

Four Foundations of Mindfulness: Introduction

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I want to start an eight-week series of talks on what in Buddhism is called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The core practice of mindfulness that we teach here, and which has become popular in the West, is derived from a particular discourse that the Buddha gave. It's called the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, where it's a teaching about these four practices—four sets of exercises for developing a heightened sense of awareness. This particular text is kind of the source book for many of the mindfulness teachings, at least in Buddhism. It's often referred to, and people kind of practice it. It's a very important text.

It's so important that in traditional Buddhist countries, it has become a liturgy that monks will chant, and sometimes they chant it. It's so important that sometimes they chant it when people are dying, with the idea that knowing about this practice and being connected to the practice of mindfulness is one of the most useful things you can do as you're dying. I've been with people who have gone through the dying process, who have been strong practitioners, and it's quite wonderful to watch them call upon this practice of mindfulness during those last hours of their life. What a big difference it makes. Certainly, I hope to be as conscious as possible for my own dying, and to be able to utilize this training I've had in mindfulness and Four Foundations of Mindfulness at that time. So I'm very happy to teach this topic, because the practice of mindfulness in this traditional form has been probably among the most important things I've done, especially in terms of any kind of spiritual practice or Buddhist practice.

It's helped me understand myself in ways I could never have imagined. It's helped me to explore states of mind and states of being that I didn't know existed. It's taught me about freedom in a way that nothing else has taught me about freedom. So we talk about spiritual freedom or liberation in Buddhism as being part of the ultimate goal of Buddhism. It's understood in our particular Buddhist tradition that it's the practice of mindfulness that leads

to the ultimate form of liberation. We know, I think many of you know now, that mindfulness has become quite popular in our culture, an icon of everywhere seemingly, and lots of references to it, and that's a great thing, and it's quite remarkable.

You know, when I started practising in the mid-1970s, I was mostly doing Zen, but mindfulness was not part of the vocabulary even in Zen back then, and certainly wasn't part of my vocabulary. Growing up in the United States, speaking English only, I kind of knew what it was. It wasn't like it was a totally foreign word, I think, but it wasn't a popular, common word. Now it's everywhere you go. It seems like there's mindfulness magazines, and you know, there's all these books on mindfulness. It used to be the popular title was mindfulness or Zen and the Art of Mindfulness.

Now the popular title is, you know, mindfulness. The cute thing I thought was that a friend of mine wrote a book called *There Was a Tale*. She was a mindfulness student, a vipassanā student for many years, still is a very devoted one. Rona Kabatnick used to teach here sometimes, and she wrote a very nice book called—that's the title the publisher gave the title of, I think. It's called, maybe some of you know, *Zen and Eating*, or *The Zen Art of Eating*, or something like that. That was maybe in the mid-nineties or something, and Zen was still kind of popular.

About ten, fifteen years later, a Zen teacher in America wrote a book on eating and she called it something like *Mindfulness in Eating*. So these, the trends change. When I did a survey some years ago of all the different books that you could buy on Amazon with the title *Mindfulness*, they even had a *Mindfulness and Angry Birds*. I don't think that's what the Buddha had in mind, but so it's kind of entered our society in some wonderful ways and some curious ways. So I'd like to take us back to these ancient teachings called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and explore it over this time. The way that this text lays out the practice of mindfulness, I think of it as a path, and it's a path that begins in one of the more obvious experiences of our life, and then moves more deeply inside of ourselves, to some of the deepest areas of our life where liberation can happen.

It's a beautiful path of deepening of awareness, of opening up, of becoming free. So during these weeks, I'll take you along this path that this text presents, and the path, in some ways, is a path of deepening inside of yourself to deeper depths. Mindfulness is a translation of an ancient word called *sati*, and it's not really sure how this should best be translated into English. Nowadays it is popularly translated as mindfulness, which gives a priority to the word mind. The word *sati* doesn't have the word mind in it. So, you know, it's possible that mindfulness is not the best translation.

In fact, I've done, with my knowledge of the ancient Buddhist language and the ancient texts, what I think is careful study about this, and think that actually the more appropriate word into English for *sati* is awareness. What we're cultivating is awareness and developing a strong capacity for awareness, and these Four Foundations of Mindfulness are the four ways, four foundations or places in which we can establish, heighten our capacity for awareness. The Buddha said that awareness practice is—mindfulness practice is—a phenomenally important way to protect yourself, independent of becoming liberated. It's a protective practice because as you become more aware, you become aware of what's going on around you. When you get aware of what's going on inside, there's much more information that you can take in about the impact things have, the impulses that you act on, an awareness of much more—the consequences of what your actions are and the motivations you have for acting—and all that information tends to protect you from danger. Probably the most useful danger it protects you from is yourself.

