

## Foundations of Mindfulness Part 1 - Intro

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So good evening, everyone. And welcome time. See and Happy New Year. And the first Monday talk of the year is the volume. Okay, everyone. So starting this evening, I'm going to give a series of talks on the source text for mindfulness practice that we teach here. The mindfulness practice in Buddhism comes from a particular text called the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

And it's a marvellous text, and it provides the instructions that are interpreted many ways in the modern world, including how we teach here at M C and now. I'm very fond of this text. It's a very important text for our tradition. And it's a long text. So it'll be a series of talks that I'll give whenever I'm here, until I'm done. For example, I won't be here next week, so whenever I'm here, I'll come and give these talks.

Thank you. When Jim, I announced that I was going to give a class on concentration starting Wednesday, I realized that it's a nice coincidence that I'm going, at the same time, to do a series on mindfulness and a series on concentration. The concentration series will be finished long before the mindfulness one, but they got a nicely starting together. These are the two primary faculties that we have, the attentional faculties that are engaged when people do meditation practice, especially mindfulness. Meditation is the faculty of mindfulness and the faculty of concentration, and these two are wonderful partners and work together in important ways. It's possible to practise mindfulness without a lot of concentration, but to take mindfulness to the depth or the fullness that it can reach, it requires the partnership of strong concentration, and these two work together.

So to start this series on the Buddhist teachings on mindfulness, I want to tell a Buddhist story. It comes from Mahāyāna Buddhism, a very different form of Buddhism, to make a point. This story goes this way: there was a young person who, as a young adult, decided to leave

his village to go off and explore the world. The person had a friend in the village who was concerned about the welfare of the traveler. While the soon-to-be traveller was sleeping, the friend sewed a very valuable jewel into the inner lining of the traveller's coat. The traveller set off across the lands and was gone for a long time, got lost in all kinds of adventures, lost money, lost food, and after many years came back very impoverished and limping back into the hometown.

There was his friend waiting. The friend said, "You know, how've you been?" "Well, it's been rough, and you know, I've been pretty poor without much, not much going on." "Oh, really. But you're not so poor. In your lining of your coat there is a very valuable gem that you could have just taken and sold, and you could have been a wealthy person." So that's the end of the story. It's not a very satisfying story. But the story is used to convey the idea that as we ourselves travel round the world, travel through our lives, we can easily become impoverished—not maybe monetarily, but certainly spiritually impoverished.

It's unnecessary to do this, because in the lining of our hearts and mind, there is a valuable gem, a priceless gem that's there, and all you have to do is turn to something as close as to the inside of your coat. Closely, you can find this gem and have it be spiritually enriching in great ways. This gem that we have is our capacity for attention, and we have a phenomenal capacity for attention. We use it every day in all kinds of different ways. In Buddhism, we're taking this very ordinary capacity we have to pay attention, highlighting it, pointing it out to us, and developing it, so it becomes a bright and shining gem that can support us and bring us lots of inner wealth that can come.

We have a range of attentional faculties that add up together to become what we call attention. It's not a unitary, singular thing, but it's a kind of composite, or the sum total, or a variety of different attentional faculties that come into play. We have the faculty for recognition. We can recognize what's there. For example, I'm holding a transmitter, I'm looking at my glass, I can see all of you in this room. I can recognize what's here. That capacity for recognition shouldn't be taken as being a lightweight kind of thing. It's actually part of the apparatus that's used for cultivating this high-quality attention that we're doing in mindfulness practice.

We also have the capacity to simply kind of lean back, in a sense, in the mind, and observe what's going on without interfering with it, and just have the observational power, just let things come. A kind of passive, receptive awareness that just watches or sees or perceives what's there, sees how things come and go. We have the capacity to feel, which means to feel physically, just sense what our experience is. That's different than observing, different than

recognizing. But we can have an intimacy with our experience, just like if you go on a cold day and stand in the sun to get warm. Most people don't just stand there and look at the phone and wait to get warm. If you're cold, to really enjoy it, you kind of open up, face the sun as quietly as you can, and let the warmth absorb into your body through your clothes, perhaps. You can feel the physicality of that, the warmth coming in and seeping in and warming you up. So that's feeling, which is also part of the attentional capacities we have.

