

Tuesday Dharma talk

Gil Fronsdal

September 01, 2026

Keywords: Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Eightfold Path, right effort, Dhamma, sandiṭṭhika, akālika, Māra, meta-awareness, wholesome and unwholesome

So, as I said at the opening, I've been living, studying, practicing with this discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness, as it's usually called—the four ways of establishing awareness, as I like to call it now. I've been doing this for a long time, and one of the curious aspects of my own history of Buddhism is the things that I've ignored. For example, for years I ignored the classic teachings of the Eightfold Path in relationship to right effort. So that's a whole story by itself.

But with the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, for a long time I ignored the first exercise, the one we're kind of touching into now. That says:

Breathing in long, or heavy, or strongly, one knows when breathing in long. Breathing out long, one knows when breathing out long. Breathing in short, light, easefully, one knows when breathing in short. Breathing out short, one knows when breathing out short.

Where the operating word is to know. So, you know, on the surface, like, talk about boring. Just long, short, long, short, short, short, short, long, long. I mean, I couldn't get my imagination around the idea that this was something we're supposed to do. So I kind of just glossed over it, reading the text.

And then there was this: breathing in, experiencing the whole body. Breathing in, one experiences the whole body. Breathing out, one experiences the whole body. I think I just didn't do much about it. I just ignored it without any reason.

And then the last one is breathing in: one calms the bodily formations. Breathing out, one calms the bodily formations. And I believe probably why I kind of conveniently skipped over it

was, as I said, those early years. For many early decades, what was important for me was how I read the text. You weren't supposed to do anything except to know, except to be present.

Anything else was extra. Anything else was maybe delusion. Anything else was somehow engaged in unnecessary manipulation or creations of things or willfulness or something. And so I just really loved that simplicity of just no. That was so wonderful for me.

And so here we're supposed to be calming. I mean, that's doing something. So it took a good number of years to come to appreciate this. And I think the first time I appreciated this section was I looked at that calming the bodily formations, and I said, "Wait a minute, we're allowed to do that." Apparently, it's in the instructions.

But then I started looking more at the others. I've been doing breath meditation for my whole Buddhist life, so it isn't that breath meditation is new to me. But this formulaic way in which it's stated there was something I had to interpret. I had to come to understand how to apply it. And now I've come to appreciate it a lot.

The reason I appreciate it a lot is, first, the emphasis on knowing and feeling. These are two attentional capacities we have, and I think it's fair to treat them as categories of attentional faculties we have. They're kind of umbrella terms. In the ancient world, they didn't have the kind of deep physiological understanding of attention that we have now. All the different attentional faculties we have, the different parts of the nervous system, how it works, different parts of the brain—we know a lot of different attentional faculties now that were never listed in the time of the Buddha.

And so I kind of think that many of these fit nicely under the category of knowing and feeling. These are important, very important parts of the neural networking, the way the harmony of the neural systems work or don't work. Our neural systems can be out of harmony. Our neural brain patterns and networks can be strongly oriented toward the amygdala, where everything is organized and understood through that filter of fear.

And data can be taken in mostly through what's called the insula. That's a whole place where the deeper wisdom can begin to arise. That's where deeper understanding arises in this thing, the insula. I guess in Italian it's *isola*. It means island, a little island we have deep tucked away in the folds of our brain.

And so I wanted to read one list of attentional faculties that apparently some of you have.

- Visual awareness: perceive light, color, shape, and movement.
- Auditory awareness: detect sound waves, pitch, volume, direction.

- Olfactory awareness: processes airborne chemical molecules and scents.
- Gustatory awareness: identifies chemical compounds through the tongue taste buds.
- Tactile awareness: registers physical contact, pressure, and surface texture.

So this whole category is called extraception: perception of the world around us. Interoception is the internal body—how we feel our own body.

- Visceral awareness: monitors internal organs, hunger, thirst, and nausea.
- Nociception: signals tissue damage, irritation, and physical pain.
- Thermoreception: senses heat and cold radiance across the body.
- Physiological tracking: registers heartbeat, breathing rate, and internal pressure.

