The Four Foundations of Mindfulness come to life. Drink long, drink deeply.” —JON KABAT-ZINN

Exceptionally helpful. Bhante’s works stand out for their depth of wisdom, clarity of expression, and warm-hearted accessibility.” —JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN, author of A Heart Full of Peace and One Dharma

“A new book from Bhante Gunaratana is always cause for celebration. You’ll find no better teacher and guide. This new work is essential for deepening our understanding of mindfulness.” —TONI BERNHARD, author of How to Be Sick

This book is based on a classic text known as the Satipatthana Sutta, one of the Buddha’s most powerful and succinct presentations, which has become the basis of all mindfulness meditation. The practice of contemplating the Four Foundations of mindfulness—mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena themselves—is recommended for all people at every stage of the spiritual path.

“Bhante makes one of the most profound and transformative sutras of the Buddha accessible to the modern mind. This is a wonderful addition to the In Plain English series.” —MATTHEW FLICKSTEIN, author of The Meditator’s Atlas

“Those of us who have come to treasure Bhante’s other classic works will not be disappointed, and those new to his writing will find this a delightful read.” —SweepingZen.com

“Simple, clear, and practical, without losing any of the depth of these teachings—how wonderful! Highly recommended.” —LARRY ROSENBERG, author of Breath by Breath

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The Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Plain English
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Preface

There are several books on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Some of them are direct translations of the original Pali discourse of the historical Buddha, some explain the sutta in great detail with commentaries and subcommentaries, some are rich scholarly treatises. And if you are interested in improving your theoretical knowledge of meditation, any of these books can be highly recommended.

When I teach meditation I always try to make sure the listeners can receive the message easily and put it into practice even without a teacher around to consult; as always, my concern in this book is the actual practice, right here in our lives. And when I write, I strive to write everything in plain English.

Meditation is becoming very popular these days for many good reasons. Unfortunately, there are not enough accessible teachers to fully meet the demand of these burgeoning explorers. Some would-be students read good meditation books, some attend meditation retreats, and some listen to many good talks on meditation. After reading books on meditation, listening to talks on meditation, and attending meditation retreats, quite a number of students of meditation write me at the Bhavana Society with questions on matters they would like clarified. I thought of writing this book to answer some, not all, of the questions. Of course, nobody can write one book or series of books answering all the questions people ask! And what’s more, as people delve more deeply, their enthusiasm prompts them to ask more questions. The present
book is my humble attempt to answer some of the questions related to meditation.

I sincerely thank Ajahn Sona, one of our students at the Bhavana Society, for his valuable help in getting this book started. I am grateful to Josh Bartok and Laura Cunningham at Wisdom Publications for making many valuable suggestions to complete this book and for shepherding it to completion, and to Brenda Rosen who contributed enormous time and effort to develop the manuscript.

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana  
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Introduction

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness is a talk or perhaps a collection of talks said to have been given by the historical Buddha. Mindfulness or insight meditation is based on the Four Foundations. Now very well known in the West, this comprehensive set of meditation topics and techniques is probably the preeminent style of meditation taught today in the Theravada Buddhist world.

Mindfulness has also been the focus of my books. In Mindfulness in Plain English, I present a practical step-by-step guide to mindfulness meditation. If you are new to insight practice, this book is a good place to start. In Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness, I show how mindfulness is used to progress along the Buddha’s eight-step path to happiness. You could say that the Four Foundations are the details of the seventh step of the Buddha’s path. In fact, the last three steps—effort, mindfulness, and concentration, which we in the West call “meditation”—are all covered in the Four Foundations. In Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English, I explain the principles and techniques of deep concentration meditation. Concentration meditation or samatha is parallel and complementary to mindfulness meditation or vipassana, since the Four Foundations are the basis of all concentration.

Now, in this book, I write directly about the Four Foundations, the underlying principles of mindfulness practice. In simple and straightforward language, I share what the Buddha said about mindfulness in his instructional talks or suttas and how we can use these principles to
improve our daily lives, deepen our mindfulness, and move closer to our spiritual goals.

The basic premise of mindfulness is simple. The body does many things without our awareness. When germs invade, our white blood cells attack the invaders without our knowledge. However, we can train ourselves to become aware of the things we do consciously with the body, such as walking, standing, talking, eating, drinking, writing, reading, playing, and other physical activities. We can also develop moment-to-moment awareness of our emotions, sensations, thoughts, and other mental activities. *Mindfulness trains us to do everything we do with full awareness.*

You may be wondering, “Why is full awareness important?” As anyone who tries mindfulness practice quickly discovers, the more aware we are of our actions and of the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions that give rise to them, the more insight we have into why we are doing what we are doing. Awareness allows us to see whether our actions spring from beneficial or harmful impulses. Beneficial motivations include generosity, friendliness, compassion, and wisdom; harmful actions are caused primarily by greed, hatred, and delusion. When we are mindful of the deep roots from which our thoughts, words, and deeds grow, we have the opportunity to cultivate those that are beneficial and weed out those that are harmful.