Another one is the capacity to use our attention wisely, to know which of those different faculties we use at different times, when to use recognition. That's what's helpful: when to use observation, when to be present for stuff with intimacy, of feeling something, very almost physically being present for it. When to have attention be very close to the experience, when to have attention be very far from experience, look at it from a distance. There are all these choices we can make about how these different parts of attention are used. As we develop mindfulness practice, we're actually learning the different faculties, how they work, how they come into play. So we can have wise attention. We can choose wisely how to engage and be present for what's going on at different times.

Together with the attentional faculties we have, a part of it is the capacities to become concentrated. These work together, and we have the deep attentional capacity to hold the attention steady so it doesn't waver and get very stable, focused, and very sensitive, centered attention. We have capacity for peripheral awareness, and sometimes it's useful to have the peripheral awareness, sometimes useful to have the central focus, steadiness of focus. I can go on and on, but I think that the lesson I was trying to give here is the idea that there are many different mental functions that are operating that add up to what we would conventionally call attention. Someone says, "Pay attention," you know. Now you know. You can ask them, "What do you mean? What specifically do you want me to do when you say, 'Pay attention'?"

So in mindfulness practice is the practice of using these different attentional functions, faculties we have, and engaging them in such a way that awareness becomes lucid. That awareness becomes quite strong and supports us in our lives in important ways. When it's strong, this lucid awareness is what *sati* is. *Sati* is the Pāli word for mindfulness. Since the time I started studying mindfulness when I was young, if only the Buddhists were mindful, or used that word that I knew back then. But now, we've lost the word. It's not our word any more, and now it's a word that's used all over, everywhere, and clinically and settings. People teach mindfulness, and there's—mind you, if you go on Amazon, I did this five years ago or something, you go on Amazon, and you could draw up a list of all the books that have mindfulness

in it.

So I did. When I did it, I think six years ago I did it, I had a very long list. I bet it's longer now. It's amazing what back then, what a field of human life are associated with mindfulness and X, right? So there was a book back then on mindfulness and poker that was kind of interesting Buddhist. What did the Buddha think of that? There was even a little book, Mindfulness and Angry Birds. So that was pretty interesting, I thought. There's mindfulness about money, and sex, and relationships, and you name it. There seemed like there was something on mindfulness in this. The thing about it—it's wonderful. I think it's probably a good thing for our society overall.

But the thing is that what mindfulness means in those settings turns out to have evolved, and it's quite different from what it means in the Buddhist settings, and generally mindfulness in the secular settings where it's used. In terms of the range of attentional faculties that we can engage in, they're using only a small subset of it, and they call that mindfulness. Whereas in Buddhism the word mindfulness is a general term, not for a particular thing that we do with the mind, but rather a state that arises strongly as we develop the practice of attention, these different attentional faculties. This strong state is a strong state of awareness, one Buddhist teacher calls a lucid awareness. Awareness is something you don't do. It's more something you allow to happen. It's something you can establish. You can dwell in awareness. You can have strong awareness present, but it's not necessarily like, "Let's be aware." If you be aware, you are actually choosing one of the other attentional faculties in order to kind of bring on this thing called awareness. You might observe, you might recognize, you might feel, you might hold your attention steady, you might use peripheral awareness, you might use a central attention, all these different things.

So the purpose of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, is to engage the attentional faculties we have strong enough and well enough so that *sati*, awareness, becomes strong and stable, that it becomes a lucid experience of awareness—lucid awareness. What I mean by lucid is that awareness becomes such a highlighted phenomenon that you're aware, that you know that you're aware. You are not lost and preoccupied with your things, what you're thinking about, or your activities, or your desires, or your fears, or fantasies, or whatever. Everything else kind of stands out and our awareness is what's highlighted. What's in the awareness? You can see it very clearly, but you're not lost in it. It's like being in a very big, spacious room or cavern or cave, or I don't know what space. What stands out is the clarity and the peace or the stillness of the space in the room. In that spaciousness, you can kind of see clearly the objects of the room, but what stands out

most is the spaciousness. That's cool, and it changes your whole mood to be in certain very spacious, open, peaceful spaces.

