Satipaṭṭhāna and Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 54:23

For the talks during this retreat, in the first portion, we as a team decided to explore primarily the Buddhist teachings on the four foundations of mindfulness, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This teaching includes some of the Buddha's most clear and detailed instructions about the practice of mindfulness. That's what we will be exploring for the first few weeks.

We'll follow that later in the retreat with talks on one of the lists that's actually mentioned in the Satipaṭṭhāna. Towards the ending of the sutta, there's a list called the Seven Factors of Awakening, which is a set of qualities that we both actively work to cultivate and that naturally grow and develop as we practice mindfulness—qualities that lead us towards freedom, towards awakening. In the second part of the retreat, we will go in depth into those qualities of supporting your cultivation in the direction of freedom and liberation.

Tonight I'd like to focus on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta itself, this teaching on the four foundations of mindfulness, and a little bit about mindfulness itself.

I think we all kind of feel like we know what mindfulness is. We've all been doing it a lot—you're here on a mindfulness retreat. And yet sometimes when we really start to explore, it becomes more mysterious. I've been practicing for twenty years, and the more I explore my mind and explore this quality of mindfulness, the more mysterious it seems. The more I'm not really sure I can give a clear definition. But we'll try. We'll explore that a little bit tonight.

There are some rough definitions we can work with. Often mindfulness is talked about as the state of being present or being aware, or an experience of witnessing what's happening, or perhaps the simple recognition of knowing what's happening while it's happening. Yet some of those definitions have a sense of a mental factor, a mental functioning. And it is mental—the quality of mindfulness is understood to be a mind state, a mental factor. Yet it can also create something more embodied, a feeling kind of experience of being connected with experience, intimate with experience. Those words—intimacy, connection—have a different quality to them than being aware or knowing what's happening while it's happening. So mindfulness has this quality of connectedness. Last night, Philip used the phrase "the felt sense of experience."

The mindfulness that we cultivate for our meditation practice, for the understanding of our hearts and minds and the exploration of what's going on in here—it's based on a completely ordinary, normal functioning of mind. It's just a natural part of being human: this self-reflexive capacity of the mind to know that we know. This is the basis from which mindfulness grows. The fact that we can know that we

know. Be aware of our experience.

We have this capacity to know what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. Yet so often we are not aware of that. Actually, there are times when that simple quality of being aware of what's happening while it's happening occurs to us throughout the day, quite naturally. In fact, I like to think that without this simple capacity, we wouldn't even be able to walk out the door. There's some part of our mind that's aware of where our body is in space, some part that's able to navigate the world. Some of that has to do with this ability to recognize what's going on.

But a lot of times what happens when we become aware of what's happening in the present moment is that we immediately start to do something with it. We might see some trash on the ground, and rather than recognizing, "Wow, I've become aware of trash on the ground"—which is very useful, I mean, it's useful to recognize the trash and do something about it, to pick it up—we don't often recognize that we have recognized that. We don't notice that mindfulness has arisen.

This, I think, is one of the pieces I'm so grateful to the Buddha for. He talked about this really simple, ordinary quality of mind and said, "Hey, this quality is worth looking at. This quality is helpful to cultivate." And as Philip mentioned last night, it's helpful to cultivate in a particular way—towards this question of what it means to move towards freedom from suffering. I'd like to explore that question of the perspective we bring when we cultivate mindfulness on the path of freedom. What does that mean, as opposed to just being aware of what's happening?

If we think about perhaps the way we were before we started meditating, or just the way we understand an ordinary person we might meet on the street—if we meet someone who's having some kind of reactive emotion, say anger, and we ask them the question, "Hey, do you know that you're angry?"—they're going to look at you kind of funny.

"Yeah, I know that I'm angry." It's not a surprise to them. And yet, to ask them at that point to just notice that they're angry—it doesn't have a lot of traction. Either they don't quite understand what you mean, or just noticing that they're angry has the function of basically amping up the anger. Because for most people, noticing that you're angry means thinking the thoughts about what you're angry about.

