

Four Foundations of Mindfulness - Week 5: Feeling Tones

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So good evening, everyone. And this evening I mean to continue the series I am doing on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Those of you who are new today, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is the fundamental, the kind of root teachings the Buddha gave that gave birth to the mindfulness movement, or at least the Buddhist mindfulness movement that they're part of. In this famous teaching, the Buddha discusses how to cultivate a heightened sense of awareness through attention to four different areas of our life. These four areas are our body, what is usually called feelings, then our mind states, and then our mental processes. One of the primary purposes for this is to cultivate a heightened sense of awareness so that we can be freer from the entanglements we get involved in.

When we are involved in all kinds of experiences, some in the present moment, some in the past and future through our imaginations, if we get entangled with them, then we're not free. There's something about the heightened awareness that can kind of set us free. One analogy that's sometimes used for this idea of heightened awareness is that of being awake, the metaphor of being awake. Another one is that of turning on a light in a dark room; you turn the light on, and suddenly you see everything becomes clear. So the idea of becoming awake, of having heightened awareness, is a way of turning on the light, or shining a light on our experience, so we see with greater clarity. In that greater clarity, we find ourselves somehow not so—I like the word—entangled with whatever is going on. We kind of disentangle the tangle.

The first exercise is mindfulness of the body, which we've covered over these last few weeks. The idea is that the body is the most accessible part of these exercises. You can know your body. Generally, you can feel that. You can touch it. You can know what you're doing when you are doing physical activity as you're doing it.

So it's relatively easy to be mindful of your body, and it's like the outer sense, the outer circle of who we are, most accessible as we get settled in to being present for our body. Then at some point, we become aware of some of the deeper activities of our body, what's going on more closely and more intimately, more subjectively with ourselves. This subjective experience, when the first subjective experience becomes clear, is what's called in English as feelings. The ancient Buddhist word is *vedanā*, which also means to know or to experience or to feel—not emotionally, not emotional feelings, but rather to have the kind of subjective feelings that arise when we have sensory experiences. So if it's warm, then you know, outside I feel hot, and the experience of hot is a physical experience. But if I'm tuned in to my subjective experience, I might feel that that sense of heat is pleasant, or I might feel it's unpleasant, depending on a variety of conditions.

That experience of it that's pleasant or unpleasant is considered to be a deeper subjective experience than just feeling the heat by itself. So it's called the feeling tone, or the way in which we feel the experience, either pleasant or unpleasant, or likable or not likable. They say in Buddhism that every experience we have has a feeling tone, and it has one of three possible feeling tones. It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Some people just call it neutral, but neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Is it unpleasant to have the air condition go on? Neither, but requires action.

Some people like it, and what seems appropriate for the talk here, because the idea is to become free regardless of what the feeling is. So how do we get entangled with these feelings? It's one thing to feel warmth. It's another thing to feel liking or not liking it. Another thing to feel: This is pleasant or This is unpleasant. And then get involved in this kind of getting tangled with pleasant and unpleasantness, to react to it.

So in thinking about this today, I was reminded of a field trip that I took yesterday, Friday, to San Quentin. Once a year or so, I go to San Quentin with people training to become Buddhist chaplains, and we went to see a program—a year-long program called Guiding Rage Into Power, where Jacques Verduin, who comes and teaches here sometimes, has gathered together all the different techniques, approaches collected over nineteen years, eighteen years of teaching in San Quentin, teaching mindfulness, meditation, anger management, many different things. In this year-long program, most of the people who come are lifers, are in San Quentin for having committed murder. So, you know, these are people who have quite a history behind them. It happened to be that this time I went, they had a particular program they were teaching them, which was quite moving, and relates to this topic of feelings or feeling tones.

A little kind of a footnote to all this, a more personal note. The teaching was really great because I brought with me my eighteen-year-old son. Imagine bringing an eighteen-year-old into San Quentin. We let him out, and so he was just barely old enough to get permission to get in to the prison, to get clearance. I was so happy for him to sit there in this room of men—many a man been transformed—and to hear them tell their stories about this teaching. The teaching was the two kinds of pain, what they called original pain and secondary pain.

