

Foundations of Mindfulness Part 3 - Refrain

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February 04, 2019

Keywords: Four Foundations of Mindfulness, sati, mindfulness of breathing, refrain, non-clinging, impermanence, embodied awareness, right effort, liberation, present moment awareness

So some of you know I started a series this January on the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. And so for the Monday evenings here, I might go through the progressive teaching on these *four foundations of mindfulness*. This is often considered to be the foundational teachings on mindfulness taught by the Buddha, from which springs all the many forms of mindfulness practice that come out of Buddhism, and even some of the secular mindfulness teachings that are taught now in the West. Some of them will also trace themselves back to this text. How much that actually comes from this text is a little up for grabs. But still, the text is considered to be foundational, and I think of the text as providing a journey, a journey with awareness, to recurrent state that we're in, to liberation.

It offers thirteen or so exercises in cultivating a heightened sense of awareness. Last time I was here, I talked about the first of these so-called exercises, which has to do with mindfulness of breathing. At the end of that section of the text, there's what's called a refrain. It's the same paragraph that's repeated after each of those thirteen mindfulness exercises. I would like to talk first about the refrain. Then, for those of you who weren't here before, I will go back a little bit and review the first exercise, and then move on from there and talk about two more of them.

As an introduction or further introduction to this, what I'm going to say today is, in some spiritual circles, an instruction that some teachers will give takes the form of a dialogue that goes something like this. Someone comes to a teacher and says that I'm searching for the truth. I'm searching for liberation. I'm searching for spiritual something, and the teacher will say, What you're searching for is in the seeking. What you're searching for is in your seeking. That's a kind of a peculiar answer, but what it does is it takes the attention and turns around

a hundred eighty degrees to look at the nature of what you're doing—you're searching and looking.

I think of it a little bit like someone who has glasses, like me, thinking that I don't know where my glasses are, and I go around looking for them. Then someone says, What are you doing? I'm looking for my glasses, and they say, What's right on your nose? Somehow I've forgotten that they're there, and so I'm looking through the glasses. But what I was looking for is right there, kind of in the seeing itself. So to say it in a different way, what you're looking for is in the looking.

This kind of turning around relates a little bit to this mindfulness practice, because what we're doing is developing our attention, our capacity for awareness, to be strong enough that we can almost turn it around, and it can see itself. As it sees itself, in order for that to happen, awareness can no longer be preoccupied by what it's seeing. If you're searching for something, always looking elsewhere for it, and so busy looking, you're not going to see the nature of the looking, the seeing. You have to somehow become free of the preoccupation, the concern, the attachments to the things we're usually concerned about, so that we can allow the attention to turn around and turn away from what we're concerned with. And look at the nature of concern itself, for example.

If we're upset about something, in mindfulness practice, we turn it around and look at the nature of upset, not what we're upset about. If we want something, we turn around and look at the nature of the wanting, not looking at what it is we want. This kind of turning around to take a deep look, and the way that's worded in this text is, at least my interpretation, in the opening, it says putting aside desire and distress about the world. So you can put something aside—the concern with what's in the world you put aside—so you can do this amazing process of really being present for your experience of how we are in the world, as opposed to concerned with the world itself. To some degree, we have to always take these kinds of teachings with a grain of salt, and understand that it's contextual what they're saying, rather than universalizing their teaching must apply everywhere. But kind of related to this idea of encouraging people to turn around and not always be looking in the world for solutions.

Sometimes our teachers will talk about trying to adjust the world so it just works perfect for you is like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. I'm sure it can look good as you go down, but it's not going to keep you from going down. So the idea of Don't be so concerned with the world, at least when you're doing this practice. Other times we should be concerned; there are things to be concerned about. But if you want to do this at a transformative, liberating movement, we turn around.

The refrain talks about what the mindfulness practice is aiming to do for us as we do the practice of mindfulness. We're developing this capacity for awareness so that it has certain characteristics. The aim, where we're going in this practice, is described in the refrain. The refrain can be interpreted as providing a journey, a four-part journey that shows four different phases of the deepening of awareness's ability to turn around and be here, really be here. So then the searching mind, the wanting mind, the preoccupied mind is turning around, and feels kind of powerfully present. In Buddhism, we say awake in the sense that the awareness is palpable, is visceral, is almost somatic in just being here.

