Skillful Supports for Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:29

In the Sutta, the Establishment of Mindfulness, are collected a number of instructions about how to practice mindfulness. And so that really is the topic this evening: the topic of mindfulness. In particular, I want to offer some of the supports for the cultivation of mindfulness that I have found really useful in my own practice. I'm going to do that through exploring some of the words of the Buddha and then talking about how they inform me, how they resonate for me, and how that has supported me in my practice.

So starting with mindfulness—I'll get to the Satipatthana Sutta in a bit. Mindfulness is a word that we're all so familiar with. It's used in our everyday culture a lot, and even the flavor of mindfulness from this Buddhist tradition has entered into the broader culture to some extent. And yet it's such a profound thing. It's an ordinary word, and in many ways it's based on a very ordinary capacity of our minds—this simple capacity that we have as human beings to know what's happening while it's happening, a kind of self-reflective capacity.

And yet that capacity, when cultivated in a particular way—and this is an important piece—can be aimed or directed towards many different ends. Imagine a thief in someone's house going around trying to be very careful not to disturb anyone, very quiet, knowing what they're doing, very aware of their movements, very aware of where they are. But the whole motivation for that is greed. The motivation is not "What does it feel like when I'm stepping? What does it feel like when I'm reaching?" This is the perspective the Buddha encouraged. And it was really a brilliant thing that he recognized the power of that.

Because it sounds like nothing. Know what's happening while it's happening. Be curious about experience as experience, as a human experience. What does it feel like? What is the experience of stepping while stepping? What is the experience of a breath while breathing? What is the experience of the arising of an emotion while it's happening? It sounds so nothing, but it is profound. It's a profoundly different way to orient to our present moment experience.

We usually orient—even when we know, when we are aware, even when we are engaged—with some agenda in mind, something we need to do or to get. We're kind of in the agenda rather than recognizing what this experience is actually like right here and right now.

Take the arising of a reactive emotion, for instance. Often, at least for me before I started practicing—always—when a reactive emotion arose, I was more interested in the relationship to something happening in the world rather than what was going on in my mind. We think of it more in terms of how we are in relationship to the world.

So that's how it was for me before I started practicing. When I noticed anger, I knew I was angry. If somebody had come up to me and said, "Do you know you're angry?" I would have looked at them like they were nuts. Of course I know I'm angry. But did I feel it? Did I actually know the experience of anger while I was angry? I did not. I was more interested in how miserable I was going to make the person I was angry at feel.

I have to say that when I got the instruction to notice my emotions, to notice what's happening in my experience when those reactive emotions arise—that was the very first meditation instruction I worked with. It was in daily life, and at that point anger was really ruling my life. I thought, well, let's look at anger, because anger is kind of ruining things for me right now. This practice of mindfulness says it will help me if I start to get to know these things, and this one is really driving me nuts, so let's look at that one.

The very first time I really noticed I was angry while I was angry, I was shocked, because it was so painful. I had never noticed that before. I had been so focused on thinking the other person was going to be miserable that I had not actually seen or felt that deeply painful experience of anger right in the moment.

So this is the shift of mindfulness. We understand, we know what's happening in the present moment as it's happening. There is a big difference between carrying an agenda or an idea or a belief along with what we know in the present moment and simply knowing: this is what's happening in the present moment.

associate with mindfulness—presence, awareness, witnessing, observing, being with. But again, the importance lies in observing the experience as experience in the present moment. And that's actually very close to something the Buddha said in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Knowing what's happening while it's happening, we could say, is a kind of working definition for mindfulness.

It's kind of mysterious, actually. We think we know what it is, but do we really know what mindfulness is? We get familiar with the observing side, but what is awareness? What is mindfulness itself? We'll probably talk more about that as we go.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddhist teachings on wise mindfulness, exists within the context of the Eightfold Path. Wise view is at the head of the Eightfold Path—a perspective. And I've been kind of talking around a perspective that will support our path. The classic perspective of wise view is that we need to understand suffering. In my own experience, that exploration carries us through the whole path. Because as we really understand suffering, the mind begins to let go of the causes of suffering—the second noble truth. And as it lets go of the causes of suffering, we experience the release from suffering—the third noble truth. And this whole journey of understanding suffering, experiencing the letting go, and realizing the release is the cultivation of the path—the fourth noble truth.

