a fresh perspective on our perception of the world and ourselves. These Four Foundations or four areas are useful perspectives to keep in mind when looking at our life.

For example, some people might be oriented towards: “What’s in it for me? What am I going to get out of this experience?” With the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we would ask instead: “What is the physical experience here? What is the feeling tone here? What mind state is present?” Then, “What are the *dharmas*? What processes of being caught or free are playing out as I practice?”

Sometimes when we look at the world, we look through what we do not like, what frightens us, or what is unpleasant for us, and we react to it from that point of view. But instead, we can ask: “How is it physically? How is the feeling tone? How is the mind state? How are the *dharmas*?”

There could be a lot of self-orientation going on. Instead of self-orientation, we practice the Four Foundations. Practicing these is like going through the scales. We can tell ourselves, “Given what is happening now, let’s look at them from these vantage points.” They are the four vantage points that the Buddha offers for the path to awakening, freedom, and everything that is wholesome and skillful – a heap of wholesomeness. For the Buddha, it is phenomenally healthy and beneficial to cultivate this kind of awareness.

The vehicle of the Four Foundations is not oriented towards me, myself, and mine. Of course, it is about you in a certain way. But the self is not the orientation with which we are looking, analyzing, and understanding the situation. To cultivate open awareness that is liberating, freeing, and healthy, the Buddha is saying to notice instead how it is in your body. Notice the feeling tones – how an experience is taken in and registered as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. Notice the qualities of the mind – the state of the mind. Is it contracted? Is it expansive? Is it filled with intense desire or intense aversion? Or is it not? Does the mind feel caught? Does the mind feel free?

These categories have no self in them. These questions are not the same as asking, “Am I caught? Am I filled with greed? Am I aversive? Am I contracted?”

None of the instructions in the *satipaṭṭhāna* involve the perspective of me, myself, and I. This can be such a relief. It can also be a challenge because of how common it is to have that perspective. But we can put that aside and evoke a different perspective. The advantage of doing so is that the perspective of looking at things from the point of view of me, myself, and mine (What’s in it for me? How am I being seen? What is good for me, and how I am) is a magnet for all kinds of unskillful, unhealthy attitudes and states of mind. One way or another, it tends to close the space inside of us and around us. It tends to reduce our open-handedness, our open-heartedness, our open-mindedness.

Instead of taking the direction of what's happening to me? How am I doing? How are people treating me? What is going on here for me? Am I improving? I am getting better; I am getting worse; I am a meditation failure – see if you can put all these things with the word “I” or “me” aside, and bring into play a different perspective: the Four Foundations.

Use what you have learned about mindfulness of the body. Go back and read some of the exercises or listen to some of the talks about mindfulness of the body. Cultivate a greater connection to the body. It is you, but you do not have to think about it as being you. Of course, this is who you are paying attention to. If you are paying attention to your body, you are paying attention to yourself. But to operate, analyze, and react to the situation by adding the idea of me, myself, and mine is extra, especially when we are meditating. Instead, stay with the simplicity of the body, the feeling tones, the mind states, and the *dharmas*.

Another orientation in the sutta is not to try to get anything out of the practice or understand or analyze the situation. But rather, to begin tuning in and waking up to the changing nature of experience – the flow of present moment experience. The river of life goes through us, and things are always changing, always moving. We tune in from the perspective of the Four Foundations.

So there is another perspective: the perspective of change, of things coming and going, and seeing this in an open-hearted, open-minded way. To rest or float and keep opening to the flow of change – the flow of experience – is a very helpful way to loosen the grip of attachments. This flow is only available or best available when we are centered in awareness: in the direct experience of body, feelings, mind states, and the *dharmas*. Let it all flow. This teaches us how not to cling and grasp.

The Five Hindrances are forms of grasping or clinging that diminish our freedom. They diminish the clarity with which we can see things. For the Buddha, they diminish our wisdom. When you are caught in the Five Hindrances, bring forth the Four Foundations. When you are caught in a hindrance, how is that in the body? What is its feeling tone? What mind states are there? Then, just be really present for each hindrance, in and of itself, as it comes and goes, letting go of it.

Referencing the Four Foundations applies also to the way in which we practice – the way that we meditate. From time to time, it is good to go through the steps – the four foundation scales – and to see them in relation to how you are practicing, how you are being mindful, how you are meditating.

How does the way you are practicing feel in your body? Are you straining or tightening up or resisting? Are you sluggish or collapsing? Is the energy draining in your body because you are not really in it? What is happening in your body? What is happening with the feeling tones? What is the feeling tone of how you are practicing – how you are mindful? Is it pleasant or unpleasant? Does it feel good to do or not? What is the mind state with which you are doing mindfulness? Is the mind state with greed, aversion, or delusion? Is the mind state expansive or is it liberating? Or is it settled? What is the mind state?

Are the Five Hindrances at play, even subtly, in the way that you practice? Are you entangled or knotted up in anything? Are you caught in identity – me, myself, and mine – around the five aggregates? Or are the Seven Factors of Awakening peeking their head up as you practice? Are they nearby or potentially nearby? Are you creating a space where those wonderful factors can grow? Are you paying attention and seeing in a way that allows you to see the Four Noble Truths, which is another way of saying seeing the changing nature of things?

We bring together the Four Foundations. When we sit down to meditate, at different times we might choose one of the foundations over another because it seems to be the salient one – it seems like a good one for developing awareness. I find it is really useful to come back to breathing over and over again – the very first exercise. I find it very useful to stay in the body. I use the other ones as needed when they are helpful. Sometimes I go through all four: “Okay, how is this area; how is it here?” in relation to whatever is happening in the moment.

This is a way of bringing the four foundations together and coordinating them. We see that they are mutually supportive of each other and that the *satipaṭṭhāna* works as a unified whole. There is a unified way of bringing together all these practices for the purpose of open awareness: open-hearted, open-minded, open-handed attention to ourselves and the world. Thank you.