Supports for Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:23

It was such a beautiful evening tonight. As I was coming over, I was seeing the light changing on the trees, lighting them up a kind of reddish color. Then I went upstairs to reflect and be a little quiet before my talk, sitting there watching the sky turn this beautiful red. I hope some of you got to see that.

The practice that we're doing here is really based on some instructions that the Buddha gave. We've mentioned this in the last few days, and I'm sure many of you have heard of the Satipatthana Sutta, which is a collection of teachings. Some people dispute whether the Buddha actually gave it front to back or whether it was a gathering of his teachings around meditation. But in any case, it's a very comprehensive description of the mindfulness practice.

The very name of the sutta, Satipatthana, means something like "establishing mindfulness." So that's what we're doing—establishing mindfulness in a way that supports the ability to see and understand our experience. It's a particular perspective of mindfulness.

The Satipatthana Sutta describes four establishments, or ways, or fields in which to collect the attention. Perhaps that's a way to look at it, or perhaps it's simply a description of what might be noticed in various areas of experience.

It talks about the establishment of mindfulness with the body, which is what we've been really focusing on these last days. Then there's the establishment of mindfulness with the experience of feeling tone—this very simple and basic experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. All experience has a kind of flavor of this sort. Every sight, sound, smell, taste, touch is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The third foundation is mindfulness of mind states. The sutta describes these pretty simply and encourages us to recognize whether greed, aversion, and delusion are present or absent, and whether the mind is moving towards concentration or not. So it's looking at the mind first with respect to greed, aversion, and delusion, and then how it's settling with respect to concentration.

The fourth foundation is a little harder to describe, but I'll say very simply that we could look at it—mindfulness of dhammas, or mindfulness of phenomena—as mindfulness of processes that will lead us either towards or away from suffering. In that sutta, the Buddha points to particular teachings: the hindrances, the six sense bases, the five aggregates, the four noble truths, the seven factors of awakening, and how an exploration of those experiences helps us to understand suffering and the release from suffering.

So that's a very quick overview of the Satipatthana Sutta.

What I wanted to explore this evening is that at the very beginning of the sutta, the Buddha gives a teaching of what Satipatthana is in brief. He's famous for these really brief summaries. I like this phrase—it contains so much in just a few words. I wanted to unpack it and look at how its words offer instructions and support for what we're doing here.

The phrase, which is repeated four times right at the beginning, once for each of the four establishments, is: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." Then, "One abides observing feeling as feeling, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." Likewise for mind states and phenomena, dhammas.

I'll start this exploration with the word we're perhaps most familiar with: mindfulness. It seems interesting to me, this word. Sati is the Pali word, and it is connected to a root meaning "to remember." So it's connected with remembering—remembering what? Remembering ourselves. But the way sati is used in the sutta gives us a clearer picture of what the Buddha is pointing to, and perhaps we can understand from another perspective what this mindfulness is that he's encouraging us to cultivate.

As we've explored here, and I'm sure you've explored on other retreats, mindfulness can be looked at as being present, being connected with experience, aware, witnessing, observing. These are perhaps some synonyms we could use to fill in what this word means. Connected with, aware with, feeling into experience, being with experience—or perhaps just knowing what's happening while it's happening. All of these words point in the direction of the experience of mindfulness.

It is a quality, a state of mind that we cultivate. And in my own experience of practicing, the longer I practice mindfulness, the less clear I am of exactly what it is. So it's okay if you're not exactly clear about it. There's a sense of knowing when I am clearly aware and mindful, but what it is exactly is hard to describe. These words point in the right direction: being with, feeling into, presence of mind.

The mindfulness that our practice is based on is rooted in a very ordinary, human capacity of our minds.

Our minds possess this capacity to know what's happening while it's happening—to be aware that we know. It's a kind of self-reflective capacity that we have as humans, this ability to know that we know. This itself is a neutral capacity of mind.

We can know that we know. We can be aware that we're angry, for instance. But we may not be knowing it in the way the Buddha is pointing to—with a kind of non-judgmental, detached observing of, "Oh, this is what the experience of anger is like." Knowing what's happening in the present moment as it's happening.

More often, the more ordinary way of being aware of anger—perhaps before we meet mindfulness practice—is to know that we're angry and to know why we're angry and who we're angry with and what they did wrong. There's a whole complex of views and ideas and opinions all wrapped up in that awareness of being angry. So it's not just simple: "This is what anger is like."

