
The Practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Theravada Buddhism within Contemporary Society in Vietnam

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Received 10/06/2025; Revised 13/08/2025; Accepted 26/08/2025

Abstract

This study examines the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) in Theravada Buddhism within contemporary Vietnamese society. Three objectives guided the investigation: (1) to identify problematic conditions that impede practice in Vietnam; (2) to analyze canonical articulations of the Four Foundations, with emphasis on the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta; and (3) to propose practical, context-sensitive guidelines to support sustainable practice. Qualitative data were collected via focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with practitioners, monastic teachers, and retreat organizers. Data analysis combined SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and thematic content analysis.

Results show that mindfulness practices are increasingly adopted for mental and physical well-being but are constrained by inconsistent meditation models, scarcity of experienced mentors, and internal and external distractions, such as unsupportive environments, social obligations, and variable retreat conditions, that undermine insight (vipassanā) development. Canonical analysis corroborates the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta's integrated emphasis on samatha (tranquility) and vipassanā (insight) as mutually reinforcing dimensions of embodied practice applicable to everyday life. Based on these findings, the study proposes tiered retreat models for beginner, intermediate, and advanced practitioners, each structured around three daily sessions (morning, afternoon, evening) and tailored pedagogical content. The OMP model (Organization, Mentor, Participant) is articulated as a pragmatic framework: organizational leadership secures logistics (schedule, accommodation, food, climate), mentors provide guidance and relational support, and participants engage with appropriate discipline and relationality. The study concludes that effective adaptation of the Four Foundations in Vietnam requires coordinated institutional support, mentor development programs, and participant preparation to address identified weaknesses and threats while leveraging local opportunities for culturally rooted, sustainable mindfulness cultivation. Implications include recommendations for

standardized retreat curricula, capacity-building for mentors, and institutional partnerships to integrate satipaṭṭhāna practice into community mental health and education. Future research should evaluate the proposed models empirically across diverse Vietnamese contexts to measure outcomes in well-being and conduct.

Keywords: Mindfulness practice; Theravada Buddhism; Satipatthana; Vietnamese Society

Introduction

In contemporary Vietnam, rapid modernization and the pressures of material life have led to increasing concerns regarding mental well-being, stress, and work-related challenges (Nguyen, 2021). As individuals seek effective methods to manage these pressures, Buddhist meditation has become a prominent means of cultivating resilience and inner balance. Numerous studies have demonstrated the therapeutic value of meditation in alleviating stress, depression, chronic pain, and insomnia (Gunaratana, 2014). Within this context, mindfulness practice, particularly the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna), has garnered significant attention among Vietnamese practitioners for its potential to promote both physical and mental well-being.

Traditionally, Vietnamese Buddhism has been shaped predominantly by Mahāyāna traditions. However, in recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in Theravāda teachings, particularly in the systematic practices of mindfulness as preserved in the Pāli Canon (Tran, Pham, & Nguyen, 2022). The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, contemplation of the body (kāyānupassanā), feelings (vedanānupassanā), mind (cittānupassanā), and mental objects (dhammānupassanā), are central to the cultivation of insight and liberation (Gethin, 2003). This approach emphasizes not only devotion but also disciplined mental training, making it especially relevant for addressing contemporary psychological and social challenges.

Recent developments in Vietnam illustrate the growing appeal of mindfulness. For example, the Phuoc Son Zen Monastery attracted nearly a thousand participants in its initial mindfulness meditation classes in 2023 (Ngoc, 2023). Such participation reflects a rising demand for structured practices that can integrate Buddhist wisdom with modern life. Yet, despite the increasing popularity of mindfulness, challenges remain, including the lack of standardized

models for practice centers and difficulties in adapting ancient teachings to contemporary contexts (Mahatthanadull, 2019).

This study, therefore, sets out to investigate The Practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Theravāda Buddhism within Contemporary Society in Vietnam. Its objectives are threefold: (1) to examine the problematic situations surrounding the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Vietnam, (2) to study the concept of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Theravāda Buddhist scriptures, and (3) to propose practical guidelines to support successful mindfulness practice in contemporary Vietnamese society. By combining doctrinal analysis with field research, the study seeks to provide a framework for sustainable and effective application of mindfulness in Vietnam.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the problematic situations of practicing the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Vietnamese society.
2. To study the concept of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Theravada Buddhist Scriptures.
3. To propose the practical guidelines for achieving success in the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness within contemporary society in Vietnam.