And then there's spatial and movement awareness.

- Proprioception: the sense which senses the relative position of your body parts to each other.
- Vestibular awareness: detects gravity, balance, acceleration, and head orientation.
- Kinesthesia: tracks the active movement and effort of muscles.
- Spatial mapping: estimates distances and calculates your orientation within an environment.

Cognitive and executive attention:

- Selective attention: focuses on one specific stimulus while filtering distractions.
- Sustained attention: maintains concentration on a task over a long period.
- Divided attention: splits mental bandwidth between multiple tasks simultaneously.
- Alternating attention: shifts focus fluidly back and forth between different activities.

Then the final category is meta-awareness and recognition.

- Recognition: matches current sensory inputs against stored memory files.
- Metacognition: observes, monitors, and evaluates your own thought processes.
- Chronoception: perceives the passage of time, pacing, and duration.
- Emotional awareness: identifies and labels your own current internal moods.

Emotional awareness is listed last. So, you've been busy. There's a lot going on here. Now I'm glad to tell you how busy you've been, doing all these things. All these things are going on all the time, one way or the other.

And what's remarkable is how much of it goes on without your effort, without your constantly conscious choice deciding to do it. This huge, complicated processing goes on all the time.

You couldn't do it with your conscious brain, and you couldn't do it with all the decisions and directions that need to be given to accomplish all this. Some of it, much of it, happens kind of automatically within our whole system.

And so when the Buddha says, “Know your breathing,” it's a tip of the iceberg. What does it mean to know your breathing? Which of all these different attentional faculties can be involved in just knowing something as simple as the breathing? It's multifaceted. It's a rich kaleidoscope of things happening as you breathe, and a kaleidoscope of different lenses that are taking in the simple experience of breathing.

And then to feel your body as you breathe, to sense it—that's a whole other field of different attentional capacities at play. Kaleidoscope and lenses, and different ways in which we experience the sensations. It's not a simple one-dimensional sense door. But fortunately, we don't have to know all this. We don't have to go through the checklist.

We don't have to memorize lists so we can know exactly what we're knowing when we know it and how we know it. There's no need for that. But so much happens when we do the simple thing of knowing. It activates all kinds of things in the brain. The neural networks are firing and communicating with each other and creating a composite, creating an understanding, creating relationships that you have to the world.

Same thing with the sensing. These are all things that come together. And how do they come together in harmony? How do they work well for us?

Then some of you know that I've been teaching a lot lately about this distinction between this surface mind, the deep mind, the fabricated operating system, and the deep womb-like operating system. That was maybe the closest the Buddha came to trying to begin parsing out, with his abilities and capacities, these different operating systems, neural networks that go on. In this modern world, there are people who have a whole different modality for understanding what's happening inside. That's very different than the Buddha.

But one of the things that you point out is that there are different centers in the brain for different ways in which we process and deal with things. There are centers of the brain that, when they get active and overactive, become the common default place for processing the world. Then it is processing it through the filter of fear, and so everything is fearful. There's a lot of fear.

That same area, the amygdala, that they say processes fear and elicits fear also is related to self-identification, self-identity, me, myself, and mine. Apparently, there are people who have a little bit of brain damage, and they look at their hand and simply can't see it as my

hand. It doesn't compute. Because this innocent thing we do about looking at the hand and thinking it's mine is a particular neural network firing that's going on.

So it's not obvious that the hand is yours. It's a creation. It's something that has to be activated to make that construction. So many identities, and to have so much of the identity center, if this is true, be the same one that's related to fear is fascinating. What is it? I don't know. How do these two work together?

And then there's this other, the insula, that also processes data coming in, but that is more where the wisdom operates, where understanding operates. They say that when things harmonize well there, when different parts of the body harmonize, physiology and the nervous system are relaxed, that activates positive states of mind. So the amygdala is related to reactivity. And then, in contrast to reactivity, there's activity.

