

Summary of the Mahasatipatthana Sutta

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Maurice Walsh–translator (Summary by Richard M. Johnson)

Note:

remarks in parentheses are from Maurice Walshe–his notes as sourced from the Commentaries
remarks/changes in italics are from Richard Johnson. Sources for these comments come from texts by Tarchin Hearn, Anlayo, Thich Nhat Hanh and others on the sutta.

Instructions applying to the whole Sutta:

There is, monks, this one way to the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and distress, for the right path, for the realization of Nibbana;– that is to say the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. What are the four? The monk contemplates the body as body, feelings as feelings, mind as mind and mind-objects as mind objects, **ardent, clearly aware** and **mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world.***

The monk retires to a secluded place (in the forest, at the root of a tree or in an empty place / room, sits cross-legged, holds his body erect and establishes mindfulness before him. *(These posture and locale instructions are only mentioned at the beginning of the section on body, but can be applied to all four foundations).*

* *emphasis in bold is from RMJ. Anlayo translates clearly aware as clearly knowing.*

Body

General Instructions for
Establishing Insight:

The monk abides contemplating body as body internally, externally (applies to other beings and is known telepathically or by inference–per MW note on feelings) and both together. He sees arising phenomena, vanishing phenomena or both together in the body. Or there is mindfulness of the body just to the extent necessary for knowledge and awareness. He abides independent and not clinging.

1 Mindfulness of Breathing

Breathing

long or short
in & out conscious of the whole body
in & out calming the whole bodily process

Instructions:

The monk establishes mindfulness, knowing the qualities of the breath, being conscious of the whole body, or calming the body.

2 The Four Postures

Postures

walking
standing
sitting
lying down

Instructions:

In whatever way the body is disposed, the monk knows that is how it is.

3 Clear Awareness

All activities

Going and looking forward and back;
bending and stretching; carrying robes and bowl; eating, drinking, chewing and savouring; passing excrement and urine; walking, standing, sitting; falling asleep or waking up, speaking or being silent.

Instructions:

The monk is clearly aware of his actions.

4 Reflections on the Repulsive Parts of the Body

Parts of the Body

Thirty one parts are given in the sutta (head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, mesentery, bowels, stomach, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, tallow, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine. *(With the addition of the brain, this comprises the later traditional meditation on the Thirty Two Parts of the Body).*)

Instructions:

The monk reviews this body from the soles up and the scalp down, knowing the parts clearly as separate identities. The body is seen as enclosed by the skin and full of manifold impurities.

5 Four Elements

Elements

- earth
- fire
- water
- air

Instructions:

Again, the monk reviews this body in terms of the elements, knowing the elements clearly as separate entities.

6 Nine Charnel-Ground Contemplations

Stages

1. one, two, three days dead–bloated, discoloured, festering
2. eaten by crows, hawks, dogs, etc.
3. skeleton with flesh and blood, connected by sinews
4. fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, connected with sinews
5. skeleton without flesh and blood, connected with sinews
6. randomly connected bones–scattered
7. bones whitened
8. bones piled up–a year old
9. bones rotted away to powder

Instructions:

The monk compares his body with the one contemplated and reflects “this body is of the same nature, will become like that, is not exempt from that fate.” One performs this reflection with bodies in each stage. The body being contemplated is described “as if the monk were to see a corpse...”. *Thus this meditation could be done with an actual corpse or done reflectively or imaginatively.*

Feelings

Vedana or Initial Impressions to Sense Objects

General Instructions:
(same as for the body,
only feelings are
substituted for body)

The monk abides contemplating feelings as feelings internally, externally (applies to other beings and is known telepathically or by inference–per MW note on feelings) and both together. He sees arising phenomena, vanishing phenomena or both together in the feelings. Or there is mindfulness of feelings just to the extent necessary for knowledge and awareness. He abides independent and not clinging.