This perspective of wise view is what supports mindfulness to be skillful. Understanding suffering—that description I gave of knowing anger as anger arising in the present moment. Now, anger is a kind of obvious form of suffering. The word suffering in the Buddhist teaching is more nuanced than just our

obvious suffering. But in this case, anger was a pretty obvious form of suffering. When I really felt it, it was clearly suffering. And as I worked with that over years, I began to really understand it—understand what happened, how it arose, what the conditions were for its arising. I saw at times the mind let go of it completely and felt the release from that suffering. My journey around witnessing suffering helped me to understand that that's really a lot of where the practice is. We understand our suffering, and through that understanding, the mind will release the dukkha, the suffering. Wisdom will release the suffering. It's not something we do.

The cultivation of the conditions, the path of practice, creates the conditions for the understanding to arise. And suffering will release. We will experience the letting go. We will experience the freedom. And all of that is the cultivation of the path.

The instruction that I got—the very first instruction that I got, which was no more than "just see if you can know those hard emotions arising while they're arising"—that kind of encapsulated the instruction of wise view. Because the encouragement there was to understand the suffering of those challenging emotions. The way we encourage you to practice sometimes sounds like we're talking about technique, but it embeds the wisdom. The very way we talk about attending to experience is infused with the wisdom of the Buddha.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta has language in it that carries this wisdom. It offers teachings on the establishment of mindfulness. How do we establish mindfulness? The establishment of it is one important piece to recognize. One way to think about the establishment of mindfulness is that it becomes established in our minds. It's not just coming and going—the establishment of mindfulness is when the mindfulness begins to gain continuity and momentum. That's where we explore in our practice.

For those of you who've been here for six weeks already, there's probably quite a bit of momentum of mindfulness. Some of what I say tonight, I can point to the recognition of that momentum as a skillful way to begin, as a skillful way to navigate this establishment of mindfulness. Recognizing when it's easy. Sometimes we over-effort. Sometimes when the mindfulness gets established, we're trying too hard.

At one point, I went in to talk to Joseph and told him how I was practicing, and he said, "You know, when the light is already on in the room, you don't have to keep trying to turn on the light switch. Let go of that."

I am going to be talking about the establishment of mindfulness for those of you who are here just in the first days.

And yet there's some aspect of what I'll say too that's relevant to those of you who've been cultivating mindfulness for these weeks, beginning to feel that momentum of the mindfulness.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha points to areas of experience. When we look at this sutta, these four areas of experience really encompass the entirety of our human experience. Actually, when I look at any single instruction in the Satipatthana Sutta, I can see that any experience can be found in any one of those

instructions. It's kind of like a hologram. If something is arising and you're exploring it through one particular aspect of the Satipatthana, you can find your experience in every single instruction. So we don't have to think about it as being that we do this kind of practice and then we do that kind of practice. There's a lot of interweaving and intertwining of the instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta.

The four areas, however, are the body—the physical body. Feeling tone—the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Mind states—the recognition of what's arising in our minds, and in particular, the Satipatthana Sutta encourages us to notice the presence or absence of greed, aversion, and delusion, and the presence or absence of concentration. So right there in that instruction, in any moment of experience, whatever's happening, if you're looking at that foundation, there will either be the presence or absence of greed. There will either be the presence or absence of delusion. Concentration will be present or not. And the instructions are: know when there's aversion arising in the mind; know when there's not aversion arising in the mind. It's quite simple. All of the instructions have this flavor of a simple pointing to something of our experience.

