Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:17

Ajahn Chah, the great Thai meditation master, once said that to calm the mind means to find the right balance. In many ways, our whole practice is about coming to balance. Really, every talk we give is about balance in some way or another.

One way of understanding balance is that when certain factors of mind—what we call the seven factors of enlightenment, qualities of mind—are in perfect balance, it allows the mind to open to the unconditioned. But I'm not going to talk about the seven factors tonight. What I'm going to talk about is what can bring our mind into this perfect balance, what can help to bring the seven factors of enlightenment into balance. And this is the development of what the Buddha called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

This is really a huge topic. It's laid out by the Buddha in the main discourse called the Mahasatipatthana Sutta, which is translated as the Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness. I want to give an incredibly brief overview of what is a vast subject, but I want to describe it especially in ways that relate to our practice as we're doing it here, because I find it very enlightening, very helpful. Really, it's a brilliant way that the Buddha had of laying out our whole field of practice—really the whole field of our life experience—in these four areas of mindfulness.

They're completely all-inclusive of any mind-body experience that we can have, whether we're in meditation or in our life. When we cultivate and develop a mindfulness, an awareness that covers all four of these foundations of mindfulness, our practice, our life, our understanding becomes quite harmonious, quite well balanced.

In working with Vipassana—so that we are working with all four, as opposed to Samatha where we're just focusing on one object—you find that actually these four fields are completely interrelated. When we're not arbitrarily fixing on one selected object, you find it's quite difficult not to pay attention to all four of these areas of mindfulness. And so we come to a harmony of being, a completeness of understanding, with nothing unduly emphasized, nothing left out.

So what are these four areas? The first one is called Contemplation of the Body in the Body. This repetition of "the body in the body" is repeated throughout the sutta, and I'll speak to that a little later.

Several different contemplations are offered by the Buddha for working with this foundation of mindfulness in the body. One is the breathing—paying attention to the sensations of breathing. And this is incredibly brief; each one of these things could be talks and talks. So, awareness of the breathing. Awareness of the bodily postures: walking, sitting, standing, lying down. Clear comprehension of our acts,

of our movements, of our actions throughout the day. Again, we're developing all of this here—clear comprehension of what we're doing when we're eating, when we're dressing, when we're walking, when we're taking a shower, when we're falling asleep.

Then there are given nine cemetery contemplations, which I'm not going to go into here simply because it's not what we're doing here, but it's another way of giving attention to this foundation of the body.

Another aspect of giving attention to the body is contemplation on our material nature in the way of looking at it through the four elements. Now, this is a way of looking closely at our material experience, broken down into the most primary way we can experience materiality. The four elements is a way of describing the building blocks of our material experience, but it's pointing to direct experience. It's not as conceptual as it sounds.

For example, there's the element of earth, experienced as stiffness, hardness or softness, solidity—earth element. It's stiff, it's hard, or it's soft. The air element is the sense of movement, of extension. Water element is the sense of cohesion, what holds things together, always present there. Fire element is the sense of temperature, of hotness or coldness. Also, and this is interesting, the sense of maturation. For example, the examples given are that as we grow old, that sense of maturation is like burning up—the fire element.

What I find very helpful about working with our physical experience in this way is that it really brings us into the direct experience. It helps us approach the experience of sensation in a way that the sensation doesn't seem so monolithic, so solid and forbidding. And it's much harder to identify with. So, for example, there's the pain in my knee—it's killing me, this practice is impossible, I'm impossible, forget it, it's horrible. And then that switches to: "Oh, the fire element."

It's burning. And it just takes this whole level of solidity and craziness away. It's a lot harder to identify with a burning, changing to twisting fire element than it is with "my pain in my knee."

As we begin to directly experience our material nature in terms of the elements, we find it's much harder to identify. It becomes much more impersonal. Also, we see the impermanence much more clearly, because when you're looking at a sensation in terms of temperature burning and suddenly it changes to throbbing, it's changed. A different element is predominant. It's a different sensation. The seeming solidity of our experience really begins to break up. Even one sensation changes from burning to twisting to throbbing to different points of intensity, back to burning again. But in being with this in terms of elements, there's this constant sense of arising and falling, of nothing personal there.

