Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:34

Tonight I'd like to talk about mindfulness, exploring it from the texts, because as Dawn mentioned last night with her real resonance with the texts, this is also the case for me. I've often found that even a sentence—and that's what we're going to look at today; we're not even going to look at a whole sutta, we're going to look at a sentence—can be deeply illuminating. We'll look at all those different words in that sentence and how they resonate, how they affect us, and what they mean about what mindfulness is, what our practice is.

I've found that this kind of exploration, really unpacking or exploring the texts in this way, has been very meaningful for me. It feels supportive in terms of making the connection between what the Buddha taught and what we do in our practice.

The main meditation instructions, or some of the main meditation instructions in the Buddha's teachings, are found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—the teachings on the four foundations, sometimes called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. I like Bhikkhu Anālayo's translation: The Four Establishments of Mindfulness. This is a sutta that really collects many of the instructions about how to practice, gathered around four basic areas, the four establishments. Those four areas are the body, feelings, mind states, and dhammas.

The foundation of the body contains a number of instructions that explore connecting with the physical body through breathing, through daily activities, through our postures, through contemplating the elemental nature of our bodies, through contemplating the parts of the body and the nature of our body to decay.

The foundation on feelings is an exploration around what we could call the felt sense aspect, the feeling aspect of experience. In the Buddhist understanding of feeling, this means experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. In all of our sense bases, in all of our senses, the understanding is that experience can have one of these flavors: pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is a whole foundation, and we will talk about it. I'm not going to talk about it tonight, but we will be talking about all of these over the course of these weeks.

The third foundation is looking at the qualities of our mind—whether there's greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind, or the absence of greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind; whether the mind is concentrated or not. It's more the state of the mind that it's pointing to. Know these things. All of these foundations are pointing to ways to recognize what's happening in our experience. These things are always happening in our experience. It's more of a pointing: this is a useful way to explore knowing what's happening in our

experience through these foundations.

The fourth foundation is a little more complex. The first three are kind of simple in a way. We recognize body experience, the feeling tone experience, what the quality of our mind is. The fourth foundation is in a way almost about investigation of our experience through some of the frameworks of the Buddhist teachings. We're encouraged to understand our experience through the framework of the hindrances: Are the hindrances present or absent? Are the enlightenment factors present or absent? How do we recognize the sense bases? Do we understand our experience in terms of the aggregates? And understanding our experience in terms of the Four Noble Truths.

This is all direct experience, not thinking about it. All of these instructions are connecting to what is the actual direct experience.

So this is the broad picture of what satipaṭṭhāna is: the establishment of mindfulness with these different areas of experience, different establishments, different foundations.

At the very beginning of that sutta, the Buddha offers a phrase, describes what satipaṭṭhāna is in just a few words. He offers a sentence that describes what mindfulness of each foundation is. This is the sentence that we're going to look at today.

We'll look at some of the words in this sentence. It starts with a rhetorical question: How does one practice the foundations of mindfulness? "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

And then it's repeated for each foundation. "One abides observing feelings as feelings, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desire and discontent for the world. One abides observing mind states as mind states, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desire and discontent for the world. One abides observing dhammas as dhammas"—phenomena as phenomena, another translation for dhamma—"one abides observing phenomena as phenomena, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

There are a number of words in that sentence, and they're all pointing to what we might call supports for our mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is in there, but there are many other words pointing to how to be present and what to be present with.

Since we are all more familiar with mindfulness, I'll start there. The more I practice, the more it seems to me that I'm not sure I can really say what mindfulness is. There are some approximations we can make, but it's kind of mysterious sometimes. We have some general words, some basic definitions: being present, being aware, witnessing, observing, connected with, being with experience, knowing what's happening while it's happening. That might be a good working definition—knowing what's happening while it's happening.

The mindfulness of our practice, the mindfulness of what the Buddha describes as wise mindfulness or right mindfulness, is related to a very ordinary capacity of our minds: the capacity to be self-reflective, to know that we are aware, to know what's happening for us in the present moment. This aspect of our minds is human, natural, familiar—and yet we often use that capacity in the service of greed or aversion. We use that capacity to know what's happening in the present moment in order to get what we want, to get rid of what we don't want, to shape our environment so that it feels pleasant. So that capacity in and of itself—to know what's happening in the present moment—isn't quite what the Buddha meant by wise mindfulness.

In fact, in the suttas, the quality of mindfulness is understood to be a neutral quality that can be shaped towards either right mindfulness or wrong mindfulness. Right mindfulness is shaped by wise view, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort—which then proceeds to wise mindfulness. And wrong mindfulness is shaped by wrong view, wrong intention, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort. At least that's the definition in the suttas of wrong mindfulness.

