

Four Foundations of Mindfulness - Week 8: The Five Aggregates

Gil Fronsdal

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So I mean to continue the series of talks that I'm giving on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It comes from an ancient Buddhist scripture that's called the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, and it's kind of the core text for the whole Insight Meditation movement. Most *vipassanā* teachers' practice lineages trace their teachings back to this particular text, and the text describes ways of developing a heightened sense of awareness, heightened capacity for awareness, so that awareness becomes available, almost like a force or a power or a presence in our lives that is liberating.

That creates a different context for being in the world. Most of the time, when we're in the world, in ordinary life, we're quite involved with our thoughts, with our activities, with our feelings, with things going on, and our awareness or attention gets subsumed into our concerns so much so that we don't really see ourselves paying attention. We just kind of comply, involved in what we're doing. And when awareness or attention gets strong enough that it becomes bigger in a sense or stronger than what we're concerned with, then the power that we have, the power of the concerns, begins to diminish. People sometimes wonder why they're so attached to things, why certain things they're so compelled to be involved and to think, to do certain thoughts, certain thought patterns, certain feelings, certain emotional states that seem to persist all the time—always angry, always sad or depressed, always in some kind of way. And it's very hard to see, you know, what's going on clearly.

It's also sometimes very hard to extract oneself from it, and we're kind of like a little bit imprisoned by it, caught in it, involved in it. But if we open up awareness and it gets strong, then rather than being claustrophobic, we enter into a much larger space. An analogy for this would be if you spent all winter long, snowbound in a high Sierra cabin, one-room cabin,

with all your relatives, all the extended relatives. It might be nice the first couple of hours, but you know, all winter long, you won't be able to leave. And then finally spring comes, the snow melts, and finally you can open the door, and finally you go out into the meadows, and the high Sierras, and the great blue sky, and you. And it feels so good to be out in the open.

I finally felt like the claustrophobia's gone, it's like there's space to breathe and to think and to be in a way you couldn't when you are all kind of caught up there. And so the sense of vast space, and open space, and the freedom to walk through the mountains after being claustrophobic can feel liberating in a dramatic way, the big sense of relief. So the same thing with the mind. If the mind can get so caught up and preoccupied with what it's doing, it gets claustrophobic, and we get involved. And what we don't realize is that there is no cabin for the mind. We're not snowed in except for, you know, the walls we make through our preoccupations and our addictive ways of thinking and feeling and all that.

And so when awareness becomes stronger or strong enough, then we become—we notice how there's a strong sense of space, openness, awareness, stillness, silence, peacefulness. People call it all kinds of things. So that with which we can, you know, not be so caught in this kind of freedom from, come from that. So the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is practices for cultivating this strong sense of awareness for the purpose of becoming free. And so we've been going through them. There's a series of thirteen exercises that's given, and we've now done—I guess about nine of them.

And so we have four more. And today we're going to do what's called the exercise on the five aggregates. And it's very, you know, people are unfamiliar with this idea. The five aggregates would be surprised that such a—I don't know what a spiritually unsexy term—should be considered in the early teachings of the Buddha one of the most important kind of teachings that he has. It's repeated over and over again in the texts, and the primary way in which—often one of the primary ways that enlightenment is described is having insight into these five aggregates. So, you know, it's a very important teaching, but it's, you know, it can get very uninteresting very quickly as I try to describe it to you.

So I don't know if that's going to help you pay attention to hear that, or it's going to kind of discouragement that we might as well give up now. So the five aggregates can be considered the five primary areas in our life that we experience our life through, which we experience ourselves and the world around us. So we want to have insight into these five primary areas because they're supposed to encompass every possible experience we have. Somehow it's through the avenue of one of these five groupings of phenomena. So these five are what's called physical form, the physicality of our world. So we can feel our body in a solitary body,

and slip my thighs, and I feel the physicality in my body.