And that's what I think this points to. The Buddha recognized that this capacity we have to be aware in the present moment is really powerful when explored from this particular perspective. Just know what's happening in the present moment and be curious about that experience. What is it like to be experiencing what this is in this present moment? So that's my understanding of this direction the Buddha is pointing us with satipaṭṭhāna—the direction of wise mindfulness or right mindfulness.

Sometimes I explore the difference between right mindfulness and wrong mindfulness. Actually, in the suttas there is the phrase "wrong mindfulness," connected to the wrong eightfold path, which is motivated by wrong view and wrong intention, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort. These qualities that support us can be skewed towards freedom or skewed towards our habits and patterns.

If we think about this quality of being aware—knowing that we're aware, knowing what we're doing in the present moment—think about how a thief might be very aware in a house where they've broken in to steal something. Very aware of being very quiet, aware of every step, every movement. But the motivation for that awareness is not to just be curious: "What is it like to step? What is it like to reach? What is it like to touch?" It is: "I need to be really quiet so that I'm not caught, so that I can get these things and take them away." The motivation is greed, perhaps aversion if there's something they're wanting to take away from somebody, or anger at someone they want to take something from.

So the motivation is crucial. The Buddha noticed that this quality of being aware is very powerful when aimed towards simple knowing. What is this like? Beginning to dive underneath views, ideas, opinions, concepts, just to the bare experience.

As we explore this bare experience, what seems to happen is that when we explore, for instance, what anger feels like, we learn pretty quickly that it doesn't feel good, that it hurts, that it's painful. Actually, one of my early mindfulness practices was exploring anger because it was big. It was really ruining my life. So I decided, having met mindfulness, "Okay, this is what I'm going to see if I can get to understand. I'll get to understand anger."

The first time I actually woke up and recognized, "Oh, this is what anger feels like," it was like a shock. It's like, "Oh my God, this is awful. This feels horrible."

We learn pretty quickly as we start to look at the experience happening right now. This is what anger feels like. This is what joy feels like. This is what loving-kindness feels like. We feel very viscerally that the unwholesome qualities of mind—those based in greed, aversion, and delusion—are painful in the moment, directly painful. Qualities that are wholesome, supportive of the heart opening and connecting—love, compassion, kindness, curiosity—those have a quality of softness, lightness. They have various flavors to them, but they generally have a feeling of moving in the direction of ease and peace and well-being.

With this quality of just curiosity—"What's this experience like?"—we begin to taste what experience is

leading us to suffering and what is leading us away from suffering. We get a sense of what is suffering and what is well-being.

Our mind has convinced us that anger is somehow going to make us be happy. It's kind of amazing to watch that process. When we're not aware of the experience of anger, our minds delude us into thinking it's actually doing something good for us.

That part of the mind is willing to forego ease and peace in the present moment for the idea of revenge or the idea of getting something in the future. And so being aware right in the present moment takes us to that understanding. Wisdom understanding grows through that simple meeting. It's quite amazing.

I think the Buddha was brilliant to understand this. We don't have to find what's wholesome and unwholesome. By this simple practice of observing, it points itself out to us. This is the mindfulness the Buddha encourages us to cultivate.

Some of the other words in this phrase—"one abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world"—point to qualities of mind or attitudes that we could bring to mindfulness to support this kind of observing. I'm going to take some time to explore some of these qualities tonight. I probably won't get through the whole sentence, but just some of them.

The first word that really lands and resonates with me deeply is this word "abides." Even just the feeling of saying the word—abide, abide. The word is a translation of the Pali *viharati*, which is related to the Pali *vi hara*, which means a place of living, a home. And so this is a sense of being at home with mindfulness. Mindfulness brings us home into the present moment. Abiding. Resting. Sometimes the feeling of being at home is a place of safety and a place of rest. That quality of abiding brings that sense. This is a quality to bring to mindfulness.

Other words that resonate with this for me: intimacy, being with, dwelling, receptive, content. At its core, what this really points to for me is relaxation.

Relaxation is such a crucial support for any form of meditation practice. Whether we're practicing mindfulness of the breathing, loving-kindness practice, open awareness practice, or focused concentration, relaxation is a deep, deep support. I did not know this, and I'm not sure I would have believed it in my first few retreats, especially when I was trying to focus the mind. It didn't feel relaxed. It was like, "No, I'm supposed to hold on to this, I'm supposed to do this, I'm supposed to grab on and stay, stay, stay, stay." It did not feel relaxed. Over the years I did begin to hear what the teachers were saying. I'm sure they emphasized it. They probably emphasized it as much as I'm going to tonight. But sometimes it just takes a while to get in.

