

Dhammas (5 of 5) Four Liberating Insights Into Change

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Gil Fronsdal

This is the final talk on the fourth foundation of mindfulness. This is the area of mindfulness practice we are studying: being attentive to the ways that we get stuck and the ways that we get unstuck. To say this in Buddhist language: how we get attached – where we get attached, the nature of the attachment – and how we get unattached, free, liberated.

I've presented this as a process. First, we spend time moving through the more and more subtle layers of attachment and stuckness we have. At some point, when it is subtle enough – when our preoccupation with stuckness doesn't predominate – meditation practice opens up to a natural feeling of well-being, which is the Seven Factors of Awakening. We don't have to be concerned with all seven. Right now, I just want to say that this is a sense of well-being: tranquil, happy, equanimous, a feeling of being deeply at ease in the world.

That is the foundation for the fifth and last exercise of the fourth foundation, which is sometimes called "The Four Noble Truths." Although it's not called that in this exercise. It is a little formula that appears repeatedly, hundreds of times, in the teachings of the Buddha: to know suffering, to know the arising of suffering, to know the cessation of suffering, and to know the way to the cessation of suffering.

As I said, the fifth exercise is sometimes called the Four Noble Truths. But that's a bit confusing because down through the ages, this wonderful teaching, the Four Noble Truths, has become a little more complicated than the simplicity of seeing change. The fifth exercise is about seeing the arising and passing of phenomena, the arising and ceasing of things. Because we're so at ease, equanimous, and peaceful, we have the readiness and ability to flow and go along with the changing nature of the present moment – the river of change that is happening here.

The sensations of breathing, the body, emotions, thoughts, and sounds are all changing, except for when we get stuck in the concepts, ideas, and stories related to them. That also has layers of subtlety. At a grosser level, we might be stuck in the stories. At the most refined level, we might be stuck in very simple concepts and ideas of what things are, such as the *idea* of breathing. The idea of breathing is not the breathing itself. You can think about your breathing and have no connection to your breathing. Or, you can really feel and sense the breathing, not through the filter of the concept or idea. Then you're able to see the changing nature of all the sensations that are coming and going.

To begin resting in and taking in the radical way in which things are flowing and changing all the time is a kind of massage for the remaining places in our mind that are stuck, frozen, and tight. This makes it hard to keep them stuck. So there starts to a willingness and relaxation into a place of ease and freedom, which comes with resting in how things are always moving and changing.

We become more and more sensitive to the subtleties of being stuck. Even the idea that "I am aware," or "I'm here, and that's the change I'm watching," is a very subtle, almost innocent stuckness that also begins to dissolve when we are really able to rest in the ocean of change and just be with it.

At some point, the experience of just seeing arising and ceasing becomes the predominant experience of mindfulness meditation. It doesn't really matter anymore *what* you're experiencing, only the fact that everything is arising and passing. There is no overlay of concepts on top of it. Now even the subtlest kinds of stuckness are no longer operating, at least for the time being, while we're in meditation.

Then, at some point, the ceasing (of the arising and ceasing) happens more dramatically. There is a ceasing that feels like something has radically, dramatically stopped. This is like the hum of a refrigerator that suddenly stops, “Wow, I didn’t even realize it was humming.” Something that we didn’t even realize was there drops away, falls away, evaporates, collapses into itself, or is set free in some way.

We can recognize, “Oh, being able to see change at this level – *that* is the way to freedom.” In this last exercise of the fourth foundation of mindfulness, knowing the way to the cessation of suffering means staying in the current of change.

The language of the fourth foundation is knowing suffering, knowing the arising of it, knowing the ceasing of it, and knowing the way to the ceasing of it. As we get more and more into the field of change, the stuckness – the place where we still suffer – stands out in highlight. It stands out above the flow. Then we bring our attention to that suffering in order to be present with and see it, until we start seeing that it too breaks up and is made up of the arising and ceasing of things.

At some point, when meditation is quite deep – when the Seven Factors of Awakening are established and there is a lot of well-being – the name of the game becomes tuning into the subtlest forms of stress, tension, and contraction.

So Buddhism is definitely about addressing suffering. We do that all along the way, because any place where we’re stuck has to be somehow resolved in order to drop into change. At the coarsest level, we’re caught up in the hindrances. It might take years to work through some of the stuckness we have. At a more refined level, we’re stuck on self and identity issues that we’re attached to. At a more subtle level, we’re still caught up in comfort, reacting to pleasure and pain, wanting or not wanting in the world and in the sensations we have. We are working through all that. It’s not an easy process, but boy, is it worthwhile. It is a fantastic thing to practice mindfulness, go through this process, and end up in a process of radical change that is freeing, liberating.

Throughout the four foundations of mindfulness and the whole process of what happens in meditation, all along the way, the basic practice is actually always the same. It is simply to be mindful and carefully attentive to what is happening now. In doing this, we slowly learn how to free attention from any kind of stuckness, any kind of agendas, any kind of attachment to self, and any kind of reactivity to anything at all.

When we first start meditating, mindfulness is not so clean. But that’s okay. It’s always the same practice. We just do the best we can to be mindful of what’s here, and we keep going, doing it over and over again, doing it in daily life and in meditation. We are developing the capacity to be aware, and to live in awareness more and more, so as we go through our life, we’re living in a field of awareness. We’re present for and aware of what’s happening in our minds, in our hearts, and all around us.

As we do that, the practice is always the same – being aware, being mindful. At some point, especially if we do enough meditation, we drop into the world of change – change that is liberating and freeing.

That is the last exercise of the fourth foundation of mindfulness. Hopefully, this explanation was clear enough. Maybe there are many other ways of understanding or interpreting it, but this is the one that I like to present. Thank you.