Feelings

- pleasant (bodily or mental) *
- painful (bodily or mental) *
- neither (mental only) *
- pleasant (sensual-of the householder life)
- painful (sensual-of the householder life)
- neither (sensual-of the householder life)
- pleasant (non-sensual-of renunciate life)
- painful (non-sensual-of renunciate life)
- neither (non-sensual-of renunciate life)

*(Feelings are not emotions. * per Anlayo, Abhidhamma holds that pleasant/pain vedana arises only at touch; the other 4 body senses have only neutral vedana.)*

Instructions:

The monk abides knowing that he is feeling a feeling of the types mentioned. When it is ‘neither’, then one is just aware that a feeling is present. Spiritual pleasures are those of the renunciate life versus those of the householder life *(explanation or definition not given in the Sutta or commentaries, however in MN 137 9-15, there is a description of the differences in the types of vedana between a householder and a renunciate, referring to the joy of insight. Elsewhere the Buddha emphasizes the importance of non-sensual joy, which arises from the jhanas.)*

Mind

Citta or Heart-Mind

General Instructions:
(same as for the body,
only mind is substituted
for body)

The monk abides contemplating mind as mind internally, externally (applies to other beings and is known telepathically or by inference—per MW note on feelings) and both together. He sees arising phenomena, vanishing phenomena or both together in the mind. Or there is mindfulness of mind just to the extent necessary for knowledge and awareness. He abides detached and not grasping at anything in the world.

Qualities of Mind

ordinary

lustful
free from lust
hating
free from hating
deluded
undeluded
contracted (by sloth & torpor)
distracted (by restlessness & worry)

higher

developed (by the jhanas) (*brahma-viharas or kasina extension in meditation*)
undeveloped
surpassed (= undeveloped) (*need to review meditation experience*)
unsurpassed (= developed) (*by jhanas or awakening*)
concentrated (into jhana)
unconcentrated
liberated
(temporarily by insight or by jhanic suppression of the defilements) (*by full awakening*)
unliberated

Instructions:

The monk knows the mind of such a quality. *The ordinary qualities start with greed, hatred and delusion and then refer to contracted and distracted, which are part of the 5 hindrances. The higher qualities refer to the need to review our meditations and know what leads to absorption and awakening.*

The instructions for the 2nd & 3rd foundations of Vedana & Citta are just to know that the vedana or the state of mind is present. In the 4th foundation of Dhammas, the monk knows the dhamma when present or absent and also knows or investigates what to do about it.

Mind-Objects

Dhammas or Mental Events, Mental Phenomena

General Instructions: (same as for the body, only substitute mind-objects for body) The monk abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects internally, externally (applies to other beings and is known telepathically or by inference—per MW note on feelings) and both together. He sees arising phenomena, vanishing phenomena or both together in the mind-objects. Or there is mindfulness of mind-objects just to the extent necessary for knowledge and awareness. He abides detached and not grasping at anything in the world.

1 The Five Hindrances (*Nivarana*)

Hindrances
sensual desire
ill-will
sloth and torpor
worry and flurry
doubt (includes doubt of Triple Gem and the inability to distinguish good from bad)

Instructions:

The monk abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in respect of the five hindrances. The monk knows if the hindrance is present or absent; knows how the unarisen comes to arise; how the abandonment comes about and how the non-arising of the abandoned hindrance in the future will come about.

2 The Five Aggregates of Grasping

Aggregates
form
feeling/initial impressions (*vedana*)
perception
mental formations
consciousness

Instructions:

Again, the monk abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in respect of the five aggregates of grasping. The monk knows if the aggregate is arising or disappearing. (*These are often referred to as the aggregates of grasping, which creates our sense of ego or self*).

3 The Six Internal and External Sense-Bases

Sense-Bases
eye and sight-objects
ear and sounds
nose and smells
tongue and tastes
body and tangibles
mind and mind-objects

Ten Fetters (this list is based on Abhidhamma, connecting non-arising of fetters to levels of path attainments): attachments to sensuality, to form & to formlessness; hatred; conceit; partial view; blind belief in rule & ritual; sceptical doubt; restlessness; ignorance.

