



The Foundations of Mindfulness

By now, we have hopefully had a taste of the kind of benefits meditation can bring to your life. And, no doubt, we have found that our mind wanders at times, and have seen how easily it is to become distracted and unmindful in meditation. To help us remain more mindful of our experience, both on and off the meditation cushion, we will explore and use two important teachings on mindfulness – *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, and *Continuity of Purpose*, as well as setting up and finishing meditation.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

In our meditation practice, we want to be mindful. But instead of just trying to be mindful generally, it's useful to have a framework, a system, for how to cultivate mindfulness. *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness* plays a central part in the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness. It offers a useful framework for tuning into, and becoming mindful of, the different aspects of our experience. We can turn to these foundations at any stage in our meditation to help us be more aware. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness are mindfulness of the body, of feeling-tones, of emotions and of thoughts.

1. Mindfulness of the Body

Being aware and mindful of the body generally means maintaining awareness of our body and its movements – being aware of the body's movements as we are walking, sitting, standing, lying down. It is being open to the natural rhythms of the body as we go about our day, and being more deliberate and aware in our physical movements.

In meditation, it means checking that we are aware of the body, how our legs are arranged, how our arms are held, being aware of how our torso feels, etc. Most importantly, it's being aware of the *physical sensations* that continuously arise and pass away in the body.

For example, as we follow the breath, we may also be aware of sensations of tightness in your lower back, then we become more aware of the movement of the ribcage as you breathe, then we notice a texture of sensation in your shoulders which passes as soon you notice it, and so on. Note that we're not aware of the breath to the exclusion of the body – instead, the breath happens *in* the body. We breathe, and are aware of the breath, within the context of all these happenings in the body.

Our body is very important in meditation – it's where meditation happens; it's the context for meditation. After all, the breath is the body breathing, nothing else. Sadly, many of us are quite out of touch with our bodies, and so, for many people, spending time deepening their awareness of the body will be a vital step to maintaining a regular meditation practice. In fact, everyone can probably do with deepening their awareness of their body and the sensations in the body.

Being aware of the body is a good antidote to being lost in your head, anxious or upset. In times like these, it may actually be painful to tune into the body and bring yourself down into it, but it's worth putting up with this discomfort, as the end result will be a more grounded, stable experience of yourself. Also, the pain will usually



dissolve in appropriately applied awareness. And being grounded in this way undercuts a lot of the unhelpful stories and thinking that we tend to habitually engage in.

2. Mindfulness of Feeling-Tone

Being aware of feeling-tone means simply noticing whether the sensations we experience are pleasant or painful, instead of getting into unhelpful stories about our experience. So when we're aware of the body, we notice particular sensations, and we notice what feeling-tones those sensations have, i.e. whether they are painful, pleasurable or somewhat neutral.

For example, as we tune into the body and the breath, we may notice a texture of sensation in the shoulders, a certain tightness of held tension. We then ask ourselves 'how does this feel?' – what is the feeling-tone – and we see that it's slightly unpleasant. And by tuning into this feeling-tone, we're more aware of what's actually going on in the shoulders, and we find it easier to relax that tension in the shoulders.

Or perhaps we feel some unusual tingling in the abdomen as we are following the breath, and we turn our attention to it. We notice that the feeling-tone is rather pleasant, and are open to this, allowing it into our awareness. By doing this, meditation tends to deepen into a more positive and enjoyable state.

Paying attention to the feeling-tone of our experience is very powerful and rewarding, both on and off the meditation cushion. It may be that we think most of what we experience is rather neutral, but if you really look you'll see more nuance and colour there. One way into opening up to the feeling-tone of your experience is to ask ourselves questions like: 'How comfortable am I right now?' 'Am I at ease in my physical experience?' These kinds of enquiries help us to explore the feeling-tone of what we're experiencing.

An important thing about feeling-tones is to be careful not to push away painful feeling-tones or grasp after pleasurable feeling tones. Simply let them be, be aware of them, and, generally speaking, if they're painful they will dissolve and if they're pleasurable they will deepen.

3. Mindfulness of Emotions

Being aware of our emotions means noticing whether we are happy, sad, dull, or angry. We can tune into these emotions by asking ourselves 'what am I feeling right now, emotionally?' Or we can use metaphors – if our minds were like the sea, what kind of sea would it be? Choppy and agitated, or calm and deep?

Emotions have to be included in meditation; we can't just wallpaper over them. If we're really angry, there's no point in pretending we're not – instead we have to breathe with the anger, allowing it to dissipate. If we're happy, great! Include this happiness in your awareness as we breathe.

The Buddha categorised our emotions according to whether they are based upon negative or unhelpful states of mind, such as greed, hatred, delusion, anxiety on the one hand, and positive or helpful states of mind such as love, kindness, peace, joy on the other. Being mindful of emotions means noticing what the emotion is, and whether it's helpful or unhelpful.

If it's a negative emotion, we firstly try not to add to it, nor to push it away. As long as we're adding to it, we can't do much about it. Then we try to simply be aware of the emotion in an open way. In this way, we can allow the emotion to dissolve in awareness. If it's a positive emotion, we sit with it without grasping. If we grasp after it, we'll most likely destroy it. Simply sitting with it in an open way, as we breathe, will allow it to naturally deepen into something more profound again.