For these men in San Quentin, every single one of them—there were twenty-eight men there in the room—every single one of them had experienced trauma as children, and the original pain was the pain that they experienced as children that set the stage, set the momentum of their lives until they came to San Quentin and caused them to create secondary pain for themselves. The secondary pain was the way they tried to avoid the original pain, by dedicating themselves to taking drugs and alcohol, by crime, by being tough or being violent themselves—were all ways of trying to escape, not feel what was going on for themselves. What was interesting was that for most of the men there, the primary pain had to do with their father one way or the other: an absent father, or father suddenly died, father suddenly left, a violent father, an alcoholic father. A variety of different kinds of relation to their father was very, very difficult for them, and a kind of the pain of that. Then, you know, they acted out, and so that was the beginning of the teaching.

This, the third part of the teaching—original pain, secondary pain—the third teaching was to learn to sit in the fire. Basically, the fire was sitting in the fire of the original pain, no longer avoid it, and to really own up to it, be with it, to process it. Then once they learned how to sit in the fire, they had the fourth step, and the fourth step—they love acronyms—so the acronym is STOP, and STOP stands for Stop To Observe the Process. So those three things: recognize the original pain, recognize the secondary pain, learn to stay with the original pain by sitting in the fire, and then observe the process of what goes on inside of you—the reactions, the responses and impulses, everything that goes on and on and on.

If these men took this teaching to heart—because for them, it has such huge consequences for their lives, and it really makes a difference for them—this was not, you know, my son struggling over the fact that his younger brother has the iPad, you know? Breathe deeply and just be with it, right? These are some of these people who were, you know, the toughest of the toughs before they got transformed in prison. They needed to be in prison, some of them. The act was quite impressive, to be among these men who had taken these teachings in deeply and had really turned a huge corner in their lives, and were now transformed.

So here were people who had learned to sit with discomfort, sit with pain, to sit with unpleas-

ant sensations—unpleasant, probably saying too mildly. They learned to sit with it rather than repress it, rather than push it away, rather than escape from it, and just learned to sit with it. In doing so, the men there talked about how they became free before leaving prison. One of them talked about how he was never free outside of prison, but after many years in prison now, he learned to become free. Some of the joy in some of their faces was contagious. It was quite something—joy in their faces, in their eyes. Some of these men, it was so beautiful to see. The men felt they become free while still in prison.

This idea that we have pleasant and unpleasant, and either pleasant or unpleasant experiences all day long—the Buddha likened it to the shifting winds. Winds can come from south, west, northeast. It can shift suddenly. Our feelings are constantly shifting and changing, like a kaleidoscope. One moment it's pleasant, next moment it's unpleasant, next moment it's neither. All these different things happening, many of them—maybe we're too busy to even notice and recognize they're happening, but there's plenty of them that we recognize.

But do we recognize it clearly enough to have this heightened awareness where the light gets turned on and we're not entangled, we're not caught up in the experience? One example that I've used and other people have found useful is to be in challenging situations and very complex situations. Just seems like it looks—so the social complexity of these kinds of crisis or challenging, you know, people arguing and angry and being mean to each other or something. It's hard on purpose to do, How do I sort this out? How do I be? It's just so complicated. Then to close it back off for a moment, and just realize this experience, the totality of this experience right now is unpleasant. Oh, this is unpleasant. I know how to be with unpleasant. It's just unpleasant.

In that kind of separating ourselves from it, or turning on the light, and then not being pulled into it or pushed around by it—keeping their equanimity, keeping their balance in the middle of it. Sometimes it's the pleasant that we get entangled with, sometimes because we want the pleasant. We don't want the pleasant to go. We're holding on to it. We're pushing for it. I think for some of these prisoners, they were pushing for pleasant because they tried to avoid their pain. They want to go where it was pleasant with drugs, with alcohol, with one man talking about crime—for him, the rush and the power he got from robbing was his way of avoiding his pain. Pretty powerful, you know. Take medicine. I think, you know, that's your medicine.

