

# 2012-12-09 The Buddhas Discourses On Mindfulness

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mindfulness, awareness, mindful, practice, hawk, presence, state, aware, buddha, verb, concerns, word, meditation, mind, stronger, present, noble qualities, establish, attain, person

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning, everyone. So what I'm inspired to talk about today is mindfulness. I hope we don't talk about it too much around here. It's a ball thing, all always. So hopefully it's different enough that it's meaningful for you. And in particular, I want to talk about mindfulness in the way that I believe the Buddha talked about it, which might be a little different than how we talk about it in the modern world. And there's nothing wrong about modern Western Buddhist approach to using the term mindfulness. But it's useful to know that words meaning of words change over time, they evolve, and, and so we don't have to judge one era's use of a word versus another, but it's interesting to kind of see the difference and I'd be leaving going back to the Buddhist time. We can highlight some aspects of this practice that are useful. It's a footnote to this idea of words and how they evolve over time. The word generosity has a particular meaning here in the modern English, which means something like, freely, generously giving, offering out of a kind of open goodwill to others. But the original word when it first started being used in English meant having a noble heart being a certain nobility, and it's related to the word Gentry genius, and a kind of Latin word for a person or a noble person. And so apparently when it started, started off first meaning kind of noble qualities of a person, a person that was generous had an a bit noble qualities, and then the 1800s or so. It was. They started In England started breaking down some of these big class distinctions and started using the word to refer to people who were technically nobles, that they had this kind of good good qualities as well noble qualities. And then it slowly moved from that general qualities and the ability to a particular quality of an ability, that of being generous. And, and so we've kind of forgotten the noble roots of generosity. But it's kind of nice because it represents perhaps that there's a kind of capacity for something in English could be called the nobility of heart, the ability of spirit that we all can have you not be born and noble. And generosity is one expression of that nobility. So mindfulness to has evolved over time. So mindfulness in the modern world, sometimes teachers like myself are not so particular About how we use the term. And we might use the term synonymous with things like to understand to know, to be aware to be present. And it can kind of slide back and forth a range of things that are referred to when we use the word mindfulness. The. And there's nothing, nothing particularly wrong with that. But sometimes it leads to some confusion. Because someone might use the word word mindfulness in one way, and someone else understands it a different way. And so they think they're talking about the same thing. But they're talking about two different things.

Mindfulness is an aspect of our capacity to know or to be aware. And I think it's very meaningful to consider that everything that we are aware of in the world we are aware of through the vehicle of awareness. We know through our capacity to know and that seems like a silly thing to say. But many

times we focus so much on what we need. know, what we're aware of, we're not aware that we are aware. And one of the things that practice can do is it can heightened not just what our capacity to see clearly what's going on in the moment. But our heightens, we get a heightened sense that we are aware that there's a kind of everything gets mediated through our capacity to be aware, even our inner life, we have to be aware of our inner life. And that awareness of our inner life happens through the filter of awareness. We might innocently think that awareness is just like a open window, or a clear mirror, and that everything that comes through there, it's just just the way it is. But in fact, awareness is a relatively complicated neurological event. Just for example, you know, I think many of you know that just the ability to see, we can go around a lifetime seeing things and thinking that we see things just as very simple, straightforward thing to see. But the act of seeing is a complicated act. photons strike the back of our eye, it stimulates nerves in our optic nerve, it goes up to our optic area of our brain and gets reorganized there. And, and then somehow we take all these signals that come in there, and the brain has the ability to organize it and constructed in such a way that it has a useful correlation to how our world is like so we can get around. And we think that this is a, you know, an easy thing to do until it starts getting difficult. unfortunate enough, maybe it's fortunate, but it doesn't seem that babies when they're born, see things very clearly, they see a jumble of sensations of sights, and slowly slowly they begin to organize it in their brain until they have something that looks like what we see. So there are a few times in our life, perhaps where the sense of being aware, will stand out and highlight. And, and so we're not just simply aware of something but we're aware that we're aware because the awareness is, is very powerful or strong or connected or, or very still. It often it kind of comes together for some people with a sense of being present kind of his presence, not a presence of some entity, but a sense of being present offering presence here for what's going on. So I think sometimes in acute danger, or maybe right after acute danger just after, again, a near accident in the car or something, there can be suddenly all the things we're preoccupied with fall away. And the fact that we're still alive and acutely aware, stands out in highlight, or being with someone as they're dying or soon after the dead. It's, it's a little bit sometimes people find that the usual concern about their taxes and what's on television And where they're gonna have for dinner and their shopping list and how they're gonna get the oil changed in the car, all the ones kind of falls away at the deathbed of someone. And a lot of concerns fall away. And in that falling away in that poignancy of that time, some people will have very strong sense of presence there. And that sense of presence sometimes can be interpreted variety of ways. Sometimes the presence of the person is still there. Sometimes it's a presence that kind of emanates from us, but their sense of very strong awareness that is different than what we're aware of. Sometimes, in sexual intimacy afterwards, there can be a strong sense of, of presence that's there and stillness awareness that seems to be broad and peaceful. We're not really involved in our thoughts so much as we usually are, but just kind of just being a sense of beingness. So this is a clear awareness clear presence that is not caught up in the thoughts and concerns of our life. Some people will refer to as just an experience of being. But that awareness is always there. Otherwise, you know, maybe, you know, maybe not when we're sleeping, but it's always there in our conscious moments, there's awareness.