In the Buddha's vocabulary, there's constructing fabrications, and there are things that are constructed, and there are things that grow. Two different systems for how things appear in our inner life: are they constructed, or do they grow? And it could be that it's through these two different brain centers operating.

So when we say, “Know your breathing, know your walking, know your chewing, know your standing, know you're impatient, know you're thinking,” this is a tip of an iceberg of a huge inner network that's operating. It makes a difference that you know it clearly. When you feel the body well, that affects and grows and develops great capacities.

If you remember the first night, I talked about wholesome and unwholesome—how important it is. These scientists who make up these kinds of things point out that this insula, that takes in a lot of sense data, takes in the tactile experiences of the body, all the information from the inner body. We get better and better, more and more attuned to recognize stress. And that's phenomenally important if you want to be wise.

Stress maybe is a little bit simplistic for Buddhists. A richer kind of array is wholesome and unwholesome. To really see and be sensitive to it from the inside, that deep sensitivity—not searching for it, but just—it grows. When we're talking about this deep neural processing that goes on, that's happening below the conscious level, we create the conditions for health to happen. We can't make it happen.

This is a part of the mind where the part we identify with—that apparently is part of the amygdala, that's maybe related to fear—is not needed so much. But what is needed is the capacity to have an overview of the mind, to see what's happening in the mind. In this kind of field, they call it sometimes meta-awareness, metacognition, where you can see. And one of the

most crucial things to see, really valuable things to see, is to see when you get distracted.

“Oops! Guess what? It was an accident, but I got distracted.” And with mindfulness, it's possible to start seeing distractions just when they begin. Look, there I'm going. There it goes. And it's even better.

Maybe, you know, everyone has their own metaphors. Maybe some of them may be unfortunate. Like the metaphor I told you yesterday of the snowball getting rolling down the hill and getting bigger and bigger. Well, you know, I don't know if that's inspiring. It's kind of cold, but I liked it. I grew up in the snow.

But another metaphor for me was on retreat, very present, just able to track and see what was going on. I was watching the mind, just watching the mind begin wandering off. It felt like those thoughts had a rubber band attached to them. The rubber band would stretch as they went farther away, and then they would get pulled back into my mind and disappear.

They weren't going to go anywhere. It wasn't like I was cutting them off or stopping them. They just, because I was so attentive, kind of came right back. And at times when my mind was not so sharp, the image I had for myself was that my mind would wander off. I would know it's wandering off, but it's not just coming back easily.

The horse was out of the barn. The horse was out of the corral, so I had to go get the horse. That was the image I had. So I'd get on my horse, and I'd ride up right next to the horse that had gotten away. Then I would just gently make a big curve and bring it back to the corral, because I wasn't going to force it back.

So that was the image I had for my mind going off. I would just saddle up right next to it and say, “Hey, let's be together here.” And I would imagine it bringing it back in. So that was fun. I don't know if you want to—I'm not suggesting it for you.

And then there are sometimes moments where the mind is so sharp, and I'm so present, that you start seeing that the mind is going to wander off into a thought, or a thought is about to happen. But it's just a physical sensation. A thought is about to happen. And you're right there seeing it, and the thought never appears.

It's really tragic because it probably was the winning lottery numbers. It was probably something really important that you needed to know, but you'll never know what it was. But I was just so fascinated by this, that somewhere deep in the mind, before I consciously knew, the mind was already starting to make a thought. Where was that coming from? Who's in charge here? What's going on in this deep mind of ours?

But this meta-awareness, this overview we have, and being right there seeing it, makes a world of difference. It makes a world of difference just simply not to get caught in your distracted thoughts, to be able to see it. “Oh, look, there it is.” There is no need to have it processed through the amygdala. To be afraid you'll get caught, it's your embarrassment for Buddhism: “How could you allow yourself to be distracted? I hope no one noticed.”

There's all these kinds of secondary things we do that we're learning not to do. Just see, just know. “Look, oh, there's a distracted thought. Let's start again.” How do you start again? Maybe just know, “This is thinking.”