The Buddha is very clear that the primary aim of all his teachings is “the end of suffering.” Mindfulness helps us to recognize that beneficial actions bring peace of mind and happiness to our everyday lives. They also help us progress on the Buddha’s path toward nibbana—liberation, complete freedom from suffering. Similarly, mindfulness teaches us that actions motivated by greed, hatred, and delusion make us miserable and anxious. They imprison us in samsara, the life-after-life cycle of repeated suffering.

When we practice mindfulness, before we speak we ask ourselves: “Are these words truthful and beneficial to me and to others? Will they
bring peace, or will they create problems?” When we think mindfully, we ask: “Does this thought make me calm and happy, or distressed and fearful?” Before we act, we ask: “Will this action cause suffering for me and for others?” Being mindful gives us the opportunity to choose: “Do I want joy and contentment or misery and worry?”

Mindfulness also trains us to remember to pay attention to the changes that are continually taking place inside our body and mind and in the world around us. Normally, we forget to pay attention because the countless things that are happening simultaneously distract our minds. We get carried away by the superficial and lose sight of the flow. The mind wants to see what is next, what is next, and what is next. We get excited by the show and forget that it is, indeed, simply a show.

The Buddha taught: “That which is impermanent is suffering.” The truth of these words becomes clear when we simply pay attention. Eventually, the mind gets tired of moving from one impermanent thing to the next. Losing interest in the futile pursuit, the mind rests and finds joy. In Pali, the word for “to remember” is sati, which can also be translated as “mindfulness.” Remembering is simply paying direct, non-verbal attention to what is happening from one moment to the next.

Resting comfortably in awareness, we relax into things as they are right now in this very moment, without slipping away into what happened in the past or will happen in the future. Normally, because we do not understand, we tend to blame the world for our pain and suffering. But with sati, mindful remembering, we understand that the only place to find peace and freedom from suffering is this very place, right here in our own body and mind.

Memory is very natural to our body, almost automatic. Our hearts pump blood without our reminding them to do so. The mind can also be taught to act the same way. Training the faculty of mindfulness is like breathing oxygen continuously to remain alive. As mental events occur, mindfulness helps us see whether they hurt our mind and body. We have the choice: Do we merely suffer from pain, or do we examine
the pain to understand why it arises? If we ignore the causes, we con-
tinue to suffer. Living with awareness requires effort, but following the
Buddha’s example, with practice anyone can master it.

Mindfulness practice has deep roots in Buddhist tradition. More
than 2,600 years ago, the Buddha exhorted his senior bhikkhus, monks
with the responsibility of passing his teachings on to others, to train
their students in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

“What four?” he was asked.

“Come, friends,” the Buddha answered. “Dwell contemplating
the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, unified, with concen-
trated one-pointed mind, in order to know the body as it really is. Dwell
contemplating feeling in feelings . . . in order to know feelings as they
really are. Dwell contemplating mind in mind . . . in order to know
mind as it really is. Dwell contemplating dhamma in dhammas . . . in
order to know dhammas as they really are.”

The practice of contemplating (or as we might say, meditating on)
the Four Foundations—mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and
dhammas (or phenomena)—is recommended for people at every stage
of the spiritual path. As the Buddha goes on to explain, everyone—
trainees who have recently become interested in the Buddhist path,
monks and nuns, and even arahants, advanced meditators who have
already reached the goal of liberation from suffering, “should be
exhorted, settled, and established in the development of these Four
Foundations of Mindfulness.”

In this sutta, the Buddha is primarily addressing the community of
bhikkhus, monks and nuns who have dedicated their lives to spiritual
practice. Given this, you might wonder whether people with families
and jobs and busy Western lives can benefit from mindfulness practice.
If the Buddha’s words were meant only for monastics, he would have
given this talk in a monastery. But he spoke in a village filled with shop-
keepers, farmers, and other ordinary folk. Since mindfulness can help
men and women from all walks of life relieve suffering, we can assume
that the word “bhikkhu” is used to mean anyone seriously interested in meditation. In that sense, we are all bhikkhus.

Let’s look briefly at each of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as a preview of things to come.