Literature Review

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) occupy a central position in Theravāda contemplative theory and practice. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes both the canonical formulation of *satipaṭṭhāna* and its practical application in modern contexts. Gethin's comprehensive account situates *satipaṭṭhāna* within the broader framework of the thirty-seven *bodhipakkhiya-dhamma* and provides a clear philological and comparative reading of key suttas, including the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (Gethin, 2003). Gethin's analysis is particularly valuable for explicating Pāli terminology and for distinguishing the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna*'s extended link to the four noble truths, an interpretive benchmark that this study uses to assess doctrinal fidelity in Vietnamese practice.

Complementing Gethin's canonical orientation, Ñāṇaponika Thera offers a systematic, practice-focused exposition of *satipaṭṭhāna* that highlights present-moment attention and the cultivation of self-reliant mental training (Ñāṇaponika Thera, 2005). His work supplies a concise pedagogical account of how the four

establishments-kāya-, vedanā-, citta-, and dhamma-nupassanā—function experientially, and thus informs this research’s criteria for evaluating practice quality in retreat and communal settings.

In terms of level of instruction and phenomenology, Mahasi Sayadaw’s classic account of vipassanā practice provides pragmatic guidance about observation methods and stages of insight (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1991). His descriptive details about common meditational experiences and teacher–student interactions have direct methodological utility: they help shape interview protocols and prompts for focus-group discussions to elicit nuanced first-person reports from practitioners and mentors.

Thitasilo’s treatment of vipassanā and its historical development in Vietnam is especially pertinent for contextualizing contemporary practice within local religious history and monastic biography (Thitasilo, 2009). By combining doctrinal exposition with descriptions of concrete stages of practice and reported benefits, Thitasilo supplies culturally sensitive material that assists in translating canonical prescriptions into feasible retreat designs and pedagogical recommendations appropriate for Vietnamese settings.

Finally, empirical and sociocultural perspectives on Theravāda revival and youth engagement in Vietnam are usefully represented in Nguyen’s analysis of young Theravāda monks (Nguyen, 2021). Nguyen’s work foregrounds the institutional and generational vectors through which satipaṭṭhāna practice is transmitted, highlighting the importance of mentor development and organizational supports—issues that this research investigates through SWOT-informed fieldwork.

Collectively, these sources provide a balanced foundation for the present study by combining textual exegesis, practical instruction, historical contextualization, and contemporary sociological insight. However, gaps remain: existing literature offers a limited systematic evaluation of standardized curricula, mentor qualifications, and retreat logistics in Vietnamese contexts. The present research, therefore, synthesizes these canonical and practical resources to (a) benchmark doctrinal fidelity, (b) design interview instruments grounded in lived practice, and (c) develop empirically informed, culturally attuned guidelines for satipaṭṭhāna practice in contemporary Vietnam.

In summary, the reviews of related literature and research work provide a comprehensive foundation for studying the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in contemporary Vietnamese society. These works offer essential insights into the theoretical underpinnings, historical development, and practical applications of

the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. They include detailed analyses of Pali terminology, comparative studies of key suttas, and reflections on the role of young Theravada monks in modern Vietnam. Together, these resources serve as critical evidence and persuasive academic perspectives, which are applied in this research to study the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in contemporary Vietnamese society.