So to learn to have a healthy relationship with the pleasant experience, and the way in Buddhism we can find that healthy relationship is learn how to sit upright or stand upright or be balanced in relationship to pleasant and unpleasant, so that we're not automatically avoid-

ing the unpleasant or automatically going towards the pleasant, but we just stay present. Turn on the light. That's the alternative. Turn the light on in your room, in your head, and really become, OK, what's happening? Be clear what's happening. Be independent in the middle of what's happening by looking around: Oh, what's happening now? Oh, this is what's happening. So not leaning forward nor thinking away.

They say that the experiences which are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, the more neutral ones, are not that common. But when they do, people tend to get dull. It helps people to fall asleep. They're not so interested any more. One of the very unfortunate examples of this is socially: if someone criticizes you, that's unpleasant. But it's also very interesting. Most people don't fall asleep when they are being criticized. When people are praising you, that's also very pleasant. Most people don't fall asleep when it's so pleasant, people are getting praised. However, if you get neither criticism nor praise—maybe not any of you—but there are people when they get neither criticism nor praise, lose interest. They get bored. Nothing's in here for me. I'm not being—my sense of self is not being reinforced. It's quite sad if you're on the recipient end of that. You know you are not particularly praising or criticizing, or you're not a particularly pleasant or unpleasant experience for someone. So they're not interested, not kind of focused on you. They kind of lose interest—it's kind of sad when that operates.

So how to stay alert, present, attentive in all three of these kind of places? In meditation practice, as we settle in to be present and kind of settle in to the present moment, you're starting maybe with the breathing, physical experience of breathing. Sooner or later, as we get more settled, one of the things that becomes clear is a subjective experience of things which are pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. It starts standing out in the highlight—the body begins aching, or the body starts feeling very soft and pleasant when meditation is going well. Or we have our feelings, our emotions or thoughts come through as we're sitting here, and we start noticing what it feels like to have these emotions, these impulses, these kinds of thoughts, and we start feeling in a very qualitative, different way, Oh, this is unpleasant to have this.

Some people really find that they grow up, mature a lot, when they finally understand in some deep inner way that being angry is unpleasant, and in some way it's, you know, Oh, that's the cost of being angry—are all these unpleasant feelings and tensions in the body. This is real. This doesn't feel good to be this way. But it takes some people years before they somehow turn the attention around from what they're angry at to really feel the consequence of being angry subjectively and how unpleasant it is. Same thing about pleasant. Some people are so involved with their thoughts, concerns, their life, their activities, that they don't recognize

when things are pleasant, that are nurturing or supportive, and so they don't take the time to be fed by that pleasant, to be supported by it, valued by it.

So as we settle into meditation, we start becoming more of a heightened awareness to the subjective feeling tone of our experience, and that gives it a chance to begin exploring how to have a balanced relationship to it, how to turn on the light and just be with them without being for or against. It's a fantastic laboratory, a fantastic kind of a place to explore, exercise, develop a capacity to be present for unpleasant without pulling away. With all habits, the usual reactivity—pulling away, denying, escaping, getting angry, all these things—and the same thing being present in a balanced way with the pleasant or with neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So meditation becomes a place to develop self-understanding, develop skills to stay balanced with these things.

That means, in meditation, it's not a mistake to feel an unpleasant meditation. In fact, unpleasant meditations sometimes are the best, at least from the point of view of a teacher who's interested in people growing, developing, and growing in the practice. For practitioners, they want all pleasant—usually that's the instinct, right? And then it's not pleasant, I must be doing something wrong. But pleasant and unpleasant comes and goes depending on what's going on in our lives. Sometimes meditation is unpleasant, and the opportunity then is to turn on the light for the unpleasant sensations and experiences and learn how to be awake rather than reactive to it. Sit in the fire, and you learn to do that in meditation. Then you might get and develop the skills so that you can do it in regular life when it really matters, when it really matters.