By asking us to practice mindfulness of the body, the Buddha is reminding us to see “the body in the body.” By these words he means that we should recognize that the body is not a solid unified thing, but rather a collection of parts. The nails, teeth, skin, bones, heart, lungs, and all other parts—each is actually a small “body” that is located in the larger entity that we call “the body.” Traditionally, the human body is divided into thirty-two parts, and we train ourselves to be mindful of each. Trying to be mindful of the entire body is like trying to grab a heap of oranges. If we grab the whole heap at once, perhaps we will end up with nothing!

Moreover, remembering that the body is composed of many parts helps us to see “the body as body”—not as my body or as myself, but simply as a physical form like all other physical forms. Like all forms, the body comes into being, remains present for a time, and then passes away. Since it experiences injury, illness, and death, the body is unsatisfactory as a source of lasting happiness. Since it is not myself, the body can also be called “selfless.” When mindfulness helps us to recognize that the body is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless, in the Buddha’s words, we “know the body as it really is.”

Similarly, by asking us to practice mindfulness of feelings, the Buddha is telling us to contemplate “the feeling in the feelings.” These words remind us that, like the body, feelings can be subdivided. Traditionally, there are only three types—pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, and neutral feelings. Each type is one “feeling” in the mental awareness that we call “feelings.” At any given moment we are able to notice only one type. When a pleasant feeling is present, neither a painful feeling nor a neutral feeling is present. The same is true of an unpleasant or neutral feeling.
We regard feelings in this way to help us develop a simple non-judgmental awareness of what we are experiencing—seeing a particular feeling as one of many feelings, rather than as *my* feeling or as part of *me*. As we watch each emotion or sensation as it arises, remains present, and passes away, we observe that any feeling is impermanent. Since a pleasant feeling does not last and an unpleasant feeling is often painful, we understand that feelings are unsatisfactory. Seeing a feeling as an emotion or sensation rather than as *my* feeling, we come to know that feelings are selfless. Recognizing these truths, we “know feelings as they really are.”

The same process applies to *mindfulness of mind*. Although we talk about “the mind” as if it were a single thing, actually, mind or consciousness is a succession of particular instances of “mind in mind.” As mindfulness practice teaches us, consciousness arises from moment to moment on the basis of information coming to us from the senses—what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch—and from internal mental states, such as memories, imaginings, and daydreams. When we look at the mind, we are not looking at mere consciousness. The mind alone cannot exist, only particular states of mind that appear depending on external or internal conditions. Paying attention to the way each thought arises, remains present, and passes away, we learn to stop the runaway train of one unsatisfactory thought leading to another and another and another. We gain a bit of detachment and understand that we are not our thoughts. In the end, we come to know “mind as it really is.”

By telling us to practice *mindfulness of dhammas*, or phenomena, the Buddha is not simply saying that we should be mindful of his teachings, though that is one meaning of the word “dhamma.” He is also reminding us that the dhamma that we contemplate is within us. The history of the world is full of truth seekers. The Buddha was one of them. Almost all sought the truth outside themselves. Before he attained enlightenment, the Buddha also searched outside of himself. He was looking for his maker, the cause of his existence, who he called the “builder of this
house.” But he never found what he was looking for. Instead, he dis-
covered that he himself was subject to birth, growth, decay, death, sickness, sorrow, lamentation, and defilement. When he looked outside himself, he saw that everyone else was suffering from these same problems. This recognition helped him to see that no one outside himself could free him from his suffering. So he began to search within. This inner seeking is known as “come and see.” Only when he began to search inside did he find the answer. Then he said:

Many a birth I wandered in samsara,
Seeking but not finding the builder of this house.
Sorrowful is it to be born again and again.
Oh! House builder thou art seen.
Thou shall not build house again.
All thy rafters are broken.
Thy ridgepole is shattered.
The mind has attained the unconditioned.

The great discovery of the Buddha is that the truth is within us. The entire Dhamma that he taught is based on this realization. When we look inside, we come to understand the significance of the Four Noble Truths—the Buddha’s essential first teaching. Where do we find suffering? We experience it within ourselves. And where is the cause of our suffering, craving? It, too, is within us. And, how can we reach the end of it, the cessation of suffering? We find the way within ourselves. And where do we develop skillful understanding, thinking, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path—the method for ending suffering? We develop all of these qualities within our own body and mind. The roots of suffering are within us. And the method for eliminating suffering is within us as well.

When we practice mindfulness, we follow the Buddha’s example and
look inside. We become aware that our own greed, hatred, and delusion are the causes of our unhappiness. When we replace these poisons with generosity, loving-friendliness, compassion, appreciative joy, patience, cordiality, gentleness, and wisdom, we find the happiness and peace of mind we have been seeking. As I always remind my students, “The meditation you do on the cushion is your homework. The rest of your life is your fieldwork. To practice mindfulness, you need both.”

