

## Foundations of Mindfulness Part 11 - Five Aggregates

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So I'll continue my talks on the four foundations of mindfulness. And we're getting now towards the end of the series of talks, and kind of the end of the journey. And as I've been emphasizing, the way that the mindfulness practice is taught in the sutta can be interpreted as providing a journey of deep—I like the metaphor going deep. So going deeper and deeper into the practice. Some people may use metaphors of height, and go higher and higher, but I like deeper because it's more grounded, it's less disconnected, high. Sometimes people get higher in space and also deeper.

For me, it's like you go deep inside, deep, really connect oneself and deep in a good way. And so it's a journey to this very deep connection. And at some point in this connection, you get to a place where there's some choice, and you start seeing the place of choice, and in the ability to see that we have some choice about how we relate to our life, how we use our minds. It's a very powerful thing to see if we can also know how to exercise that choice. And in particular, having to do with the attachments that bring about a lot of suffering that people have, if we can see there's some choice about how to be involved in attachment and choose not to be. It makes a huge difference in life.

So it can be said that a lot of the earlier exercises of mindfulness have a function. Part of their function is to get settled, calm, and very sensitive, a heightened sensitivity to our present moment experience, especially kind of internally. What's really happening inside of us in our body, our feelings, our emotions, our mind states. And as we develop this heightened sensitivity, an ability to really abide, really kind of stay in the flow of the present moment, then it becomes easier and easier to see where there might be choice, and we can make a difference in how we relate to this world of ours and to ourselves. I find this mindfulness practice remarkable, I think, to be involved in and to have it, a way of not being lost in thought,

to have a way of not being disconnected in abstract ideas and preoccupations, and really kind of begin to allow the natural functioning of our senses, in our capacity to be settled and at peace. It's a beautiful thing.

Today I heard a beautiful definition of the Dharma, and now I see if I have it right on. Some of you were there when I heard it, but maybe I can. You can tell me if I got it right. A: The Dharma is reality's way of finding its way to peace. That's close enough. Reality's way of finding its way to peace. So whatever helps reality, it's unlikely where the person didn't say, You know how I find peace? We know is much more encompassing. Dharma's usually seen as being something, you know, much more than just something personal. I was inspired by that.

So to come into this deeper connection of not being preoccupied, pre preoccupied many times. Much of the preoccupation has to do with self, and find this relief from self concern and self preoccupation, and allow some deeper process to happen. That is not really part of it. If we have choice, and part of it is something that we allow, that which doesn't, that which operates without our choice or allow one deeper process that unfolds the natural process that's within us. It doesn't involve our doing so much. And the play between what we do and the play of what we allow to happen and unfold is this beautiful dance of meditation practice and mindfulness practice.

So here we are practising mindfulness, giving this talk after you've sat for forty five minutes, and most of you look kind of quiet. I hope that's a nice way. I hope you feel a bit more connected to yourself. A little more maybe aware of what's happening. A little more maybe less preoccupied or caught up in your thoughts than when you came. Maybe less tense than when you came. So here we are.

So the fourth foundation of mindfulness involves five different perspectives or exercises for cultivating the deeper insight into what goes on inside of us. And I'd like to again interpret this as a journey, because it starts with coarser insights, or and then we get at once the coarser way the mind operates gets quieter. It gives us actual to see something a little more subtle. And if that gets more subtle, we have a chance to see something more subtle. And then you'll see I'll talk about at the end of the day. Then it opens up to something which is not so common for people to experience. But that is a seven beautiful qualities called that are one of the treasures of a Dharma practice called the Seven Factors of Awakening.

So the coarsest of these is what I talked about last week, is the five hindrances. So these are five major, often major preoccupations that people have that keep people caught up in their thoughts, their concerns, their worries, their fears, their desires, their hates. And the mind will latch on. It's sometimes very hard to get out of it. People can hold resentment for

decades, and that sense of resentment, that second hindrance of ill will, means that it can be so tenacious for some people. Maybe it's not the mind every single moment, but all they have to do is maybe relax, and they find a reservoir of resentment, the kind of still sitting there, reservoir of ill will, reservoir of something that, you know, that we carry with us.