And it's missed because we're so concerned about things. We're involved with what we're doing. We're focused on what we're doing. We're involved with our thoughts and our worries and our concerns. We're involved in, you know, we're involved in something or images or visualizations. And you can see that in meditation and be aware of it in meditation. And you can feel sometimes meditation the difference between a mind which is wondering often thought, so much so that you don't weren't even aware that you were involved in thought and you kind of wake up and realize you've been thinking for the last five minutes about something. And then you can let go and once you let go, there's a kind of different kind of presence that's there. Maybe it's not very strong. There. Kind of awareness or something that's there a difference than being involved in our thoughts as we quiet down in meditation and as we let go of our compulsion to think slowly, there's can be a sense of calm or peace that gets developed. But with that comes a stronger sense of presence of a broader awareness. That is That

feels good. So in the time of the Buddha, if you go back to the discourses of the Buddha, to see how he talks about the word Sati, as a TI, usually translated into English as mindfulness. There's a particular discourse that the Buddha gave called the discourse in the fourth, usually translated to English as the four foundations of mindfulness. It's probably the word foundation is probably not a good translation, but I'll get to that. But this discourse in the four foundations of mindfulness is kind of like the root texts, the foundational text And instructions for the whole mindfulness movement that we have here in the West, the insight meditation movement. It's like our, our cortex. And it's properly it's considered to talk about mindfulness, how you how you Be mindful. A very curious thing happens if you look carefully at the text. The text says that if you want to be free of suffering, distress, limitations, sorrow, grief, and despair. If you want to be free of suffering, you need to establish mindfulness. That's the that's the vehicle. And then it's going to say, how do you establish mindfulness? It says you establish mindfulness, by contemplating the body in the body. Being ardent, mindful and clearly aware He to establish mindfulness of feelings in the feelings, being ardent, mindful and clearly aware, need to establish. You need to contemplate mind states and the mind states ardently, with mindful and clearly aware and establish, contemplate what's called I for now called the truth, true aspects of how our mind works in and of itself, the truth in in the truth, ardent, clearly aware and mindful. So what's interesting here I want to point out the instruction of establishing mindfulness, and then describes how to do that by using the verb to contemplate. Or to observe it could be the word observe could also be used, but contemplate And then it says, How do you do this? So how do you do contemplate these four things. And then the text goes into 21 different instructions for how to practice with different aspects of our life, with the different ways of being aware of our body, different ways of being aware of our feelings, our mental states, and their so called True what's called the truth here. The Dharma is when you look at how the instructions in these 21 different areas, none of the verbs for what you're supposed to do have the word mindfulness in it. So nowhere in this text does the Buddha say, Be mindful, in the sense of if you're having if you're breathing, be mindful of your breathing. If you have feelings, be mindful, apply mindfulness. Apply Michael's just like my mother would say, kill, be mindful. She meant like pay attention. What you're doing, because you just tracked all this mud into the house, and I just cleaned the floor, be mindful of you know, be aware that you know. And she wants me to kind of do something with attention. Nowhere in the instructions of mindfulness, this the Buddha, use the word, mindful as a verb. This is what you do you do mindfulness, you follow me, okay?