Bear in mind also that emotions too have feeling-tones – i.e. emotions too can be pleasurable or painful. Noticing this is a good way to tune more into the emotion. Negative emotions tend to be painful, and positive emotions tend to be pleasurable, though not always! Destructive anger can feel superficially quite pleasurable and empowering...

By becoming aware of our emotional life we will find that unhelpful emotional states – such as hatred, greed, fear – will tend to be resolved; whereas helpful emotional states – such as love, kindness, peace – will deepen and refine.

4. Mindfulness of Thoughts

Most of the time, we're not really aware of the stream of our thoughts. One thought follows another, and we are 'distracted from distraction by distraction'. This doesn't, however, mean that thoughts, in and of themselves, are bad. Rather, it's our tendency to be unaware of them, or caught up in them, and allow them to proliferate, that's the problem.

So being aware of our thoughts firstly means being open and aware of the thoughts that are already there. As with the other foundations of mindfulness, we open up to thoughts as they are, acknowledge them, and allow them to settle in time by not adding to them.

Not being caught up in thoughts is a very useful and important skill, both in meditation and in life. We can experience times where thought simply ceases in meditation, but much of the time the practice is to simply be aware of them without 'buying into' them, and not getting lost in the content.

Buddhism speaks of our minds in their deepest nature as being like a clear blue sky, and thoughts being simply like clouds drifting across this clear blue sky. So we need to identify with the spaciousness of this clear blue sky, rather than the clouds than can fill it. We need to allow thoughts to simply arise and pass away without getting caught up in them.

Setting up in Meditation

We can use the foundations of mindfulness in our meditation if we feel we've become disconnected from or lost in our meditation sit. But one place that the foundations of mindfulness are particularly useful is when we are setting up our meditation.

Every time we start a meditation, we should take time to set up properly. The setting-up phase is the foundation upon which the effectiveness of the entire meditation session rests, and is a transition from our life off the cushion to a meditation environment. It's important to give ourselves time to set up, even if we're keen to get on with our meditation practice.

In setting up, firstly we become aware of the surroundings we are in. We allow any sounds to be there in the background, without trying to block them out. Be aware of the room, the floor underneath you. And if there are people around us, we become aware of them too.

Then we tune into the four foundation of mindfulness. We might choose to spend up to five or even ten minutes tuning into these carefully. And when we're ready, within this context, we allow an awareness of the breath to emerge. We gradually become aware of the breath, while aware of the foundations of mindfulness. When our awareness of the breath is established, we begin stage one of the practice.

If we get lost in meditation practice, or if it gets 'heady', we can come back once more to the foundations of mindfulness. As we continue the practice, we might find that the foundations of mindfulness are less



immediately present in your experience, and we are more deeply focused on the breath. This is quite natural – we are moving from a broad awareness to a more focused awareness. Simply let this happen.

Continuity of Purpose

Mindfulness isn't just about being aware here and now of what's happening – it's also about being aware of what our purpose or intention for meditating. So as we meditate, we are aware that we intend to stay engaged with the breath, and intend to stay mindful of the body breathing.

When we become unmindful in meditation, usually it's because we forget to be mindful. We lose our sense of purpose. Staying in touch with our sense of purpose or intention tends to galvanise our energies and gives focus to the practice, and gives us a sense of confidence in your own potential.

It's particularly worthwhile connecting with this sense of purpose in the setting up stage of our meditation. After we connect with the foundations of mindfulness, we connect with our sense of determination, of purpose, to help our practice stay focused. We could also check in with our sense of purpose regularly throughout the meditation, e.g. at the start of every stage of the practice.

Finishing our Meditation

By the end of the meditation, we will have made quite a bit of effort, and it is important to balance that effort now with a period of 'just sitting'. Simply let go into a broader experience of ourselves. So we try to remain still, doing nothing, for two or three minutes at the end of the meditation, absorbing our meditation.

Just sitting in this way means simply letting go of any formal practice and literally *just sitting*, doing nothing in particular, not making any effort and simply allowing the mind and body to rest and relax. Then we re-introduce movement slowly, e.g. wiggling fingers and toes, taking a deeper breath or two. And when we do move, we do so gently. When we are ready, we can open our eyes and begin to re-engage with the external world.

It is important to be mindful of how we finish our meditation sit. If we jump up straight after meditating we are likely to lose all the calm and concentration that we have built up. It is also likely that we'll find the experience unpleasant. We want to make a smooth transition from our newly focused awareness back to a more broad awareness. We might like to reflect at this point on how we're feeling, specifically if we notice any change in our mental states now as compared to when we began. In this way, we'll see for ourselves how meditation can transform our mental wellbeing and positively change how we see the world.

And Finally...

Remember there is no such thing as a bad meditation! Meditation is about cultivating positive states of mind, so if our mind kept wandering and we kept trying to bring it back, then that is a good meditation. Meditation is about creating a momentum towards positive change and it may take some time for that to bear fruit. In the meantime, we just need to patiently work with our experience and simply enjoy the process.

Home Practice

This week do the **Mindfulness of Breathing** (track 2) each day.
(If you're using the CD this track is on CD 1.)

www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/guided-meditations