The fourth foundation is a foundation of Dhamma. This foundation is a little more complex to describe, so I'll just give a high-level perspective on it. In this foundation, there's the encouragement to notice experience through the perspective of several of the Buddhist teachings. We're encouraged to notice experience through the perspective of the six sense spheres, through the perspective of the hindrances—which we'll talk about over the coming evenings—through the perspective of the five aggregates, and through the perspective of the seven factors of awakening. Again, the instructions are quite simple. For the seven factors of awakening, with mindfulness being one of them, the instruction is to notice when the enlightenment factor of mindfulness is present and when it is not present. It will always be one of those two things. So there's a very wide inclusivity in the instructions of the Satipatthana Sutta.

These four areas encompass all aspects of our experience. The entirety of the Satipatthana is an encouragement to get to know all of it—all of our human experience. No part left out. Including the reactivity, including the joy, including confusion. All of it.

We start here, especially for those beginning, with an establishment of the body as a foundation. This is quite helpful. As we begin to explore the body, we'll begin to see the difference between the body and all of these other areas. We begin to distinguish body from mind. We begin to recognize that some things we think of as happening in our body are actually going on in our minds. So we begin to really attune to what is the actual experience of the body, and that begins to highlight: well, what's the difference between our bodies and our minds? What's happening in our minds? We begin to see the conditioned relationship between body and mind.

Early in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha has four sentences that briefly describe what Satipatthana is—how we establish mindfulness, in four brief sentences. There's one sentence for each of the four foundations, and they have a similar flavor, with each of the four categories put into the sentence in one

place.

The sentence is—and I'll read it four times, once for each of the four establishments: How does one establish mindfulness? One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desires and discontent for the world. One abides observing feeling as feeling, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desire and discontent for the world. One abides observing mind states as mind states, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desires and discontent for the world. For the fourth foundation, I'm going to translate the word Dhamma, because Dhamma has different usages. Small-d dhamma, which is how it's used here, basically means phenomena. One abides observing phenomena as phenomena, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desire and discontent for the world.

Each word in this phrase is a pointing to a quality that supports the cultivation of mindfulness. He's offering, in this sentence: this is what we have to do.

And so I've spent quite a bit of time with these words. That's what I'm going to reflect on with you tonight—these words and how they inform my practice.

I think the first word in the sentence is one of my favorites: *abides*. Even just that word creates a sense of relaxation for me. Abide. The feeling of the word creates almost a dropping and a relaxation. The word itself is translating the Pali *viharati*, which literally means living, a place to live, or an abode. It's the same root as the Brahma Viharas, the divine abodes. And so there's this sense of abiding at home, a sense of coming home. And really, this is what it feels like as mindfulness becomes established—there's a deep sense of coming home.

So there's this intimacy, this being with experience. Thinking about being at home, that's where we can be most intimate, most ourselves, perhaps. There's this sense of relaxation again. For some of you, this imagery of home may have different connotations. But I believe the word here is intending to point to relaxation, receptivity, resting, contentment. I feel like this word itself—abide—sometimes I can just use that word, *abide*, and I feel a kind of settling. Yeah, abide. Just be with this. Abide.

I once asked a group of people—it was a conversational teaching I was offering—what does the word abide mean? How does it resonate for you? Some of what I've just shared was what came up. And somebody said, "The Dude abides," from The Big Lebowski. I hadn't seen the movie, but it made me laugh. And I think, in a way, that was the same kind of encouragement. Yeah, the Dude abides. You can bring some humor into the word.

So for me, this really points to the quality of relaxation. And relaxation was not what I thought mindfulness and meditation were about when I first started. I really thought it was about going for it, striving. And the whole container of meditation—that it's really fundamentally based in relaxation—was kind of not on my radar. But it is so important.

When the body relaxes, it can be useful to check in at the beginning of a sitting. How is the body? Is there

tension? And if there is tension, you could take a few moments to relax, perhaps do a body scan, just relax the body. I found this useful in the middle of long retreats at times. Weeks into a retreat in Burma, I sat down one day and it was like, wow, this body is so tense. And I spent the entire meditation period just exploring relaxation. By the end of that period, I was so grateful for that teaching. I was practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma, and he really emphasizes this quality of relaxation as a foundation for our practice.