Relaxation is crucial. And we can explore this. We can begin with a container of relaxation in our meditation. I often will start there in my practice, relaxing the body—sometimes with a body scan, sometimes just opening and dropping in a kind of intention or invitation. Maybe the body is willing to

relax right now. It's amazing sometimes that kind of invitation can be very powerful. You could try it right now.

Maybe the body can relax. Not trying to do relaxation. Just dropping that kind of invitation in. And see how the mind and body respond to that invitation.

For me, dropping that in, I can feel sometimes just a subtle "oh"—there was something that let go and I didn't even know it was being held. So I'll feel into that. I'll just drop that in and feel that releasing happen, and drop it in again. Maybe the body can relax. Feeling some more opening, softening.

As the body softens and relaxes, it creates the conditions for the mind to be a little more soft and relaxed. Not so wrapped up in thoughts and worries and opinions and views, but just willing to settle and be with experience.

Maybe the body can relax. And maybe, just maybe, the mind can relax—inviting that as well. This relaxed attention.

As we relax, as the mind relaxes, sometimes very naturally the mind lets go of some of its ways it's caught and whirling and spinning. As that tension releases in the body and the mind, there can just be this very natural "oh yeah, and I'm aware now." Awareness is here.

So it can be a very relaxed way into touching into the recognition that we're aware, with very little effort, allowing the relaxation to support this recognition of being aware of just this in the present moment—mindful, not pushing, not striving, and not drifting.

So "abides." Abide observing. This next word, *anupassī* in the Pali, translated here as "observing," means basically to look at closely, see clearly, closely observe, touch into repeatedly. So we abide observing. This might feel like a bit of a conflict—settling back, relaxing, and yet connecting. I'll talk about that in just a moment.

It can be, and this to me points to the fact that relaxation and connection are not opposites. We can connect with relaxation.

"Abide observing the body as a body." This next phrase: "Abide observing the body in and of itself." This to me gets to that pointing I mentioned earlier—just knowing the experience directly, just what's happening in the present moment. Not our ideas about it, our views, our opinions. The body in and of itself.

Tonight I'll just explore this one through the perspective of the body, since we're exploring the body more in these first days.

So meeting the bare experience of the body, just the sensation level of experience. We often think of our body in terms of parts—hand, head, shoulders, knees, feet. Sometimes when I'm talking to someone who's newer to the practice, I'll ask them, "What are you experiencing right now? What are your sensations?"

And they'll say, "Well, I feel my knee right now." Knee is a concept, right? It's a reference to a portion of this fathom-long thing sitting here. But the experience of knee—knee is not an experience.

Let's look at hand, actually. Let's make it something a little less charged, since perhaps you may have some sore knees right now. Hand. Hand is a concept. We can think about our hand, know what it does. It picks up things. It holds on to things. It moves things around. Knowing our hand as what it does—that's the conceptual level of hand. That's not the experience of hand.

So touch in right now. Put your attention in that area of hand. What sensations? What's the actual sensation level of experience in hand? Pulsing, tingling, stiffness, throbbing, pressure, heat, tension. That's closer to the direct experience. Those are words, and words are concepts, but the experience is much closer to those words than it is to "hand."

And this is, I think, what this is pointing to. We understand or know the body as, in and of itself, as a body. This also, I feel, encourages a non-interfering awareness. Just to know what is actually happening with the body. Not the opinions and ideas and views and relationships we have to it, but just—this is what it is. This is how it is right now. This is the body right now. This is the experience of body right now.

Of course. The experience of the body is like this. This begins to bring in wisdom. It begins to bring in understanding. It points to the impersonal nature of the body. It's kind of just this collection of sensations that we have very little control over. It's human experience. This is human experience. What is the experience of body underneath perhaps concepts, views, ideas about it, opinions? Just the sensations.

This is what we're pointing to in the instructions.

Touching into the breath and the body. We could use breath here too: one abides observing the breath as the breath. Just a sensation. Pressure increasing, releasing. Maybe a sense of vibratory energy expanding and contracting. A flow of sensations. Coolness at the nostrils. A kind of coolness in the throat. The breath in and of itself. Abide. Abide connecting with the breath as it is.

This combination of "one abides observing" points to something important for me. To abide feels receptive—settle back, let experience come to you. You don't need to go out and find things or look for things. Just settle back and be with what's here. That's the quality of abides.

Observing brings in a little bit more of directing, of choosing perhaps, attending to some particular area of experience: the breath, the body, sound—those three areas we've been encouraging. This is the gathering and collecting of attention so that we can be mindful.

Mindfulness has a wide range of ways it can be experienced. Mindfulness can be receptive, where we settle back and simply notice what's arising in the present moment without choosing or directing the attention. And mindfulness can also be connected with choosing and directing attention—we can choose to attend or aim toward the breath, the body, hearing.