The suttas point to how mindfulness itself can be shaped. As I said a few moments ago, knowing what's happening for us in the present moment—that quality of mind can be harnessed in the direction of being curious about present moment experience as present moment experience. That might be another good working definition of something closer to wise mindfulness: knowing an experience in the present moment as an experience in the present moment, and being curious about it as an experience in the present moment.

It sounds like almost nothing, but that's not our usual perspective. Normally, when we become aware of something in the present moment, we're interested in acting on it in the service of getting what we want, getting rid of what we don't want. We're not interested in asking, "What does this feel like? What is this experience like?" We want to get rid of unpleasant things. We want to hold on to pleasant things. We're not interested—or often not quite interested—in exploring what that experience is actually like. That's part of what we're nourishing here: that curiosity. What is this experience?

We get curious about what it feels like right now. How is it arising in this moment? If what's arising is reactivity, rather than acting on it to try to get rid of it, we ask: What does this experience feel like? That begins to help the mind understand suffering. We understand that those qualities of mind—reactive qualities like greed, aversion, delusion, anger, frustration, confusion, hatred—when we recognize them in the present moment, we understand them as suffering.

This is actually looking at the First Noble Truth. We're encouraged to understand suffering in the First Noble Truth—to understand this through experience. What is this experience of reactivity? How does it affect the body?

How does it affect the mind? And perhaps learning something about how it comes to be, and how it goes away when it goes away—as opposed to asking, "How can I get rid of this? How can I fix this? How can I

change this?"

Paradoxically, the very exploration of what this experience is as a human experience tends to change it.

This quality of mindfulness—the Buddha understood this everyday ordinary capacity of mind to be aware in the present moment, to know what's happening in the present moment—when shaped, when cultivated from a particular perspective, is very freeing. And you all know this, or you wouldn't have signed up for a six-week retreat or a three-month retreat. How freeing this is. You've had a taste of that—that sense of the freedom that can be there with this curiosity. What is this experience in the present moment?

And so this sentence in the Satipatthana Sutta I understand as a kind of pointing of the perspective—the perspective of how to cultivate mindfulness. How do we cultivate this quality, shape this ordinary quality of mind so that it leads to freedom?

We'll explore this sentence from the perspective of the body: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

I love this first word: abides. Even as I say it to myself, I feel a kind of relaxation. Abide. And it's actually a very good translation of the Pali, because the Pali word *viharati* means something like abode, home, dwelling place. The Brahmaviharas are the divine abodes—this is the same root word, *viharati*, abide.

And so it evokes a quality of being at home. Abiding. Resting. Receptive. Contentment perhaps. A dwelling. Maybe a sense of intimacy, because being at home there can be a feeling of comfort, of intimacy. I feel it also points a little bit to this receptive quality that we've been emphasizing with mindfulness. When we're at home, relaxed, we can be available. We don't have to be on guard. We can just be receptive. We can be available.

So: abide. How does that word feel for you? If I just say right now, just abide, just abide. For me it feels like rest, just a resting, a relaxation.

This relaxation—I think Devin brought it up, Nakowai brought it up, Dawn probably brought it up, we've all brought it up—this is abiding. This is that beginning to be able to land and to dwell in our experiences, finding a home in our experience. Relaxation supports this.

We can explore, and I find often at the beginning of a retreat, spending some time consciously relaxing is really helpful. Scanning through the body, doing a little bit of bodily relaxation—Devon did that in the guided meditation a little bit. Just scan through the body and relax the body. And as you relax the body, it's a condition that supports the mind to relax. Especially when you relax the face. Right now, just explore if you can soften the face. See what happens in the quality of your mind as you relax your face.

Relaxation is not counter to attention. We might think it is, but we can be relaxed and attentive. This quality of relaxed attentiveness—the relaxation and attention, the receptivity of mindfulness—can have that quality of relaxed attention.

If right now you don't try to look at anything, don't try to find any particular experience, just relax—what's obvious?

Is there something that's being received already? You don't have to look for anything. There's something here in the experience. We don't have to look for anything.

So if you had a sense of that—of just relaxing and just receiving whatever's here—you could play with it. Just receive a breath. There's a breath happening, so can you receive a breath?

This quality of relaxed, receptive attention is supportive for any form of meditation practice. It's useful for concentration practice. It's useful for insight practice. It's useful for mettā practice. It's useful for open awareness practice. This understanding, or stepping into that relaxed, receptive awareness of being mindful—it's really the foundation.