As we explore relaxation of body—which is possible to do consciously—the consequence is that the mind starts to relax. Body and mind influence each other. And when the mind relaxes, it quite naturally is aware. It knows what's happening in the present moment. When the mind is relaxed, when it's not caught up in thoughts of the past or the future, that's what relaxation of mind is. It's just this arriving. And so relaxation is so important.

Sometimes that word *abide* can invite that relaxation. Abide. What does it feel like? Whatever your anchor is, whatever your primary home base of practice is—whether it's breath or body, hearing—abide with that. Can you be with the breath with relaxation? Can you be with the body with relaxation? In fact, relaxation supports our ability to be with the breath and the body.

I will often start a walking practice by just finding a pace that feels really relaxed. It may be sometimes faster, sometimes slower. But allowing the relaxation in walking to support the mind's ability to be present. So that's a wonderful way to begin walking practice—just walking back and forth until you find that pace of ease and relaxation. And then, when there is some measure of relaxation, turning towards the movement, wherever you're noticing it.

So "one abides observing." This word *observing* has the flavor of looking closely at, meeting, seeing carefully, experiencing carefully. This pairing of relaxation with observation—of *abide* and *observe*—to me, it's almost a paradox of the practice that we can be interested, closely attentive, and very relaxed.

This brings in the notion of receptivity. The two together: abide, observing. Those two words together. *Obs erve* feels like a going out and digging and looking at and finding. *Abide* feels more like settling back. So how do they come together? What does it mean, this sense of abide and observe? This is the investigation I've explored.

Mindfulness can just know. The quality of mindfulness is the quality that knows what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. Attention is another function of our minds. It's the function that picks something out of experience to know. I used to think if I wasn't choosing what the object was, if I wasn't choosing the experience, if I wasn't directing the attention, that I couldn't possibly be being mindful. So I was equating mindfulness and attention, thinking they were the same thing.

But just a little mental reflection can point out to us that they're not the same thing. If you're walking around completely lost in thought, not mindful at all—and I know you've all experienced this, where you

kind of wake up and it's like, "Wow, I did not know my last five minutes of walking"—and yet you were still walking. Possibly you were still going on your path, stopping and turning around and stopping and turning. Something was experiencing sight and sound. Mindfulness not present. But the functions of mind that perceive and recognize and attend to experience were happening.

So attention is one of those functions that's happening in every single moment. The mind is attending to something whether or not we are mindful of it. And I think we can see that through recognizing when mindfulness is not there. The return of mindfulness is like, "Yep, well, I had that experience at one point." I found myself driving somewhere and knew I needed to turn and then lost mindfulness completely, and found myself about two streets further than my turn, stopped at a red light, waking up into mindfulness, having had zero recollection of the last two blocks. I could remember what my thoughts were. I knew what I'd been thinking about, but zero recollection. It's like, "Wow, thank you, attention, for stopping at that red light. I did not know that red light was there." So something was paying attention. Mindfulness was not there.

This factor of attention is amenable to our choice, our conscious control, and this is very much how we practice here. We shape our practice through choosing, at times, our object, our anchor object. We attend to the experience, and then we allow mindfulness to kind of ride with that experience. So there's a choice that we can make to attend to experience.

But if we don't choose that, there's a kind of more receptive quality to awareness, to mindfulness, that we can recognize at times when we're not choosing what to pay attention to. And there are whole practices based on this form of receptive awareness—just noticing that you're aware and what is obvious, not choosing to direct the attention.

So those are two different approaches to using attention in meditation. We can use attention to direct the mind and then allow mindfulness to come to that. Or we can step back, and then it's kind of like following where the attention goes, because attention is just a conditioned phenomenon. It will attend to something based on our history, our conditions.

It'll attend to something based on just the simplicity of our sense bases. You might notice sometime when you're walking and paying attention to the walking path, noticing the movement, that maybe a bird flies by. And instantly, without your even doing it, you are looking at the bird. That's the shift of attention in dependence on conditions, because movement is something that will draw our attention. It's not a failure. It's natural for this to happen.