Conceptual Framework

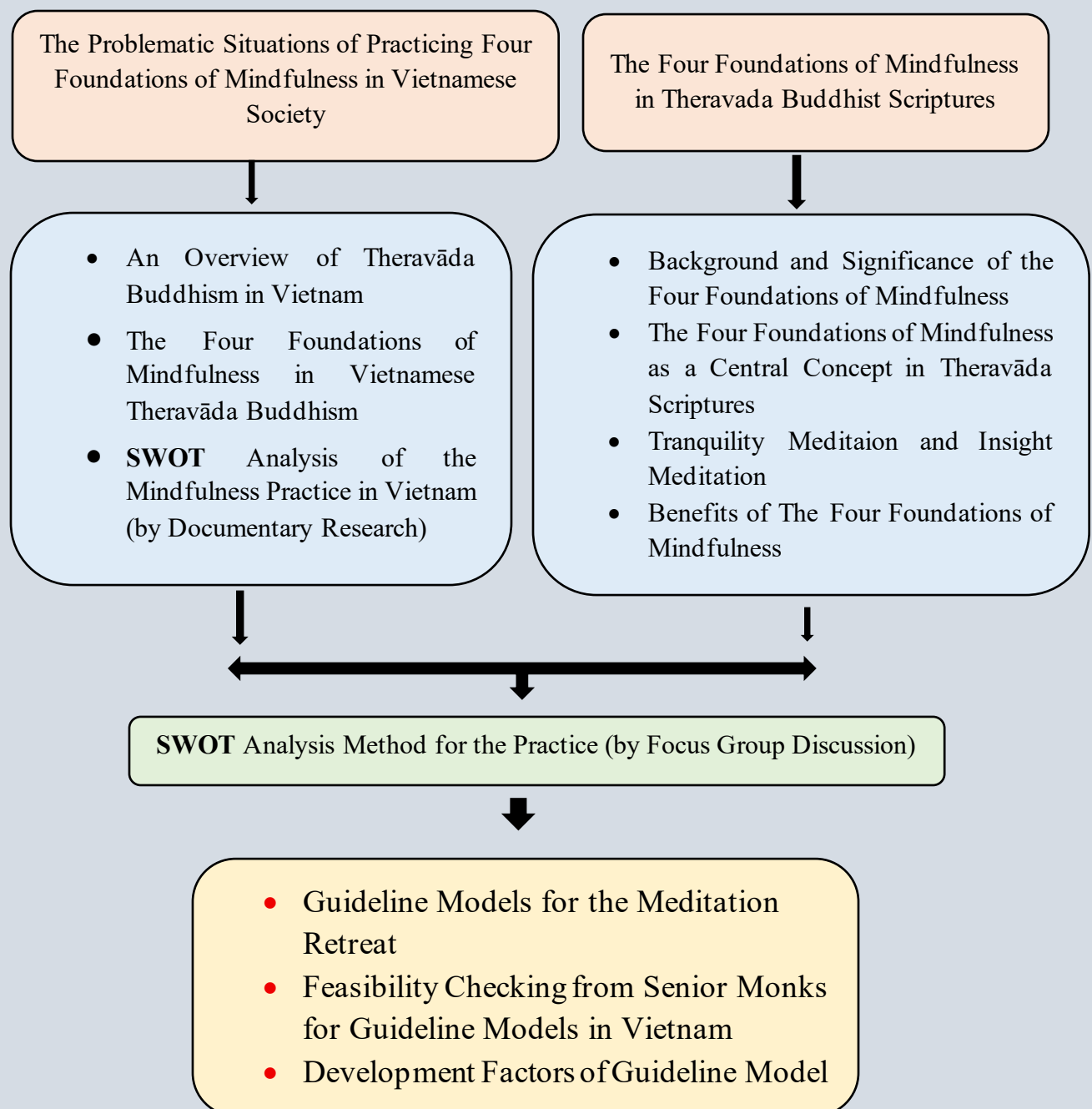


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design that combined documentary analysis, focus-group discussion, and in-depth interviews to investigate the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) in contemporary Vietnam. The methodology was organized into three interrelated phases: data collection, data management and analysis, and model development.

Research design: A descriptive–interpretive qualitative approach guided the study, enabling an integrated examination of canonical texts and lived practice. Documentary analysis of primary Theravāda sources (Tipiṭaka, Pāli Text Society translations), classical commentaries, and contemporary secondary literature provided a doctrinal benchmark. Empirical field data were collected to identify context-specific problems and inform the development of practical guidelines.

Participants and sampling: Purposive sampling was used to recruit two categories of key informants: (1) senior monastic informants (N = 6) selected for their leadership and teaching roles in Vietnamese Theravāda communities (e.g., abbots and university lecturers); and (2) a focus group of ten lay and monastic practitioners from southern Vietnam representing novice, intermediate, and experienced meditators. Selection criteria prioritized direct experience with satipaṭṭhāna practice, involvement in retreat organization, or pedagogical responsibilities.