Whereas in the modern tradition, we often may talk about mindfulness practice, we often use the word, be mindful as a verb, should be mindful of your breathing, you should be mindful of this Be mindful this can be how did did you apply your mindfulness here? Someone will come to me and say I had a lot of doubt, and filled with doubt. And it's really hard to practice because of my doubt. And I'll say to them, have you turned around and applied your mindfulness to the doubt? And they say, No, never occurred to me. Doubt has this authority that's like you no doubt about the practice is not the practice. That's the doubt is the truth. But if you turn around 180 degrees and are mindful of the doubt, very interesting things begin to happen. Sometimes the authority of the doubt begins to break up. And we begin to feel some distance from the doubt rather than being caught in it. For example, so I might say, be mindful of the doubt as a verb what you're supposed to do. But the Buddha didn't say that he didn't ever use mindfulness as a verb is something to do. But he did talk about establishing mindfulness. So then if you go through the discourses, the ancient discourses, see what kind of verbs what kind of actions are used together with the word mindfulness. They are words like, possessed with, endowed with a buy in. So rather than doing mindfulness, mindfulness is something we have is something that is established. Something that is the word establishes, use, possess or you abide in. What's the difference between being mindful in terms of a verb of active actively being mindful versus possessing mindfulness? Any suggestions? The difference? anybody like to offer? What you think about the contrast? Between what do we was doing versus being?

So what you know, to be mindful is more like a doing. to possess mindfulness is more like a being. Okay, someone else great. Someone else. In the back there, maybe test the mic. By making mindfulness and noun, they've essentially separated away from you. It's because Something you want to attain, I want to have mindfulness, being mindful is something anybody can do at any time. So essentially, by making it a mindfulness, it isn't their thing. It's an object which you trust, striving to obtain. But it's not something you can put into your behavior before you could obtain it. Great, good to hear that everyone was a little bit weak. So he said that, that by making it a noun, rather than a verb, it becomes something that you could attain, as opposed to something you could do. If it's something you can do, it's easier sometimes to access. You can just do it. Whereas ibbitson now and it's something you have to take and maybe you can, you know, you can, you know, get around to it eventually or some you could do things that can attain it. interesting distinction, I appreciate that. Yes. Mike, somewhere over there. Genie has water

okay. Good, I don't know what I'll sing. No, I won't burden you with that

you'll get our attention

to me a being is something that along the lines of saying that you may have all the time, where is it doing something that you bring focus

to at particular moments.

So this is interesting distinction then. So, the first person said that it's or the second there said that it's a noun. So it's something you can attain as if you don't have it. you're suggesting it's something maybe you can have already. And so it's not so much a matter of doing as it is to maybe realize or discover that's there.

Or maybe that once you've attained it, then you should have it all the time.

Once you attain it, you can have it all the time.

Whereas you shouldn't just keep it in the back of your head and use it to add opportunities.

Okay,

I would say that mindfulness,

the mindfulness, there's one that where you enter it and allow it to be. And the and then the other definition would be to apply it or to,

yeah, to apply your mind to it.

