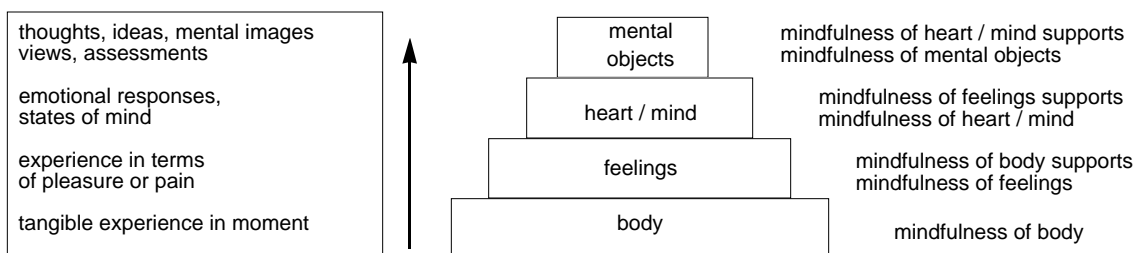


MBC course notes - Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Week 1

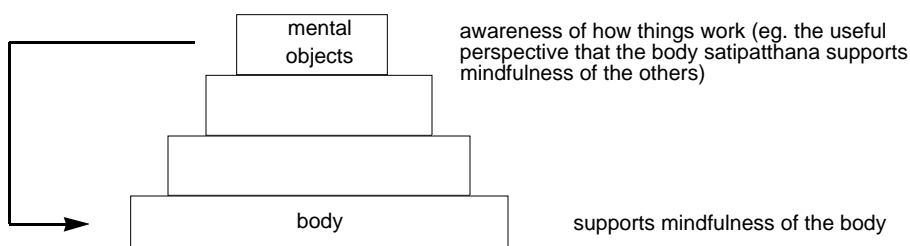
Mahabodhi
3 September 2007

1. The first point is that we have experience. According to the phenomenologist, the philosopher Heidegger, all we can really say about experience - if we leave aside theorising about it - is that we are here **in the world**. In buddhist terms we are in *samsara* (conditioned existence). But what do we do about that? His answer is quite buddhist.
2. We CARE, in relation to ourselves and others. Taken seriously this leads to a sense of empathy for ourselves and others as centres of experience (cf. the *metta bhavana*) but Heidegger doesn't give much practical advice as to how we CARE . Buddhism does though: in its teaching of mindfulness.
3. Through mindfulness we CARE in two basic ways: by awareness (by being careful), and by simply caring (*metta*).
4. If I am **aware** of something in my *experience* now, that gives me a **good foundation** for future action in relation to it (eg. if I know I've sprained my ankle I can go to the doctor - If I know I am tense I have information toward a relaxed future). But I can also bring awareness to my *actions* in the present moment and to how they will affect future experience through awareness of ethics. The future is on a safer foundation because of my care now.
5. The Buddha taught mindfulness in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, where he teaches the four things to be mindful of, the four *satipatthanas* or four foundations of mindfulness. They are body, feeling, heart / states of mind and mental objects. A *satipatthana* is what we bring attention to: *sati* means *awareness* and *upatthana* means *to place near*. In the *Satipatthana Sutta* the Buddha begins with mindfulness of the body, then feeling and so on. We can think of them as a pyramid. Each supports the others as you go up the pyramid:



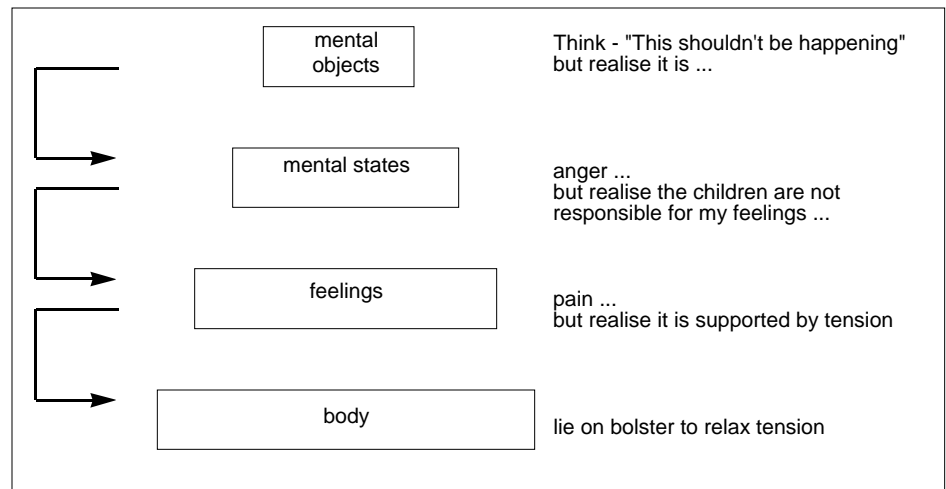
The process begins with mindfulness of the body - in the Sutta that is setting up a meditation posture under a tree, but really is the whole area of bodywork / relaxation as well as any setting up of conditions (quiet space, etc) that help us focus on the other *satipatthanas*. We do the best we can to make our tangible experience 'safe' (this is called *samatha* - calming).

But the pyramid is not just a 'one way' process (as in for instance bodily relaxation supporting positive states of mind), there are also positive 'feedback loops' from higher up the pyramid supporting the lower levels:



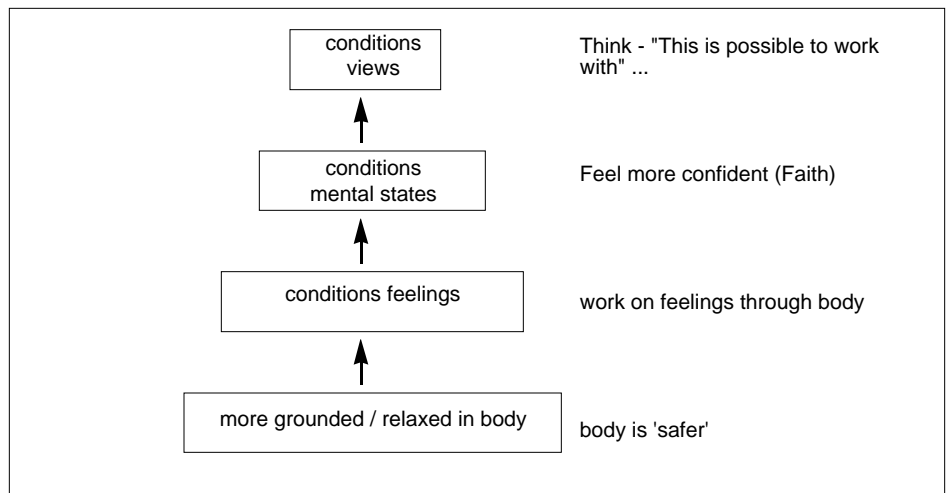
In fact the four satipatthanas really function as foundations (or otherwise) for each other, and a 'weakness' in one will undermine the others. We will see how this works later. But as the Buddha indicates in taking them in a particular order in the Sutta (and in the Anapanasati Sutta which is a meditation based on the same principles), it is probably best to begin with body and work upwards - but bear in mind the other 'inter-relations'.

I had a good example of working on the satipatthanas last week. I have been having difficulties with children outside of my flat which has caused me a lot of anxiety. I began with the notion "This is bad. It shouldn't be happening". I then went backwards down the satipatthanas until I ended up laying on a bolster several hours a day trying to relax (which has worked!)



That relaxation then helps build things up again ... but the relaxation only lasts so long ... I have to keep going back to the bolster.

What is interesting is that I have been a bit 'stuck in my head' writing and researching my book, on mindfulness, while at the same time having a slight sense I am missing something (like for instance live examples), and here, a week before my first talk, the world provides a very tangible live example.



Buddhism says we should practice as if our turban is on fire, but maybe that is better put as 'when our turban is on fire - it is then we will really practice', and that is mostly either a question of actual painful experience or a question of sensitivity of imagination to painful experience (for the Buddha-to-be in the palace it was the latter).

Homework: Keep a daily journal on the topic of safety and how you have worked with it using mindfulness each day.