Data collection procedures: Documentary sources were collected and systematized to extract doctrinal prescriptions and pedagogical recommendations. Fieldwork occurred between December 2024 and April 2025 and comprised: (a) semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior monks to elicit historical, pedagogical, and institutional perspectives; and (b) a moderated focus-group discussion with ten practitioners to surface common obstacles, practices, and contextual variables affecting retreat effectiveness. Interview and focus-group guides were developed from Gethin’s and Ñāṇaponika Thera’s canonical analyses and Mahasi Sayadaw’s practice descriptions to ensure topical relevance.

Data analysis: All audio-recorded interviews and focus-group sessions were transcribed verbatim. Analysis combined SWOT mapping (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) to organisationally situate practice issues, with thematic content analysis to identify recurrent experiential and pedagogical

themes. Documentary evidence was compared to empirical findings in a constant-comparison process to assess doctrinal fidelity and practical adaptation. Findings were synthesized to design tiered retreat curricula and the OMP (Organization–Mentor–Participant) development framework.

Trustworthiness and ethics: Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation (texts, interviews, focus group), member checking with select informants, and peer debriefing. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions. Ethical approval and informed consent procedures were observed; participant anonymity and data confidentiality were protected in reporting.

Outcome: The methodological sequence produced an evidence-based set of practicable guidelines, organized by skill level and supported by the OMP model, intended to standardize retreat practice, strengthen mentor capacity, and inform institutional planning for sustainable satipaṭṭhāna cultivation in Vietnam.

Research Results

Objective 1. The results showed that while mindfulness practice is gaining popularity, it faces several obstacles, including inconsistent meditation models, a lack of experienced mentors, and internal and external distractions. From the opinions and perspectives gathered during focus group discussions, several prominent issues in the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in contemporary Vietnamese society have been identified. The table below presents a summary of the SWOT analysis of the current problematic situations regarding the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Vietnamese Theravada Buddhism.

Addressing these threats and weaknesses requires proactive measures to promote and safeguard the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Theravada Buddhism within contemporary Vietnamese society. These threats and weaknesses are analyzed as problematic situations of the meditation practice that should be addressed comprehensively. Through comprehensive addressing of these issues, the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness can be preserved and nurtured as a vital component of spiritual and cultural tradition in Vietnam and Vietnamese Theravada Buddhism collectively and individually.

Table 1: The Main Factors in The SWOT Analysis

SWOT Factors	Strengths	Weakness	Opportunities	Threats
(1)	Strong Faith in the Triple Gem	Inexperienced Mentors	Preservation of Theravāda Tradition	Insufficient Availability of Expert Mentors
(2)	Esteemed Scholars in Theravada Buddhism	Limited Accessibility to Tranquility Meditation Practices	Pathways to Liberation	Lack of Dedicated Meditation Centers
(3)	Engagement in Meditation Practices	Absence of Comprehensive Guidelines	Enhancing Young Monks' Responsibilities	Challenges in Establishing Unified Guidelines
(4)	Variety of Meditation Practices	Limited Knowledge Among Practitioners	Integration and Innovation	
(5)	Conducive Environment and Climate	External Distractions in Urban Centers	Improving Physical and Mental Health	

Objective 2. The results showed that central concepts in Theravada Buddhist Scriptures, particularly the Mahasatipatthana Sutta, highlight the significance of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in daily life and integrating both tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*) meditation for a well-rounded practice. The essential characteristics of each foundation of the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are illustrated in the figure below.

The brief characteristics of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness begin with diligence (*atapi*), along with clearly knowing (*sampajana*) and mindfulness (*sati*) of the objectives or activities. Each foundation corresponds with a necessary factor that supports that practice: *Kayanupassana* combines reflecting on the repulsiveness of the objective related to the body (*paṭikkula-manasikara*). The Buddha often emphasized the disgust of this physical body. *Vedananupassana* combines the contemplation of *paticcasamuppada*, by which the Buddha shows the conditioned “arising of this whole mass of suffering.” Sense impression is said to be the principal condition of feeling (*phassa-paccaya vedana*). *Cittanupassana* corresponds to contemplating the origination and dissolution of things or dhamma (*samudayavayadhammanupassī*). *Dhammanupassana* is closely linked with the three characteristics (*tilakkhana*). For the practice to be effective and beneficial for those who practice the Four

Foundations of Mindfulness, it requires the right effort (*sammaviriya*) from the practitioner, which is the determining factor for whether the practice will yield benefits or not.