But if you go into these big, open spaces, and you're really concerned about some particular detail—maybe you lost your keys last time you were in there, and you're looking for your keys—you don't notice the space. You're just like staring and studying for your keys everywhere, especially if it's important to get somewhere with your car. All right. You're preoccupied. You don't notice. Human beings spend a tremendous amount of time preoccupied, and so we don't really—we know we're aware. But to really feel the strength of awareness so that this highlighted sense of space or openness or clarity is—it's not available to us to take our practice or our wisdom or insight to a whole different level. That's what mindfulness practice is doing, is taking this capacity for awareness, making it lucid, making it strong and stable. So really, when you're in the moment, you're really in the present moment. Not just to be in the present moment, but to have this clarity of awareness while I'm here.

There's a paradigm shift for many people, a paradigm from thinking, "What's most important in life are the objects," to appreciating that maybe what's most important is the awareness that holds the objects, that experiences the object, that sees the objects that's there. To go down the street, you know, and grab someone off the sidewalk and say, "By the way, the most important thing you can ever do in your life is to have a lucid, open awareness," they'll probably think you're crazy, you know. There's no context for it. So it's kind of a foreign idea for many people. But for people who start meditating, this is one of things that we slowly begin to cultivate, develop, and appreciate. A paradigm shift is another way of being and living that's almost like a different life that we get to live if we can live in strong awareness. There's a lot of benefits to this.

The Buddha listed a number of them. One of them in terms of the three trainings that Buddhism is about: trainings in ethics, trainings in *samādhi*, and trainings in wisdom. Mindfulness supports all three. The Buddha said that as the mindfulness practice is cultivated and comes strong, it tends to make people more ethical. It becomes easier and easier and more natural to live by the five precepts: not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to get involved in intoxication. Rather than a duty or an obligation or moralistic requirement to be ethical, there's something about the cultivation of a very strong sensitivity of awareness, that lucid awareness that creates a moral sensitivity or an ethical sensitivity in us, that it becomes kind of natural. Of course, not going to do these things that are certain kind of agitating forces within me. They're constricting, they're actually limiting me, or diminishing my wellness, diminishing my openness, my willingness to be involved in

unethical things. Of course not going to do that because I know something better.

Mindfulness is very effective for developing *samādhi*. Back in the Buddha's time, one of the means for *samādhi* was cultivating these four foundations of mindfulness, and to be able to really hold your attention or keep your attention in the present moment, hold it steady, and see what's going on. It tends to calm the mind, steady the mind, focus the mind, and develop a lot more capacity for concentration. This is useful, certainly in meditation, to enter into *samādhi*, but it's also useful in daily life. I can see in my own mind these days still that there are days where I'm meditating more, and I have much deeper states of concentration I've touched into. When I come out of those states, my mind is much more nimble, quicker, more creative, makes connections quicker, and is kind of smarter. When I am not, I don't. The other day I came back from retreat, and my wife gave me a crossword puzzle, and I just whipped through it like I'd never done before, and I attributed it to coming right out of retreat. So, you know, I don't know if that's motivating. But *sati* helps us in our daily life that way. Yet, when I notice when I'm not, I don't have that concentration going so well, that I'm not as clever or smart or not going so well for me—maybe like today. So it helps with *samādhi*.