So to enter into so there's almost like a state that you can enter into, as opposed to an activity that you apply yourself to. And so, the language of entering is used in Buddhism, enter and abide for entering into states of concentration. And, and so, states of concentration are more the result of a certain practice, you do a certain practice of concentrating and then you enter into an abide in is somebody in a state of concentration And the state is a result of practice. So the same way, it seems that the word

mindfulness is, the way the US would have used the word is more a result than it is an activity. And so and it's interesting that one of the most common places that the word mindfulness is used in the discourses of the Buddha is in reference to states of concentration. In the third, what's called the third jhana. A person has mindfulness and confidence when abides and mindful mindfulness and confidence, and the fourth jhana. When has mindfulness purified by equanimity, and many people, some people in the modern world, differentiate as if mindfulness and concentration are two different things. They don't go together. But here are the most common most common places mindfulness appears and the suttas is in connection to concentration practice. And the first the third jhana, which is a little bit lower level of concentration, and the fourth, it comes together with with confidence. And it's interesting the word confidence, the Can you do confidence? Or do you have confidence? Do you develop confidence? Will you just kind of you know, make yourself confident. I would suggest that you don't usually in English talk about like, okay, apply your confidence. You might resort to your confidence, confidence or call forth your confidence. But confidence is something you have or you don't have. You can cultivate confidence. So you could go in when the Buddha said in the suttas cultivate mindfulness. He wasn't saying, Do mindfulness, studying, do those things that establish the state of mindfulness. make some sense. You're still with me. Loser. One person so

Okay, so the so if you look at this, this discourse in the four foundations of mindfulness, the word Foundation, that sounds usually translate. It's ambiguous what that word is how it's supposed to be translated into English. And there's a lot of scholarly articles are writing about what the right translation of that word is. But what clearly one of the possibilities for Hollywood is, that's more likely than the word foundation. It means establish the for establishment of mindfulness for ways of establishing mindfulness. So again, establishing a state. So how do you do that to the text and discusses how you do that? And it does suggest a variety of different ways. And the ways that they you do it can be called mindfulness practice. It's the practice that leads to the state of mindfulness. And so because we call it mindfulness practice, in shorthand, we say I'm being mindful. I'm doing mindfulness, but it's really a collection of practices. And so in the scores it says, Be ardent, be mindful. Or you know, ardent, mindful and clearly aware. It doesn't say be mindful means being be applying mindfulness. It means being in the state of mindfulness as an adjective qualifies how you wish to be. And then it has it tells you one of the most common instructions that the text gives is to know what's happening as it's happening. And they use the word know or to understand. So while you're having a feeling, know or understand or recognize the feeling you're having as you have it. When you're having a mind state know that you're having the mind state as you're having. When your body sensations know you Having no sensations as you have it. And that act of knowing is sometimes people consider that to be mindfulness. But here in the text they are differentiating knowing from mindfulness. Knowing is knowing. And mindfulness is a state of awareness or presence. So knowing is kind of like the heart of mindfulness practice. So if I tell you that I run, that's all I say. It doesn't say very much. I could be running from danger. I could be running after the bus. I could be running in circles because I'm confused. It doesn't say much running. But if I say that I have a running practice. Probably it then evokes a little narrow idea of what it means running practice probably means that I run regularly. I probably run to condition myself and develops strength and stamina, and endurance and things. And you know, there's a variety of things we associated with running as a training as a practice. And it's, you'd probably don't think I'm running from danger from doing running practice. It's, you know, it's usually, right. So the same thing, mindfulness is one thing. with mine, mindfulness practice is something else. So mindfulness practice of those things that help us establish the state of awareness is open mindfulness This is so to know is really important to know what's happening as it's happening. The reason why I want to emphasize this is if we differentiate, distinguish between the important practice of knowing and the state of mindfulness, then we might begin to notice the state as it becomes stronger in us. And there are some people who practice mindfulness quite strongly dedicatedly but Oh, Only practice knowing, knowing this knowing it's



happening knowing this, and the practice remains a little bit too cognitive a little bit too much in the doing mode. And, and they don't learn to relax into a state of awareness, a state of presence, a state of being mindful, that is not a doing, but rather a being. make some sense.