I feel and feel and see the physicality of the floor, the platform, and you, all, and all kinds of things. And so the physicality of this world is one whole grouping. Aggregate means a big grouping of things, big category of things. The second one is the affective, subjective way in which—how this feels to be, to sense and feel and experience the world around us and the world within us and now. So by how it feels, what I mean, what it means by attrition, what the experience is. It's one thing to have an experience. It's one thing just below the experience, how it feels for us to have it.

So if, you know, if it's, you know, really cold, biting cold, we can feel the physicality of that cold in our body, and it might be, depending on the context, that might feel very unpleasant. We might then go out and stand in the sun and warm up and after a while, the physical effect, Oh, that's pleasant. That's nice. It's how we receive it, how we feel about the experience. And they say that every experience we have has some kind of affective effect on us, some kind of way in which, Oh, that's nice. That's not nice. That's pleasant. That's not pleasant.

And so that's a very, very important category in Buddhism. So that's considered its own aggregate, its own kind of grouping of things, how we feel about the experience that goes on. And it's kind of very simple, how it's not like the complicated analysis, but just, you know, and almost physically, how it feels pleasant or unpleasant. The third grouping is—it's usually translated into English as perception, but probably a better way of translating is cognition or recognition. And recognition works well, because the "re" part means, again, recognizing—recognition. And that is, when I see something, if I see this object here that I'm holding my hand in, you know, because I lived in a particular culture, particular time in human history, I recognize it as a glass.

I wouldn't be surprised if there was a time not so far away than our ancestors, your ancestors maybe ten, fifteen thousand years ago—only if you'd hand them this kind of object, they wouldn't—what is it? You know, they wouldn't have the label glass. They wouldn't recognize it as a glass, even though for us it's completely obvious. Or, you know, I saw all kinds of things. We imagine ten thousand years ago, your particular ancestors, wherever they were, you gave them a smartphone. "Oh, that's a smartphone. That's so nice. I'm sorry we don't get any signals here." They wouldn't have a clue what it is, you know. They may be impressed by it, but they wouldn't have a label for it. They wouldn't recognize it as something.

We go around the world recognizing things all the time, and we just think we're seeing things as they actually are, but really we're processing the sense data that comes in through our eyes and ears and everywhere, and reconstructing it, and based on memory, we have a label

for it. We recognize it as something, and it's accurate enough. Some of these recognitions, and some of them are not accurate. I remember once, in the forest, in a jungle of Thailand, there was a wide kind of dirt road I was walking along. I don't know how wide it was, but I would say it was five or six feet wide. And it was dusk, so I couldn't see very well. And various branches and stuff had fallen from the trees or were laying on the ground, and there was one branch that wound across the road, a crooked branch, and yet I was walking around. I think I had my camera with me. Maybe I was looking to take photographs or something. And so I stepped on that branch, and it was a snake, huge snake, and I think I jumped faster than ever in my life.

I jumped up high up in the air and spun around and threw my camera down the ground towards the snake just to get away and have something between us. So I had misperceived, cognized what was there, and, you know, so it wasn't accurate. So this is a hugely important category, because how we perceive things, how we recognize things has a lot to do with our reaction in response to things. The fourth grouping, fourth aggregate, is—it's a technical word—it's the world of mental constructions, sometimes called mental formations. But in particular, it has to do with the volitional aspects of the mind, the wanting of something, wanting, not wanting, our intentions. And that's a hugely important part of our life. The mind is constantly wanting something much more than you realize, and as you feel uncomfortable in your chair, you shift. There has to be a movement of wanting in the mind, maybe almost subconscious, in order to do that shifting.

You hear a sound and you turn your head to look in that direction. It's a volitional act. You're going to say something. It's a volitional act—all kinds of. So the whole world that comes along with those volitions, the thoughts, the memories, the planning, all those things, are called the mental constructions. Such a huge category. And it's a category that's very important, because what we want and the world that we construct around our wants, what we don't want, the world of thoughts and memories that we construct around it, has a lot to do with how we suffer. And so to get a handle on this is very important.