There can be very profound addictions in the human being. And even if we're not always addicted, always wanting, it doesn't take much to realize that the mind, the heart, is kind of always wanting something, reaching out, trying to get something there. There can be a profound sense of regret, of anxiety, of worry, that we're so caught up in all thoughts of worry and what should happen, what do I do, and how do I deal with things, how to become safe. And the world of the five hindrances is very much a world of ideas, the world of concepts and stories. And so we often—the fuel for these five hindrances, or the story making mind. So they're considered to be one of the primary mental forces activities that we want to quiet down when we are going to start being able to really connect this fuller, deeper way of being aware, of being attentive.

And so it's kind of like the door to really being present is to learn about the hindrances and be able to put them aside, not be caught in them, as if there are the more coarser things and we settle down. Then the next coarse thing—I don't know it seems necessarily so linear as the way I'm saying it, but it is as the sequence in the text. The next is a seeing something that's a little bit technical for people who are unfamiliar with is something that's called the five aggregates. You probably didn't know that you had five aggregates in you. The word aggregate is *khandha*, which means something like a heap, five heaps of things. And so what is these five heaps and why are they important? They're primary.

And one of the primary reasons why they're important in the Buddhist analysis of the human, of humanity, human activity, is that these are the five primary areas, at least in ancient India, where people are posited as self, where people identified themselves with, This is who I am. And so here we're still involved with a little bit of ideas, a little bit of kind of, you know, ideas of things when I am this, I am that, I'm not this, I'm not that. And that's deeper, and sometimes operates in more subtle and tenacious ways. Then, you know, desire for sex or resentment toward my high school girlfriend or something, you know, it's—we carry the self with us, a self identity. It's very deeply seated. It's something we're partly we learn from our society, our family, from whatever our psychological conditions are, what we take to be the self.

It was a remarkable experience for me to be intimately living with about thirty five Japanese monks in Japan. We slept in the same room. We ate in the same room together. We had free time together in a free room. We worked together. So we were intense. And Japanese

culture is a collectivist culture. So the idea that, you know, and it was remarkable for me growing up in an individualist culture to have an intimate experience of a collectivist culture, and I could see a very different way in which people understood themselves. They identify or get attached to who they are. I didn't think that the collectivist culture was necessarily a better individualistic one, though. In many ways it can be easily seen that way, but some ways it causes more suffering, different kinds of suffering than the individualistic one.

So rather, in seeing it, one is better than the other. They're just different ways that human societies organize themselves to get around, and somehow get along well enough, we have to have so some kind of principles to organize ourselves with. And so this idea of self identity, This is who I am, that seems like it's just automatic and natural for us to have when we practise deeply and really see what goes on the mind. Or if you go sometimes to different cultures, you see how relative it is, and how much it's a social construct that we're living under. And I saw this very dramatically when I came back from a—well, from being in Asia for some time. And then when after my first son was born, and when he was toddler, and could talk and stuff like that, and maybe it was two or some three somewhere there. And you know, parents, how parents talk, and how they relate to kids, and how parents think that people should get along and operate in the world, has a big impact on these kids. That's what they pick up. They learn from them. And I could see, I was kind of in a surprise to see how thoroughly I was raising my kid to be an individualist. That's the way I was raised. That's the way my cultural background, probably for generations, were, you know, there is no surprise that I would do that. That's what I knew.

What was remarkable was that I saw it rather than seeing it. Rather than seeing it, I thought this was the way the universe was built. You know, just that's how it is, and isn't everyone like this. And then to have had experience both of this kind of deep practice, to watch the little subtle movements of the mind and how we construct our reality to a great degree, and to be in the different culture with a very different understanding of self really helped me to see what I was doing to my child, and I tried very hard. We tried—my wife and I tried very hard to modify how we raised our kids. So somehow not convey that we now The Worst of Individualism individual stick to my son but you now. And so this idea of self, I am this who I am that we often take for granted gets questioned in Buddhism.