You don't have to fight it or change it or anything, or just leave it alone. “Oh, there's a distracted thought. Let me start again with the breathing. Let's come back to the present. Come back to the body.” Without making a problem, without making a project, without anything else.

Because this whole inner mental processing, this realignment and reharmonizing that goes on in the brain, the mind, or the neural system, doesn't need you to be so busy. It just needs for you not to give in to those things which are not so good for you. And how do you not give in? See it clearly. See it clearly so you do have some choice.

See it again clearly. Decide to leave it alone, to give it space, have breathing room for it. Be aware of thinking in a really relaxed, calm knowing. Be aware of thinking spatially. Make space around it.

We have spatial awareness. There are all kinds of ways to just let it be there and not be reactive to it, not support the reactive mind, but start supporting that mind that allows something very deep to begin happening. This deep kind of neural pathway allows for the wisdom to begin arising, to surface and come.

So when the Buddha says, “When you're breathing, know you're breathing,” if you're doing that, knowing that you're breathing, staying with the rhythm of breathing, using it as the thread, using it as the connection to a continuity of attention, then you'll start seeing that you're getting distracted. The mind's wandering away. Of course, it does that. That's not a crime.

But maybe at first it takes you ten minutes to realize that you've been distracted for ten minutes in the meditation. I've had that. And then to start to—okay, okay, okay, it's enough. I mean, sometimes my first ten minutes of meditation, still to this day, sometimes I'm a little bit relaxed and easy, and kind of like, “I'll get around to it.”

I'm just settling in and just being at ease, and then my mind is thinking. Then at some point

I'm ready. I say, "Okay, enough. Enough of that. Let's be here now with this." So it can be a long time to wake up to it. But then, as we practice, it becomes faster and faster.

And it might be one of the most important things we're learning here: not breath meditation, but rather the way that breath meditation, body meditation, awareness meditation is helping us to recognize when we're getting pulled into that constructing mind, the distracted mind, the story-making mind, the conversational mind. "Oh, there it is." And it might be very helpful for you to appreciate that it's actually important to see it.

It isn't like you've failed. You're supposed to be with the breath, and by golly, if you're not with the breath, you're a meditation failure. It's the opposite. You try to be with the breath. You try to have continuity so that you can be successful at seeing that the mind's wandering off.

You see your mind's wandering off. Gil has this metaphor of horses, and that's silly. Let me make my own. Maybe I'll do turtles. They go away slowly. I could bring them back slowly, and I see them before they get too far.

And you're making this whole, "There it is. I'm a successful mindfulness practitioner. I did it. I saw my story-making, my turtle-making mind, and I'm back. I'm here again. Wow, I did that well." Maybe you can make a little notch: did one, one down, a million to go.

And so, don't have this idea that distractions are wrong in meditation. It isn't that they're right, but they're not wrong. It's where we wake up. It's what we have to see so that we begin shifting the operating systems we're in. Because so often the distracted mind is a byproduct of the fear mind, the mind that's busy with self-stories, identities.

There's something else available in the mind that's operating. There are other operating systems. There's the deep mind, the *yoni* mind. There's the insula mind, part of the mind. And so, to begin allowing that to slowly create strong neural connections, so that wisdom begins arising, coming.

So how do we do this? The suggestion is: be very simple, and be as continuous as you can in a relaxed way, in a calm way. So my favorite part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* now is the first section, partly because that's what I'm teaching right now. But when you're breathing, know you're breathing. Know it with clarity. Know it with being available.

I kind of sometimes have the notion that when I know something, when the cognition is there, it's clear. It's not casual, but it's clear. It might be spontaneous. It might be the mind's way of knowing that I'm available. I'm available to know, and the mind will know things.

But I often imagine that the act of knowing has a tail, or has momentum, like riding a scooter. It's not the end of the journey to know something. It's the beginning of a very short journey. And then you kind of open and just sense what follows. "But now that I know, what's happening now?"