So there's a four-step journey. I think maybe what might work is to go through that journey backwards, so you see where the goal is, the end, and then see, as we go backwards, what precedes it that leads to the end and back like that. It's four parts in this refrain, and it says, so that the end result is one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. Remember this thing about the world and turning around and not being caught up in the world? This is actually—as long as we're clinging, attached to things in the world, there is no freedom. That's not a rejection of the world, but it's bringing to an end this movement of holding, clinging, resisting, wanting that can be so perpetual in some minds, and then abiding independent, no longer dependent.

It may be not quite right to translate that into English as independent, because that works really well in the United States, where independence is so important. The literal Pāli word meaning, the original language, is dwelling not dependent on anything. The distinction is that some people, when they hear an idea of being independent, they think they are just free to do whatever they want. Not dependent has a little different connotation. It means that we're not basing our life in dependency on what other people will do for us. Our happiness is not dependent on finances, status, looks, recreational opportunities. All the kinds of things people are looking for in order to be happy is not dependent on anything.

This idea of finding a sense of freedom and happiness that can dwell within, that doesn't require anything to be there—not searching for something out there that's going to be the magic trick that can do it for us. Many people are spending a lot of time rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic just so they get everything just right, and then they'll be happy. Then the particular deck, the particular boat they're on, begins to go down. Sometimes they just jump ship to another one until that one goes down. In a lot of cases, some people are just moving around between all these things that are slowly disappearing and going, and thinking they can be ahead of it. So to abide not dependent, to abide not requiring anything, is a powerful state to be in.

This movement in Buddhism towards liberation, to freedom, to awakening, is in fact a very powerful, significant transformation of how we live in the world and how we relate to the world. Relating to the world, not dependent on anything, our happiness not requiring anything. Happiness is not requiring the outer world to comply to all my desires and things. That's the direction. And free. So there's a freedom from clinging, not clinging to anything in the world.

Repeatedly in these ancient texts, the Buddha refers to a liberation as liberation from non-clinging, not holding on, not tight. I kind of like to think of it almost as clinging is going around with a fist, and a fist, you know, is useful for some things. So you don't want to be too critical of a fist. But if you walk around with the fist, people give you a wide berth. After a while it gets tired, and it's hard, and then we justify having a fist, and we think we have to kind of organize a little world around our fists or make everything work for our fist, and it's limited, right?

But when we can release the clinging, it's kind of like releasing the fist—the fist of the heart, the fist of the mind. The amazing thing that can happen when the fist opens, when the hand opens: first of all, the fist doesn't exist when the hand is open. What happens to the fist? It's one of the wonderful things that only exists when it's being done. But what happens when the fist opens? The soft spot of the hand becomes exposed—the tender part, the part that's really sensitive right in the middle.

The idea is that if we can release the fists of the heart, the clings of the mind, there is heightened sensitivity that's available to the world. It's not uncommon for people to associate that with compassion, but it can be many things that's there. In that sensitivity, that heightened sensitivity that we're capable of, is kept in check, is kept hidden, or tucked away when we go around always clinging. So it's non-clinging, not depending on anything, and not clinging to anything in the world. So how do we get there? If that's the goal, how do we get there?

The step before that is described this way: there is mind, one has mindfulness that there is a body. This mindfulness is simply established to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. A little bit of paraphrasing here: a mindfulness that there is a body is simply established to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. As this mindfulness practice develops and gets stronger, and we're no longer caught up and preoccupied by the world around us, our experience begins to purify itself or simplify itself. Even if we're really here and not concerned out there, it's so easy to be caught up in commentary and ideas and stories of myself and who I am, and my worth, and what I need to do, and right and wrong. We're doing mindfulness of the body here, so we're paying attention to the body, developing

mindfulness of the body.

You know, my body is too big, too small, too much this, and all these issues of my body, and I feel like my body—I hope no one's looking at me, I hope everyone's looking at me, and all this stuff that goes on, right? It's complicated. For all these complications, the stories and the commentary and the judgments, they get simpler and simpler, and they can fall away, so that what we're left with is a simple, very simple awareness that's simple here in the present moment. It's not in the past. It's not in the future. It's not assigning meaning to anything.