Because you know yourself well enough, you can kind of take more responsibility or care around the thoughts you act on, the impulses you act on, the beliefs that you carry along with you—all kinds of things. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, these four areas in which awareness is practiced and developed, the Buddha called it one thing. He called it your home country. I just call it your home, but you know, your native place. So if you wandered off into the wild world for a while and through many years you come back to your native place, you've come back home. If you had a conventionally nice native place or home, then it's nice to be home, you know.

It's like, "Oh, this is my place. I can relax. This is where I am." He also talked about the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as our pasture. You can imagine a kind of pastoral image—not cows, but for the Buddha, probably deer—who were grazing on their pasture and feeling at home. So the Four Foundations might be the best place we get nourished and supported, and where we can grow and develop.

The Buddha gave an analogy, a story once of something like a little rabbit that was out on a ploughed field, which means that all the clods of dirt were up and about, and you're kind of exposed. A little rabbit, and you know, no vegetation to protect you. Sure enough, this hawk came in, flew over, saw dinner, and swooped down, and picked up that rabbit. The rabbit said something on that down to the hawk, and said, "Well, you know, I wasn't—something like I wasn't really paying attention. But if I was paying attention in the middle of the field, I don't think you would have caught me." The hawk said, "Well, what do you think? Of course I would have caught you." The rabbit said, "Well, try it." So, okay, the hawk said, and put

the rabbit down in the middle of the field. The rabbit couldn't run away so easily. The hawk went high up in the air, and then went swooping down to really show that rabbit what it could do. Just before it was going to grab the rabbit, the rabbit jumped behind a big clod of dirt, and then the poor hawk hit the clod, and that was the end. We never hear about that hawk again.

This kind of very violent story is—then the Buddha said something like, “You know, if you stay in your pasture of mindfulness and awareness, then you're protected from the dangers that come. You're paying attention. You get out of the way and not get caught.” More importantly is that the path of mindfulness is a path of liberation. It's a path of understanding how we get caught, how we get contracted, and then learning the forces inside of us of the real—what releases the way we're caught and unleashes beautiful forces, qualities, or states within us that come with increasing freedom, joy, tranquillity, equanimity, happiness, concentration—a variety of things that can get born, which is quite beautiful.

This process of what happens is the idea of mindfulness, *sati*. It is part of a constellation of mental factors that Buddhism puts a lot of emphasis on, having to do with attention. Buddhism has, like a map, or understands the ecology of attention, and the different elements that get put into place, or different kind of moving parts of attention are studied, worked on, evoked, and for different purposes, in different ways. Learning how attention works is actually part of the whole path of Buddhism. We all have the capacity to pay attention, but our capacity to pay attention is often being used—it's always operating. It's very hard to turn attention off.

I just love to try to tell people to stop paying attention, cut it out, stop being aware. Most of you know, as soon as you're told not to pay attention, it's kind of hopeless. You can't stop it. Often our attention is being used by what probably we can call unconscious forces inside of us—our subconscious—that we have our desires, we have our thoughts, we have our fears, we have our animosities, we have our concerns. We're so strongly involved in those, and we use them to think and fantasize and imagine things. We use it to negotiate the world, to get what we want, to do what we want, to take care of ourselves.

We're so involved in those concerns that we don't really notice that we're using attention as the vehicle to negotiate all those. With growth of attention, we're beginning to develop a heightened appreciation of this capacity for attention in all its different ways it functions. It's a remarkable thing that happens when we shift our attention away from our preoccupations to notice the field or the terrain of awareness that has to be there for us to have any concerns at all. Rather than being absorbed in concerns, it's a kind of difference between being and—

oh, I think the greatest maybe example nowadays, you know, all these people are walking around with their palms cupped upwards, looking down, and maybe the other hand has one finger, and now you're pointing at that cupped hand. It's quite something to watch, and it's very common. So you're looking at your device and absorbed in what's going on there, and now you're walking around, and then, you know, maybe the battery dies, and you put it away in your pocket, and you look up, and you're, "Wow, it's beautiful here."