So you don't have to go to San Quentin. You can just, you know, stay balanced and present for something that's very unpleasant when you're sitting in your original fire, the original pain. Interestingly enough, this teaching on being mindful of pleasant, unpleasant, neither is one of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. He gave tremendous—I can't emphasize how much he emphasizes over and over again as being extremely important—doorway into freedom. It kind of makes things, in some ways, simple. It's kind of reductionistic, but it's reductionistic in the way that the narrow neck of an hourglass is reductionistic for the sand. All the sand has to go through that narrow neck to come out. So if you want to watch the sand, you can see if it's really a thing. You can watch each grain go by, because maybe one grain at a time. It's so narrow.

So the feeling—so much of our life goes through the neck of what is. These feelings are pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, and it's amazing how much of our life is a reaction to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. In fact, I suspect that some political philosophies, some philosophies

ical philosophies, political stands people have arise not because of some deep philosophical consideration, but rather someone is feeling unpleasant about something, and they want to justify getting rid of it, and so they kind of develop whole scenarios—all the lawyers in the mind come up, and policy makers come up in the mind, and, you know, establish why you have to push this away. Or why you have to get this, because of our very simple amoeba-like relationship to pleasant and unpleasant. If you sit quietly and watch yourself and watch how this works, it's actually quite humbling for those of us who might think we're very sophisticated beings, and everything we do is very deeply considered, and, you know, wise, and, you know, it turns out that like amoebas, we've got this narrow little neck. So much goes through that narrow neck.

But the Buddha's teaching on this feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—gets more interesting once we start understanding how this works. We get quiet and settled enough to see that underlying all experience there is some quality of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. If we can be quiet enough and still enough just to watch that process operating inside of us, then at some point the Buddha says you can distinguish between two different classes of feeling, tones of these feelings. The two different classes of things which are pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. He used a very kind of physical word for this. Literally, its translation into English is those feeling tones which are of the flesh and those which are not of the flesh. That's kind of pretty graphic—of the flesh.

Of the flesh, I understand to be those feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—that arise because our physical senses are stimulated by the usual kind of sense objects. So if I get a massage on my flesh, that's a pleasure of the flesh. If I step on a nail, that's something unpleasant of the flesh. So something has to be—the senses have to be stimulating the ordinary ways in which they get stimulated. Not of the flesh are those feeling tones that kind of emerge or glow or rise out of us, independent of what's happening with the senses. The primary example the Buddha used for this was the joy and happiness that can well up in deep meditation.

So you're sitting there minding your own business, meditating, following your breath, and you are getting concentrated, and without any intention of your own, without anything changing in the world around you—in fact, sometimes the world around you can be quite unpleasant—as the concentration deepens, it seems to trigger a kind of glow or warmth or joy, this nice energy that begins flowing through the body. Nowadays, people say it was just serotonin. But serotonin is, you know, that's nice, you know. So it's not the ordinary senses being stimulated, but some chemicals inside of us that are operating that kind of sends

things through, and this kind of pleasant sensation that calls it—Buddha calls it not of the flesh. In modern English translations, because that's kind of a strange translation, they've tried other translations. One that some of you who read these kinds of suttas come across is *atthangika-bodhi*, translated as unworldly feelings. None of that works any better than not of the flesh, unworldly, not of the world. But then some people have tried using spiritual as a translation for it, because it's often connected with people's spiritual life, how the Buddha talked about it.

So what happens is, as we settle into practice in a deeper way, more connected to ourselves, when we wake up, the light is turned on, there's a kind of very pleasant, enjoyable sensations that begin to well up, that are a byproduct of that clarity, of that subtleness, of that sense of balance and harmony that can come. Not only is there pleasant, but it's nourishing. It kind of nourishes us, kind of feeds us in a good way. It's kind of like, Somehow this feels healthy. This feels good. When the Buddha first experienced this for himself, his reaction to this was, Oh, I don't have to be afraid of this, because in ancient India there was a certain fear that some of the religious people had about anything that was pleasant, because it would trigger some kind of attachment and desire too much. But this is pleasing. This is—this I don't have to be afraid of. So to be able to tune in and recognize pleasant inner sensations or qualities of our inner life, or inner life starts feeling pleasant, is one of the stepping stones to going deeper into this mindfulness practice.