So there's right on four of the categories of our physicality: the feeling, the affective feeling, how it feels, the recognition, the perception, the cognition, the recognition of things, and then the mental formations. And the fifth one is consciousness. And consciousness is a hard one to get a sense of what it means in Buddhism, and it's hard to get a sense of what it means in modern psychology. A little bit of study, I get the sense that different researchers into the nature of consciousness have different definitions. If understanding what it is, but it's kind of maybe the basic capacity to track all that, to register all that. You can take it in and become

aware of it.

So these five areas are five areas. When we get attached to things and cling to things, we can only get attached to those five areas. There's nowhere else to get attached. Everything is supposed to fit into those five. So our mental world, much of it of thoughts and stuff, has to do with the fourth one: mental formations, but our perceptions. We cling to ideas. And what's fascinating, I think, is if your mindfulness gets really sharp and clear, you'll discover something that is rather amazing. Or maybe humbling, unbelievable—that the only thing that we ever cling to, get attached to, are actually ideas, thoughts, concepts related to these five areas.

So of course, if you are on the edge of a huge cliff, you might be physically hanging on to the railing, but much of the time we're clinging, reacting, responding not to what's going on in the world. We think that. We think that's what we're doing. But a lot of the response and reaction has to do with everything gets processed through the brain, the mind. And then we have thoughts and ideas and the meaning behind it, what it means, what we hope, what our intentions are, how it fits into what we think's important. And when we react in response, it has a lot to do with the inner thoughts, the inner world of ideas that we have in relationship to it.

So these five aggregates, five areas, and the Buddha gave a simile for them, that the physicality, our physical form or body, is like a foam on top of a running river. The feelings, the affective way it feels, of how it is for us to take in experience, is like bubbles, just individual bubbles, soap bubbles. Our perceptions, our recognitions are like a mirage. Our mental constructions, our ideas and thoughts and intentions are like a plantain trunk, a banana trunk of a banana tree. And why is that? Is that a banana trunk is hollow inside. And so our inner world of thoughts have no core to them. There's no essence, no solidity there. And consciousness is like a magic show. So those are the analogies about the ancient that the Buddha gave.

So the physicality is like foam, you know. Our body, our physical experience, shifts and changes all the time. And maybe we have—sometimes you have to get really old to start feeling this body of mine by its shifting and changing faster than I want. Yes, foam is right. And you know, feelings are pretty ephemeral, they come and go like a bubble that can pop and a new one gets formed. And perceptions are sometimes accurate, sometimes not, but they're kind of like a mirage that we can kind of relate to and react to. And it's kind of amazing to appreciate how much.

So as I said, you know, our ancestors might not have recognized this as a glass, but I see it as a glass. But is the glass really in the object? Is it really a glass? It's a glass because it functions

as a glass. We define it as a glass. But it could be something else. I could have it on my table at home and use it as a vase for flowers. It makes it a vase, and someone might actually walk by and see the nice vase you have. Or it could be, you know, back in the nineteen fifties, it could have been an ashtray, you know, very, very good. You do have to empty it very often. Or it can be a pencil holder. Only pencils and pens are kind. It can be many different things.

And I could easily imagine a glass—maybe not this one so easily—a glass that kind of because of how it's constructed, it's kind of ambiguous exactly what it is. And depending how it's used, you would see it, you'd recognize it in different ways. If you see the same object in different circumstances and see it with different labels, then you start dawning on you that I'm projecting a label on that. I'm not an innocent bystander. When I say, "This is a glass," there's a part in me that's constructing it, or seeing it, or painting glass on it, overlaying on it. So I guess that's kind of like a mirage, that painting on it, the filter we put on top here. But as we say, it's accurate enough, but this—but you know, it's not always accurate, you know, what we do to our fellow human beings, and what we do with our concepts, our recognitions, is pretty awful sometimes. And how we see them and judge them, and categories we put them in, and we see them through that filter, and they're like going, "No, no, no." But, you know, we often have these recognitions which are not very helpful, or support some mirage, and don't really see the real person there, as I said. And then the magic show is everything is kind of arising and passing in this magical way in the field of consciousness.