The other meaning of dhammas is simply “phenomena.” When we follow the Buddha’s advice and “dwell contemplating dhamma in dhammas,” we come to understand that each individual phenomenon within reality as we experience it, including physical objects, feelings, perceptions, mental activities, and consciousness, comes into being, remains, and then passes away. In the same way, the deep-rooted negative habits of the unenlightened mind that bind us to one unsatisfactory life after another, known as the fetters, are impermanent. With effort, each fetter—including greed, hatred, and belief in the existence of a permanent self or soul—can be recognized and removed. In essence, the dhamma path is quite straightforward. We eliminate our harmful habits one by one and cultivate beneficial qualities based on our understanding of each of the Buddha’s teachings. In the end, the last fetter falls away, and we achieve liberation from suffering.

So how do we get started with mindfulness meditation? I always recommend meditation focused on the breath as the best way to begin mindfulness training. In Mindfulness in Plain English, I explain the basics of breath meditation and other essential mindfulness practices. Similar instructions for sitting meditation and walking meditation can be found in this book in the chapters on mindfulness of the body. In the section that follows this introduction, I suggest ways to include the Buddha’s Four Foundations of Mindfulness Sutta in a simple daily practice.

While many people are drawn to meditation because of its wonderful benefits for relaxation, relief from stress and pain, and the general health of the body and mind, in the context of the Four Foundations,
it’s important to keep another set of goals in mind. With dedicated effort and regular practice, we can look forward to five significant spiritual accomplishments:

First, meditation helps us become fully aware of what is going on in the mind and body here and now. All too often, we sleepwalk through our days, musing about the past or daydreaming about the future. Mindfulness teaches us to cut through the fog and bring our focus to the present moment.

Second, because of this new awareness, we are able to evaluate more clearly the purpose and suitability of everything we say and do. As a result, we make wiser and more beneficial choices.

Third, meditation trains us to see our own body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness exactly as they are, from moment to moment. Seeing ourselves clearly is the essential first step to making positive life changes.

Fourth, as our practice deepens, we see the world around us in a special way, without distortion. We come to understand that everything that exists—including us—is interdependent with everything else, and that everything is always changing. For this reason, we realize, no person, place, thing, or situation can ever be permanently satisfying.

And finally, we learn to dedicate ourselves fully to reflection or meditation, recognizing that only by following the Buddha’s example can we hope to find lasting happiness and peace.

In a nutshell, insight meditation trains the mind to be aware twenty-four hours a day. With this new clarity, we begin to perceive material objects as less solid than our ordinary senses tell us they are. In fact, we discover, they are only as real as a mirage shimmering in the desert. In the same way, we recognize that our thoughts and feelings are always in flux. In truth, they are only as permanent as soap bubbles. Awareness frees us from the desire to grasp on to things and other people with the thought “this is mine” and to view our own body and mind as fixed and unchanging with the thought “this I am” or “this is my self.”
The Four Foundations of Mindfulness is a powerful teaching. In fact, the Buddha promises that anyone who practices his mindfulness instructions, exactly as they are given, without leaving anything out, can attain enlightenment—permanent liberation from suffering—in this very life, even in as short a time as seven days!

Amazing as that guarantee sounds, it makes perfect sense. Imagine how clear your mind would be if you were mindful during every waking moment for just one day from morning to evening. Then imagine how clear it would be if you spent two days with mindfulness, three days, four days. When we remain mindful all the time, it’s easy to make good choices. The mind is purified and becomes luminous. Every day that we practice mindfulness moves us closer to liberation.
Before we turn to a detailed consideration of each of the Four Foundations, let’s look ahead to what we will be covering. As I mentioned, the teachings on the Four Foundations come down to us from a teaching talk given by the Buddha known as the Satipatthana Sutta. A summarized version of the sutta is given below. I have added headings not part of the original sutta to help you follow the sequence.

As you read this book, you may find it helpful to turn back to it from time to time to refresh your memory about what's been covered and look ahead at what’s to come. Try reading the sutta out loud when you turn to it. It’s beneficial to hear the Buddha’s words as if they were intended specifically for you—which, of course, they are!

A word of advice: This book is not meant to be read like a novel or digested like a university textbook. Rather, the teachings of the Buddha are to be explored and practiced, more like a piece of great music. As your familiarity grows, your experiential understanding of the Dhamma takes on a life of its own. In the beginning, mindfulness takes much effort, but eventually, it becomes second nature.