But the key thing that mindfulness is supposed to cultivate, and why the Buddha really emphasized it, was for the value of cultivating wisdom. A word which we translate as wisdom can just as well be translated as insight: to have a really deep, penetrating perception of what's going on here in our human life. What's really here? What's really deep? What's the underlying structures? What's the underlying operating systems of our hearts, our minds, our reality in a way that—only for the Buddhist idea—only by touching into that depth that's often not available in ordinary states of mind do we touch into the understandings and the wisdom that are liberating, that can free us from how we cling and how we get attached, how we get constricted, how we get caught and preoccupied in very profound, deep ways, like attached to self and to life and to all kinds of things. Most people, most of us, are probably more attached to than we realize. One of the functions of meditation is to get quiet enough and still enough to see the depth of how attached we are. That really helps because many people are mystified why they suffer so much, because they don't see the operating principles of what's really going on in the depth of the mind. You really have to have a very still, focused, clear mind to see the underlying structures of attachment that are operating, that really need to be touched for the kind of liberation of the heart that the Buddha was talking about.

So this mindfulness practice has many different functions and values in our life. The last one I'll mention—the Buddha once taught that mindfulness practice is a preeminent practice for protecting oneself and for protecting others. There's a delightful little story or vignette that

the Buddha told. He said there was an acrobat and an acrobat's assistant, and they would do the acrobatic tricks, I guess for donations. They were going to put on their show one day, and the apprentice said to the assistant—the apprentice, the acrobat said to the apprentice, "Let's go do our tricks. But while we do them, why don't you pay attention to me carefully and I'll pay attention to you?" Because acrobats, they would do on top of each other. The devices they were using for acrobats was their bodies. So they would climb up on each other and stand on each other's hands and heads and do things. So the idea was, "Why don't you watch over me, and I'll watch over you, and that way we'll stay safe?" The apprentice said, "No, I'll watch over myself, and you watch over yourself, and that way I will be safe." So they went to the Buddha and said, "Who was right?" The Buddha said, "This is how it is, at least not outside, roof, but acrobats. But," he said, "If you pay attention to yourself through mindfulness, that's how you'll protect others." That's a powerful statement. One of the ways it protects others, it protects them from you, which is not a small thing, right? To become a safe person in the world.

So in this discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha opens up by saying there is a direct way for the purification of beings: how to purify the mind and heart, to overcome sorrow, distress, lamentation, to realize liberation, to experience *nibbāna*—the direct way. That direct way, he said, is to practise the four foundations of mindfulness, or the four foundations for cultivating awareness, this lucid awareness. Then he enumerated what those are. The first foundation is the foundation of mindfulness of the body, awareness of the body. The second is mindfulness of what's called feeling tones, and we'll talk about that in a few weeks. The third is mindfulness of the mind. The fourth is mindfulness of what's called *dhammā*. A simple way of discussing it may be the inner mental processes that either bring us suffering—the ways we contribute to our own suffering and how our minds operate—or the inner processes that lead to liberation. To be able to have one of the values of this deep mindfulness is to see these paths that the mind can take, and the mind can take a path towards more suffering and a path to freedom. To see those paths makes a world of difference, because then we can take one more than the other. We can support one rather than the other. We really know it for ourselves from the inside out.

What's nice about these four areas is they go kind of from the outside in to deeper, more subjective areas of ourselves. It's a beautiful path, the route of mindfulness, that as we do this practice, we become more and more intimate, deeper. We touch ourselves in deeper subjective ways than in more higher quality ways than many people have in ordinary life. So body, in a sense, in this kind of framework, is kind of like the outermost circle of who we are, the first

thing we contact, the easiest thing to experience. In the Buddha talked about mindfulness of the body, he talked about things like being mindful of when you are walking. It's not too difficult to know you're walking. That doesn't require a lot of sophistication—when you're sitting, when you're standing, when you're putting on your clothes, when you're urinating, when you're defecating. All these different parts of life are included. You only become aware of what the sensations and experiences of your body are, the heart, so that's got a little bit coarse. It's a little bit like, you know, the coarse body. What's here you can tap and feel yourself. Then a little bit more subtle—it takes a little more care and attention to notice—is not just the physicality, but what they mean, what it feels like to experience the physicality. So there's experiencing what it feels like to experience it. Is it pleasant? Is it unpleasant? That's a little bit more getting a little bit more under the skin, in a sense, to experience something a little more subjective as we settle in, more and more subjective, and deeper inside, closer to kind of what some people might say: who we are is the state of our minds or the quality of our hearts.