I spent a lot of time striving and pushing and looking, and it created a mind that was pretty tight. Then I kind of had to let go and back off and let the mind relax for a while. On one particular retreat, after really holding on to that breath—"I am going to stay with this breath"—and getting so tight, I spent a day or so just relaxing. And then after that: wow, that breath is really easy. I didn't have to work for that one. And that next breath. And then the mind would grab onto it.

So I began to appreciate that cultivating that receptivity, that relaxation, was kind of primary. The practice unfolded more skillfully when that was the ground out of which the practice was unfolding—as opposed to "I'm going to do this, I'm going to hold on to it, I'm going to figure this out."

As I began to see this pattern around working with the breath and then relaxing and settling back, I noticed that at the beginning when I'd come back to the breath, it was quite easy and restful. Then as soon as I saw the mind get tight around it, I would let go: "Okay, let's relax." So instead of taking three days of getting tight and a couple days of relaxing, then three days of getting tight and a couple days of relaxing, it would be like a few breaths. A breath of getting tight, a breath of relaxing, then try again. It was much more just playing with that edge—a couple of breaths and then noticing how the mind began to get tight, and then, "Okay, relax, step back." The relaxation became more primary.

"One abides observing." This is a simple word—noticing what's here. The two words together, "abides observing," to me kind of encourage both the relaxation, the receptivity, and the meeting of experience. So there's something that we're observing.

And to me, observing here is not so much thinking about or looking at—it's feeling. Feeling into. What does it mean to experience the present moment? And what we are experiencing in this sentence is the body. What does it mean to observe the body, to know the experience, the direct present-moment experience of the body? To abide with relaxation, observing, being with the body.

The sentence here is interesting: "One abides observing the body as a body." This repetition points to some

of the wisdom that is being carried into how we practice mindfulness. This is: know experience as experience. Know the experience in the present moment as experience in the present moment. Know the body as a body. Know the breath as a breath. Know vibratory energy in the body as vibratory energy in the body. Know pressure as pressure. Simple, connecting, direct. Abide observing. The body as a body.

Let's play with it now with the breath. Abide. Relax. Connecting with, meeting the breath as a breath. Simple. Just a breath. What is the experience of the breath—as opposed to our ideas about the breath?

What is the experience of body as opposed to our ideas about the body? What's the direct, felt experience of the breath?

Sometimes we feel it in the nostrils, in the mouth, in the throat. Sometimes in the chest. Sometimes there's a broader sense of the whole body. This is direct experience. The breath is a breath. The body is a body.

This approach also encourages, I think, a non-judgmental and non-interfering awareness of experience. The body is a body. This is a human body. It's impersonal. It's just a body doing its thing. This is a way to point toward exploring the experience of breath and body as human experience, rather than thinking about it as *my* breath or *my* body. It's a human body. A human body that does its thing.

There's a phrase later in the Satipatthana Sutta, throughout the foundation of the body, where after each instruction on how to practice with a particular area—like the breath—it offers a few other little pointers. And one of them is: one recognizes there is a body.

Sometimes it can be that simple. Joseph points to this instruction a lot. *There is a body*. Even saying that—as I say it right now—it just creates for me a sense of the whole body experience. It's very direct. One understands there is a body.

Sometimes understanding the body as a body has more specificity. We feel into sensations of the breath, or the sensations as we're walking, our feet on the ground. There's more of a sense of specific sensations. But sometimes it's more: there is a body. There's a broad range of ways to meet our experience. It doesn't always have to be narrow and focused on some detail. Sometimes it can simply be: there is a body. And what is the experience?

One abides observing the body as a body. Another translation for that: one abides observing the body in and of itself. Again, a pointing to the wisdom side of what we are actually interested in exploring here.

What is the Buddha, in giving these instructions, saying? He's saying these instructions are onward leading. Noticing your experience in this way is useful. Try it. Come and see. *Ehi passiko*—the Dharma is *e hi passiko*. Come and see. Try it for yourself.

It's not something that we can necessarily understand just from hearing it. The first time I heard an instruction like this, I thought, "Well, what good is that going to do?" Somebody sent me a book that talked about mindfulness meditation. I was experiencing a lot of anger at the time. And what I got out of this

book was: try noticing that you're angry. Try noticing what anger feels like. And I thought, "What good is that going to do?"

So we may have to take it on faith at first. The Buddha says this is a useful way to explore. Come and see. Try it for yourself. You will find out for yourself that it is useful to explore experience—noticing the body as a body, as a human body, just as experience.