So we're really seeing, just in being with that one experience in that moment, anicca, impermanence, and anatta, not-self, pretty clearly. Even if we're not consciously notching it up—"Oh, there's a moment of anicca, a moment of anatta"—we're viscerally experiencing that. Also the unsatisfactoriness: there's no solid me there. It's just this insubstantial, changing experience. There's no control, which is another way

that we experience anatta or not-self. We can't say what sensation is going to come next. "I think I'll just be with the water element today." Fat chance. Or how long it'll last. Or what the next sensation will be. Or whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. There's a lot to be seen and understood from being with a moment of this first foundation of mindfulness of the body.

The second foundation is called contemplation of feelings in the feelings. We've spoken some about this, about the feeling element. I'll just briefly go over it again because it can be quite subtle, being in touch with the feeling tone of an experience. And it can also be quite crucial in our understanding of how suffering is created on a moment-by-moment basis in our mind.

Feeling, as we've said, has a very specific meaning in this context. It's that quality of an experience that is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. And it is one of the five aggregates, the five things that make up a human being. So it is present in each moment of our experience. It won't always be predominant, but it's present.

Feeling arises from what is called contact. In other words, we have the sense base—the eye, the ear, the nose. Take the ear. A sound arises, and in the coming together of that with consciousness, the knowing of it, this is called contact. When this happens in a moment, these three coming together, a feeling arises from that. That sound is experienced as pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. No big deal. There's no value judgment in any of this.

It happens so much and it's so subtle that when it's unseen, this is where we get into big trouble. Where the pleasant leads to liking, a kind of craving, wanting more, and without seeing, into grasping, into fantasy, into all the things we do to perpetuate pleasant sensation. Same with unpleasant—all the things we do to avoid it. And with neutral, all the things we do to change it because we don't even notice it. I can't say how many times people have, just in this last couple weeks, talked about boredom as a really difficult experience. Not quite noticing what's happening.

So this is this quality of feeling. And it can be so important to notice because it is one really observable place in our experience where this ongoing cycle of perpetuating suffering and confusion can be broken. The cycle that starts with ignorance, leading through this contact, the pleasant or unpleasant or neutrality, the craving that arises from that, going on to clinging, going on to becoming, going on to more pain and suffering. This cycle can be broken when it's touched with mindfulness.

We don't have to stay trapped like this. Mindfulness itself is an incredibly powerful tool that allows the power to go out of this cycle. Not by hating it. Not by saying, "I'm never going to experience anything pleasant again, so I don't have to get into craving." Simply by seeing it with the power of mindfulness. That's why this foundation of feeling is a really important one.

I know it may sound oversimplified when we're in the middle of some really strong emotional experience, and someone comes along and says, "Well, if you would just notice the feeling of unpleasantness, it would all just drop away." I know it doesn't always work like that. And feeling won't always be the predominant

experience. But we can begin to bring it to our awareness and give it more attention, because it is really powerful.

So when there is something going on that we're caught in, stop a minute. Can we bring the attention back to the bare experience? You're sitting here. There's a recurrent noise in the hall from someone. You're aware of the noise. You're not off in fantasy, but really spinning in the aversion: "How can that person be so inconsiderate? Don't they know they're spoiling my concentration?" And on and on. Aware of anger, but not really completely gone.

When we can come back even closer to the original contact, we begin to see what Ajahn Chah said—that it's not that the sound disturbs us, it's we who go out and disturb the sound. It's just a sound. Hearing. An unpleasantness arising with that.

When we're sitting there, lost in anger, then there's the imagination: "Oh, they're gonna do it again." And then we're really angry, in anticipation of something that hasn't even happened yet. But you know it's going to happen. Okay—the next sound. Bring your attention open to it, fully to that actual contact, the hearing. Really note it. Be with it fully. And perhaps one will notice then the quality of pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality with it, that might or might not lead into this whole mental torment that follows. But each moment that we can be right there at that contact point, really aware of the pleasantness or unpleasantness, it's much less likely that we'll get so lost.

It's also a lot harder to identify with unpleasant feeling than it is with "that insensitive brute of a person ruining my meditation." Unpleasant feeling—there's not much to do about it.