How did I end up in this beautiful park? It's a great big lawn, and you know, pasture, and there's birds and rabbits, and this blue sky is blue, and these flowers. Some idealized, "Well, this is peaceful. This is nice. I wonder where I can get my device charged." But you know, that means you wake up, and—oh, so to begin appreciating awareness, something we all have, and to go, to wake up in the expansiveness, the openness, the peacefulness, the kind of beautiful feelings that come from being alert and aware in a peaceful way. It changes the context or changes the priorities of what's important for us in our life from the preoccupation to a state of being unoccupied or free or spacious. It's a beautiful thing.

So how do we do that? How do we develop our capacity for awareness? Awareness becomes a resource. Awareness becomes a jewel. Awareness becomes like a clear, cloudless sky that we really feel so expansive just looking up and being at. The way we do it is by cultivating these four foundations for awareness, these Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

These four are the foundation of mindfulness of the body, the foundation of what's called feelings, the foundation of mind, and the foundation of mental states. The way this works is a path. If we start with the coarsest aspect, almost like the outermost aspect of who we are—our body—and we start becoming embodied, we start feeling our body, living in our body, waking up the body. As we become more familiar with our body and the breathing, then almost naturally, even without constructing it, we become aware of what's called the feelings. I will describe in a few weeks what that means, what it feels like to be a body, what it feels like to be alive. It's hard to recognize the living experience, our living experience, and what it feels like if we're preoccupied in thoughts, or if we're preoccupied in our device, which is doing the thinking for us.

But to begin kind of slowing down, showing up for ourselves, and really tuning into what's here, then sooner or later we start noticing what it feels like, how things are pleasant and unpleasant. As we kind of tune in to what things feel like, at some point sooner or later, we start becoming aware of the quality of our mind, our quality of our heart, the inner quality of our state of being. So we're kind of going inwards—body, what it feels like to be embodied, and then deeper into the kind of inner quality of state or state of being. As we kind of become

aware of the quality of our state of being, then, as we stay there and be present for it and pay attention to it, sooner or later we start becoming aware of what goes on in our minds that affects the quality of our being, the state of our mind. What are the impulses, thoughts, desires, wishes? What are the things going on that have some bearing on whether we are free or whether we are caught up?

That's getting into the heart of the issue, the place where we make the most difference for our well-being, our sense of spiritual happiness and contentment. As we really get down in there, where we're really making the choices, making the operating system that makes it all work. So it's a movement coming inward. As we go inward, the remarkable thing that happens with concentration or mindful meditation practice is there is a kind of beautiful process of settling and going inwards that, at the same time, is an opening up in expansiveness. You have to almost experience it to kind of understand what I'm talking about. Rather than narrowing into a narrow world, it's like we open up into, if you kind of felt a sense of it, a much more expansive, wider, bigger world than you ever could have imagined.

The world is much bigger than, you know, when you enter into this amazing field of awareness. It's just a pleasure to swim in it, to play in it, to graze in it in our pasture. So mindfulness in this tradition of this practice is much more, much more than learning how to play Angry Birds. Well, it has—it's really, it's one of the most, I think, sacred, if you like that language, sacred aspects, the sacred practice, sacred states that come into play by cultivating and developing a capacity that's ordinary, completely ordinary capacity we all have that is underutilized. That is a simple capacity for being aware.

In this text, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, the text makes a grand promise—is the right word—but makes a grand statement about where this practice leads. I'll like to read this to you. So the Buddha said, "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of *nibbāna*, namely, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness." *Nibbāna* is the word for *nirvāṇa* in this tradition—enlightenment, liberation. He said, "This is the direct path." I love this idea of the direct path.

If you want to go, sometimes it's nice to go directly, rather than taking the roundabout, no back roads, which takes a while and you might end up in a dead end. But this is a very direct thing. Now, one of the ways that makes it direct is that it does not require a lot of learning. It doesn't require you to understand a lot of Buddhist beliefs and tenets, ideas that Buddhism has. You don't have to believe in metaphysics and the nature of reality, or true statements about God, or rebirth, or heavens, or hells. There's all this kind of more things that are con-

sidered more the unseen world that we can't really know for sure.

We can't easily share together, because some people may be not so accessible. But here the direct way is we enter into what's accessible, what's immediate, where we can touch here and see here and know here. It's what's immediately available. The Buddha said the *Dhamma* that he teaches is visible here and now. It's evident here and now. It so welcomes our inspection, welcomes our investigation. Come here and take a look here.