This is the terrain of the perspective shift that the Buddha is asking us to make. We need a new perspective around our experience. Often when we have something arising—a reactive emotion—we may be oriented outwards towards whatever it is we're reacting about, thinking about that thing. What do we need to do about it? How do we fix it? How do we change it? And that very process, if we're not also aware that reactivity is happening right now, will fuel the reaction. It's like we've got our foot on the gas pedal of that reactive emotion, and so it exacerbates the reactivity.

What the Buddha is asking us to do—and what seems to be repeated throughout the Satipatthana, which I'll explore in a few minutes—is to see if we can turn towards just what we are experiencing, rather than

being oriented outwards towards what we should do about it. Oh, there's anger happening. What is it? What is the experience of anger happening here and now? We recognize what's happening as happening in this body, in this mind, as a phenomenon, as experience arising here.

That perspective shift creates the conditions for something different to happen. You all know this. You've done quite a bit of practice, and you've experienced that shift. So I want to highlight this piece of mindfulness practice: it's not just about being aware. It's about being aware and understanding that what we are aware of is a phenomenon—a human phenomenon, let's say, because we are human beings. In exploring mindfulness, we are starting to explore what is the experience of humanness.

That includes the whole range of humanness: all of our reactivity, all of our beautiful emotions, the states of concentration that come as we collect and gather our attention, the bodily sensations that happen as we walk down the hill, the feelings that arise as we lie down in bed at night, the experience of coolness as we take a drink of water. Everything that happens to us, we can recognize: this is the experience of being human right now.

That shift—towards this recognition and away from "what do I need to do about this experience?"—is crucial. Because I think you're all familiar with the tendency, as we meet our human experience, to think, "Well, this flavor isn't exactly what I want right now. It's not the flavor I would really choose in this moment." And so we ask ourselves how we can go about getting something a little more pleasant, or how we can get rid of these unpleasant things, or how we can space out and just ignore the whole thing.

Rather than being curious and interested in the experience of humanness, we're trying to adjust it to be some other way. And that is where a lot of our suffering happens—in that wishing our experience were some other way than it already is in this moment.

As I talk about this, I always think it's important to clarify: turning towards the experience of being human, recognizing that anger is arising right now—this is not to say that we never act. Sometimes as we talk about mindfulness and being with experience as it is, people get a sense that meditators are just passive, that we don't take action, we just sit there and let experience flow over us without doing anything about it.

In my experience, what being mindful does—when we actually meet experience and open to the reality of being human with an open heart, not a contracted heart, when we meet experience with interest and curiosity—is that it creates the conditions for a wise response to arise, as opposed to an automatic reaction.

That automatic reaction is our usual approach. At least I know in my own life, that's been my usual approach when something happened to make me angry: I need to do something about this. And it's kind of knee-jerk—something unpleasant, got to get rid of it, got to figure out how to fix it.

With mindfulness practice, responsiveness actually grows. We begin acting from a completely different

place. Rather than acting out of reactivity, out of confusion and greed and anger and aversion and frustration, we start acting out of wisdom and compassion and generosity and kindness. There's a whole host of beautiful qualities of mind that inspire action in our lives and in the world. Mindfulness opens us to that place where we can touch into being motivated by these beautiful forces of mind.

And yet, as we're exploring this, as we're practicing with this, of course there are going to be times when we feel that contractedness and yet we still have to act.

You know, if you're in a situation of danger or a situation of abuse, to just sit there and wait until you have a completely non-reactive response before you take action is not necessarily so helpful. And so we have to learn to navigate it—to honor the arising of our strong reactivity, to meet it, to recognize it, and in that simple recognition, at least we are aware that we may be acting from it. We have a little bit of a chance, a little bit of a choice point to perhaps bring in a reflection on compassion or wisdom even as we are recognizing.