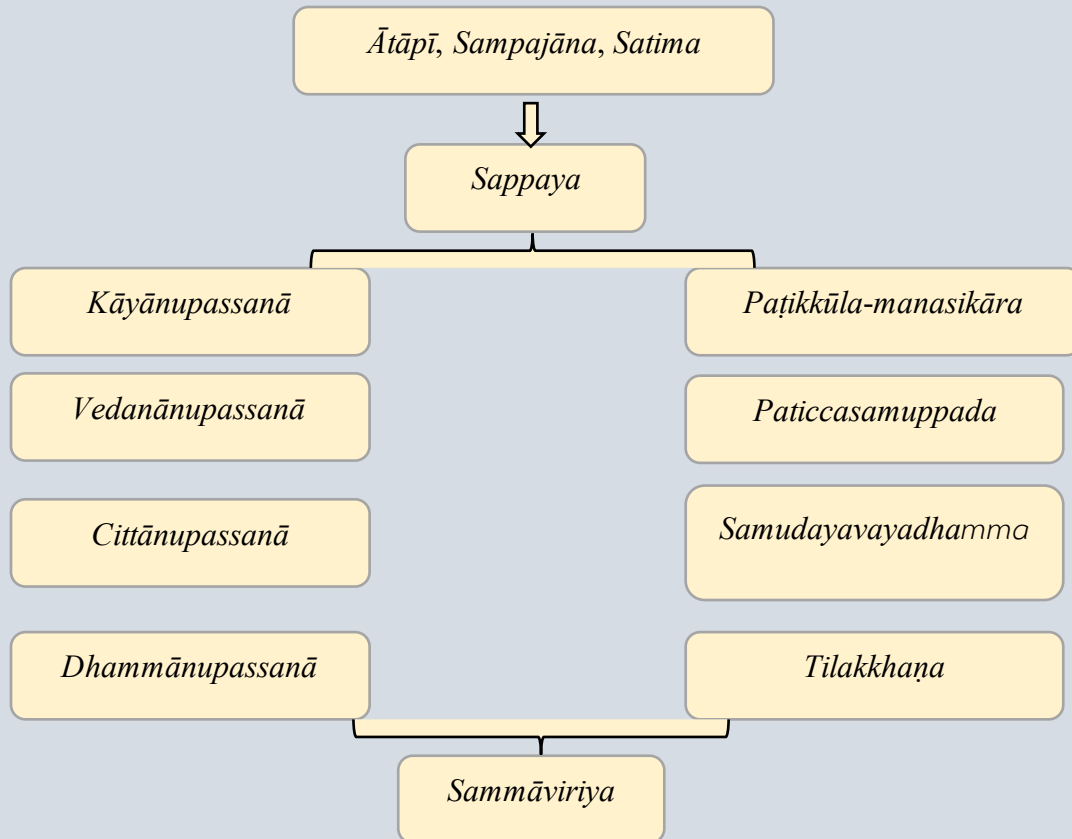


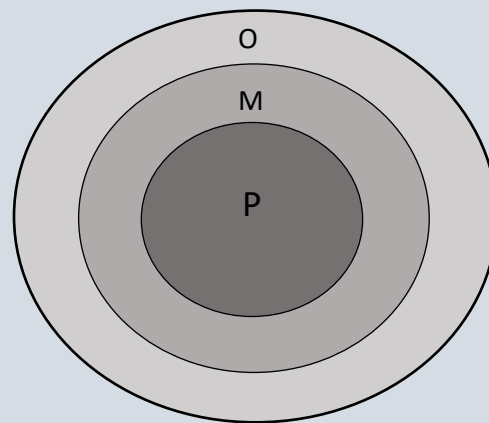
Figure 1: Characteristics of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Objective 3. Based on the above insights, the study proposes guideline models for meditation retreats with three different levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced practitioners, ensuring accessibility for all practitioners to address the aforementioned challenges. The meditation retreats at different levels help participants register according to their individual practice abilities, and the expected sermons are delivered appropriately, to the right people, at the right time, and skillfully, as the Buddha mentioned.