Instructions:

The monk knows the sense door and its object and what fetter arises dependent on the two. (*The fetters are basically greed, hatred & delusion. Sometimes they are enlarged to the ten fetters. Thich Nhat Hanh in his translation refers not to fetters, but to "formations which arise in dependence on sense organs and sense objects"*). He knows how the unarisen fetter comes to arise, how the abandonment comes about and how the non-arising of the abandoned fetter in the future will come about. The following list given by Maurice Walshe in his commentary differs slightly from Abhidhamma version given in left panel: sensuality, resentment, pride, wrong views, doubt, desire for becoming, attachment to rules and rituals, jealousy, avarice, and ignorance.

4 The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Factors

| | |
|---------------------------|----------|
| mindfulness | sati |
| investigation of states | vicaya |
| energy / Right Effort | viriya |
| delight / joyful interest | piti |
| tranquillity | passadhi |
| concentration | samadhi |
| equanimity | upekkha |

Instructions:

The monk knows if the factor is present or absent, how it comes to arise, and how the complete development of each factor comes about.

5 The Four Noble Truths

Truths

suffering
origin of suffering
cessation of suffering
the way of practice leading to cessation of suffering is the....

Noble Eightfold Path

Right View / *Understanding*
knowledge of suffering, of origin of suffering, of cessation of suffering & of way of practice leading to cessation of suffering
Right Thought / *Aim*
thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will & of harmlessness
Right Speech
refraining from lying, slander, harsh speech & frivolous speech
Right Action
refraining from taking life, from taking that which is not given, from sexual misconduct
Right Livelihood
giving up of wrong livelihood & maintaining right livelihood
Right Effort
rouses will, makes an effort, stirs up energy, exerts his mind to the "*Four Right Efforts*"
Right Mindfulness
contemplates the body as body, feelings as feelings, mind as mind and mind-objects as mind objects, ardent, clearly aware, mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world. *These are identical to the sutta's opening description of the four foundations.*
Right Concentration
enters & remains in each of the Four Rupa Jhanas
A moment of mindfulness will develop the path factors of right effort, mindfulness, concentration, view and thought.

Instructions:

The monk abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in respect of the Four Noble Truths. Here the monk knows each truth as it really is.

Dukkha

Birth, ageing and death are suffering, as is sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness and distress. Attachment to the unloved; separation from the loved; and not getting what one wants are suffering. The five aggregates are suffering.

Tanha

Craving is the origin of suffering and gives rise to rebirth; is bound up with pleasure and lust; finds fresh delight now here, now there. It is sensual craving, craving for existence and craving for non-existence.

Craving arises and establishes itself where there is anything pleasurable or agreeable.

Pleasure is found in the six sense doors and its objects. As well, pleasure is found through each of the sense doors in the arising of sense consciousness, contact, feeling, perception, volition, craving itself, vitakha (initial application of attention) and vicara (sustained application of attention). As pleasure arises, craving arises and establishes itself.

Nibbana:

Cessation of suffering is in relationship to craving: the complete fading away and extinction of craving; its forsaking and abandonment; and its liberation and detachment are the ending of suffering.

The way out is the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Four Right Efforts

To make an arisen, unwholesome state of mind cease

To make an unarisen, unwholesome state of mind not arise

To make an unarisen, wholesome state of mind arise

To make an arisen, wholesome state of mind continue, not to fade away, to grow & to come to full perfection of development.

Conclusion

Practice of these four foundations will bring one of two results: Arahantship in this life, or state of Non-Returner. The results will come in 7 years, 6 years, 5 years, 4 years, 3 years, 2 years, 1 year, 7 months, 6 months, 5 months, 4 months, 3 months, 2 months, 1 month, ½ month or 1 week.