Even just recognizing: yes, this is an abusive situation, and boy, do I hate that person, and yes, it is compassionate for me to get away from this. To recognize that it's a process of purification really—purifying our minds.

And so the teaching of Satipaṭṭhāna is really the Buddha's encouragement for us to cultivate this quality of mindfulness from a perspective that points us towards freedom.

Satipaṭṭhāna, this word, contains sati, which is the Pali word for mindfulness, and the second part of the word, paṭṭhāna, which is translated in a couple of different ways that I think shed some different light on what is being pointed to.

One very common way of translating Satipaṭṭhāna is "the foundations of mindfulness." There are four areas offered, and so often the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is described as the teachings on the four foundations of mindfulness. In this way, the four areas are body, feeling, mind states, and dhammas—and I'll talk about that in just a minute in more depth.

This translation of "foundation of mindfulness" emphasizes that there are aspects of experience that are helpful to pay attention to. It emphasizes what we are paying attention to in order to support this cultivation of mindfulness. The term "foundations of mindfulness" encourages us to think about what we're noticing.

Another translation for this word Satipaṭṭhāna is "the four establishments of mindfulness." To me, this points a little bit more to the establishing of mindfulness—that we explore how to create the conditions to allow mindfulness to flourish. This points more to how we bring our attention to experience as opposed to what we are paying attention to.

Those two translations—the foundations of mindfulness and the establishing of mindfulness—I think it's

important to recognize that both what and how we pay attention are important.

So if we explore what it means to establish mindfulness in these four areas, mindfulness of body is the first establishment of mindfulness. This is exploring, opening to the physical sensation level of experience. Philip was pointing to this in the guided meditation this morning—the feelings of heaviness and weight, and so many different sensations of pressure, vibration, tingling, pulsing, just this felt sense of the body.

This is a great foundation for mindfulness because it is so obvious in so many ways. Although I have to say, when I first started practicing mindfulness, it wasn't very obvious. It's kind of like I was experiencing my body from the neck up. I was really in my head, and even though I was a dancer and could control my body, when people told me to feel into the feeling of the body, I was kind of mystified as to what that meant. And so it took some time to begin to explore and feel into all the different sensations of experience. It's almost like we have to learn the language that the body is communicating with us with.

The exploration of the body is one of the more obvious areas. I can call your attention, for instance, to the sensations of your hands, and probably you can feel that. Or just noticing the sensations of your hips against the chair or cushion or bench. There's some obvious sensations in the body. And so as a place to begin mindfulness, to me this points to some of the wisdom of the Buddha—to start with something that's pretty easy. We start by connecting with experience that's obvious and easy.

It also begins to help us tease apart what is the experience of the body and what's the experience in relationship to the body. If there's pain in the body—this is a kind of unpleasant, strong unpleasant sensation in the knee or in the back—there's that sensation. There's unpleasantness in the body, and probably sensations of burning or sparking or aching or dullness or throbbing. So there's that sensation level of experience. And then there's the whole host of "I can't stand this, I hate this, I have to fix this, I have to change this." There's a whole host of reactivity to that experience.

What we see as we pay attention to our experience with mindfulness is that the juxtaposition of those two things—physical pain and reactivity—makes the entire experience way worse. It almost seems like the physical pain is worse when we are reactive. There's this really tight feedback loop between body and mind, and in ways that are surprising, we almost confuse an experience of the body with the experience of the mind.

So as we start to get familiar with the sensation level of experience, we can begin to recognize: oh yes, there's that burning sensation, and oh, I really don't like it, and ooh, feel how that burning gets stronger as I don't like it. We can start to see how the mind influences the experience of the body. This is an important part of beginning to recognize what the experience of the body actually is, as distinct from our relationship—our mental relationship—to it.