It's one of the really big explorations, questionings that we do in Buddhist practice is to take a good look at: Who do I think I am? And what is this self? What do I take to be me, myself, and mine? And not to do it like by taking a class in philosophy and work out the logic of it. But to get quiet enough and still enough and attentive enough to watch the formation of self in the

moment. Then, you know, it can be as simple. You've gotten very calm and settled sitting here. Maybe you've gotten calmer than usual. If you look quite good, you feel like you're really present. After sitting, and now you get up, and it feels like you're like the whole world's getting up with you, because that's so attentive and here, and you quietly go out to get your shoes, and you'd very mindfully. It's pull out your shoes from the shelf, and you put them down. It's just you, the shoes, the floor. And it's so precious. The simplicity. And actually it turns out the shelf is kind of exquisitely beautiful, and you never noticed the shelf was so beautiful. And your shoes. Look at that, you know, shoes. And sometimes meditators like this wow factor.

Oh, suppose, too, you know, you go up putting your shoes, but you're putting on your shoes, but you're already thinking about, you know, tomorrow and what you can say to who tomorrow, and you can effect your putting on the shoes is just like a boring thing. You know, it's uninteresting. As you put down your shoes, put on your shoes, you notice that someone's watching you: Oh, I better show them I know how to put on shoes. I need to be a good shoe putter on, and I need to do it mindfully, because, you know, after all, this is a mindfulness center, and so I better, you know. I need to be, you know, I mean to be a mindful person here. So not only have to be good at putting on shoes, I have to do it very mindfully. And I hope this person noticed that. Is how mindful I am. That's a lot of I, me, my you. Now I have to be, and I want them to see me this way, and I have to do it. So I'm seen as a certain kind of person, you know. It's, you know, and that just has to do with shoes. But this idea of me, myself, and mine goes on for some people all day long, in subtle ways, many times unseen. It's just automatic. It just assumed that that's how things are.

But when we meditate and get quiet and unmindful, what we think is normal. We see that it's an activity of the mind and we have some choice over it. You can be putting on your shoes and you see the thought arise, I need to be the perfect shoe putter on, or today because I'm being watched. And you see that thought arise, and you say, That's ridiculous, you know. Why should I care whether people think I'm a good shoe putter on, and so the thought arises. You see it and you puff. You let it go. If you're there, if you're already thinking about tomorrow, and the conversations you have to have with people, and the concerns and worries, that little thought about being a good shoe putter on might be there in the corner of the mind kind of subconsciously, but it's not really loud enough to be seen, because your loud part of the mind is thinking about tomorrow. And so there's all these kind of back corners of the mind, subtle, sub almost subconscious things going on that accumulate, that have a lot to do with me, myself, and mine.

So these five aggregates are five areas of our life where people tend to, at least in ancient India, according to the Buddha, where people would identify, This is who I am. So the first one is the body, our physical bodily experience. And it doesn't take a lot of reflection to think that there's a lot of attachment connected to self in people's bodies and how they look, what they are. People's self worth is sometimes connected to their body, their form, their hair, their skin color, their nose, their all kinds of things. There's a lot of suffering around this that we perpetuate in our society. But you know, people are so identified with their body, I'm too tall, I'm too short, this that I'm only appealing, I'm only likable because I'm not likeable because of, you know, I have a wart, and so there's a lot of concern about body. And some people say that our culture has an infatuation with youth and staying young.

And so some people exercising a lot and dieting a lot, not because they want to live a healthy, good life, but in order to keep themselves young and attractive, because that's where it's at, is to be physically attractive. So it's a lot of, a lot of attachment around body that goes on. A little more subtle to see is attached to our feelings, the feelings of things being pleasant and unpleasant, the sensations of pleasure and comfort and discomfort. And some people are very preoccupied by that, and the idea of being comfortable or pleasant is kind of what drives their whole orientation in life. And they're constantly trying to be comfortable and have pleasure. Some people think that only if I have pleasure am I successful. Pleasure or pleasant experience is a proof that I've got everything going okay for myself. Unpleasant experience is proof that somehow I failed. Some people think that I somehow identify strongly with this comfort and pain and discomfort, and they somehow wrap up around this is who I am. It's very subtle.