And so sometimes we can recognize that. In these instructions that we're offering, we haven't quite gotten to what happens when the attention shifts. But this happens in meditation. This is a lot of what we explore. We are attending to the breath or the body, aware with that, and suddenly a sound happens. Without our choosing it, attention goes to the sound. And we're instructed to recognize hearing, to note and recognize that hearing is happening—to acknowledge that that is where the attention shifted. Not to

have a contentious relationship with it, but to just recognize the shift of attention. And then with this practice, we say, "Okay, yep, that is happening, and can I incline? Can I prefer to be with the breath? Can I prefer to be with my primary object?" So then we use our capacity to direct the attention back to the breath.

But this process of the attention shifting—it doesn't mean that you failed in any way. It's just conditioned. You're seeing attention at work. You're seeing the conditioned nature of attention happening there when you see that the attention has shifted from the breath to something else.

And so this quality of receptivity—we can settle back and be curious about what is being received. What is the attention connecting to? That's a receptive quality. There's the side of directing the attention, and then receiving what the attention is already paying attention to.

To me, this phrase *abides observing* can bring these two together. We may be aiming our attention, curious, directing the attention to the breath, for instance. But then rather than continuing to look and find and ask "What is that?"—that's one way we can explore—there's this other way: "Okay, there's the breath. And what is the breath like? What is obvious about the breath? How is the breath being received?"

We can think of the receptivity of our mindfulness through an analogy like a radio receiver. The radio is available to receive all of the radio waves, and we have this tuning device so we can tune to a specific channel. When we've tuned to that channel, we can kind of sit back and just take in what that channel has to offer—classical music, perhaps. The receiver is just receiving there. It's like there's a narrowing of the bandwidth, but then it's just received with that narrowed bandwidth.

Quite similarly with aiming the attention: aim the attention to the breath, but then step back and see how the breath is showing up. Narrow the attention to the field of hearing and then receive—how is hearing showing up? Narrow the attention to the field of the body—what's obvious in the body? You don't have to always be looking.

So this blend of aim and receive. Aim and receive. What would that mean with the breath right now? A sense of relaxation with the breath, and abide observing the breath—relaxed receiving of the breath.

The next phrase begins to bring in wisdom, the perspective of satipaṭṭhāna. I think of these first two, *abide s observing*, as kind of supports for sati, supports for mindfulness. This phrase: "One abides observing the body as a body. One abides observing feelings as feelings. One abides observing mind states as mind states."

One abides observing phenomena as phenomena. Phenomena in and of itself. Body in and of itself. Breath in and of itself.

In this phrase, the repetition of "body"—observes the body *as* a body—encourages an impartial perspective on the body, a less attached perspective. Just as a body. Body is what we explore; body

sensations. "As a body" is *how* we explore it.

So what is the actual experience of body? In our normal everyday lives, we often feel like there's this outline of body—yes, there's my foot and my hand and my shoulder. But what is the actual experience? Foot, hand, shoulder—those are actually concepts.

Put your attention in your hand for a moment. What's the actual experience of hand? Tingling? Pulsing? Vibration? Heat? Stiffness?

This is the body as a body. The actual sensation level of the body. How our body communicates with us through these sensations. What is the actual experience of the body?

And what's the actual experience of the breath? Again, that receptivity of receiving can help us to feel the actual experience. Feel the rising pressure and expansion. Feel the collapse of the lungs. Maybe some tingling in the nostrils or throat. What is the actual experience? This is the body as a body.

We get to know body as human experience. It begins to take the "me," the sense of "I am," out of the experience. Just recognizing the body doing what body does. Sensing. Feeling. This encourages a kind of non-interfering awareness of experience. This is really where the instruction lives: notice experience as experience. Be interested in what it is like to be stepping. What it is like to be reaching. Not the motivation behind doing it, but just that experience. Noticing experience as experience.

This brings in another word that's very resonant for me—one I think is implied in this phrase, this wisdom perspective of non-interfering attention to just know the body as a body. And that's *allowing*. The perspective or attitude in the mind that allows us to see the body as a body is by allowing the body to be the body. Not needing it to be any different. Just allowing.