In particular, in the first three foundations of mindfulness, and especially in the foundation of the body, there's a strong encouragement to simply take experience as it is. There are places where it says: when

you're breathing in, know that you're breathing in. Breathing out, know that you're breathing out. When you're walking, know that you're walking. When you're reaching, know that you're reaching. It's really simple—just a very straightforward encouragement to know what's happening with the body while it's happening. When there's the experience of pressure, know that the experience of pressure is there. It doesn't say notice the experience of pressure and do something about it. It says notice the experience of pressure and be aware of that.

Breathing in, know that you're breathing in. Breathing out, know that you're breathing out. That's actually a great meditation instruction to work with. It's so simple. You don't have to get all close and figure out what the breath feels like. It's like: yeah, breathing in—I know I'm breathing in. That's good enough. Breathing out—yeah, I know I'm breathing out. That's good enough. That's one of the first meditation instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta. Really simple, just this bare knowing of what's happening with the body. And that kind of simplicity is repeated for these first three foundations in particular.

The second foundation, the foundation of feeling, is an encouragement to recognize pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. Just whatever's arising has some flavor of being pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. And this goes on all the time. While you were eating your meal, this was happening with every single bite. Flavors arising: ooh, tofu—hmm, not liking tofu. Ooh, tahini sauce—liking tahini sauce. There's that kind of fluctuation of pleasant and unpleasant all through our day. We walk down the hill seeing things, liking things, not liking things. We take certain things as pleasant, certain things as unpleasant. This is a feature of every moment of experience—it's got this flavor of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. And again, the Buddha's encouragement with this foundation of mindfulness is: when pleasant experience arises, know pleasant experience is arising. When unpleasant experience is arising, know unpleasant experience is arising. Again, very simple instructions.

The third foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of mind states—being aware of what our mind is doing, essentially some of these relationships with experience. This section is again very simple. The teaching highlights a few straightforward areas: know whether aversion is present or absent, know whether greed is present or absent, know whether delusion is present or absent, know whether concentration is present or absent, notice whether distraction is present or absent. There are eight or nine states that are encouraged—notice whether these states are present or absent. Again, if aversion is arising, know aversion is arising. That's the instruction in the Satipatthana Sutta. It doesn't say notice aversion arising and then try to figure out how to get rid of it.

So these first three foundations in particular have a strong emphasis on the simplicity of noticing human experience, being aware that feelings are arising in the present moment, that body sensations are arising in the present moment.

Mind states are arising in the present moment. Just this simple. This is what human experience is.

This—what we might call bare recognition of what's happening right now—is a feature of this perspective

of mindfulness that the Buddha offers for heading us in the direction of freedom.

The fourth foundation is a little more complex in its structure. It's called the mindfulness of dhammas, and I like to think about it as awareness of our experience through the perspective of the Dharma teachings. How do we apply what we learn in the Dharma to our direct experience? This foundation explores various lists, and one that we'll talk about in a day or two is the hindrances—those states of mind that tend to catch us up often: desire, ill will, doubt, restlessness and anxiety, and sloth and torpor. These are the states of mind that tend to get in our way.

There's an encouragement in the fourth foundation to notice if one of those hindrances is arising or if it's not arising. Even just that simplicity: Is doubt arising, or is doubt not arising in this moment? This very simple exploration covers every moment of experience. Either doubt is present or it's not. We can simplify and look at our experience in this way.

So the fourth foundation is asking us to explore these teachings of the Buddha. And in this foundation, there is an encouragement to begin to recognize that the hindrances tend to get in the way. We're encouraged to recognize what helps us let go of the hindrances. What is it that gets us caught? How do they come to be? How do they dissipate? We're encouraged to see the conditions that lead toward the creation of the hindrances and those conditions that lead toward their release.

There are other lists also in this fourth foundation—different Dharma perspectives through which we're asked to look at our experience and begin to explore how we might apply each teaching to this moment of experience. In particular, there's a lot of curiosity in this foundation about the conditioned nature of experience. How does this experience arise in the mind? What are the conditions that put it together? What allows it to fall apart? What supports the continuance of wholesome states? There's this encouragement to reflect on the conditioned nature of experience and the impersonal nature of experience.