Does that knowing fade away? Does it open to something else? Does it help me feel something now? And then the next knowing comes. So this idea that knowing is open-ended into the future, knowing is open. It doesn't close anything. The knowing is an act of opening.

You hear a sound. "Oh, what's that?" It's open. And so to know, and then the second exercise is to feel, to sense. That's so simplistic, that one word, but it's an umbrella term for all these many multifaceted ways that the body can register what's happening. Some of it is conscious, and some of it is unconscious.

But it requires being present. If you're present to take in the data in the body, it's not an incidental, boring thing for the insula. It's part of knowing and holding all the things that are coming in from the senses in a peaceful way, in a harmonious way, in a nonreactive way. So the insula can begin to reshape itself and develop a greater and greater sensitivity to what it can know and sense and feel in a deeper and deeper way.

That can be a source of tremendous wisdom in Buddhism. And so, knowing even the most boring thing that you are sensing, the most boring thing that you sense, is not boring for the insula. It's only boring for some other part of your brain, maybe the part of the brain that's self-preoccupied. There, you can imagine, "Wow, I mean, just here, just my breath is just kind of like a little pulling and a little letting go of the pulling and expanding of the chest and releasing that. I mean, that's like my process. Feel that over and over again. I mean, I could be at the casino. That would be good. I mean, that's exciting and all this stuff. And talk about then I really feel things. The Buddha wants me to feel things."

You'll probably feel things the wrong way. But to really feel, in this calm mind, peaceful mind, just here, just this—to sense your experience of fear. It's okay to be afraid. To feel it, sense it, to know it calmly. To feel it calmly.

To see how the distracted mind comes into play, the reactive mind comes into play when you're afraid. "Look, there it is. I'm wandering off. I'm getting caught in a story. That's interesting. I've heard it's important to know that, so I'll just know it and leave it at that." Just know, just know.

So the first part of this exercise is to know, and then to feel, and the third one, as I've said, is to relax. And what's wonderful, I believe, is that this idea of calming, relaxing, stilling, quieting—

the end of this exercise—can be applied to the knowing and the sensing. To let the knowing become whatever you know, it's the knowing that relaxes. Not necessarily the thing that you're paying attention to.

What you're sensing is the sensing you're relaxing, not the thing that you're sensing. But they can't really be separated. Anyway, it's kind of more open. So, staying simple, staying here.

And then I want to end. I have fifteen more minutes, they say, with kind of what I most wanted to say today, teach today. This was just a warm-up. I taught this recently for YouTube, so some of you probably heard this. Maybe you'll appreciate my enthusiasm for this topic, that I say it again.

So, in one of the common, sometimes daily chants that are done in Theravādan liturgy when people chant every day, there are the five qualities of the *Dhamma*. Some people say it's six qualities. The well-spoken *Dhamma*. So this well-spoken is one, but then there are five more. And I think it's so profound, so important, to really appreciate these five.

The well-spoken *Dhamma* of the Buddha is directly visible, can be seen by oneself: *sandiṭṭhika*. And visible, to see something, is one of the attentional faculties. But here they're talking about the mind's eye, the way we can observe and the mind's eye perceive from inside, know from inside. We can.

So whatever it is, the *Dhamma* is something that is perceivable. And it's worth saying because of what our minds tend to do. Anything that's visible to you in the moment is here and now. It's not in the future. It's not in the past. And it's here in the visible world. That's where the *Dhamma* is found.

And then it's *akālika*. It's immediate, which means that it's now. So it's visible here, and it's known now. It's not about the past. It's not about the future. It's something about right now.

The next one is a colloquial expression that literally is just someone saying, “Come see, come see, come see, come see.” Come look here. So here, what's visible now? Come and take a look. But it's often translated or rendered as inviting inspection. And I love this expression, inviting inspection.

This is where one of the values, one of the important things about beginning to rest in the present moment, be interested in the present moment, is that if you really develop this sensitivity to the present moment, to know, to feel, to sense, at some point you'll feel that there's something in the present moment that's saying, “Here, come pay attention to this. This is

where your attention should be.” Sometimes your body screams at you. You have pain, like, “Come, me! Why aren't you paying attention?”