The experience that I always bring up, one that was very strong for me, happened once when I was doing walking meditation late into a retreat one summer here, during one of our plagues of the flies, which we had really badly at times. I was walking very slowly, and this fly was just—you know how they are—crawling all over my face. And I was noting it. But I was noting sensation, and I was noting aversion, and growing aversion. And it was a lot of trouble, the way I was describing the eating meditation. I mean, I was going about that slow—to lift and move and intend to wipe and wipe. And by the time my hand got there, the fly would be long gone. By the time I got my hand back down, the fly was back. So it was a losing battle.

And finally I kind of said, "Maybe I could notice the unpleasantness." I got very careful with the sensations, and sure enough could really get a sense of that unpleasantness. And that was fine. It took really staying right there at that sense door, right at that contact, because each little movement of the foot brought up unpleasantness. But when I was there with it—it's just a little tickle. Unpleasantness. Now there's nothing to hate or really get off into aversion about. It's really quite freeing.

This is sort of an aside note. Why does the Buddha repeat, in each of his instructions, this "be aware of the body in the body, the feeling in the feeling"? I've read different explanations. The one I like best, because it

really speaks to my experience, is this: often when we talk about observing the feelings, observing the body, the consciousness, objects of consciousness—

It sounds incredibly dualistic, like I'm standing over here somewhere observing the feelings in the consciousness, which is down there. The way Thich Nhat Hanh explains it, which makes a lot of sense to me, is that this phrasing repeatedly emphasizes in the language of the sutta that the Buddha is pointing to our direct, bare experience—not to thinking about experience.

This is what Thich Nhat Hanh says: "Remember the phrase from the Satipatthana Sutta: contemplate the body in the body, contemplate the feelings in the feelings, contemplate the mind in the mind, contemplate the objects of mind in the objects of mind. This means that you must live in the body in full awareness of it and not just study it like a separate object. Live in awareness with feelings, mind, and objects of mind. Do not just study them. When we meditate on our body, we live with it as truth and give it our most lucid attention. We become one with it. The flower blossoms because sunlight touches it and warms its bud, becoming one with it. Meditation reveals not a concept of truth, but a direct view of truth itself."

To me, that makes a lot of sense—what the Buddha is pointing to.

Often we won't be able to be aware of or contemplate the feeling quality of an experience. It's not always predominant. We might be really angry, way lost in being angry at that sound, with no chance of getting close to the contact and seeing the unpleasantness. That's fine, because feeling is only one of the four foundations.

The third foundation is the one we're paying attention to when we're aware of anger or aware of calm. The third foundation of mindfulness is contemplation of consciousness, or state of mind, and this includes mind states and emotions. What I love about this is there's no sense of hierarchy. It's not that we're doing a lesser contemplation when we're aware of consciousness rather than feeling. It's just as valid. It's simply that a different foundation is predominant in this moment. No one of the four foundations will always be prominent when we're working with vipassana in this way—it will continually shift and change. In my experience, that's not only not a problem, it's incredibly helpful because it keeps us from getting stuck in one way of seeing, stuck in our blind spots.

So, contemplation of consciousness. One way of looking at it is that there are two component parts of a moment of consciousness. Consciousness itself is that quality of bare knowing of what's happening, the bare awareness. But in any particular moment, arising together with the bare knowing will be some mental factor or emotion present with consciousness. It colors the consciousness, so to speak, in that moment. They arise together.

Mental factors might include greed, lust, happiness, faith, joy, boredom, or gratitude. In that moment, the bare knowing quality and the mental factor can't really be separated. It's like you're looking at consciousness through this mental factor. That's why it's so important to include this foundation of

consciousness in our practice, in contemplating it—because that mental factor, that emotion, is coloring our perception, our experience.

This can be quite obvious. When you first fall in love with somebody, suddenly the world is beautiful, the sun is shining, and people you couldn't stand—you don't know what was the matter with you—they're so wonderful now. That happiness is coloring our experience of everything. When you're having a bad day here, suddenly this place is the pits, a prison; everybody is grim and forbidding and sick. And you really believe it.

I remember once, on a retreat I did a while ago, this first really hit me. I was sitting in the dining room and wasn't aware of the state of my consciousness. I was sitting quietly, noting, and each person that walked by—something about them was incredibly annoying. "Oh God, look at the way they walk. Look at that person—they haven't been mindful since the day they got here." Something like that, about ten people in a row. Finally it hit me: "Hey, wait a minute. I think there's anger in the mind here. And it's got nothing to do with the people."