So the instructions in this exercise to develop stronger awareness is, first, to see your experience in these five categories. Not to have everything just be all a big buzz, all kind of organized together. But to say, "Oh, now I'm having a physical sensation. I'm cold. I'm hot. Now that's a feeling. It feels pleasant. I feel the pleasantness of it. Oh, that's a perception, a recognition. Now I'm involved in the inner world of mental formations and volitions and ideas. And now I'm just feeling, I am conscious of it all. There is a consciousness of awareness that holds it all or within which it occurs." So the desire to become aware of that.

But what's more important in the tradition is to start seeing how these five arise and pass—their impermanent nature. When we don't tease these apart, we often live in the solidity of things. When we can kind of take it apart into the component parts, then we start seeing that they actually are shifting and changing all the time. So maybe these are useful analogies: that if I'm walking down the street, empty street, maybe it's dark, it's middle of the night, and I see the shape of another person walking towards me, I get pretty interested in a back alley some place, you know. I'm coming to keep my eye on that person. I don't know what's going on. I can't tell—it's just a shape. It's dark, and we're going to meet in the darkest part, you know,

the alley, and you know. And then the shape reminds me of something that scares me, and now I'm pretty focused on that person and what it means and everything. This person, just like—and everything, person's called like a solid, real person. It's like preoccupation dictated on the person.

Another time you are on a very busy—you're a tourist, very busy metropolitan. Say you're in New York City, just near the entryway maybe of subway and the rush hour. People are walking, streets are packed, people coming and going, walking up and down. And since you're a tourist, you're like just looking at the sights, and all these people are passing you by, and you start losing any sense of like a focus on any individual. They're passing by so fast, so many of them, so many different kinds of people from all over the world. And it's just amazing to see the humanity of people in New York City passing. And you are on something. I am in awe of the diversity and the change and you're ready to celebrate, you know, how wonderfully diverse human beings are. And it's just like you now, but you're not focused on one. It's like the change that makes a difference to you and your very different perception, very different relationship when you see it all changing and passing, and you feel safe just like all this, right?

Or you have a gallon of water. Someone gives you a gallon of water. You're thirsty, haven't drunk for a few days, can't believe your good luck, and you're really focused on that water. That's really great. Or you have another purpose for the water. You know, I'm so glad I have a squat gallon of—can water my garden water. And so you focus on the water. Then someone up river from you pours that gallon of water into the river, and you are like Siddhartha sitting on the river bank watching the water go by, and you have a whole different relationship—just watching water flow by, flow by, flow by. It's kind of very relaxing. It's pleasant. You see it kind of as a metaphor for the flowing of life, and just kind of the whole different relationship. You're not fixated on the gallon and protecting a gallon from other people who can take it from you, whatever. It's just you see water flowing. Very different relationship with it.

So if we can see how the five aggregates are constantly flowing, constantly shifting and changing, we'll have a very different relationship to it, to them, than if we kind of just affixated on them, or "This is it." So if I fixated on my body, that I think—thinking about my body. My body is too much this, too big, too small, too this and that, and my body concerns. It's very much focused on the body through our image of the body. I identify with our image and everything. And some people suffer a tremendous amount because of their body image. But if you close your eyes and feel your body, you feel as if your body is shifting and changing. The feeling, the experience of it, the physicality, is constantly shifting and changing. And you have a very

different relationship to your body than if you see it through an image.