It's valuable because it feels really good to have all those different kinds of contractions, clingings relax and settle, to have attention become so simple that when you feel your body, you just recognize this as a body—not a good body, not a bad body, just a body. It's just allowed to be as it is. In mindfulness is established, awareness is established just enough. I love this expression: just to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. The word bare—I love this word bare. The usual understanding of this is that bare means awareness without stories, awareness without the filter of concepts, of ideas that we have.

Very, very simple awareness right here. Now, that's a difficult place to come to because we're so often so wedded to our stories, our commentary, our judgments, our interpretations, our concepts of how things are. So it's not easy to get there. But to really do this in a dedicated, deep way, and develop the awareness, turning it around, let everything else kind of settle down and quiet down, and come to this place of stability and tremendous clarity where we just see things very simply as it actually is—a phenomenal state. In that state is what is the precursor for being able to abide not depending on anything and not clinging to anything. So the preceding step is this very simple awareness, very simple presence that is no longer for and against anything, no longer making stories, but just there with our direct experience.

That allows something to let go, that allows us to discover this place of nondependence. So how do we get there to that place? That's what's described just before that—a little better, an earlier or more a phase or a coarser state of mind. There is more awareness. Awareness is more active, more engaged. It sees more.

Here it says, One observes in the body phenomena arising. One observes in the body phenomena passing away. One observes in the body phenomena rising and phenomena passing away. It's a very particular way in which this ancient literature talks about seeing impermanence, seeing the changing nature of phenomena. In order to see and hear what we're looking for, what we're seeing is the general characteristics, general character of all phenomena that happens in the body—all the sensations, all the feelings, all the emotions. Anything that can be considered a bodily experience is seen as something that's fleeting and transitory and

inconstant and coming and going.

That can't be seen that way when we're seeing the world through our concepts, through our ideas, through our searching for something out there, and we see it, and we project onto it, and there's a tremendous amount of projection that human minds do on their experience. Part of that projection is to put a label on it, a concept on it, that this is how it is. The nature of concepts is concepts—kind of Platonic, like Plato had these concepts—they're kind of like permanent. Plato thought concepts were permanent. There's something about a concept that kind of has, you know, it doesn't—concept doesn't exist, right? Just like, I don't know, just, you know, just some idea in the mind, right?

But, you know, is the idea of a bell, and then I have, you know, no idea what a bell is, and the image of the bell doesn't necessarily change so much. It's just the bell. But when you look at your body, and we stop making these concepts and ideas and overlay on them, and really can be in the direct experience, really what's going on in the body—the visceral, the alive, the dynamic, the experience of just being embodied—it's fruitful, changing and flowing. It's like you don't have to do chemotherapy. You don't get the energy to get the energy going. The energy is flowing and moving, and things are changing, and there's no resistance.

There's no bottling up. There's no contraction, coagulation. There's no hardening of the whole experience of having a body. It's all fluid and flowing, because that's the nature of the body if it weren't for these concepts, which get things kind of stuck. So to be able to see things arising and passing and coming and going is a pretty high level of mindfulness that requires quieting down, the settling of all these concepts and ideas that we have, so we can see something directly. Then, as we see things arise and pass, a remarkable thing that can happen there is that we realize that there's nothing here for me to be clinging to.

There's nothing here for me to do and make happen. There's nothing here that I have to do except surf on this—be with it. Just become the flow of all this stuff, and this seeing rising and passing and learning to step back more and not cling. Then a lot moves into the phase I just talked about, where there is just knowledge, the simplicity of just bare knowledge, and mindfulness just there with experience in a very simple way. To rest in that kind of equanimity and peace, and non-reactivity, non-clinging, not wanting anything, it just rests there, is what helps the mind discover the final stage of nondependence, not clinging to anything in the world.

So how do I get to observe the arising and passing of phenomena? Well, that's the stage before that in the four-part stage. That is where it describes: one abides contemplating the body as a body internally, and one abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or

one abides contemplating body as a body both internally and externally. No one knows what this means, really, and so. But there's plenty of interpretations, and so I'll give you a little bit of interpretation based on my experience of going through some of this process.