Now, these feelings not of the flesh—there are also unpleasant ones. The primary one the Buddha gives as an example is, for someone who wants to have a spiritual life, wants to go and be able to go deeper, more deeply in this, but for some reason their life's circumstances prevent them from doing it, and so their strong longing or desire is frustrated. The unpleasantness of that is called unpleasantness not of the flesh, unworldly, a spirit—not in and of spiritual unpleasantness. I think some people—maybe some of you—have had that experience of somehow feeling frustrated or feeling like somehow you can't follow through on what you really want to do, right? Like this gentleman here, right? How many years were you wanting to follow through but you didn't? Many years did you want to follow through on your spiritual longing but you didn't—decades, right? No, so there's a man here, waited a long time. Things worth waiting—good things are worth waiting for.

So what happens here is that in this Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the first six exercises are about staying connected to your body, using your physical body, your body as an area to develop a heightened sense of awareness. Then there's a turning point that goes on. We are at this juncture of feeling tone. We start dipping into the inner subjective experience that

we have. At first, it's a little bit more the more obvious feeling tones of that, of the flesh, which could be said to be a little bit on the surface pleasure. But as we get more settled, then we start going underneath the surface to the deeper quality of our being, inner life. That also can be pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. We become more sensitive, more aware of a higher quality of an inner life, and that high. Becoming aware of this higher quality, I see as a very important piece of information that makes sense of what we're doing in the second half of these exercises, in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Because in the next exercise, we're becoming aware of our mind states, and then the inner mental processes that affect our mind states, that affect the quality of our inner life. So we want to become more and more aware of this inner life, because the quality of our mind, the quality of our heart, is one of the most precious things we can be the caretaker for. No one else can be the caretaker for the quality of your own heart, quality of your inner life. So if you want to start becoming the caretaker for it, responsible for it, and cultivating a high inner quality of inner life, then this—the practice of mindfulness that goes from the body to feeling tones to mind states—it moves in the direction of being able to be the caretaker for it. As we become more and more a caretaker for our inner quality of heart and mind, we get the information of how to be even more caring of it. As we get more caring of it, we prepare the mind. We create a kind of inner life, inner quality of mind that has more and more access to wisdom, more access to understanding. What do we do that causes us to lose that quality? What do we do that supports having more of it? That's one of the definitions of wisdom, is to become a caretaker of the quality of your heart for yourself, and then one of the doors at the doorway into this is to become aware of our feeling tones—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

So while on the surface it might seem an exercise to be mindful of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither is kind of simplistic, reductionistic, kind of maybe not so interesting, because there are more important, sophisticated things to be interested in in life, this is really the hourglass neck in which that opens up, for at least in Buddhist terms, into a deep inner spiritual life. How does that sound? We have but five minutes, and now, if any of you have any questions about this, or comments or testimonials about sitting in the fire or anything, please—thank you for your lesson today.

One of the things I struggle with is the neutral aspect of emotion that you talked about, and how to differentiate between where you are dissociating from something or whether you're neutral or not. A lot of times I feel I am neutral on something, and much later I figure out that I was trying to not address it. Yes, great. That's a great topic. So how do we associate being

neither pleasant nor unpleasant with being neutral or being non-? In this regard, I learned many years ago that, you know, I would practise letting go. I'd let go of certain feelings, ideas, whatever I had, and I would be neutral. Good, I did it. But I learned that if I let go and don't feel some modicum of joy, feeling lighter and joyful, it's going to come back and bite me, because neutral is not really neutral. So dissociation, going numb—I think the best thing I know is to be mindful of it.