But there's a wonderful exercise that I'll sometimes give to people on retreat when the mind is a little more sharp and a little more can see the subtle differences. What's going on? And that is when we're sitting in pain. Sometimes you sit in meditation, there's pain, and to tell yourself to refer to the pain not as my pain, but as the pain. And some people, by changing that language from my pain to the pain, will find that there's a little more ease with the pain, a little bit more relaxation, not more space for it. There's less preoccupation, less contraction around it. You know, it's the whole idea: my pain, my, my, you know, it comes along with a lot of baggage, a lot of complications, but the pain makes it kind of simple. So there can be a lot of me myself and mine around pain and pleasure.

There can also be some kind of identification with our perceptions of things, that what I perceive is accurate, I or the perceiver, the one who perceives is the real self, or I am right because I see it this way, and it's somewhat connected. That's a third heap or aggregate is the heap

of our perceptions, our concepts, our ideas of what is going on. So identification with ideas, conceptual ideas of what's happening, what's here and there. The fourth heap is a kind of the whole inner world of mental activity. The most simple way of understanding it has to do with our thinking. As a tradition puts a big emphasis, that has to do with intention, intentional thinking, what our motivations are when we're trying to accomplish and do. And this is a whole inner landscape that's quite complex: the thoughts, ideas, memories, plans, projections, ideas. And they have a lot to do with stories. That's what the stories can reside as well. And there can be a very strong identification with the stories, you know, and ideas we have, and interpretations we have, and about ourselves and other people.

And so the simplest maybe way of talking about attachment, self attachment, or identification with this whole heap of the inner thoughts is to see how deeply identified some people are with their opinions, their political opinions, with anything. Some people need to really insist they're right about their opinions, because that's who they are. That kind of defines who they are. Some people hold on to stories because stories reinforce for them who they think they are. It's hard sometimes to feel, you know, to people. Some people really feel I need to be someone. That's how they become safe. That's how they find their way in the world. And so we hold on sometimes to ideas and stories about ourselves that from our life, some of them which are dysfunctional, not so easy helpful. I've known people who held on tightly to stories of their suffering, to being a victim, and on the surface it seems like they're, you know, they're suffering and they don't want to suffer. But some people, if they go deeper inside and see what's driving their stories around being a victim, is that's all they know. That's how the world has related to them, how they got attention, how they've got to be someone clear, and there's a clear sense of, I am this person who's a victim. And not having that helps chaos. And so some people get identified to these stories and ideas, This is who I am.

So the fifth of these heaps, the fifth area of our inner life that is a strong place of identification, this happens especially for people who can be deep meditators or have some very strong spiritual practice, but other people as well. And that is identification to consciousness. That, be a consciousness, is who I am. Yes, all these other things—stories, ideas, perceptions, the experience of the world, that's not who I am. But there is something. There is a kernel. There is, as a core or centre to all this. And that's the consciousness that knows it all. And everything else seems to come and go. But the consciousness, it doesn't seem to come and go. It's always there. And that's who I am. And that's—some people will use language like, That's the true self is as a kind of abiding awareness of consciousness. So the Buddha pointed out that even that can be an attachment to self, holding on.

So as the hindrances quiet down, and people meditate, get quieter, and mindfulness at some point, it isn't a matter of believing ideas that shouldn't identify is bad or wrong, or dismay myself. My preoccupation is somehow, you know, philosophically incorrect. Sometimes in Buddhism they add people. A Buddhist teacher sometimes will give them pass on the idea that there is no self, and then people so as to believe there is no self now and there's nothing to do with it. What happens is, as this is a power of mindfulness to be settled and quiet, if sharp mindfulness really here, we start seeing that there's identification, the movement of clinging on to ideas of me, myself, and mine. We see for ourselves that there's an outlet in it. It actually is uncomfortable. There's a contraction. There's a stress. There's tension in this identification that can happen. And even appropriate identities, we all have identities. Certainly, having identity is not the problem. It's the act of identification with identities, the act of kind of latching on to them, which is where this out can be, this stress can be. I like to think of it as wind drag.