A Daily Mindfulness Practice

If you’re already practicing meditation, or if reading this book inspires you to start, you can make reading the Satipatthana Sutta part of your meditation session.
I always recommend that people begin a session of meditation with thoughts of loving-friendliness for their parents, teachers, relatives, friends, strangers, adversaries, and ultimately, for all living beings. Starting your meditation session in this way helps develop your concentration and also avoid any resentment that may arise as you sit.

Then, before turning your attention to the breath or other point of focus, you may find it worthwhile to read aloud, recite, or even chant the version of the Satipatthana Sutta given below. Read or recite slowly, to give yourself time to review in your mind what you’ve learned or understood about each point. If you find that you cannot remember the Buddha’s meaning or that you are confused about something, resolve to read more or to ask a more experienced meditator for help. If you read and think about the sutta every day, eventually the whole sequence of mindfulness practices will be at the tip of your tongue.

**The Four Foundations of Mindfulness**

**Satipatthana Sutta**

Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana—namely, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

1. **Mindfulness of the Body**
   Mindfulness of the breath.
   Mindfulness of the four postures: walking, standing, sitting, and lying down.
   Mindfulness with clear comprehension: of what is beneficial, of suitability, of the meditator’s domain, of non-delusion.
Reflection on the thirty-two parts of the body.
Analysis of the four elements.
Nine cemetery contemplations.

2. Mindfulness of Feelings
Pleasant, painful, and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feelings, worldly and spiritual.
Awareness of their manifestation, arising, and disappearance.

3. Mindfulness of Mind
Understanding the mind as:
- greedy or not greedy,
- hateful or not hateful,
- deluded or not deluded,
- contracted or distracted,
- not developed or developed,
- not supreme or supreme,
- not concentrated or concentrated,
- not liberated or liberated.
Awareness of its manifestation, arising, and disappearance.

4. Mindfulness of Dhamma

FIVE MENTAL HINDRANCES
Sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor,
restlessness and worry, sceptical doubt.
Awareness of their manifestation, origin, and disappearance.

FIVE AGGREGATES OF CLINGING
Material form, feelings, perceptions,
mental formations, and consciousness.
Awareness of their manifestation, arising, and dissolution.
SIX INTERNAL AND SIX EXTERNAL SENSE BASES
Eye and visible objects, ear and sounds, nose and smells, tongue and tastes, body and tangible objects, mind and mental objects. Knowledge of them, and of the arising, abandoning, and future non-arising of the fetters that originate dependent on both.

SEVEN FACTORS OF ENLIGHTENMENT
Mindfulness, investigation of Dhamma, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Knowledge of their presence, their arising, and their development.

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS
Suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH
Skillful understanding, thinking, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

Bhikkhus, if anyone should properly develop these Four Foundations of Mindfulness for seven years . . . or even for seven days, one of two fruits could be expected for that person: either final knowledge here and now, or, if there is a trace of clinging left, the state of non-returning.
**PART I:**

*Mindfulness of the Body*
Breath

Twenty years after the Buddha attained enlightenment, a senior monk by the name of Ananda became his personal attendant. One day he asked the Buddha, “Venerable sir, if people ask me whether you are still practicing meditation, what shall I tell them?”

The Buddha replied that, yes, he was still meditating.

“What kind of meditation do you practice, venerable sir?” Ananda asked.

“Mindfulness of breathing,” the Buddha answered.

Meditation on the breath is the ideal way to get started with mindfulness training. Breathing is our most constantly repeated physical action. The mind can always return to the breath as an object of focus because it is always with us. We don’t need to be taught to breathe. Nor do we need long experience with meditation to place our attention on the breath. The breath is also our life force. No organ in the body can function without the supply of oxygen we get from the cycle of breathing in and breathing out.

Moreover, breathing is not exclusive. Living beings differ in appearance and behavior. They eat various kinds of food. They sleep in many types of beds. But all living beings breathe. Breathing does not differentiate among Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, and Zoroastrians. Nor does it distinguish between rich and poor, capitalists and socialists, or conservatives and liberals, for that matter. When we focus on the breath, we become mindful of the universal nature of all beings.
Although we have been breathing our entire life, until we pay attention to the process, we do not know what is really happening. But when we focus the mind on the breath, we discover everything related to the breath. Training in this way is so essential to our peace of mind and spiritual progress that the Buddha recommends that everyone practice meditation on the breath.

Even the Buddha used mindfulness of breathing to achieve his goal. After his enlightenment, the Buddha described how he had previously practiced extreme self-discipline by manipulating his breath in arcane and special ways. But he discovered that he could not get rid of impurities by holding his breath or altering his breathing. So he gave up breath-control exercises and followed his own middle way.