So it makes it direct. It's what's directly available here and now. The study of directly available here is such a big hallmark of this mindfulness tradition. If it's not available here and now, it's probably not relevant. So directly here. So to connect here. So the body, feeling your body here. Most people don't doubt they have a body, you know. It's the direct and immediate thing you can experience.

The cultivation of this mindfulness, then, there's a kind of the goal of liberation and freedom. But the stepping stone to it is described in this text through a refrain that reappears some thirteen times in this text, like the refrain of a song. The same thing happens over and over again, indicating that it's important. This refrain ends—it talks about how much we're supposed to develop mindfulness, and says: We develop mindfulness to the point where we dwell without depending on anything, not clinging to anything in the world. Dwelling, independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

So, as mindfulness, as the awareness gets stronger and stronger, it's kind of like, you know, maybe like a snake that grows, and as it grows, it sheds its skin. As the awareness grows, we shed the old, scaly attachments and clings we have, and then just kind of—some of them begin to fall off as we become bigger and stronger. There's a kind of way in which mindfulness practice, as it develops, helps us to feel confident, strong, upright, present, where things begin to kind of fall off—the scales begin to fall off, all fall off, when not—the clings fall off. So not clinging to anything in the world. So it begins by being aware of the body here.

In terms of being aware of the body, it begins by being aware of our breathing. The instructions for the first exercise here go like this: "And how does one abide observing the body as a body here? A person, going to the forest or the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down having folded one's legs crosswise, sets one's body erect, and establishes mindfulness. Ever mindful, one breathes in. Ever mindful, one breathes out. Breathing in a long breath, one understands, 'I am breathing in a long breath.' Breathing out a long breath, one understands, 'I breathe out a long breath.' Breathing in a short breath, one understands, 'I breathe in a short breath.' Breathing out a short breath, one understands, 'I breathe out a short breath.' One trains oneself thus, 'I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body.' One trains oneself

thus, 'I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.' One trains thus, 'I shall breathe in relaxing the bodily formation.' One trains thus, 'I shall breathe out relaxing the bodily formation.' Just as a skilled turner or an apprentice, like a lathe turner, when making a long turn, understands, 'I make a long turn,' and making a short turn understands, 'I make a short turn,' so too, breathing in long, a person understands, 'I breathe in long,' breathing out and so forth.”

So it begins with this exercise in breathing, and I'll talk about it again somewhere next week. But I want to read the whole thing, because it gives a simile at the end of a turner. I think it means like a lathe, someone turning a piece of wood on a lathe. They have the knife and are kind of attentive, very present there. I've made bowls on a lathe, and this piece of wood spins around, and exactly there's only one point where the knife touches the lathe, one little place, and eventually you touch the whole piece of wood as it goes on round and round. But the place of contact is always just one place where the knife rests.

This sharp point is the developing, the sharpness of awareness. We sharply see the cycles, the turning of breathing in and breathing out, kind of like a circle. The Buddha likened it to a craftsperson, which is quite wonderful. This idea—Tini talked last week about developing ourselves like a craftsperson develops themselves, where the craft, where the medium that we're developing ourselves with. The first place where this craft of mindfulness begins is beginning to tune into our breathing. The breathing is a beautiful thing to practice in for most people.

I've spent now forty years of my life practising mindfulness of the breathing. It's been one of the treasures of my life and I love it, and it seems like the more I do it, the more I appreciate it, the more valuable it is. You would think that that's a long time to pay attention to something as boring and simple as the breathing. You mean you can just, after all, you can see me just, you know, watch two or three breaths, and you have the basic idea—near forty years. The skill must be slow in the uptake. But in fact, this tuning in to the breath and all that comes from it is really some of the most beautiful things, that beautiful thing that can happen.

So it begins with breathing, and then goes into the body, feelings, states of being, the operating system underneath, and comes out to liberation. So that's it. That's the kind of introduction to what we'll do over these next seven or so weeks. There are thirteen exercises for developing awareness here in this text. So I will go more than one a week, but I won't go through these thirteen exercises and describe it. In doing so, I hope that it does a number of things for those of you who come.