In this fourth foundation, we are exploring whatever's happening in the present moment through the lens of the Buddha's teaching, the Dharma. We'll explore these foundations together over the course of the next few weeks. This is really just to give you a sense of the direction or the flavor of where this teaching as a whole points. It points to a kind of mindfulness that is a non-judgmental, non-interfering awareness of what's happening while it's happening—and yet an understanding, a curiosity about what states help me move toward freedom and what states are in the way of that movement.

Early in the sutta, the Buddha offers a phrase that gives a sense of the way it's helpful to bring our attention to experience. What I just went through was really about what we're noticing, and a little bit about that non-judgmental exploration of mindfulness around what we're noticing. This phrase that the Buddha offers at the beginning of each of the foundations gives us a flavor of the qualities of mind that will help support mindfulness.

The phrase is: "One abides contemplating our experience." It's repeated for each foundation. "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world. One abides contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, mindful, fully aware, free from desires and discontent for the world. One abides contemplating mind states as mind states, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

This phrase adds a richness to what we're doing—how we're doing it, really. I'd like to look at this phrase a little bit. What does it evoke for us? These words are actually quite potent.

Even just the first two: abides contemplating. As you explore right now, what does it feel like when I say the word "abide" with your experience? What does that evoke? Abide with the body. To me it conveys a sense of dwelling, a sense of home, a sense of resting, of contentment. Abiding in the body. Abiding, contemplating.

The contemplating part is not just abiding and spacing off into the netherworld, but abiding and contemplating the body. We actually gather that abiding around an area of experience. To me, these two words together—abides contemplating—encourage a relaxed,

Open, receptive meeting of experience. One abides contemplating the body.

How does that feel as you let that phrase land? Abide contemplating the body. Just with a simplicity—there is a body. Or abide contemplating an in-breath. Abide, knowing an out-breath.

One abides contemplating the body as a body. That's an interesting phrase. The body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states. What might that mean?

I think this is bringing in some wisdom to this contemplation. We are recognizing the body in and of itself—recognizing the body as a body, not me, not my body, but just: this is a body as a body. So it begins to bring in something impersonal, even as we connect and dwell right in the middle of it.

There's almost a paradox just in the speaking of it. But as we feel into it—abide contemplating, there is a body—can there be a landing in that, and yet a knowing of the fact that this body is here? There are so many conditions for this body that are not my doing. Well, that's not completely true. We eat a certain amount and it influences whether we gain or lose weight, so it's not entirely beyond our influence. But the conditions for this body to come into being, this body made of the same stuff that the rest of the universe is made from—this is the perspective that the body is just stuff, elements.

There's one teaching that I love that comes from an unexpected source, perhaps—from Carl Sagan, the astrophysicist. He teaches us that every single atom in our bodies, every single particle of physicality, was forged in the heart of a star. We are star stuff. It's not mine. It doesn't belong to me. It's really just the universe expressing itself.

Abides contemplating the body as a body. Abides contemplating star stuff as star stuff.

Ardent. This word brings in several pieces. It brings in the heart quality—ardent has a sense of wholehearted, heartfelt connection with experience. It also brings in a sense of commitment and diligence to practice. So it includes both the heart qualities and the sense of "I'm going to do this." There's a level of needing to commit to being present, opening to abiding with moment after moment after moment.

This is a delicate balance, this area of ardency, of diligence, of persistence—because it's so easy to have that turn into forcing, pressing, overdoing it. There's a way that this teaching encourages us to abide *with* ardency. So it's bringing in both a sense of relax and commit. They're not opposites, those two. And so there's a delicate dance that happens right in the present moment. We commit to just enough ardency to meet this moment—no more than that, because that's all we can really do: meet this moment. And then we do it again and again and again.