This is an important piece, because early in my practice I thought that if I wasn't choosing what I was aware of, then it meant I wasn't being mindful. But sometimes there are moments in practice where something else is happening that's very strong, and we can't necessarily choose not to look at it. There's a strong sensation in the knee pulling the attention—I'm not choosing to do it, I'd rather be with the breath. In those situations, perhaps we abide with that experience, bringing in the breath alongside it, but not trying to push away what's demanding attention.

So this "abide observing" allows us to connect with an experience like the breath, to aim or direct—okay, that's what I'm going to pay attention to for now, that's where I'll set the intention. But then we settle back and simply see what's there, rather than trying to find what's there. We allow there to be an abiding with the breath, a resting with the breath as it's showing up.

This has been said multiple times: just as it is. We don't need to find exactly how it's being experienced. Just this—what is it, how is it being known right now? How is mindfulness able to know it right now? That is this abiding and observing together.

It's like tuning a radio. You tune to a particular channel, narrow the bandwidth of what's being received. But the radio doesn't go out at that bandwidth and grab the radio waves. It's receiving all of that and then simply looking at this channel. It's a receptive quality rather than going out and grabbing.

This receptive quality of attention can be very supportive. It supports a relaxed knowing, a relaxed observing of whatever it is that you're choosing to cultivate as a stable place to land the attention. So this is really pointing to a receptive quality of awareness. Relaxed. Relax and receive—two words that maybe are different flavors of this sentence that the Buddha offers. Relax and receive.

Another word that I think is implied in the text here, especially in this phrase "observing the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states," is *allowing*. Observing the body as it already is, what is happening, without trying to fix it or change it. This is allowing the body to be as it is. So we cultivate an attitude of allowing, allowing things to be as they are.

This is actually one of the kindest things that we can do for ourselves. It brings in the quality of mettā. Annie in her talk spoke about how mettā is woven into our practice, and it's woven in right in the mindfulness practice with this quality or attitude of allowing—allowing your experience to be as it is.

Just imagine what it feels like when you have a friend who is so willing to accept you completely as you are. A friend who doesn't want you to change, who is willing to be there with you when things are hard, celebrating with you when things are going well. This friend who just lets you be who you are. There's a real sense of care and connection, a feeling of being loved. That is what this quality of mindfulness feels like—loving attention.

So right in the mindfulness practice, this quality of mettā is being cultivated as we explore just allowing ourselves to be just as we are. It's like we learn how to belong to ourselves, this sense of being cared for

just as we are. It's beautiful. It's a beautiful quality of the mind. It's about allowing all of our human experience, opening to all of it.

This allowing perspective isn't about agreeing or disagreeing with what's happening. We can allow things to be as they are and not like them. But what it is, is a recognition: this is what is happening. What is happening is already happening. What we're observing has already happened. So it's here. We're really connecting with that truth of this moment—it's here already. Wishing it weren't this way is just suffering.

But allowing, opening to experience as it is, is also not about passivity. Allowing really helps to open us, especially in our daily lives. Here on retreat, particularly in our sittings, we can really just allow what's flowing through us, really be that friend sitting with ourselves. "I'll be here with you for everything." And there are times in our lives, and there may be times here also, where the opening to experience points us to, "Oh, something actually does need to change here."

So this perspective of mindfulness isn't about just letting things roll over us. It supports connecting with a skillful response—not out of greed, aversion, or delusion, but out of compassion. Compassion is allowing connected with the quality of loving-kindness. When that allowing meets something that needs to happen, or something that may need to change, the perspective of allowing connects with compassion, a wish to alleviate suffering.

So allowing is a key support for our practice, but there are times when we can't command ourselves to allow. And this is where we step back a little further—to allow that we're not allowing. This is what's happening: I don't like it, it feels like I can't allow it. But can I know? "Yeah, not liking is what's happening. Okay." Be that friend who is just okay with you not liking this thing. That's okay. So we step back to just check in: can I not try to change this not liking, but just allow it?

the non-allowing. It feels like moving into a bigger container. So relax. Receive. And allow.

Another word in this phrase: ardent. This has the quality of diligence, wholeheartedness, connecting to experience. It's a place where commitment to the practice comes in—persistence, where effort is really pointed to. We can't just abide. The dude abides and floats off into the ether. There has to be a connection. Ardency.

And yet, there's a balance. Abiding and ardent. Relaxation and effort. These two are not opposites. They can support each other. There's a way that we can make effort in a very relaxed way. We can dwell and be really connected to experience.