And someone asked me once, And what's the self in Buddhism? And my answer was wind drag, because when we, when we're involved in too active identification with me, myself, and mine, then it slows down. Our mental processes are thinking. We're not as fluid and flexible with what's happening in the moment, because we have this kind of, like, is tightening around something they were holding on to or needing to be, needing to. You need a little louder, returned a little later. And so to sit and meditate and become quiet, and then watch the little thoughts arise. You know, it's something like something as simple as, You know, my knee really hurts. I'd like to move my knee, but I can't because I need to be a good Buddhist. And the Buddhist Centre, you know, because if I move, people think, I'm not a good meditator. That's a lot of selfing going on, a lot of self. So you can watch that and see those thoughts arise. It gives a chance just to put a question mark after those thoughts: Is this really true? Do any of us operate on these thoughts? Is this really wise? Is this really how I take care of my situation is by believing those thoughts automatically.

I, you know, when I was about thirteen or fourteen. My father took me aside a little bit for one of these father-son talks, and he said to me, Gil, from time to time, as you go through your life, you might notice that you have bizarre thoughts. And if that happens, just know that that's normal. You know that that's what happens periodically. Bizarre thoughts. I don't know what can. I didn't understand anything. I was thirteen. And what's he talking about? But years later, lo and behold, I had one or two or so bad thoughts, and I'd been warned about them. So rather than saying, Oh no, I'm a terrible person because I had those thoughts, you know, I'm a bad person, that thought is that having that thought is a proof of my true nature



as being an awful person. To think that it was like, That's a bizarre thought. I've been told I was supposed to, those will append, and so I could see them with much more ease. I didn't make them into myself, then latch on to them. And so to get quiet enough to see how this operates is what I keep emphasizing over, or so important I keep repeating myself here. So it's not a matter of believing. It's a matter of seeing when we do this practice, and seeing how we hold on and how we cling.

Now, in this text where it talks about these five areas—body, feelings, perceptions, they call it something translated in sometimes into English as mental formations and consciousness, these five areas. What it says in the text, the instructions for mindfulness practitioners, is to watch how these phenomena arise and pass. Are they there? They come and they disappear, and some of them you can see come and go quite quickly. You can watch and see, you know, perceptions come and go, or if you really pay attention, or feelings are really fleeting, if you really pay careful attention to them. Some might be a little more enduring, but as the practice gets deeper, we see much more the fluid or the flow of it, the river of these things coming and going. And the advantage of that is when just are getting the flow, then you see them arise and see them go. It's a lot easier to see the wind drag. Or, you know, you see it is a stream, and you're trying to paddle a boat, or flow down a river, and you put something heavy into the water that slows you down. It's much easier to see how we get caught, and we stop the momentum of the flow movement.

The image I like is going down to the river bank with a bucket, and you're watching the river go by, and then you take a bucket, and you scoop up the water in the bucket, and then you walk around some more, and you say, Tell everyone, look! Here's the river—the river is not in the bucket. It's the water is in the bucket. But you didn't. You didn't capture any river at all in the bucket. The river's still back at the river. And so this idea, so you can watch the moment, a more operation of the direct experience of bodily sensations, of the feelings that come along with the sensations, the perceptions that we have with them, the mental formations, the attitudes, the ideas we have around all things and even consciousness flow. Then you can see the times when you take your mind's bucket and you've left the flow of the present moment. And if you can see that, then it's easier to settle back into it and continue to stay in the flow, stay in the flow. Most importantly, not because we got to stay in the flow, if that's the point. The point in Buddhism is to see how we get caught and how we suffer in getting caught round ideas of self, so we can let go.

I don't know what percentage of human suffering has to do with self, but a self identity, self ideas. But I would venture to, if I was going to, you know, at the vote or something, I would

suspect that it's more than fifty per cent of our suffering is related to self. So just as one exercise, even though it's a little technical, maybe difficult to understand if you never heard about what I taught just now, is really powerful, can be a great help in our lives. So when the hindrances get quieter, then it's possible to see this more subtle operation of identification that goes on around these five different areas. And we don't—maybe that was true in ancient India, or that's the framework or the way that the Buddha categorizes these things. They might not work for us exactly the same way how we understand our experience. But the principle of paying attention to how we identify with some aspect of our experience is the same. And that's really where it's the heart of it is. See there making a self out of this. They're claiming this is mine. And there's where I pulled the bucket out of the river or have the wind drag. This is where I've left the flow of it all. And then getting wise with that.