I spoke about receptivity, that quality of abiding and observing, of receiving experience. I want to talk just briefly about how sometimes we might think of receptivity as something we only practice in open awareness—that we settle back and don't choose an object.

and we just receive what's arising. That's a way sometimes people think about what receptive awareness means. But mindfulness itself, I think, is receptive—it just depends on where the attention is, what it's receiving.

If we think about a radio, a radio is a receiver. If you have a tuner on the receiver and all of the tunings are gone, it's just going to receive all the frequencies at once. That would be kind of like receptive awareness—a broad receptive awareness, receiving many frequencies and just noticing lots of different things. But with a tuner on a radio, you can pick a channel and tune to a particular frequency and listen to a particular channel, hearing that channel clearly.

So we can tune the radio, and then the radio doesn't go out into the air and grab those airwaves. It's not reaching out for that frequency—it's receiving. It's just attunement to a particular frequency or channel. We can think about the receptivity around our breath meditation, for instance, as a kind of attunement to the breath. We just attune to the breath, but then we receive. We receive that channel. We receive that aspect of experience. And we don't even have to think of it as narrowing. It can be that we're just saying, okay, let's see what's in that channel. There may still be stuff going on around it, but we're just letting this be the preference of what we're receiving. Just receiving.

Try this right now. What is it like for you if you're just, again, abiding? That relaxation. And there's a breath. Just receiving the breath, however it's showing up. You don't have to dive in and find any particular detail about the breath. Just receive it as it is. An in-breath, an out-breath, as it is. And then another one, as it is. There can be sound going on around, but you can still know. Just receive the breath as it is.

In my experience, this simple receptivity—attuning to a particular channel like that—the attunement begins, just over time, as you attune to that particular aspect of experience, the continuity of mindfulness there begins to reveal more detail. We don't have to try to dig in and see that detail; it becomes available. Not by forcing or holding or pushing, but just through steady, gentle perseverance. Receiving.

One abides observing the body as a body. Ardent. This word has some connotations that might, in our language, feel a little hard. But ardency has a connection to heartfelt. The word itself is even related to

heart. The Pali word is *ātāpī*. It's connected with this sense of wholehearted, gentle perseverance, heartfelt interest, curiosity. These qualities are brought in with ardency.

For me, the biggest flavor around ardency is curiosity. What is this experience? What is this human body? How does it do this stuff? And I can see I'm not in charge of it. What is this? It's got that quality of heartfelt interest. It's rapt, it's connected, it brings in those heart qualities. The word ardent also points to the steadiness, the gentle perseverance that Don was speaking about last night—the steadiness and continuity that both Don and Nakowai mentioned. That we keep going. There's that sense of wholehearted commitment.

And abide. These two—abide ardent—they're kind of like relaxation and alertness. I think ardency also brings in that quality of alertness. In my experience, relaxation and alertness are not on a continuum. You might think that relaxation is over here and alertness is over here.

But the mind that can be extremely relaxed can also be very alert. Now, that doesn't always happen. Sometimes when we're really relaxed, we fall asleep. But it's possible—the relaxed mind can be quite naturally very alert. So we shouldn't think about them as necessarily separate ends of the spectrum. We can play with this, the quality of relaxation and engagement in that relaxation. "Abide observing"—that also kind of brings those two together. Abide, observing, ardent.

In terms of continuity—and I'm sure we'll speak more about continuity over the coming days—it's really helpful, and Dawn was speaking of this too, this kind of gentle persistence, a light touch of effort, a light touch of application of energy. It actually doesn't take much to be connecting with something in the present moment for a moment, for a split second.

Right now, can you notice a breath? What about the sensations of your hands? The contact of your hips against where you're sitting? When I name each of those areas, it probably wasn't hard. It was almost like it was just there. Sometimes, at least if you're listening, it probably just popped in. Oh yeah, there are the hands. There's a breath. That's all the level of effort you need in a moment. Just a light touch of effort to connect—this breath, this half a breath, and then this half a breath, and then this half a breath.

Where we get caught, I think, is when we think, "I have to do this for forty-five minutes." But the level of effort in a moment? It's very light. It's not actually possible to pick up the amount of effort we think we need. I've done this, you know, sitting down at the beginning of a sitting: "Okay, I am going to be aware for this whole forty-five minutes. I'm going to bring up this energy and I'm going to do it." You can't do that. We'll exhaust ourselves very quickly trying to do that, and then the mind will wander, or we'll just get really tied in knots.

Just the light touch. Just enough for this moment. Connect. Connect again. Connect again. And notice when the mind says, "Forty-five minutes?" Just this moment. Just this moment. And then the mind will wander, of course. And then it'll come back and you just start again. Just starting again. That light touch of effort,

over and over again.