Feelings—if you like, I can be fixated on a particular feeling. I feel a certain kind of pain. Sometimes I've pain in my foot, and yet all my pain—my foot is so important, I'm not being a cripple, I won't be able to walk any more, and it's all fixated on that pain. But if I really pay attention to the pain carefully, I still need to—I may be concerned in what's happened to my foot, but I see actually a pain comes and goes. It's actually impermanent, changes and shifts. And then there's a loud sound outside, and for a few moments I don't even know I have a foot because of the sound. And then something happens. That's really important. And I guess they had the last episode of Downtown Abbey, right? You know? And so you didn't notice your foot. And so, but these things are shifting and changing. Our attention, our awareness of it shifts and changes, and it's like bubbles pop, and our relationship to it becomes very different. Then we were fixated on it, our mental formations.

We have ideas about ourselves. We have ideas: I am this kind of person. I am a—someone gave me an example, so I'll use her example. Feeling a little bit kind of out of harmony with the world. So wanting to have something, searching for something, and coming across an ice cream store, going and getting quadruple decker scoops of ice cream because, you know, and eating it all, and then feeling miserable. And then, "How could I've been so stupid. I am a stupid person." Oh, thank you. And so there is an idea, a label, a mental formation, a construct of the mind that we put this label, and "I am this kind of person." I suppose you simply say, "Oh, I am a person who made a poor choice, so now I have to live with the consequences for a while," kind of simple. And so when we can get stuck in this label that we have for ourselves and suffer for a long time, but if we can watch carefully how the inner mental landscape functions, we see that it's constant stream and flow of shift and change, of ideas and perceptions and coming and going.

And so the question is, so you know? Are you, you know, are you always holding the idea that you're a stupid person, and always holding that idea? No, you know, Downtown Abbey goes on at TV, and I don't think it by myself for an hour if I ever I'll watch it. So I don't know. And so, you know, so things are constantly interrupted—realities, constantly interrupting our fantasies, and what we think we're, you know? And so it creates shifting and changing, and you see it's shifting and changing. Ideas are not solid. These ideas are constantly fleeting, and moving, and becoming different ones, and returning. And it's only because we kind of project continuity onto this. We think that we're continuously the same thing, then our relationships are shifting. And the relationship that we're interested in Buddhism that wants to shift is how we cling to it, how we grasp or resist.

And when we see things, these things in their elemental level, at the foundational building block level of experience, before we get living at abstractions, are constantly shifting and changing, then we begin to relax, soften, round it, open up, and don't cling so much. And as we do that, awareness becomes—stands out and stronger and stronger. Awareness gets lost when we are attached. Awareness gets covered over or becomes invisible to us when we're preoccupied. But if we are not caught in the field of these five aggregates, then awareness becomes clear and clear. The stronger awareness becomes, the more we can see the shifting, changing nature of the river going by, flowing by. And to rest in the flowing, changing river of our experience is one of the more, one of the more fulfilling places of becoming free, of becoming at peace, of resting.

So in this five aggregates, to see them is not just to see them, but to see how they arise and see how they pass. And that's the exercise to cultivate strong awareness. Generally, it's something that people experience kind of keenly on our meditation retreats, because this is a kind of takes a little higher level of attention, focus, concentration to call the attention, to see this kind of the five aggregates, the stream of them flowing and moving. But it does require that we shift our priorities from focusing on the concepts and ideas and stories that we think are important to the process in which all this is being experienced with physical experience, the feeling, the perceptions, the mental formations, and the consciousness. So I'll say again what I said before. This is one of the most common and central teachings the Buddha gave. It can seem kind of foreign, difficult to understand, difficult to understand how relevant it is. But it took me many years to really understand it. I really got into it once I started to practise it. And practice is *vipassanā*.