This sounds rather obvious, but so often it isn't—until we remember to turn our attention to the quality of consciousness in that moment. When we're aware of it, it's very, very powerful. And when we're not, it becomes a veil we look at everything through.

So we simply, again, need to recognize the state of consciousness, acknowledge it, and allow it.

We're not trying to manage it or manipulate it—simply allow it. And this applies not only to difficult states of consciousness, but also to really pleasant and positive ones, and to neutral ones as well. It's quite common for people to come in and say, "It's just calm, nothing's happening." But calm *is* something. Calm is a mental factor. It's happening. We need to notice it. It's a worthy experience to give our attention to. It's the truth of this moment. The third foundation—state of consciousness—is important to pay attention to.

How do we pay attention to it? Again, it's simply knowing the quality of consciousness at that moment. That's all—the bare knowing of it, the direct experience. There's a phrase from the sutta where the Buddha says that a bhikkhu, or in our case a yogi, knows a consciousness with lust as a consciousness with lust, and knows a consciousness without lust as a consciousness without lust. That's all. It's not that complicated. We don't have to do something about it. It's simply to know it for what it is. Be with it. Feel it. Allow it.

Often in a strong mental state we can feel it in the body. And here's where the foundations start to interrelate, because you're moving into awareness of the body again. But just let the state of consciousness be as it is, with our mindful awareness of it—whether it's restlessness, sleepiness, joy, excitement, bliss, concentration, or calm. The key is alert attention and acceptance of whatever state the consciousness is in, knowing it.

As we begin to give our attention more to this area—because it can be quite subtle; mental states aren't

always strong and can just nebulously color what goes on—we find that it also becomes clearer and easier to be aware of the subtle shifts of mental states. And this is where it moves into wisdom, into understanding. Because as we continue to observe this, we really see that no state of consciousness lasts very long. It really doesn't. How many times do you note calm, or do you note sleepiness? It might seem like forever, but it changes. Even the really heavy, seemingly negative states of mind that we feel caught in and identified with—when we really look on a moment-to-moment basis, no matter how solid we think it is, we start to notice moments when it's just really not there.

So we're really sad, filled with grief, and it hurts. It's hard. We're noting it. And suddenly there's a moment: "God, I'm so hungry. I wonder what's for lunch." And then we're back to, "Oh, I'm so sad." But that moment happened. The sadness was completely gone, and the mind had moved into hunger and desire for lunch. Just watching this carefully, this awareness of the impermanence of mental states begins to poke holes in the seeming solidity of what we think is our identity, of what we think is our experience of our mind, our consciousness. We see quite strongly that mental states come and go.

Sometimes as we practice for a long time, we find that really strong mental states are flipping back and forth with a seemingly crazy rapidity. This is quite common, and it's not a problem—except if we keep thinking each one is who we are. Then we're flipping back and forth between all these identities, and in one hour we go from exaltation to despair to starvation to murderous rage to loving-kindness, and we think, "My God, I'm crazy." But we're only crazy if we think each of those is who we are and we're trying to find some kind of solid core there, some kind of continuity. When we really start looking, there isn't a solid core and there isn't continuity. The more we're aware of the state of consciousness, the harder it is to really identify with it for very long. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, none of them last too long.

One might find—I've found this is quite perverse—that with really painful and unpleasant mental states, when I start to see how impermanent they are and they're beginning to dissolve away, there's a real clutching after them. "Wait a minute, if that goes away, then who am I? I'm this really screwed up, pained, depressed person." There can often be this kind of perverse holding on to really difficult and unpleasant states. Just notice that if it comes up. You'll see it when you begin to acknowledge the changing nature of consciousness.

No mental state will last. It can't. How much pain comes from identifying with and yearning for pleasant states of mind?

Concentration, rapture, bliss, calm—these also are mental states. They also arise and fall. They're also not us. No mental state is going to bring us lasting peace. It can't do it for us. And in that continuing to yearn for something solid and satisfying where it can't be found, until we bring our attention to actually look at the nature of mental states, we'll continue to suffer.