A key for this kind of balance between abiding and ardent is a light touch of effort—just enough effort to be present right in this split second. That's all, actually. Can you know a breath right now? How about the sensations of your hands? Another breath. The sound of my voice. When I name each of those experiences, probably there was just a moment of connecting with that experience. Not too hard. Just for a moment. Just right there.

What is harder is sustaining it. And this is where we often get tight in our practice. Kind of the idea that we sit down and think, "Okay, I'm going to be mindful for forty-five minutes." It's like we pick up the whole forty-five minutes in that first second. And that's a recipe for tension. But you can just be aware of sitting, and here's a breath. And how about another one?

Joseph offered on one retreat I taught—he may still offer it at times—what he calls the secret teaching of practicing with the breath. All you need to do is make enough effort to be with half a breath. Just the in-breath. Can you be with an in-breath right now? And then at the end of that in-breath, can you be with the out-breath? Just enough effort for those few moments. That's the lightness of the effort. Just connecting, receiving for that moment, those few moments. How does the in-breath feel? How does the out-breath feel? How about the next in-breath?

And after a few of those, the mind will probably wander, and that's okay. At some point you'll recognize that the mind has wandered, and you can come back to just another half a breath. A light touch, over and over and over again.

Now, don't pick up the "over and over and over again." You mean I've got to do this for six weeks or three months? No, you just have to do it right now. That's it. That's all there is anyway. This is all there is—this moment, that's it. Six weeks from now doesn't exist. Just this moment. Aware now. And again. And again. How much effort does it take to be with this?

It's often a lot less than we think.

"One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, free from desire and discontent for the world."

That last phrase I don't have time to go into in great detail, but one thing I'll mention: Bhikkhu Anālayo, in his exploration of this sutta—many of you have probably seen or perhaps read his book *Satipaṭṭhāna*—wh en he describes this phrase, looking at this particular piece, "free from desires and discontent for the world," he says that the Pali used here (and I'm not a Pali scholar, so I can't confirm or deny this, but I trust Anālayo), this word *vinaya*, which we actually chant—*vinaya gedam*—we chant that in the sutta that Greg is teaching us tonight. *Vinaya* means "freeing from," and it can be understood as happening simultaneously with everything else going on in the sentence.

So we could say that this phrase might read: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world." This freeing from can happen simultaneously with the process of mindfulness.

And this is what we do. Something challenging arises—desire, discontent, greed, aversion. Desire and ill will, the first two hindrances. Mindfulness can be brought to those, and that's the very work of freeing ourselves. We free ourselves by being with them and understanding them, understanding how they affect us. As I said earlier, understanding the stress they cause.

We understand that they are stressful—that when we're caught by them, when we're caught by desire and discontent, we believe the story they're telling us, which is: "If you get this thing, if you get rid of this thing, then you'll be happy." We're caught in that belief, essentially deluding ourselves that this is good for us. And we're not noticing how it's affecting us here and now, the stress it's creating on our system here and now.

So this attending to it, bringing mindfulness to desire and discontent, is the process of freeing ourselves from these challenging states. At times we may be able to set them aside, but sometimes it's not possible. And then allowing, abiding, relaxing with, receiving, opening to can be a very powerful way to explore them. There are times to say no to them, definitely, and we'll talk about that more in the talks that are coming.

So this phrase—"one abides observing the body as a body, ardent, mindful, fully aware, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world"—it really brings together the what and the how of our practice. The what of our practice: body sensations, mind states, moods, emotions, processes of body and mind, all these foundations of mindfulness. What we are experiencing—this body, this human body, these processes of body and mind. Body as a body. Feelings as feelings. Mind states as mind states. Phenomena as phenomena.

What we're paying attention to, and how to pay attention—the attitude or the way we bring attention to it. Relax. Abide with some diligence, some perseverance, some heartfelt connection. With kind, loving attention. Allowing. Receiving. Receiving the experience.

All of this creates the conditions—relax, receive, allow—creates the conditions for the mind to understand, to learn what this being is. It's a doing. It's a being. It's not an "is." It's a process. And we understand the processes of this being that lead us, get us caught, take us into our habits and patterns. And those processes that free the mind, release us from those habits and patterns.

Our organism fundamentally wants to move towards well-being. That's good news. Because as we see the stress of a challenging mind state, very naturally the mind, the body, the being wants to move in the direction of releasing it when it understands it.

Relax. Receive experience. Allow it to be as it is. And let the learning happen. The wisdom will develop with mindfulness cultivated in this perspective.

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you for your practice.

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