As we settle in, we start becoming mindful and aware of our experience wherever it's occurring, whether it comes from an external stimulus—there's a sound, or the wind blows against our cheek, or there's a smell or something—we're aware of the experience, the actual sense experience of that as it's happening. So the external world as it impinges on our senses, and we're aware internally of what goes on in the body—all the sensations, all the nerves that are stimulated there as different things go on. We start cultivating this awareness that can sit back and observe. The language is observe, to see. I love the idea of observing, because for me observing is also associated with kind of laying against a nice tree on a nice day, and just observing, watching what goes on, watching the show go by, rather than studying or probing. It's just like, Just observe and watch what happens.

So it's cultivating abilities of watching everything that's happening in all our different sense doors. Just learning how to be there, present in a very simple way, as things begin occurring as they occur in the present moment, in direct experience. So we cultivate the ability to be observing what's happening in the present moment, in the experiences of our body, sensations of our body, the senses. We're observing it, coming back, coming back, doing it again and again. The mind settles down. As it does that more and more, we see that what we're observing is just phenomena that's transitory and changing.

As we observe, it's constantly changing. Something begins to relax and release and stop, you know. We don't fight. We don't try to make anything anymore, make up anything, project anything. Then we just allow things to be just very simple. We're very present, experience just what it is.

We allow things to be, but there's no overlays of stories and ideas or wanting and not wanting and trying to fix and do something. Just bare knowledge and mindfulness, just enough. That being so settled and bare and settled, and not trying to do anything and being relaxed and peaceful, that allows something to let go to a place where we know that we're not clinging to anything in the world. So this four-step process describes this journey. You'll find in these ancient texts repeatedly, so many ways, the path of practice described as a journey because it unfolds over time, and so the deepening that goes on.

What precedes this is the exercise on mindfulness of breathing—the first exercise of this text, which I talked about two weeks ago. Here, it says that one goes to a forest or an empty hut, sits down, crosses one's arms, and sits upright, and establishes this mindfulness, and then

becomes mindfully aware that they're breathing. Now, when first it becomes aware of the qualities, the characteristics of one's breathing, and one starts tuning in to the experience of breathing. Many different religious traditions emphasize the role of mindfulness of breathing. It's a wonderful place to wait to calm down, just hanging out with your breath. It's a wonderful way to begin disengaging from all our business of the world and let go some stress and just come back and be here with experiences.

Be here. The mind wanders off, and we come back to the breathing. The mind wanders off, and you come back. This idea of coming back and starting over and over again slowly begins to soften the momentum of our preoccupations, concerns of the day, the stresses of the day. They settle down. Things relax.

As they relax, then at some point, when we're no longer caught up in the world and the concerns and everything so much, and we're able to be with our breathing more, it's relatively common for people to become more aware of their body. It's just, How here I am. I even hardly knew I was a body. I was just running around so much and start noticing here in a body. It's not uncommon for people who are busy, when they kind of start settling down and relaxing in meditation, to realize how much stress they carry in their body, the tensions they carry—their shoulders, their belly, their face, their eyes, and all these different places. That's not a mistake to see that. That's actually part of the unfolding and deepening to see that.

So the instructions are, when you see that, first, says the first instructions are: See that. So relax, stay with your breathing, stay with the breathing. As you continue with your breathing, and you start feeling what's going on in the body, and you feel the tensions and stuff in the body, get to know it, feel it, know it, experience it. After you get to know it well, it's very nice. I said you just experience it. So many of us are fixers. If there's a problem, we're going to fix it. Tension is bad. I'm going to figure out some way to get rid of it and stop it, and we get busy.

Might be sitting meditating happily for, you know, the duration of four minutes, and then start noticing you're kind of tense. Something has to happen. So you move around, you get up, you do some yoga, you sit down and it hasn't gone away. Three minutes later you're sitting there just as tense shoulders. So what's the solution, right? Probably a solution is to get in your car and go to a massage parlour and get a massage, and then come back and meditate when you're in better shape, you know, in two years or something.

We want to fix things and make things better, and if we can't do it, then I'm upset with myself, and meditation is not working. Part of what we're trying to do, learning in meditation, is to learn to be with discomfort and be relaxed about it, to be with it and not fight it or fix it and

do everything. So seeing the discomforts of the body, the tensions we hold, it's a powerful teaching, is a powerful lesson to learn—how to be present for it without it needing to go away, not depending on anything, including not depending on our discomfort going away, and just let it be there for a little while. Then the Buddha's instructions are: The final piece of this exercise is, as you continue with this breathing exercise, being with the breath, being with the breath, and you have noticed the tensions of your body and you've learned how to be with it without being too reactive to it, then the Buddha says, Relax it. Relax. Soften the body. Let it relax.