In the gathering dusk, on the night he would attain enlightenment, the Buddha asked himself, “What subject of meditation should I practice?” Then he remembered. “Ah! When I was a child, I used the breath. Let me use the breath again.” So he focused his mind on the breath, just as it was. After long hours of unwavering mindfulness and deep concentration, everything became clear to him. The last of his negative mental habits disappeared, and he reached enlightenment—full and complete liberation from suffering.

The Buddha’s Instructions

In one of the most important suttas, the Buddha explains in detail how to practice mindfulness of breathing. He suggests that people go to a quiet place, such as a forest or a house with few noises—somewhere they have undisturbed solitude and can withdraw from everyday concerns. There, he says, begin by establishing mindfulness “in front.”

By these words he doesn’t mean that we should place our attention on what is in front of us in space. Rather, we focus on the present moment. We cannot live in the past, nor can we live in the future. Even when we remember something that happened in the past, we under-
stand that this memory is occurring now. The only place and time truly available to us is right here and right now. For this reason, we establish mindfulness by paying attention to this very instance of breathing in and breathing out.

Having established the mind in the present moment, the Buddha continues, sit in a comfortable posture, with the body straight—upright but not uptight. I explain more fully about comfortable postures for sitting meditation in the next chapter. Then focus the mind on the breath, going in and going out, in and out.

Among other things, we become aware that sometimes the breath is long and sometimes short. These variations are natural. If we watch a baby sleeping, we observe that the baby breathes for a while in a regular rhythm. Then she takes a long breath. Then she goes back to her previous rhythm.

As the Buddha explains, when we breathe in long, we understand, “I breathe in long,” and when we breathe out long, we understand, “I breathe out long.” Breathing in short, we understand, “I breathe in short.” Breathing out short, we understand, “I breathe out short.” This advice can be misinterpreted to mean that we should force ourselves to take long inhaling breaths and long exhaling breaths, or short inhaling breaths and short exhaling breaths. But when we deliberately alter the duration, our breathing does not follow its natural rhythm. Soon, we get tired. Meditation on the breath is not a breathing exercise. We are simply using the breath as a point of focus to cultivate mindfulness.

As we discover, when we pay attention to its natural rhythm, the breath becomes calm. Simultaneously, the mind quiets down. It all happens naturally. Mindfulness itself makes the breath relax. Any force is counterproductive. Agitation or extra effort makes our breathing speed up. When this happens, we pay attention to the fast breathing and notice the agitation. Then we relax the mind, and the agitation disappears by itself.

We also notice that when we inhale and exhale with mindfulness,
we experience the feeling of each breath. The sensations change as the breath changes. So we observe the changing breath and the changing sensations. We find, for instance, that sometimes the breath is shallow; other times it is deep. Sometimes it is easy to breathe; other times, not so easy. We watch these variations.

Along with this, we notice another pattern of subtle feelings, a little bit of anxiety and relief of anxiety, pressure and release of pressure, for instance. Mindfulness helps us notice that when the lungs are full of air, we feel a slight pressure or tension in our lungs. As we breathe out, this tension is slowly released. But when there is no more air in our lungs, we experience a degree of anxiety because there is no air in our lungs. So we breathe in again, and this anxiety fades away. As it does, we experience a degree of pleasure but also the return of pressure.

Of course, we have to pay total attention to the cycle of breathing to notice these changes. We soon discover that there is no escape from them. We inhale and experience pleasure and then tension. We exhale and experience release but also anxiety. But even this pattern has much to teach us. When we experience tension, we remind ourselves not to be disappointed. When we experience pleasure, we remember not to attach to it.

So, as we breathe in and out, we strive to maintain equanimity, a balanced mind. We remind ourselves that our underlying preference for pleasant feelings often arises from desire, which can lead to greed for sensual pleasure. But when we crave pleasure, we always end up suffering, because like all impermanent things, pleasure eventually changes or disappears. We also remember that our underlying tendency to avoid unpleasant feelings often arises from resentment, which can lead to anger. We observe these tendencies, our greed and our anger, and then let them go, returning our attention to the breath.
**The Breath-Body**

We also pay attention to how we feel at the beginning, the middle, and the end of each in-breath and out-breath. This awareness of the entire breathing cycle is called mindfulness of the breath-body. While the mind is engaged with the breath-body, the mind and the breath are relaxed. When they are relaxed, the rest of our body is also relaxed. This is so because the breath is part of the body. Paying attention to the breath-body is an aspect of being mindful of “the body in the body,” as the Buddha recommends. Mindfulness helps us see that the breath and the body are not completely separate.