The quality of our mind is one of the things we are hoping to become the caretaker of in terms of this jewel that we have in our lining. The quality of our mind is one of the most important things that we have. It turns out the only person who can really safeguard and care for and be responsible for the quality of your own mind, quality of your own heart, is yourself. To forfeit that responsibility and expect someone else to take care of it for you makes people kind of impoverished and sets up a condition that can just make a lot of suffering. But to learn how to be the caretaker of your own heart is one of the great tasks of a lifetime. To be able to track one's mind, heart, the quality, and keep it good, keep it open, keep it in a way that you feel really comfortable to live in your own heart, comfortable to live in your mind, is a beautiful thing.

But then going even more subjective, more deep than the quality of the mind, is all the different little movements, factors, activities of the mind, what the mind actually does that contribute to the quality of the mind. These are movements of desire, or movements of joy, movements of equanimity and peace, movements of mindfulness, movements of aversion, movements of clinging, movements of letting go, movements of a real insight into experience. That's the fourth foundation. Now we're really getting into something that feels very intimate, very personal, very satisfying to really be here because of this. This is where the liberation begins to happen, where it can really unfold.

So I like to think of the four foundations of mindfulness—when we do this kind of practice—as if we're setting forth on a journey. The Buddha talked of the path. He said it was a direct



path. But I'd like to think of a journey, and that it's not a quick fix. It's not like just, you know, find the button and push that button, and you'll be happier ever after. But it's a journey that can take years of developing and cultivating awareness, different intentional faculties. We have developing it to a degree that we become more useful for us. Also, as we do it, a lot of self-understanding, a lot of not just self-understanding, but understanding of our life in some deep way. It's a fantastic journey. It's a journey of a lifetime to do this—there's no end to it. But I've found that in this now, over forty years, that in doing this kind of practice, it just seems to get better and better. I'm just delighted by it all. That's not uncommon for me to—it occurred to me as I go about my life, you know, in getting busy in stuff, and so, you know, Gil, you know, maybe you shouldn't be, you know, so preoccupied in your thoughts so much as you are. Why don't you just kind of, you know, relax and be aware a bit more, be aware what's happening? So I'll do it, and I kind of like begin to smile. I'm just so happy. I'm just like a little bit amused, a little bit delighted, a little bit kind of content, a little bit that just makes me happy. Maybe that makes me weird to be happy just being aware. I mean, you know, there's no monetary value, but it's a beautiful thing. It's like this treasure, this jewel that's there. To be able to feel it—so there it is, and part of the jewel of it, part of the treasure of it.

This is, at some point, what you might discover—that inherent in a lucid state of awareness is freedom. Maybe not a hundred percent freedom, but you can have a palpable feeling of the freedom, the openness, the non-attachment, the non-clinging, the spaciousness. My experience, I think it's true, is it's one of the most deeply satisfying experiences that a human being can have. It's also, when you do it really well and deeply, it's the most beautiful experience you can have, the most beautiful things I've seen in this universe. I haven't been a lot of places in the universe, but I've been in a lot of places on this planet, been a lot of beautiful places, and the most beautiful thing I've ever seen is a pure mind, the pure mind that's free. It's a wonderful thing. So to even to taste, get a taste of it and the smell of it—sometimes it makes me so happy. So I feel myself lucky to do this thing.

So that's a bit of an overview of this text called The Text on Four Foundations of Mindfulness that's usually translated into English, but I like to translate a little different these days. I like to translate it as the four ways of establishing awareness. We establish awareness through our body. We establish this wonderful awareness through attention to the feeling tones of our experience. We establish awareness through attention to the quality of our mind or heart. We establish awareness through paying attention to these inner mental processes as they operate. To have this awareness established, that's the great thing.