This is not a process of tuning in to the breath. Being with the breath strengthens awareness of the present moment. As our awareness of present moments deepens, we become aware of what's going on in our body, the impact of how we live our lives, to a big degree. Then we train ourselves to be aware and present for something that's uncomfortable, and it helps just to keep breathing. Breathe through it. Breathing is kind of the ballast that keeps us from getting too reactive and keeps us relaxed. Just feel what's going on. Be with it. Then after you've been in for a while, if it feels like the right time and it's easy enough, soften, relax the tensions of the body. Maybe you can't do much at first, but you can do a little bit. Then maybe some minutes later, or some days later, something more happens, and some of it you can do yourself, some of it is just done to you as you sit.

It's an amazing process that as you stay present and feel and connect to yourself and really make room for you to experience yourself, things begin to relax themselves. I think of the process of mindfulness as a process of giving breathing room to your experience. You give lots of room to it, and then it can unfold. It's like taking the lid off the jack-in-the-box. So you take the lid off all the tight way we hold our tensions and stuff, and it'll let go. It'll slowly relax over time.

When I first started meditating, I chronically held my stomach really tight. So one of the things I did in meditation was maybe a couple of times, not much more than that. Each time I meditated, I would try relaxing it. Beginning, maybe halfway through, it took me actually two years before my stomach would stay relaxed. But that was really worthwhile. That was two years well spent. But I didn't make it like, now, I didn't like the whole period of meditation just focus on relaxing that belly. I really relax it. You may get all tense, relaxing it. I just periodically got to check in and relax, center, relax.

This process of staying with the breath, feeling the body, relaxing the body begins to heighten our sense of present moment awareness. We're training ourselves not to be distracted, but to be here. We're training ourselves to feel what's here. If you feel and experience your body,

you're present, and there's present moment awareness. Relaxing, as we relax more, relaxing kind of releases a certain kind of energy of awareness. It makes energy awareness more easy to be. The more relaxed we are, the more the capacities for sensing and feeling come alive. The more tense we are, the more sensing, being aware, closes down, goes numb.

This feeling of aliveness comes. Awareness feels alive, and it starts feeling more satisfying to be present, to be here, to be aware here, than it is to go back into being preoccupied, back into thinking about the future, the past, what I have to fix, what I have to do, all these things. That's a fantastic kind of tipping point to come to in meditation that we come to periodically and have to come back to again. It isn't like you stay there, but you come to this place. You're settled enough, peaceful enough that you really feel, can see clearly. Why would I agitate my mind when I've gotten so calm? Why would I pick something up? Why would I pick up the hot coal when I don't have to? Why would I start thinking about tomorrow and all this, what's going on? Because it feels so good to be here, present, peaceful, all that.

So it feels more and more like home to be here and present. That allows us to begin observing what's happening here internally, externally, all the senses. As we observe it, we observe that things are constantly changing, flowing, and moving. As we see that it's constantly flowing and moving, we can simplify our relationship to it all. Just let it be. Let it be. Awareness, mindfulness, knowledge, and understanding of what's happening becomes very simple because experience becomes kind of simple.

That ability to be very simple, efficient, peaceful with what is there—it can seem very simple-minded because so little is going on there. You're not solving problems of quantum physics. You're not figuring out your taxes, and you're not figuring out the best date for a Saturday night. You're just there in a simple, very satisfying, happy, peaceful way. It's when that can be experienced—satisfied, contented, happy, peaceful here—then at some point the mind releases, the heart opens up, the fist opens up, and we experience what it's like to be alive, to be breathing, to be alert, to be attentive without depending on anything, not requiring anything to be any different, not clinging to anything in the world.

So here we're describing a process, right? Do you see that? Each of the exercises, the thirteen exercises, are the way, setting it up on the way, to start this four-part process that's described in the refrain that leads to liberation. This is the next piece of this text. We'll go through more of these exercises as we go along. Then we'll touch into this refrain quite briefly, because they are at the end of each one. All these exercises are exercises which are—the purpose is to set in motion this journey that's described in the refrain. Their purpose is to heighten our awareness of present moment experience so that our present moment awareness can begin

doing this work of unfolding this journey to liberation.