One abides observing the breath as breath, ardent, connected, wholeheartedly connecting, fully aware.

The next word, "fully aware," is *sampajañña*. Some of you may be familiar with this one, sometimes translated as "clear comprehension." Many people are familiar with this phrase from the first foundation of mindfulness—the instruction on clear comprehension is kind of about daily activities, being aware of all activities in the day. Knowing when you're reaching, arms bending and extending, going and coming, using the toilet—it's in there—and eating, and being silent, and talking. All of these daily activities are pointed to, and the instructions there say something like, "One acts in full awareness while going and returning. One acts in full awareness, or one clearly comprehends, while going and returning. One clearly comprehends while reaching and extending the arm."

So the activities themselves aren't necessarily what clear comprehension is. But that seems to be mostly what people associate with that teaching of clear comprehension—the continuity and the practice with, you know, the continuing throughout the day. And that may be partly what's pointed to here: keep practicing, continue.

But there's another place in the suttas where this term "clear comprehension" is actually defined. The definition of what it means for somebody to clearly comprehend something is that experience—feelings, thoughts, perceptions, body sensations, experience—is understood as it arises, remains present, and passes away.

So if we put that phrase into that section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it would sound something like: "While bending and extending one's arm, one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, remain present, and pass away."

That's the other piece of the definition of clear comprehension: one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, remain present, and pass away while being aware. This is bringing the mindfulness to a whole new level, actually. It's pointing to a broader sense of what's happening in experience. One observes the body as a body, fully aware—the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away.

In my experience, that level of awareness comes over time through the gentle persistence of being curious about what is here. Slowly, over time, the mind begins to see the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions that are arising in relationship to what's happening in the body. This is also pointing to impermanence—the understanding of impermanence and the importance of understanding impermanence as we are exploring our experience. And again, this isn't something that we try to do. It's more of an understanding, more of an insight.

So this aspect of clear comprehension and full awareness, to me, is beginning to point to the insight nature of this practice—where it's heading. This will get unpacked over the course of many talks, what we're

exploring over these weeks, what this aspect of this sentence means. But I think we can just rest with: what does it mean? What's the feeling of "fully aware" to us? Sometimes Joseph uses the phrase, "Well, are you just more or less aware, or are you fully aware?" And so it kind of brightens the mind a little bit to explore the possibility of full awareness. Full awareness. It also brings to me a sense of full body, full immersion—an immersion kind of feeling.

The last part of this phrase: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." Now this phrase, again, in a way it's pointing to where we're headed. We're probably not going to be free from desires and discontent for the world anytime soon. We may get little respites from being free from desire and discontent for the world. But often at the beginning of retreat, we sit down, we notice the breath for a few moments, and then we think about what we want to go do next, or what's for lunch, and there's desire there. So we are going to be working with desires and discontent.

It's interesting to me that this phrase is part of the definition of mindfulness. To me, it kind of points to where we're headed ultimately. But there's also something that Bhikkhu Anālayo pointed out that I really like—his take on this. He said that the Pali term for "free from" can be understood in the active verb tense, so happening simultaneously to this process of mindfulness. So he translates this as "freeing from." We could put a little bit of "freeing oneself from" in there: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world."

The process of freeing is what happens as we do this practice. I love that perspective because that's my experience. I don't free myself—the freeing happens. Freeing from desire and discontent from the world.

Anālayo also says we could understand it as "setting aside." And this sometimes can happen. Sometimes we can consciously say, "Yeah, I'm not going to go there right now. I can just set lunch aside for now and come back to the breath." So we can do that sometimes, and that's a skillful practice. That's skillful. But sometimes those thoughts are very strong, and the process of mindfulness there is not to beat ourselves up, like, "I'm not free from desire and discontent."

It's to notice what's arising. Desire is arising right now. Discontent is arising right now. What is the human experience of desire? What is the human experience of discontent? That's where the process continues.

It's not a mistake when we experience desire and discontent in our practice. And so we explore allowing when they arise. We abide observing. It shifts in a way to another aspect of mindfulness. If we're noticing the body, abiding observing the body as a body, and desire and discontent arise, then we perhaps begin exploring the mind state. We begin noticing, oh, this is what the mind state of desire is like. And this is how it affects the body.

So can we allow whatever arises? There are times, as I said, when we can set them aside. But there are times when they're so strong that we cannot. And so we observe them. We get curious about that as

human experience. Understanding desire in and of itself. Discontent in and of itself. And this is the process of freeing from. This is how it works.

One abides observing the body as a body. Feelings as feelings. Mind states as mind states. Phenomena as phenomena—ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing from desire and discontent for the world.

May it be so for all of us.

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