So we spend a lot of time in mindfulness exploring what's going on. If you explore what you think is neutral, then as you get to know it better and better, you start feeling, Oh, this is off. This doesn't feel good. I'm closed down. I'm resisting, you know, trying to spin out in my thoughts. I've lost connection with my body. Those are all kind of symptoms or signs that we're more dissociated than we are either pleasant or unpleasant. There is part of the lore of Buddhism, you know—I don't know how all this works so well—but the part of the lore is that experiences which are neither pleasant nor unpleasant are quite rare. So you might be careful if you have a whole bunch of neutral. It's probably not neutral.

So the whole not of the flesh thing is a little hard to—I mean, it feels a little cerebral. So it's like generosity, compassion—do those fit into that which qualifies as pleasant but is not of the flesh? Not in and of itself. But if you practise generosity, and the result of that is that there's a nice warmth, a glow, a sense of well-being, joy, a sort of the afterglow, as it were—yet the subjective way in which you feel about that would be not of the flesh. That's my understanding. Oh, that works. But if they say, Oh, thank you, you're so generous, and that feels really, Oh, I feel—I'm so special, that feels good, that would be of the flesh in these categories.

Yes, one more. So how do you actually get into the fire? And is it recommended that you not do it alone? Not do it alone, Alice. Should you do it in a group? Because it would—I think it would be a very painful experiment. I think sometimes it's important to have a lot of support. It depends how strong the fire is. Sometimes a lot—not necessarily do it with a group. But knowing these other people who understand it or support you, who are going through the same thing, can be very helpful. You're in this group in San Quentin. They could do it together really nicely in this group, their program they're in. But they have to be careful about doing the same thing out in the yard, you know, because they talked about this, because if they—in the group, they could cry. But out in the yard, if they cry, they're seen as weak, which is not a good thing to be seen as weak at San Quentin. So getting support depends on the kind of fire you have. Some people—it depends on you, you know, how you are. Some people find it a lot easier to do it alone, they're willing, then some people find it much easier to do it with support of others. Some people find it easier to do it in small pieces. Kind of first you get

to the edge of the rest, kind of hot, you know? Then they get comfortable there, and then take another little step closer. Some kind of—you don't just jump right into the middle right away. Sit in the fire is like, you know, maybe that's like jumping into the deep end of the pool before you know how to swim. So first you put your toe in and get used to that, and then, you know, slowly go further. But I think that it's important to understand that there is a fire, there is an original pain. There is something that we carry with us that needs to be addressed. To recognize that even if we can't address it or aren't ready to sit in it, it's a huge step to even recall, to recognize it: Oh, this is my issue. This is my pain. Because even if you recognize it, then you start making maybe wiser choices as opposed to impulsive choices or escapist choices or whatever.

So you ask more, so I can respond better, I think, because I feel like I know—so there, I recognize what my fire is, but I know I feel like I'm not getting into it, because instead of seeing, I keep seeing all the issues that come up because of my fire, and I'm really mindful of that now. So I guess that's a plus. But it's very painful to be mindful of the issues, and know your fire, but not seem to be able to get to the fire. So a couple of things occur to me—I don't know if it's relevant for you. Sometimes it's necessary to clean up some of the secondary pain. It takes a while before we can get to the original pain. So to learn to clean up and take care of things, and maybe even remove ourselves from situations where the secondary reactions are predominating. It might take a while, but things settle down so that we're ready for the, you know, the original pain thing. That's one thing. The other thing that some people find very useful is to go on a retreat, and go on a seven-day, ten-day retreat, and then you're not necessarily going to sit in the fire there, but you might. Now that's a great place to have things come up, because I tell you, it'll come up if it really needs it, if it's time for it to come up. Then you're not distracted by all the other things, and not having to negotiate all the other things. There's a silence, a context of people sitting together in retreat. Many people find it's a really safe place to open up and let the stuff be there. So that's a possibility too. I know you have a young child, so that makes it all difficult to go. But, you know, talk to me about it. Maybe there's some way to—some ideas I have for that.

Gay: So pleasant, unpleasant, and neither—it happens from time to time. When it does, turn on the light and see what happens. Thank you.