

# The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## A Traditional Framework and a Contemporary Lens Steve Lovinger Feb 2026

In the Pali Canon, the Buddha describes four foundations (satipaṭṭhāna) for establishing mindfulness. These are four domains in which awareness can be cultivated deliberately and steadily:

1. Body
2. Feeling tone
3. Mind
4. Mental patterns

They are not beliefs or doctrines. They are observational categories — **a structured way to examine how experience unfolds and how suffering arises**. Traditionally, these foundations cultivate clarity, reduce reactivity, and foster wisdom.

From a contemporary perspective, they also reveal where experience “closes” — where fluid process hardens into preference, identity, and narrative. Mindfulness allows us to observe this closing in real time.

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body (Kāyānupassanā)

### Traditional

- Awareness of breathing
- Posture (walking, standing, sitting, lying down)
- Bodily movements
- Physical sensations
- The body as a conditioned process

When we observe the body carefully, we begin to see:

- Sensations arise and pass
- The body operates through conditions
- Experience is a combination of processes, not a fixed thing

Mindfulness of body reveals that bodily experience is a continuously conditioned process. From that, it becomes clear that what we call “the body” is not an independent entity but an ongoing biological process. “Notice how the breath changes when you’re stressed. Notice how tension builds when you’re worried. Notice how the body responds to thoughts. That’s conditionality.”

**The body is often the most accessible anchor. The body grounds attention in present-moment experience and helps regulate emotional reactivity. It stabilizes awareness and reduces mental proliferation.**

**Contemporary Lens** Closure begins at the sensory level. The moment a sound, sight, or sensation appears, the mind automatically names it, categorizes it, and relates it to past experience.

Sensation → labeling → ownership  
“Tightness” becomes “my pain.”  
“Warmth” becomes “I’m comfortable.”

When sensation is observed before labeling and story, we see it as dynamic and impersonal. The body is not a fixed object but an unfolding biological event. **Mindfulness restores fluidity at the most basic level of experience.**

## 2. Mindfulness of Feeling Tone (Vedanānupassanā)

### Traditional

Feeling tone is not emotion. It is the basic valence of experience and an evolutionary mechanism:

- Pleasant leads to Approach
- Unpleasant leads to Avoid
- Neutral leads to ignore and ignorance

The Buddha emphasized this because feeling tone is often the trigger point. Feeling tone conditions craving and aversion.

**Contemporary Lens** Feeling tone is the hinge point before a thought story begins.

Pleasant → grasping  
Unpleasant → resistance  
Neutral → indifference

The shift from preference (“I would rather”) to demand (“This must”) often occurs here.

When feeling tone is clearly seen, reactivity can be noticed before it becomes narrative. We observe the organism’s biasing system in action.

## 3. Mindfulness of Mind (Cittānupassanā)

### Traditional

We observe the overall state of the mind:

- Contracted or open
- Reactive or calm
- Focused or scattered
- Restless or Settled
- Grasping or at ease

We are not judging the mind — only recognizing conditions.

**Contemporary Lens** Closure at this level becomes identification.

“I am angry.” “I am anxious.”

But mind states are atmospheric conditions. They arise, shape perception, and pass.

The shift from “I am this” to “this is present” weakens identification and reduces suffering.

## 4. Mindfulness of Mental Patterns (Dhammānupassanā)

### Traditional

We observe recurring structures such as:

- The Five Hindrances
- The Five Aggregates
- The Six Sense Bases
- The Seven Factors of Awakening
- The Four Ennobling Truths

Here, mindfulness becomes more investigative. We begin to see how experience is constructed and conditioned.

- We start to recognize patterns rather than just individual thoughts.
- This foundation invites wisdom:  
How does suffering arise? How does it cease?

### Contemporary Lens

At this level, closure becomes narrative structure.

Desire becomes: “I need something more.”

Aversion becomes: “This should not be happening.”

Doubt becomes: “I am not capable.”

These are not personal defects. They are lawful human patterns. **When patterns are seen clearly, narratives loosen and certainty softens.**

### How the Four Work Together

Traditionally, the Four Foundations cultivate clarity and wisdom.

These are not linear steps. They interweave:

- Body awareness stabilizes attention
- Feeling tone reveals the trigger of reactivity
- Mindfulness of mind shows the overall state
- Mindfulness of patterns reveals conditioning

Together, they move us from autopilot to responsiveness.

Seen through both lenses, the Four Foundations reveal where experience progressively stabilizes:

1. Sensation becomes object
2. Valence becomes preference
3. Preference becomes identity
4. Identity becomes narrative

Mindfulness does not suppress these processes. It exposes them.

Exposure reduces automaticity.

Reduced automaticity increases responsiveness.

## **Practical Implications**

The Four Foundations are diagnostic tools.

They help us observe:

- Where does reactivity begin?
- Where does experience harden?
- Where can awareness interrupt automaticity?

Freedom in this framework is not metaphysical independence, but reduced reactivity and increased clarity within conditioned life. The aim is not to eliminate experience, but to understand how it forms.

As understanding deepens, reactivity softens.

That softening is the beginning of freedom.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. Which foundation feels most accessible to you right now?
2. Have you ever experienced a shift from “I am this emotion: to “this emotion is present”? What changed in that moment? How did it feel?
3. Can you detect the moment when preference shifts into demand?
4. When observing a mind state, does it feel personal or impersonal?
5. How does labeling something immediately change your experience?
6. If mindfulness is meant to reduce suffering and increase wisdom, which of these four seems most directly connected to that aim?

## **Additional Resources:**

This and all handouts are available at [www.mindfulnessmeditationgroup.com](http://www.mindfulnessmeditationgroup.com)

Book recommended: The Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Plain English by Bhante Gunaratana

Audio recommended for further practice: see website under recommended Audios and Videos for link to: Joseph Goldstein, Satipatthana Sutta series (four ways to establish mindfulness)