There's a flavor in this. Even though it's phrased as wisdom—know the body as a body—the experience of this feels very intimate. Very heartfelt. Very kind. The experience of this instruction, "know the body as a body," has love in it. Even though it's not explicit, the experience of exploring in this way brings that flavor.

The quality of allowing experience to be as it is *is* love. Just imagine if you have a friend sitting with you, and you're having your worst day, and your friend says, "I'm here with you. You be you right now. I'm just going to be here with you, and it's okay—you can be as messy as you like."

Most of us would feel that as love, as care. And that's what we can do for ourselves. We can let ourselves be messy and hold it.

It takes a little bit of a bigger container, in a way. We're not always going to feel like we can allow experience. We're going to be reactive to what's arising. This unpleasant experience is happening, yes, and there's aversion to that unpleasant experience. And that aversion can be also held. So maybe we can't allow the unpleasant experience, but can we allow the aversion? Can we allow the not allowing?

There's always room to expand the container and allow whatever feels like it can't be allowed. Like, yep, that too. That can be allowed. That can be allowed.

I'm not going to get through the entire phrase tonight, but I will end with the word *ardent*, because this one too brings in an important quality, and Brian spoke to it the other night. He even used this word. *Atapi* is the word in the Pali, and it's often translated as ardent. But some other words that resonate with this are engaged, wholehearted, sincere, heartfelt, interest, connection to experience. This is a kind of wholehearted engagement that encourages a continuity, a gentle persistence, a gentle commitment to practice, balanced and sustained effort.

This ardency has to be paired with "abides." Relaxation and ardency, this sense of engagement, relaxation and alertness—these are not opposites. They can coexist quite nicely. But it's a little different sometimes. When we're really engaged, there's tension that creeps in habitually. It's our natural habit to pick things up and be tight around them. So there's some learning around this process: what does it mean to be engaged, to practice with a continuity and commitment to moment-to-moment awareness, and not be tight? How to be relaxed with that?

The light touch of effort is really the key here. I invite you right now to notice your breath, however you're noticing it. Just this moment. And that moment when I mentioned that, could you feel it? That is enough effort. So that breath. And then the next moment. Okay, and how about now? Can you feel the next part of the breath? Just enough effort to meet this. To meet half a breath. That's enough. And then you do it again. Light, light, light touch, over and over again.

Now, we pick up the idea of "over and over again" and get tight around that, but that's just an idea. The amount of actual effort that's needed in a moment is really light. If you're holding onto a helium balloon with a string, you need a little bit of remembering to keep the pressure between the fingers to hold that string. But it's not a lot of pressure. You don't need to clench your fist around that string to keep track of the helium balloon. You just have to remember that light connection. That's enough. Just remember.

And you'll forget. It's okay. You'll forget. You don't have to beat yourself up when you forget—not *if* you forget, because you will. And then when you remember—and you will remember too, that's the great thing about mindfulness, you will remember—when you remember, right there, mindfulness is receiving something already. What is that?

And then reconnecting with your primary object. Light touch, over and over again.

This is useful in walking meditation too. Where he was talking this morning about each step—one thing I found useful in walking practice at times when my mind was really scattered: I would find something on the ground, like half a step out or two steps out. "Oh, that leaf. Can I be mindful till I get there? Yep. Okay. How about that patch on the ground? Can I get there?" Not trying to do the whole path at once, because that created too much tension in my mind. Just enough, just enough effort to take this step, to get to that

little patch. Okay, then I can let go and do it again. Just that light touch of effort, over and over again.

That has been so important in my practice. Just remembering the light touch, and noticing when I was too tight, letting go. Sometimes I would ask the question: How little effort do I need in order to be mindful? Because especially those of you who've been here for a long time, you may be in that camp where you've got enough momentum to really just ride the wave of momentum. Let go of the effort, and begin to recognize when the mindfulness gets a little wobbly. Then connect again with that light touch of effort.

Sometimes that question—how little effort do I need to be mindful?—I could back off so far, so much further than I thought.

So I'll repeat the whole phrase now. And just for yourself, whatever is apparent for you—the sound of my voice, body sensation—one abides observing experience as experience, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desire and discontent for the world.

Thank you for your practice.

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