So, one of the places that I learned a lot about a sense of presence or awareness, or beingness, was through my Zen practice. And that was not by doing a lot of knowing, but rather by doing a lot of emphasis on being present for my posture and was going on, keep coming back. No matter what was happening in my experience, just be present for it. Just be there with it. And that's simply just practice over and over and just being there being They're being they're slowly my preoccupied mind, my thoughts, my commentary, my judgments, but my living in my thoughts began to dissipate and get thinner and thinner, be less and less. And then the natural functioning, of presence of awareness started to stand out in highlight. And this is one of the great treasures of human life. The treasure of having a sense of aware presence that stands out strong enough that it's stronger than our tendency to be involved in our fears, in our future planning our past regrets or concerns about others, our desires and aversions, all the ways in which our mind can be caught up and preoccupied. It isn't that we have to get rid of those, but something else becomes stronger. So You know, if you go maybe if you go someplace like to the beach or to the mountains, you might think you might go there completely caught up in some big concern that you have. And you might kind of contract it around this concern. But it might be that they're looking out across the horizon into over the ocean or looking in the VISTA in the mountains, that somehow the expanse of it and the openness of it inspires you. And you realize that, you know, your concerns are only your concerns. There's something much more going on here. And so you start getting some different perspective of your concerns, where you still have your concerns, but they seem not so central, as they were before. Or if you go backpacking, you could be completely caught up and all kinds of important things here, and a lot of things are so consequential here at work or in your usual busy life, perhaps, but you go up into the mountains And after a few days, so many things don't matter anymore, and you meet someone who else is backpacking, hiking around the mountains, and doesn't matter what kind of job they have, or whatever they are all they are or you know what kind of car they have, or you know, all kinds of things, you know, or how they belong to different classes of society than you. Things that might be irrelevant in, you know, in your ordinary life at work. But that there you know, you see someone and you see them in a fresher, more open way as a person. And so as you're, as things fall away, there's a different kind of presence, different kind of awareness, that tunes into the present is sensitive to the present is feels kind of intimacy and openness to what's happening here. That is part of the reason people go spend time in nature. Same thing with meditation can happen. It can be harder and meditation sometimes. Sometimes it's easier, but one of the reasons it To be harder meditation is that nature is not helping us. We don't get this, you know, automatically this great big VISTA of us that takes our breath away. And there's so much authority in our mind around how important it is to think these things. And it can it's a, it's a radical retraining of the mind, or re education of the mind, for the mind to have confidence and trust, that there's something better to do in meditation than to think that tall order. But as we as we clearly realized, nothing better to do than to think, then we start letting go the grip of thinking. And at some point, what could stand out in highlight is that we're aware and awareness to be aware feels a certain way. You can have a sense of what it's like to be aware. There's kind of maybe clarity or openness or spaciousness or knowingness or presence through which are within which we know and are aware of things that we know and are aware of.

And it's not so much a matter of doing what a more as a matter of relaxing and resting or settling back into, or allowing for, or tuning into, or entering into the capacity for being aware or being at being present or being mindful, if that's still the right word we want to use. Some scholars of early Buddhism have used the word presence as a translation of Sati. That being present for because being present, you know, being present for is a little bit more ambiguous where there You're doing or whether you're

allowing. And maybe it's a nice word because it kind of bridges the divide between doing and being, to be present. When you have to do something to be present, when when you're present, there's no more doing. You have to allow yourself to be present. And so mindfulness as a state mindfulness as a result. So as you practice mindfulness practice, clearly knowing what's going on. Being with your breath. The first instructions in mindfulness practice in the four foundations is to tune in to your breath. And then relax. Tune into your breath in the calm your body and mind. So as you relax and calm, one of the things that can be useful to do is to begin noticing if there's some quality Or character of knowingness itself, of awareness itself that's there being conscious What's it like to be conscious. And rather than always emphasizing, knowing and focusing on something, what happens if you then allow for that knowingness, that awareness to be brighter, stronger. And rather than doing, applying, being receptive, allowing your experience to come into that field of awareness, that space of awareness, instead of always doing so I'll end with a story about mindfulness or a parable herbs that the Buddha gave. Now it's a little bit you know, you know, has a violent ending, so be prepared but not as it is Yesterday I took my 14 year old son to see Skyfall So, James Bond latest James Bond movie so the story is not gonna be as violent Once there was a hawk that's swept down and talons grabbed acquittal, quail, and sort of flying away in order to you know, eat this quail. And so the quail said, Hey, wait a minute talk. You know, you think you're so great and strong and capable to hunt but you know, if I had been in my home domain, my home territory, you would never you could never have caught me in the box. Oh, yeah. You think so? So yeah, to the hawk. Why'd you put it back down? And then we'll see. And so they talk said, Well, where's your home domain? And he said, Well, it's in the open field. The plowed farmer's field. Oh, put in the middle of there. You think I can't get you? Nope. So the hawk went and put the quail back in the middle of the field, they've just recently plowed. And then the hawk went flew high up and they're circling around and the quail stood up and they clawed on in the field. And then the, the hawk then started, swooping straight down. You know, you ever seen a hawk flash straight down, right with talents open and ready, just kind of just grab that quail, and the quail is ready. And just before the hawk was going to grab it, the quail jump behind the quad, because there's a big clot and the hawk couldn't stop in time and slow. Whether it's breast plate right up against the cloud and God, that's the violent part. And, and so then the Buddha said,