The beginner model lays the foundation, the intermediate model deepens understanding and practice, and the advanced model supports intensive cultivation of mindfulness and insight. Doctrine and practice mainly rely on the teachings of the Buddha by focusing on developing concentration with an object, practicing mindfulness through four postures: walking, standing, lying, and sitting, and ultimately understanding the nature of reality through the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and non-self.

At the end of the meditation retreats at different levels, participants are also evaluated on their personal qualities, identifying meditation methods that suit them without spending much time choosing the right way or getting confused between different meditation methods. This approach promotes the significance and essential importance of practicing the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in contemporary Vietnamese society.

Additionally, the OMP model (Organization, Mentor, Participant), is identified as a development factor of practical guidelines for meditation retreats, ensuring that mindfulness practice remains deeply rooted in Theravada Buddhist traditions while being adaptable to contemporary society in Vietnam.



O: It is an organization hosting the meditation retreat, which is a key factor for a meditation model.

M: The mentor uses the core teachings of the Buddha to provide guidance rooted in theoretical knowledge and practical experience.

P: It is the participant who contributes internal effort and benefits from external support.

In the model of factors for the development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness practice at meditation retreats, the organizational factor **O** encompasses the other two factors because the organization will determine how the meditation retreat is conducted. This includes an appropriate schedule, suitable accommodation, suitable food, and suitable climate. As a result, the effectiveness of the practice depends on the relationship and connection between the practitioner and the mentor, which can also involve appropriate friendship and appropriate speech. Therefore, the participant factor **P** is guided and protected by the instructor **M**.

Discussions

This study's findings align with and extend recent scholarship that seeks to translate canonical satipaṭṭhāna prescriptions into practical frameworks suitable for contemporary, often secularized, contexts. Both the present research and Pasri (2021) share a problem-to-practice orientation: they begin by diagnosing situational impediments (heterogeneous curricula, environmental distractions, and variable teacher capacity) and proceed to propose pragmatic methods that preserve doctrinal intent while increasing accessibility. Pasri's recommendation of deliberate, slow embodied movements as an introductory strategy for kāyānupassanā (Pasri, 2021) resonates with the present study's inclusion of structured walking and rising, falling practices in retreat guidelines, techniques long emphasized in classical vipassanā pedagogy (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1991).

Canonically, both works ground practice in the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta and its commentarial tradition, stressing the complementary roles of samatha (tranquility) and vipassanā (insight) in producing stable attention and liberative insight (Gethin, 2003; Ñāṇaponika Thera, 2005). Where Gethin supplies philological and comparative clarity, especially regarding the Mahā-formulation and its linkage to the Four Noble Truths, Ñāṇaponika illuminates practical, present-moment engagement with the four establishments (Gethin, 2003; Ñāṇaponika Thera, 2005). The present research synthesizes these textual benchmarks with field data to assess fidelity: finding that many contemporary Vietnamese programs favor accessible, wellbeing-oriented outcomes (e.g., stress reduction) but sometimes attenuate the disciplined, insight-oriented sequences that the sutta prescribes (Gunaratana, 2014).

Methodologically and pedagogically, the two bodies of work complement one another. Pasri emphasizes micro-level practices for daily integration, what might be called pre-mental notation and slow-movement entry practices, whereas the present study develops a macro-level training architecture (tiered retreat curricula and the OMP: Organization–Mentor–Participant model) designed to secure the institutional, relational, and logistical supports necessary for progressive insight work. The OMP framework addresses structural gaps identified by Nguyen (2021) and Tran Thi et al. (2022), namely the need for mentor development and organizational standards for retreats in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2021; Tran Thi et al., 2022).

Despite convergence, notable differences remain. Pasri's emphasis is primarily on accessible daily practices and experiential entry-points; the present

study places greater weight on institution-building and curriculum standardization to sustain practice across skill levels. Both approaches would benefit from stronger empirical evaluation: although the therapeutic benefits of mindfulness are well documented in broader clinical literature (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Gunaratana, 2014), there remains a paucity of longitudinal, outcome-based studies that assess whether tiered curricula and organizational interventions (such as OMP) produce durable insight and well-being gains in Vietnamese contexts.

