

## Robert Cusick 04-28-2010



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*Meditation Center. He subsequently served there, upon his return to the U.S., in the role of Retreats Program Manager. Robert is a certified Kripalu Yoga teacher.*

As we discussed previously, we can think of practice as a four-legged chair:

- Cultivation of virtue (sila)
- Mindfulness (sati), or clear comprehension
- Concentration (samadhi)
- Application of Vipassana (insight)

All of these work together. Sometimes we may focus on one of these “legs” more than another, depending on our circumstances and situation. It is important to integrate these into our daily life.

### *Four Foundations*

There are four foundations of mindfulness: the contemplation of the body, the contemplation of feeling, the contemplation of consciousness, and the contemplation of mind objects. These are explained in the Satipatthana Sutta (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.nysa.html>).

The contemplation of the body is a fruitful area to explore. One of the most basic mindfulness practices is mindfulness of the breath. When we are mindful of the breath, we are grounded in the present moment. When we become distracted during meditation, and become enmeshed in thinking, we are no longer in the present moment. At the point we become aware that we are thinking rather than concentrating on our breath, we are again in the present moment. From there we move our concentration back to the breath and the present moment.

Another concentration on the body could include scanning from head to toe, being aware of tightness in the muscles, or parts that are uncomfortable. Another view of the body can be through the four elements: earth, fire, air, and water.

Becoming aware of earth elements in the body include being mindful of the teeth, skeleton, or parts of the body that are solid. There are also external forms, such as gravity. These elements are not the self.

Water elements include saliva, blood, mucus, perspiration, and urine. As we become mindful of these, we remember that they are not the self.

The fire element includes anything relating to temperature. Are you warm? Are your toes cold? These are just things that flow through you – they are not the self.

Air elements include breathing and a breeze on our skin. They are not us.

In the contemplation of mind objects, we may see that we are amused, cheerful, excited, agitated, confused, or irritable. Using the mirror of mindfulness, note what the attitude is. It is just something we are experiencing.

*The mind, hard to control.  
Flighty-alighting where it wishes  
One does well to tame.  
The disciplined mind brings happiness.  
The mind, hard to see.  
Subtle-alighting where it wishes  
The sage protects.  
The watched mind brings happiness.*

- Dhammapada 35-36

In the contemplation of feeling, or mindfulness of emotion, we see through to what is actually happening. We are aware of anger, or desire, or happiness, without judging.

In *the Issue at Hand*, Gil Fronsdal says:

*There are four aspects to mindfulness of emotions: recognition, naming, acceptance and investigation. There is no need to practice with all four each time an emotion is present. You can experiment to find out how they each encourage a non-reactive awareness towards emotions.*

**Recognition:** *A basic principle of mindfulness is that we cannot experience freedom and spaciousness unless we recognize what is happening. Recognizing certain emotions as they arise can sometimes be difficult. We have been taught that some emotions are inappropriate, or we are afraid of them, or simply don't like them. For example, when I first started practice, I became angry when my practice on retreat didn't go the way I expected it to. But I had an image of myself as someone who was not angry, so I didn't acknowledge the anger. Not until I recognized the anger could the retreat really begin for me. The more we learn to recognize the range of our emotions, including the subtlest ones, the more familiar and comfortable we become with them. As this happens, their grip on us relaxes.*

**Naming:** *A steady and relaxed mental noting, or naming of the emotion of the moment—"joy", "anger", "frustration", "happiness", "boredom", "contentment", "desire" and the like—encourages us to stay present with what is central in our experience. Naming is a powerful way to keep us from identifying with strong emotions. There are many ways that we are caught by emotions: we can feel justified in them, condemn them, feel ashamed of them, or enthralled with them. Naming helps us step outside of the identification to a more neutral point of observation: "it's like this." Folk tales tell of the dragon losing its power when it is named. Likewise, emotions can lose their power over us when they are named.*

**Acceptance:** *In mindfulness, we simply allow emotions to be present, whatever they may be. This does not mean condoning or justifying our feelings. Formal meditation practice offers us the extraordinary opportunity to practice unconditional acceptance of our emotions. This does not mean expressing emotion, but letting emotions move through us without inhibitions, resistance, or encouragement. To facilitate acceptance, we can try to see that the emotion has arisen because certain conditions have come together. For example, if you had a flat tire on the way to work, and your boss gave you a new assignment with a tight deadline after you finally arrived, you might feel frustrated or angry. If your boss gave you that same assignment on a morning after you'd had a good night's sleep and heard some great news about your stock options, you might feel excited*

or challenged. If we can see emotions as arising from a particular set of conditions, we can more easily accept them, and not take them personally.

**Investigation:** This entails dropping any fixed ideas we have about an emotion and looking at it afresh. Emotions are composite events, made up of bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, motivations and attitudes. Investigation is not abstract analysis. Instead it is more of a sensory awareness exercise: we feel our way into the present moment experience of the emotions. Particularly useful is the practice of investigating the bodily sensations of an emotion. The correlation between emotions and their physical manifestation is so strong that when we resist or suppress our emotions, we often do the same with sensations in parts of our bodies. Waking up to our body through mindfulness practice also allows us to wake up to our capacity to feel emotions. If we let the body be the container for the emotion, we can more easily disengage from the thoughts around the emotion—the stories, analysis, or attempts to fix the situation—and simply rest with the present moment experience.

Mindfulness of emotions helps us to come to a place where we don't react habitually to our inner urges and emotions. That place is a good foundation from which to look carefully at situations and make wise decisions. The point of Buddhist meditation is not to become emotionally neutral. Through it, we can open up to our full capacity to feel emotions and be sensitive to the world around us, and yet not be overwhelmed by what we feel.

In meditation, we sometimes find that we have drifted off into thinking. When the thoughts are random, we just redirect back to the breathing. If we are caught in a loop, where our thoughts are obsessive and we keep going back to them, there is an emotion fueling them. In that case, we need to become mindful of the emotion driving them. Ground yourself in the present, being mindful of that emotion, without criticism or judgment.

In daily life, when we become obsessed with a negative emotion, we often distract ourselves by having a beer or watching TV. If, instead, you hold the light of mindfulness to it, you can see that it is just an experience. It will pass.

It is all about letting go. Once we see what holds us, we have options and freedom.

There may be a tendency to look at the 8 Fold Noble Path as metaphysical. It is not metaphysical—it is practical. Just be honest with yourself – what's really happening now?

Even when you think you've got it - be mindful, and see the clinging in the "I've got it".

*May you all awaken to the truth.  
May you all be free from suffering.  
May you all experience Nirvana.*