But as meditation deepens, and even when it's fairly peaceful and quiet, even there you can feel there's an invitation here. This is the way. This is where attention can be. Sometimes when the mind starts getting concentrated, there's a very clear signal: “Here, this is the way. This is the place to rest the attention. This is how concentration can deepen. Here, place it here.”

This is not the same as trying to find something, looking around for the key. It's not creating something and making something happen. It's being so in the present moment, so sensitive, so just here, that it finds you. This invitation: “Hey, come and inspect this. Come be with this. Come look.”

And then you come look. You stay with it. You get to know it. And then the next quality of the *Dhamma*. Now the *Dhamma* is not just teachings. Now the *Dhamma* is the *Dhamma* that's in you. That's the *Dhamma* where it's really important.

When you have this invitation, “Come here,” as it goes deeper, the next characteristic of the *Dhamma* is that it's onward-leading. It isn't because it has all these lists, and if you follow the lists by the numbers, it'll take you someplace. That's irrelevant, that kind of thinking. But rather, if you place your attention here, if you feel and sense well, if you're not trying to construct anything, not trying to make something happen, just this ability to follow the invitation—“Here, this is the place. This is what to do. This is where to be”—something will open.

Something will grow. Something will heal. Something will reveal. Something unfolds. It's onward-leading. It's onward-leading.

Partly because, I guess, these neural networks we have are all busy. They're firing away like crazy in there to take care of you. There's a lot. If we could shine an image of our neural networks up on the screen for us all to see, we'd probably get exhausted really quickly just looking at all the different things going on.

But it's remarkable that these things can come into kind of harmony. They can come into kind of a subtleness. They allow for kind of a deeper unification, a deeper way in which all this begins working together. The convergence, the confluence, of all these ways of being aware—they begin gathering together. And this gathering and this working is onward-leading: onward-leading to peace, onward-leading to freedom, onward-leading.

And so, what is required? Required to be here, where you can see things directly, to see it, to

know it, to be here and now, to stay here and now. And what's a good way to stay here and now? To know when the mind is not doing it. “Bingo! Look, I saw that. I'm going into the future. Bingo! I see it. Now I'm making plans. Now I'm telling a story. Bingo! Oh, I see it. I see you. Oh, I see you.”

Some of you, probably most of you, know the famous Buddha's response to *Māra*: “*Māra*, I see you.” Now you can maybe appreciate better how profound that is. He doesn't tell *Māra* to go away. He doesn't get a sledgehammer and knock him out. Just, “*Māra*, I see you.”

Some people think you're supposed to invite *Māra* for tea. No, I don't think so. Just, “I see you.”

And then the final characteristic of the *Dhamma*, that's supposed to make it really personal, free to you, is what the wise would personally realize. It's what the wise will personally realize. And that's supposed to be you. You're the wise one. How are you wise? By beginning to see it for yourself.

There's no one else. No one else can do this for you. This is your job. And I wonder—I want to emphasize, as we come to the end here—maybe there should be one more quality of the *Dhamma* that the Buddha forgot. It's simple. The *Dhamma* is simple.

Keep it simple. Trust knowing the simple way in which you know and see, feel, recognize, stay with, hang out in this moment. There's a lot of forces inside of us that will take us away from that trust, from that confidence. They take us away with a lot of force, a lot of arguments, a lot of authority, a lot that's very, very compelling.

See *Māra*, see the tricks, see what's happening in you. And if you can, if it seems appropriate, remember to be simple with it. Just see it, just know it, and know it and see it and feel it with enough clarity, with enough confidence, with enough emphasis that, for a moment, you're not caught by what's happening. You haven't been hijacked by it.

For a moment, you're not believing some of the old stories, the old ways. You're ready to switch operating systems. That allows you to see for yourself what is wholesome and what is unwholesome here. Thank you.