in the same way, monks and nuns, he said, when you're living in your home territory, your home domain, you'll be, you'll be safe and nothing can grab you. Nothing can get you and kill you that way. And then the other side, what is your home domain, your home territory, being mindful of the body and the body, being mindful of the feelings and the feelings being mindful of mind states in mind states being mindful of the truth of the dharmas. Mindfulness is the is your home territory. So there's something about resting in mindfulness, having this open sense of awareness, letting awareness be open. and spacious, transparent enough so that you so that you can kind of read so then you really, when you really know something, then you don't just know it in and of itself. But you know, within the context of this spacious mind, spacious heart. There's something about that that makes us safe from the talents of our own clinging. And the Buddhist adapts your home domain, that's where you can live. Live in that space of mindfulness live in that state of open, relaxed awareness. So as you do mindfulness, practice, experiment, tune into trust, have confidence in, find value in not just being mindful as an activity. But being mindful as something you rest in and allow for and if you rested, relaxed in this wider state of presence, you probably find yourself a lot safer. And when the hawk of your mind swoops down to grab you, it'll be pretty easy for you to step aside. So, we have about five minutes left. And if you would like to ask any questions or comments about this, please. serenity of the Oneness is where the truth is. serenity of the Oneness is where the truth is.

It's interesting that the Buddha would not have said that, not to contradict you, but partly because this open state of awareness of freedom doesn't lend itself very well to having concept about it. And so they

have concepts of oneness, or concept of duality. A little bit messes it up, not quite to the point. So it's so the Buddha just prefer not to make those kinds of statements. Not because it's just not because they're inaccurate, but because making them gets in the way.

I had an interesting experience, I have application of mindfulness in relationship. So it's a trainings that I was doing with a group. And at first, there's a lot of doings that came from a place where it's not mindful, pretty much at all. So, but it was funny the feedback I got was, as I as I developed it, it was a lot of intensity, and actually kind of scaring the person I was with these exercises because he was so focused on the do on doings of, you know, where are my eyes and my hands fidgeting what all these things about it. And it that that feedback was really really wonderful because it got me that exactly what you were describing of like just to relax. There may be a little doing little cleanup needs to start at the beginning of you know, put the phone away and that sort of thing to be mindful in that moment be present with that other person. But if I guess you relax and then it's not like a doing process then of noticing like, Oh, hey, I just drifted off or I just had I just had a thought. It's just it just there. And it's, I so enjoyed that feedback of working with another person in that way because it just

being caught is interesting in

its little bit. So add to this that as we develop the quality or state of mindfulness. It can be developed by more and more focus on knowing but that knowing of what's going on, can be active or can be receptive And as we were, as we receive into the field of awareness, and our experience and know it clearly, then the mindfulness state of mindfulness gets sharper and stronger and more pristine, and develops more and more. And in fact, eventually, the further development of mindfulness will, I think can only happen if you keep being receptive, rather than active. If the mind is really busy and really agitated, it might be at that necessary as a corrective to that to apply yourself and have more sense of doing as you do the practice, but at some point, becomes less and less doing and more and more what modern world we call just being. So I hope this was interesting enough for you useful. Thank you.