So these four foundations of mindfulness, this text that we'll be talking about, is kind of like

the anthem of the Vipassanā movement. I think of it like a poem, though. If you read—if some of you went home, try to read it today, you'd say, "What is Gil thinking? A poem?" Probably, if you've never read it before, you probably won't get through it. Probably put you to sleep. But you know, if you live with it for a while and this practice that comes alive, it's an artificial text that isn't like the Buddha sat down and just started teaching, you know, like this is how he taught. Rather, it was probably composed some, maybe some decades, centuries after the Buddha had died, and it was an attempt by the tradition to bring together a lot of the different attentional practices that the Buddha taught, and house them in one place, and coordinate them together in such a way to show how they can work together to develop this lucid awareness, this path of practice. So it's very intentionally constructed. It's one of the most kind of almost numerical, constructed and organized. But the reason I think of it as a poem or a song is that there are thirteen main verses—kind of not verses, but my funny way of thinking. Then in between, the refrain, and the refrain gets repeated after each exercise. So thirteen exercises, after each exercise, a refrain. The refrain for years—when I read this text, I ignored it. It's kind of boring. It's kind of technical. It gets repeated over and over again. You repeat things because it's important. Turns out this may be that it's a singer's—it's pointing to what's most important as we kind of develop this mindfulness practice.

So over these weeks that I do this, we'll talk about the four foundations of my fully established ways of establishing awareness, and how we engage different attentional faculties to kind of go along. Then we will also talk about that refrain, and especially as we get further along, and how that refrain points to things very important. What I have in mind to do also is the second half of the sitting that we do this Monday evening. We sit from seven thirty to seven forty-five, the last fifteen or twenty minutes. So twenty minutes to do a guided meditation that kind of relates to what I be teaching that evening, and maybe that will make it come a little more alive or more meaningful for you, and it gives you more sense of how this can be done when what is being talked about. So that's the plan when I'm here. So you have to look, if you know, just come all the time, and then I'll be here sometimes. So we have about five minutes before nine. Do you have any comments, questions, or protests about this?

I tried to answer this question myself to other people, but I think unsuccessfully. When I think in terms of—I'll just describe the way I think—in terms of our thinking mind, which is not, I believe, it's not the mind that's doing the observing. But I think that there's maybe—is there a technical word or description for a mind, the place where the observation is coming from, is actually doing the observing, which is separate from the conscious thinking mind? There might, you know, if we know these ancient texts, ancient teachings, it's possible there might

be something, but nothing jumps out because I think they prefer not to posit such a thing, where it comes from, because then you get into the danger of then assuming that whatever that is, some kind of essence, some kind of eternal essence, permanent essence, like a soul or a self or something like that. This ancient tradition is very reluctant to solidify anything into something. It's all process. So it's all this stuff working together.

But you know, your me. I'll say this. Then we'll stop because you've brought up thinking. It's one thing—no one else. I'm just going to be the last word here I can give. A strange job I have—I get to talk and talk, and nowhere else in my life can I go or just talk like this. But so let's see. So this thinking thing, I wanted to say something I was thinking about lately. I noticed recently that I've said I've been doing this for over forty years, right? And I still forget. So one thing I forget sometimes is, so I don't say about thinking—there are different kinds of thinking. So if we just make a kind of categorical statement about thinking, as if thinking is just one thing, we do ourselves a disservice. But one form of thinking is discursive thinking. We're having conversations. We're planning our meals. We're arguing with our boss. We're, you know, remembering our wonderful, whatever. So it's kind of like, you know, like having conversation or showing a movie to yourself or something. That's a relatively coarse way of thinking. It's easy to get pulled into that world—planning, thinking, figuring out, solving problems, chasing after desires, all kinds of things. Then we do, and there's a wonderful way in which this discursive thinking camouflages itself because we get so interested in it, either positively or negatively, that we get pulled into it, and we don't even know we're doing it. So I can do that. Still I know I'm doing some important things I have to do, you know, and I forget until I sit down to meditate sometimes how good it is not to do that. Oh, this is good, you know. But what struck me was, after forty years, I still forget this. Somehow I get so caught up—not dramatically, but if you like, "Oh, here we are again. Great," and it's so. May your discursive mind take frequent vacations and provide you with more peace. Thank you.