And then I was sidetracked by my Zen practice. That is a little aside, footnote to talk, and Zen they do almost every morning. They do a chant as part of the liturgy called the Heart Sūtra. And part of the Heart Sūtra says that these five aggregates are empty, or form is empty. Feelings are empty. Perceptions are empty. Mental formations are empty. Consciousness empty. So I chanted that for years and years and let no one—or initially no one told me what they were. I just dutifully chanted it. But I came to the conclusion that because they were empty, I didn't have to know what they were. So I just ignored their teachings. And then when I was introduced to this practice we do here, I pass here. They didn't say just off hand they're empty. They say they're like foam, like a bubble, like a mirage, like a, you know, banana trunk. And magic shows it—a bit more poetic than just saying empty.

So we have six minutes. And what can I clarify that would make this come alive more for you? Anything you'd like to ask? Yes, please. You've used the words, you know, for the fifth

aggregate of consciousness, and you've also used the word awareness. Could you talk about if those are the same thing or different things, and then it'll be hard to do in two minutes? Yes, thank you. No, thank you for that, for asking that. I think it's a pretty obvious question, and I don't, you know. I don't know what they are really. I can't put my finger and tell you what consciousness is or what the awareness is. However, functionally, as I live my life, I have a general sense of what, you know, what I'm pointing out when I use the word awareness. I have a general sense of what it means, and consciousness. I have a general sense of what it means, operational understanding of it.

And now I asked here once Monday night, some years ago, as the group here, "How do you know that you're aware?" And it was very interesting for me to hear all the answers people gave because of how different people respond to that question. And that became aware. You know, I think people, when you use the word awareness, different people have different reference points for it. They mean different things. And generally, it's in the ballpark well enough that if I say, "Now, be aware," they do something that's useful. But I don't believe any more that necessarily they do exactly what I think I'm doing when I'm aware. So, you know, there's an operational kind of general idea that we kind of in the ballpark. Maybe it doesn't—maybe not helpful to define it exactly that. I know that's very unsatisfying.

I mean, I guess at the very least what I was looking for is that these are the same thing, right? I mean, at least are like—are they two different words in the original scriptures, that sort of thing? Yeah, yes, both. Rather, equally there, what we have to say, what words we work with, I tend to use the word awareness and mindfulness as synonyms. I tend not to use the word consciousness very much. It's not a word that I find so relevant, except sometimes in deep states of meditation, and then it's—then I have a clear sense that this is consciousness is operating here now. But in and outside of very deep states of meditation, then I'm content using the word awareness, and I think of awareness as basic. I'll use it almost so synonymously with mindfulness. But that depends on what you mean by mindfulness, you know. Then it gets semantic, all these definitions. So it gets very complicated very quickly if you start asking these kinds of questions.

And hopefully, it's good enough to get us all on the same page, and people get a sense enough. It does. I don't think we have to have exact definitions of some of these things. We have to be close enough to engage in it, in practising attention, using our attention, engaging and clarifying what's here for ourselves. And as we get deeper and deeper into it, it'll become more obvious for us personally what we're seeing, what we're experiencing, rather than kind of fitting into what someone says: "This is exactly what it is." So anyway, that's kind of how, you

know, I've been doing this for a very long time, forty years. I have a PhD in Buddhist studies, so I've, you know, I've put my time into trying to understand these things. So hopefully the fact that I say, I don't know what consciousness is, or awareness is, hopefully not just going to be dismissed as being some, you know, ignorant. I know that there's something, something significant about the fact that I would say, I don't know about what we're—something about what we're trying to talk about, that it's kind of slippery.

I hope you come back—one more, and then we'll stop. We feel so curious how you hold that not knowing is. Is it just fine to not know? Is it something that you dig down and try to find out, or just kind of curious, and would that slipperiness be something to explore? How do you—what's your relationship to that? I think the first and the third—that I'm fine with not knowing, and also still curious. Can we refine it? Can we understand it better? Can we know? What can we understand? But, you know, I'm not concerned with digging down, you know. Just, you know, I'm curious to find out knowing. And I still would like to know better. I'd like to know better why I don't know. I think it's a fascinating topic. What is it about these things—consciousness and awareness—that defies really clear understanding. I'd like to know that. So that, yeah, great. So thank you all very much.