Knowledge from Research

Research indicates that the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) are widely practiced in Vietnam, yet their efficacy is often undermined by inadequate instruction and unsuitable practice environments. Methodological misunderstandings and reductive, therapeutic framings can obscure the sutta's ultimate aim—liberation from suffering—and divert practice from its transformative intent. Uneven mentor expertise, heterogeneous retreat conditions, and diverse participant backgrounds further complicate reliable teaching and assessment, producing variable outcomes and occasional misapplication of methods.

Conceptually, *satipaṭṭhāna* comprises four interrelated domains, *kāyānupassanā* (attention to the body), *vedanānupassanā* (attention to feeling), *cittānupassanā* (attention to mind states), and *dhammānupassanā* (attention to mental phenomena), each supported by sustained diligence, clear comprehension, and continuous mindfulness. Practitioners cultivate bodily awareness to counter sensual attachment, attend to feeling as conditioned by contact, observe the arising and passing of mental states, and investigate phenomena through the three characteristics (impermanence, suffering, non-self). Consistent right effort is the decisive factor in enabling insight to emerge.

Empirical analysis suggests practical remedies: tiered retreat curricula (beginner, intermediate, advanced) that align pedagogy with practitioner capacity, and an integrated OMP framework (Organization–Mentor–Participant) that coordinates logistics, mentor development, and participant preparation. Implementing graduated training, robust mentorship, and context-sensitive retreat conditions can help preserve doctrinal coherence while increasing accessibility and sustained benefit.

Conclusion

This study examined the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) in contemporary Vietnamese Theravada contexts, identifying both doctrinal foundations and practical obstacles to effective implementation. Empirical findings indicate that misunderstandings about method, inconsistent retreat formats, insufficient mentor expertise, and unsuitable practice environments undermine practitioners' ability to progress in insight (vipassanā). Heterogeneity in participants' backgrounds further complicates the assessment of retreat capacity and outcomes.

Textual analysis confirmed that the Four Foundations, contemplation of the body (kāya), feelings (vedanā), mind (citta), and mental objects (dhammā), remain central to the Theravada soteriological programme. The study reiterates the complementary relationship between tranquility (samatha) and insight (vipassanā): samatha cultivates one-pointedness (ekaggatā) and moderates the five hindrances, while vipassanā develops wisdom (paññā) that erodes ignorance (avijjā) and facilitates liberation (Nibbāna). Together, these modes of practice constitute a coherent pathway for cognitive transformation and ethical maturation in present-day settings.

Practically, the application of SWOT and content analysis enabled the formulation of adaptive interventions: a three-level retreat model (beginner, intermediate, advanced) with structured daily sessions, and the OMP development framework (Organization, Mentor, Participant). Organizational design secures appropriate schedules, facilities, and logistics; mentor formation ensures pedagogical consistency and relational support; participant preparation fosters disciplinary commitment and ethical conduct. These elements operate synergistically to address identified weaknesses and threats while leveraging existing strengths and opportunities.

The study recommends prioritized investment in mentor training, standardized curricula for retreat programming, institutional support for retreat infrastructure, and longitudinal evaluation of outcomes. Future research should undertake empirical testing of the proposed models across diverse Vietnamese settings and measure psychological, behavioral, and spiritual indicators of practice efficacy. Implemented together, these measures can strengthen the accessibility, fidelity, and sustainability of satipaṭṭhāna practice in contemporary Vietnamese society.

Suggestions

This research has found that while mindfulness practice is gaining popularity, it faces several obstacles, including inconsistent meditation models, a lack of experienced mentors, and internal and external distractions. Central concepts in Theravada Buddhist Scriptures, particularly the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta*, highlight the significance of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in daily life and integrating both tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*) meditation for a well-rounded practice.

Based on these insights, the study proposes guideline models for meditation retreats with three different levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced practitioners, ensuring accessibility for all practitioners to address the aforementioned challenges. Additionally, the OMP model (Organization, Mentor, Participant) is identified as a development factor of practical guidelines for meditation retreats, ensuring that mindfulness practice remains deeply rooted in Theravada Buddhist traditions while being adaptable to contemporary society in Vietnam.

The important thing is that guideline models for meditation retreats with three different levels can be applied to meditation retreats and should be given importance to practitioners in terms of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

For the next research issue, research should be done on the issue of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as a Therapeutic Tool in Vietnamese Buddhist Counselling. Based on the analyzed data on the importance of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in modern life, including theory and practice. (see my article)

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