Right now, how hard is it to notice the sensation of your hips against a chair or cushion or bench? How about now, to notice the sensations of your hands? How about now, to notice the sensations of your feet? Or your lips contacting each other?

As I name each thing, often it's pretty... it's not a lot, right? It's not a lot to notice that in that moment. There it is. That meeting of experience in that moment—for that moment, that's enough.

But we have to remember to do it in the next moment too. And so that's the dance—enough commitment to be present for this, and then do it again, and again, and again. And we'll forget. In the moment when you remember, it's just, okay, here I am. Can I be with this, and this, and this?

Joseph Goldstein sometimes talks about the secret teaching of the half breath. Just enough energy is necessary to connect with half a breath at a time. How hard is it to know an in-breath right now? Just enough—that's all you need to do, know this in-breath. And then this out-breath. That level of effort, repeated, is how the ardency is expressed.

The next phrase is "fully aware." Abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware. Here too, I think the context in which this is used brings in the clear understanding of things as they are—fully aware that whatever experience is happening right now is impermanent. It's arising and ceasing. Experiences arise, they may stay for a moment or for a little while, they stay however long they do, and then they cease. Just knowing clearly, fully aware, that phenomenon is rolling on—the impermanent nature of experience.

Some teachings also include in this area being fully aware of the purpose towards which we are doing this practice. This really brings in the intention that Philip was talking about last night. Why are we doing this? It's not simply something we just do. It takes a lot of commitment to come here for a month. So you all have some connection with your purpose for this practice. Remembering that purpose infuses the practice with more heart. I think it infuses it both with heart and wisdom, to understand why we are engaged in this practice.

The last phrase, "free from desires and discontent for the world"—it sounds like you're supposed to be done with desires and discontent, the way it's phrased in this particular translation. And yet, we're not going to be able to get there right away. Whatever's arising, probably there are going to be desires and discontent arising around it. So there's pain arising in the knee and there's frustration. There's discontent with that pain. And yet, what we can do, what we can begin to do, is to recognize: okay, yes, there is the pain and there is the frustration. We recognize that mind state itself. Right there, we are starting to move in the direction of freeing ourselves from being caught by that frustration.

Actually, I believe it's been pointed out that this phrase "free from desires and discontent for the world" could be expressed not in the past tense but in the active tense: freeing oneself from desires and discontent. So we engage. We abide contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world. It's a process that we engage in, one that begins to allow us—this very process of meeting desire and discontent begins meeting it in this way of, "Oh, discontent is arising right now." That is the step that begins to move in the direction of freedom.

We're not going to be able to flip a switch. We see discontent arising. We see frustration, anger, aversion arising. We know it. We'd like it to stop. It would be great if we had a switch we could flip and say, "Oh, anger, that's not useful. Let me turn that off." How successful are we with that? I'm not very successful with it.

But what's really useful is that there is a kind of turning towards: "Oh, that's anger. What's that like? That's frustration. Ah, what's that like?" And the experience that we find in that moment—rather than being caught by it, tied up in knots wondering how to get rid of this—it's more like, "Oh, let me see what it's like." There's a huge difference in the experience there. And the felt sense of that is an understanding of how it does start to free us from that state.

So, this practice of mindfulness the Buddha points to encourages us to abide contemplating our experience with heart, with diligence, really understanding the impermanent nature of experience and exploring what it means to turn towards those feelings of desire and discontent rather than being driven by them. This process is the process that will very naturally lead us to freedom.

And that is the promise of the Satipatthana Sutta. It says at the beginning that this path is the direct path to freedom. At the end of the sutta, there's actually a kind of promise. It says if you engage in this for seven months, you will have freedom. Not to speak of seven months—if you engage with it for one month, you will find freedom. Not to speak of one month—if you engage with it for seven days, you will find freedom. Now, that's really continuous practice for seven days. But the Buddha points us right to freedom through this practice of mindfulness.

Thank you for your attention.

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