One is it helps you to appreciate and recognize your own capacity for being aware, for pay-

ing attention, and begin to treasure it, to value it, to see that it's actually very important, and to be able to recognize awareness as opposed to awareness operating. But it's kind of in the background, and beautiful things happen when we start really clearly recognizing awareness itself. The other thing I hope will happen is that you'll become aware of how these Four Foundations of Mindfulness can support you in so many ways in your life. It clarifies things, makes things a lot easier, protects you, helps you become wiser, and helps you to understand yourself in a deeper way. If, at the end of the eight weeks, this also liberated you, that would be great, or at least set you on the path of liberation, because you appreciate and understand it. That's a task.

So we have about ten minutes left here, and I've kind of given you this introduction. If you have any questions you'd like to ask about that or clarification, it'd be nice to hear your concerns about this topic, so I can hear your concerns as we go over this next week, so maybe I can address those. I can use them. Mike, I kill. My question is, as we're learning the thirteen practices, will you be incorporating that into the silent meditation practice as guiding us? Great, perhaps that would help.

So exciting, that you know, I've almost never done any kind of guided meditations Monday night because I think silence is so great, and I think a lot of people get a lot of, you know, so I'm a little bit reluctant to kind of, you know, add something. But maybe I'll think about it a little bit, and maybe something like the last ten minutes of the sitting. Maybe I can get away with it then. Thank you for the suggestion, and I agree. It might make it become more alive, or a more meaningful experience in that way. Or maybe we can do a little bit of it during the talk. I don't have to talk so much yet.

I'm wondering about being—how you stay disciplined and being mindful. I oftentimes at night will take a walk for a couple of miles or so, and I'm really mindful, very mindful for the first fifty feet, and then I come back. I make a circle and come back to my place. I said, "Well, what happened?" Years ago I bought a watch that had a tiny beep every hour or so, and I thought, "Well, that little beep will remind me to be mindful." Well, after a few days that didn't happen. So I don't know what else there is except maybe wearing a little battery pack. It will shock—it's shocking every five minutes or so. "Oh, yes, I got to be mindful," but it's really, really—I'm incredibly difficult to remember to pay attention.

Yes, and it can be. They say that the mindfulness is easy. Remembering to do it is what's hard. Yes, exactly. It's just amazingly difficult. You're doing that on a walk where you're kind of casually walking around, as opposed to some people working or involved in social situations. You know, it's much more even harder there.

So for your particular thing, what you're saying, I can offer a couple of suggestions. The first is that it's very helpful to, at some point, stop trying to be mindful, but rather try to understand how you lose your mindfulness. What you might do is recognize fifty feet is all you can go. So let's say that's to the end of the block. When you get to every time you get to the end of the block, to the corner, stop and review what just happened over the last steps, and see what would happen. What did I get caught up in—were my thoughts, were the feelings? Try to see if things—to understand what is it, what went on for you that was so important that your mind kind of lost the present moment and went off into some place? Really try to get really familiar with that.

In order to do that as an exercise for a few weeks, you might have to actually stop and really take a look back—what just happened, what just happened. You might need some kind of probe, some kind of key, some kind of thing you have to understand about yourself, about how you leave the present moment. Once you understand that, then we can talk about discipline of staying mindful. You know, one of the things that has occurred to me about this is that being on the physical plane, we've all been through various dramas and so forth. I think being unmindful is almost, in a way, the same thing as an alcoholic drinking—that you want to be someplace else, because being present is painful. Yes, that's why I saw you saw.

So maybe stop. Make sure you stop early enough. Maybe it's one—maybe you, maybe it's even to say you be able to be mindful of fifty feet, maybe it was being generous to yourself. So you might, as an exercise over some weeks, figure out how far you need to walk so you can then really stop and say, "What just happened?" Slowly you might discover, if that's the case for you, that yes, you're so uncomfortable in your body, so uncomfortable here. Then you start—then, and once you start recognizing that, or get a hint of that—maybe you already have that hint, and use the big word, drama, as a big word. If there is some important drama, then sometimes it's really helpful to go get some professional help. People can help you be mindful, be present, and give you the resources, giving you support. So there's a container, support, love, acceptance, wisdom. They can help you, because sometimes with things like that, it's very hard to do it alone. Yes, great. Thank you.

So that's the journey we'll take. Thank you all very much. I hope that this week, while you are preparing for these talks, that you'll get curious about what is awareness. How do you know when you are paying attention? What is attention for? You just got to be curious. What is awareness? What is attention? When does it operate? Can you recognize it? What happens? What shifts for you with that kind of curiosity and investigation during this week? Thank you.