Some of these exercises have to do with the body, and through the vehicle of embodied awareness that we start the process. Another exercise is about doing it through what's called feelings—we'll talk about in some weeks. The exercise has to do with mind states, fascinating topic, and then the last one has to do with beginning to five exercises having to do with understanding the mental processes that operate in our minds that either lead us to bondage or lead us to freedom. So these are, in some total, thirteen different exercises. They lead to the cultivation, the deepening of this awareness that I like to suggest is a little bit similar to what you're searching for is in the seeking. What you're seeking is in the searching. Turn around and see what's here and find your peace there. What you're looking for is there.

So hopefully it will make some sense. If it didn't make sense to some of you who are new to all this, I don't know. Maybe you'll have beginner's luck. So we have five minutes before the nine o'clock closing time, so maybe there's time for one or two questions about this. Anybody like to ask something, or make a comment, or give a testimonial about how something like this has worked for them, and how they recognize it?

Are there to be that? Sit on, yes. So where I get stuck with this a little bit is in the process of trying to learn something. This makes so much sense. It has given me just enormous benefit in my life for decades. But again, where I get stuck is if I'm trying to master something or learn something and I'm struggling with it, and it seems like there's some benefit in the clinging.

Yes, as long as it's beneficial to cling, keep doing it. Well, it also causes some suffering. So at some point, you have to decide what the balance is. Is it more beneficial or more harmful? Then you can decide which way to go. Okay, so that striving can have benefit, yes, at times, at times.

But you know, if a friend of yours has made you a delicious meal, they spent days making this meal for your birthday or something, and you show up and you're really clinging to winning the California lottery, you know, and you're checking lottery numbers and doing equations and calculations, and you're eating the food they made, but you are actually doing all your calculations for what kind of numbers to choose, and you don't hardly notice your eating. So you know that's the wrong time to be clinging to lottery numbers. You should let go of that and be with your friend's meal that they made. As a silly way of saying that striving, certain clings may be useful in some settings, but not in other settings. Hopefully you know how to put them down when they're not useful. But if you think it's useful to cling, and you're better off because of it, who am I to say that you shouldn't cling?

But it's very useful and painful, and I probably need to work more with the balance. Yes, some say, and so what happens. One of the benefits of mindfulness is that we start seeing the cost of the clinging more and more, and at some point the cost-benefit analysis doesn't come out in favour of clinging. So you must be careful with mindfulness because you might not get the information you want. You get all the answers out, whereas the clinging had a lot of hope to it. The hope was, but after a while, you know, hope is vague, like, you know, imaginary. So sometimes you see why there's more out here than there is, you know, hope, you know. So maybe it's not worth it. Maybe there's something. Maybe there's another way.

When I teach the kids programs in order to teach them about the value of not clinging, I show them, I hold the bell in my hand like this. I grasp it. It's really tight. I'm clinging, right? But you can still hold the bell. You don't want to throw it away, or not have a bell, but you don't want to cling to it. Look what happens when you don't cling to it. So that's a cling—when you drop the thing you're clinging to. Not necessarily a thing that's a problem. Not all things we cling to need to be abandoned. It's the clinging we drop. Thank you.

So I just got a—I think partly what I'm asking about is how much it has to do with right effort. Yes, that's life. You said you've been benefiting from this for a long time. Right figuring out, right left, right effort goes on forever. You'll never get the right effort finally. Right goes in a little shift. Part of it's like a surfer right on her surfing. Finally I know, you know, now I know how to ride the wave. I want to do anything, but just be still. You're constantly adjusting, right? So the right effort in meditation and mindfulness is constantly changing, adjusting. After all, it's kind of fun.

Well, I hope this was useful for you, gave you some maybe inspiration about this practice, and maybe helps this text, which can be very dry, become a little more alive, and maybe see how it's more relevant. As we go through these different exercises, I hope that it shows you a little bit or teaches you or highlights for you ways that you could cultivate and develop a heightened sense of awareness, and why you might want to do that. Why it would be useful for you. So in the meantime, breathe, feel, and relax. Thank you.