So then with that as not. When the study of identification gets simpler, it doesn't happen so much because it's a little bit of a complicated thing—me, myself, and mine. When the meditation gets quieter and calmer, then at some point, we can go to the next exercise, which is a much, much more simple exercise. And we'll save that for next time I talk. It's an exercise where we get to notice how we get knotted up. The literal word is knots. See the knots, how we get knotted up in our experience. And that's a kind of more simple than these hindrances and identifications. So we'll leave that for—I'll be back in a couple of weeks for that. And then once we get to learn about the knots and the knots untangle, then the untangling of the knots, the loosening of the knots, liberates, frees up the seven factors of awakening. And so these beautiful qualities of mind that are kind of cherished in Buddhism, not only because they are quite beautiful, but also because they're onward, leading to liberation, are the penultimate exercise. So we'll have another three weeks or so to get through all this.

So we have about five minutes before the end, and now if anyone would like to ask any questions about this or comments or testimonials about working for identification. Eyal: Be lovely to hear. Oh, so it's a testimonial. I guess I had an experience, but I realized what I was identifying with. And it's funny, because it was vipassanā like it was the meditation. And one of my cousins told me, You know, people who practise vipassanā go for ten days, sit alone—Oh, they're selfish. And I could, they're selfish. And I could like feel myself identifying with it, like I felt like a pinch in my heart. I was like a hawk and she saw that we're trying to improve ourselves. But I didn't say anything. I could like sit back and watch my identification with the practice. By watching it, was there more peace? Oh, I don't know but I could just see that there was suffering. I guess that's great. I didn't have to react, and I didn't have to justify in that moment. So a little bit fantastic. So that's where you saw a place of choice, and you

chose not to go along with it, and just watch it. Great. That's like, I love hearing that. Thank you.

So I had over there. So one of the aggregates, he spoke of the mental formations. It seems like that I could like also essential to contain all the other ones, like the other ones could manifest as like you could have mental formations about all of the other aggregates. Or absolutely now, you can have stories for if stories or intentions or these about the other things, right? Rather than just having a simple—you hear a sound outside and it's just a simple sound, it suddenly it's like, you know, there shouldn't be a meditation center in an urban centre where there's car traffic, you know? I think I'll write a letter and tell them we should move to a quieter place, you know? And something's definitely wrong here, and I chose the wrong meditation center to meditate in because there's car traffic sounds. You know, that's a lot of mental formations for just the sound of a car going by, like, for the example.

I then the distinction of things like, I get like pure perception, versus a perception that, like, leads to mental formation. Yes, yes, that's sort of the way you think about that a little bit. Yes, I'm a little bit hesitant to use the word pure as if there is a thing. But we get closer to that simpler, simple, less baggage connected to it. And that'll be a little bit the topic for next time I talk in two weeks, because it's these knots have to do with the learning how to be in the most simple flow of direct experience, which is what you're describing. So be sure to put your shoes on. Well, what? Yes, be good little Buddhists now. Please don't be Buddhists. Save the world for, you know, from being Buddhists. If we have to do something like that, be a Buddha, or be compassionate, be caring. Please care for your world that you live in after today.

Actually, today's Earth Day, right? I gave an Earth Day talk yesterday, and I see. But this is, you know, I think it's a very important day. Earth Day and to care for this world is the way of caring for our fellow human beings, fellow living life on the planet, for the planet itself. And so's way of caring for ourselves. But Buddhism has this mutuality of a system, and we are all in it together. We're all interconnected in very interdependent, in very profound ways. And so there's a practice of mutual care. And the hope I have this kind of practice of mindfulness, and you don't get the metaphor going deep inside and becoming liberated. It's not just a personal. We don't do it personally for ourselves, but you can't just do it for yourself, because that's more identification. It's a freedom from identification that this inner process goes through. And there's a wonderful way I think of it. We go inward, and it turns us inside out, and then we come out, and we're, you know, you know, we're sensitive and open and connected in a whole different way than we were before, when we were maybe inside a shell. So may we be

turned inside out, so we can care for this, care for this world, for this earth. Thank you.