We experience the relationship between breath and body when we notice the rising and falling of the abdomen during the breathing cycle, as some meditation teachers suggest. When we breathe in, the abdomen expands, and when we breathe out, it contracts. But actually, the movement of the abdomen is the second stage of the body’s rising and falling. The first stage occurs at the tip of the nose. Inhaling is rising and exhaling is falling. With mindfulness, we notice in a microscopic way our body’s expansion or rising as we breathe in and contraction or falling as we breathe out.

While noticing these events, we also feel expansion, contraction, and other subtle movements in the entire body. These same motions occur in every material object. Even walls breathe! In summer, they expand; in winter, they contract. Astrophysicists tell us that the whole universe is actually expanding and contracting. To practice mindfulness of breathing, however, we need awareness only of the expansion and contraction in our own body.

**Internal and External Elements**

Another way we become aware of the relationship between the breath and the body is by noting that the breath is made up of four elements—
earth, water, air, and heat. All material objects, including the body, are composed of these elements.

As we practice mindfulness of breathing, we recognize that it is the breath’s earth element—its form or shape—that gives rise to pressure, release, and other sensations of touch in the nose, lungs, and abdomen. Similarly, we notice that the breath is dry when its water element is low. When we are aware of moisture in the breath, its water element is high.

The function of the air element is motion and energy. We experience the movement of the breath because of its air element. The temperature of the breath is due to its heat element. Heat fluctuates. When its heat element is high, we call the breath hot. When it goes down, we call the breath cold.

In addition to the four elements, the parts of the body—including the breath—are described as internal or external. The elements inside the body are internal; those outside are external. If we think about this distinction, it may occur to us that the breath that we have inhaled is internal. When we exhale, this internal breath mixes with the external air. Then the breath is external. We might also say that the internal body is inhaling, and the external body is exhaling.

In the Maha Rahulovada Sutta, the Buddha explains the meaning of the words “internal” and “external” as they apply to the four elements of the body. In terms of the air element, he says, “Whatever internally, belonging to oneself, is air . . . that is up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in limbs, in-breath and out-breath . . . this is called the internal air element.”

Moreover, the Buddha explains, “Both the internal air element and the external air element are simply air element.” This point is important because of our tendency to cling to things we perceive as belonging to us. But seen with “proper wisdom,” we recognize that even the air we inhale—the internal air—“is not mine, this I am not, and this is not my self. When one sees it thus as it actually is . . . one becomes dis-
enchanted with the air element and makes the mind dispassionate toward the air element.”

Further, the Buddha continues, from time to time, the external air element is disturbed. It “sweeps away villages, towns, cities, districts, and countries,” as it does in a hurricane or tornado. At other times, such as during the last month of the hot season, people “seek wind by means of a fan or bellows, and even the stands of straw in the drip-fringe of the thatch do not stir.”

These seasonal changes in the external air, which we have all experienced, demonstrate vividly that the air element, “great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, disappearance, and change.” The same applies to the earth, water, and heat elements inside the body and outside the body. Since this is so, the Buddha asks, “what of this body, which is clung to by craving and lasts but a while?” Our body, too, he reminds us, is composed of four elements, which are always being destroyed, disappearing, or changing. Therefore, he concludes, “There can be no considering that as I or mine or I am.”

Breath and the Aggregates

As we see from our discussion of the four elements of the breath, mindfulness of breathing is instructive in many important ways. If we follow the Buddha’s example and use the breath to examine our mind-body system as it is, we gain insight into a number of essential Dhamma points. As the Buddha explains, “All dhammas arise from attention.” Among these, we gain firsthand knowledge of the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, thought, and consciousness—the traditional constituents of the body and mind.

Let’s look briefly at the five aggregates as they apply to the breath. The breath-body and all other material objects including the physical body belong to the aggregate of form. We have already noted that we experience the touch of the breath at the nose, lungs, and abdomen
because the breath has a kind of form or shape. From moment to moment, the form of the breath changes, as we can see when we focus our attention at the nose or abdomen.

The other four aggregates describe our mental experience. The aggregate of feeling refers to our sensations of the breath and the emotions we experience as a result. The anxiety we feel when we sense that our lungs are empty and our feeling of relief when we inhale belong to this aggregate. Next is the aggregate of perception. We can use the breath as an object of meditation only because our minds perceive it.

The aggregate of thought includes all other mental activities, including ideas, opinions, and decisions. The thought “this is the feeling of the breath” and the decision to pay attention to the breath belong to this aggregate. The last of the five, the aggregate of consciousness, is the basis of all mental experience. We become aware of changes in the other four aggregates because of the aggregate of consciousness. But consciousness, too, is changing as the form of the breath and our feelings, perceptions, and thoughts change.

In the sutta on mindfulness of breathing, the Buddha tells us: “Mindful of impermanence breathe in, mindful of impermanence breathe out; mindful of dispassion breathe in, mindful of dispassion breathe out; mindful of cessation breathe in, mindful of cessation breathe out; mindful of relinquishing breathe in, mindful of relinquishing breathe out.”

When we apply these words to the aggregates of the breath, we notice that all five consist of three very minor moments: the rising moment, the living or enduring moment, and the passing away moment. The same is true of all things that exist. This activity never stops. Such is the nature of impermanence. Forms, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and even consciousness itself don’t stick around. They cease without leaving a trace. Once they are gone, they are gone forever. New forms, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness always appear. Observing these changes teaches us detachment and makes it easier for us to relinquish the habit of clinging to any part of the body or mind.
Patience and Joy

Below I suggest a basic technique for getting started with mindfulness meditation on the breath. Take time to work with the practice. Try not to be impatient or rush ahead to experience something new. Allow things to unfold naturally.

People these days are good at making things happen very quickly. Computers, email, and mobile telephones are fast. Washers and dryers, instant breadmaking machines, and instant coffeemakers are time-savers. But too many people don’t have time to smile. They don’t have time to allow joy to develop the natural way.

One day, a man who wanted to take my picture asked me to relax and be natural. When his camera was ready, he said, “Bhante, smile.”

So I said to him, “First you ask me to be natural. Now you are asking me to smile. Do you want me to smile or be natural?”

When something is funny, smiling happens naturally. We also smile when our stress, tension, and fear disappear. Then our face becomes calm and peaceful, and we smile with our hearts without showing our teeth. That is the kind of smile the Buddha had all the time.

As we gain experience with mindfulness of breathing, we gradually overcome sleepiness, restlessness, and other obstacles to concentration. As our concentration deepens, we begin to smile with our hearts. It’s not hard to understand why this happens. As we have seen, the breath is part of the body. When we relax the breath, the body becomes relaxed. The breath is free from greed, hatred, delusion, and fear. When the mind joins with the breath, the mind temporarily becomes free from greed, hatred, delusion, and fear. Relaxing the breath, breathe in. Relaxing the breath, breathe out. Then joy arises naturally.

With every small step of meditation, you gain a small degree of insight. Do your practice with patience. Don’t rush. Let the insights unfold. Consider the analogy of an impatient hen who lays a few eggs. She wants to see chicks coming out of them quickly, so she turns them
over very often to check. But she will never see chicks coming out of these eggs. Another hen lays a few eggs and sits on them patiently. When the eggs are properly hatched, the chicks break the eggshells with their little claws and bills. Then this mother hen sees good feathery results!

**Key Points for Meditation on the Breath**

- Go to a quiet place where you will be alone and not disturbed.
- Bring your attention to the present moment.
- Sit in a comfortable posture that allows your upper body to be straight and relaxed, upright but not uptight.
- Place your hands on the lap, palms upward, with the right hand on top of the left and the thumbs touching at the tips.
- Close your eyes or leave them half-open.
- Focus your attention on the breath, coming in and going out.
- To deepen your mindfulness, try counting:
  
  Inhale and exhale. Say silently “one.”
  Inhale and exhale. Say silently “two.”
  Inhale and exhale. Say silently “three.”
  Continue up to ten.
  Inhale and exhale. Say silently “ten.”
  Inhale and exhale. Say silently “nine.”
  Inhale and exhale. Say silently “eight.”
  Continue down to one.
When you complete this round of counting, settle on your primary object—breath, feeling, thought, rising and falling, or consciousness.

If restlessness, agitation, or doubt occurs, don’t intensify the distraction by following it. Instead, say to your self, “Let me think how I started. I started from my breath. It is not difficult to find my breath.” Breathe several times quickly and return your attention to the breath and its natural pace.

If your mind wanders from its focus on the breath, don’t get upset. Simply noticing that you have been thinking, daydreaming, or worrying is a wonderful achievement! Gently but firmly return your attention to the breath. And then do it again the next time, and the next time, and the time after that.

If you feel sleepy or dull, try focusing with slightly more effort on the touch sensations of the in-breath and out-breath. If stronger focus does not help, stand up and continue meditating in a standing posture for a few minutes or try walking meditation. You’ll find instructions for both postures in the next chapter.

If you begin to feel pain, first try to address the situation as much as possible. Loosen your clothing and check your posture to make sure that you are not slouching. Move to a posture that’s easier to maintain (as described in the next chapter). If these adjustments do not help, then work with the pain: try making the sensation of pain your object of meditation. Observe the sensation and watch how it changes over time.

If questions arise, ask someone with more experience. Remind yourself that millions of people have used this practice to attain clarity and peace of mind.

Keep practicing with patience.