The paradox is that the peace that comes when we quit fighting the state of mind that's happening now

and looking for something else—that acceptance, that total mindful acceptance of what's happening right now, is where the peace can come.

Sometimes I get the impression from talking with people that there's an almost unconscious tendency not to give full attention to states of consciousness. Sometimes because it's painful, something hard to be with. But sometimes I get the impression there's this sort of sense of hierarchy: "Well, being with mental states isn't as important as being with the breath. Somehow that's a more valid and useful object of contemplation." If you're feeling a sense of struggle in that way, sometimes stop for a minute. Check out the third foundation of mindfulness. What is the quality of consciousness? Is there something we're not seeing in trying to push it away and hold on to some idea we have?

Peace and freedom isn't about achieving the perfect, unchanging state of consciousness and then just floating there for the rest of our life. It doesn't happen. Peace isn't the absence of difficult or unpleasant experience, but the seeing of it for what it actually is—seeing the impersonal, ultimately unsatisfying nature, the sense that there's no abiding self here. And being aware of, noting and noticing and fully allowing our states of consciousness to be in our awareness when that's the predominant experience is an incredibly helpful part of understanding this.

One other thing I want to say about working with emotions, mental states, states of consciousness, because it's a strong one for many of us: seeing the mind state for simply what it is requires the use of what we call wise attention. Both of these are very powerful. The power of mental states is obvious; the power of wise attention is also very strong.

A good example of the power of both of these is in that phenomenon we've spoken of called yogi mind. In our normal life, in our normal experience, we have a tremendous amount of energy that's expended in activity, in going here and there, in our minds going here and there. And one of the things that's happening now as we sit and we focus and we pay attention and we really limit our activities and our movements is that this tremendous energy is being gathered together into the power of our meditation. It's really a strong energy. It builds and builds as the retreat goes on. It's very powerful when directed into mindfulness, into seeing. It's equally powerful and can be directed into total identification with what's going on in a particular mental state. And this is where we get yogi mind.

So a simple experience: you have a little sniffle, it's unpleasant. The thought goes through, "Uh-oh, I'm getting a cold." Fear comes up. There's identification with the fear. There's the thought, "Maybe if I had some echinacea, I must have some echinacea. I know I'll get better, I won't get sick if I have echinacea." And this fear builds, and all the energy we've been building up is going into this total identification with, "If I don't get echinacea by tonight, I'm going to have pneumonia." And you know, you come bursting into the office at 6 a.m.—"I've got to have echinacea!" And the poor people in the office are just sitting there: "Okay, sure, echinacea, right, okay." The incredible power of energy directed into identification with the mind state of fear. This is yogi mind.

Now we can also, at whatever point of the process we become aware of it, move that energy from identification with the fear into paying attention to the fear—into the noticing, the noting, the observing of it. We're not saying, "Fear, bad, go away." But shifting where the energy is going, from identification into observing the fear itself, back into the third foundation of mindfulness. This is wise attention—simply shifting the focus of energy.

And it's very powerful.

The fourth foundation is a very complex one, so what I'm going to say is incredibly cursory. The fourth foundation is contemplation of the dhammas, a word which can variously mean many things. One of the usual translations in this context is "contemplation of mental objects," or "objects of mind," sometimes "contents of mind," "the process of mind." Again, it's the bare knowing of what we call objects of mind.

This is not license to spend the next three and a half hours fantasizing about what you're going to do when you leave here. "Well, this is an object of mind. I'm being quite mindful of the fourth foundation here." No, sorry. It's awareness, bare knowing of the objects of mind.

The Buddha actually, in the sutta, is very specific. Fred and I were just talking before about how the list of what he gives as the objects of mind basically comprises the whole of the Buddhist understanding. Each one of these could be a huge talk. I'm just going to list them and give an example of one.

He discusses very specific dhammas, objects of mind, listing the five hindrances, the five aggregates—the five factors that make up a person—the six internal and external sense bases (which are eye, ear, nose, touch, smell, and the mind base internally, and their objects externally), the seven factors of enlightenment, and the Four Noble Truths. A huge, huge area. And we're not talking about thinking about these things, ruminating, philosophizing, trying to remember, but much more the bare knowing.

To give an example using sense desire as one of the five hindrances: knowing when sense desire as a hindrance is present in the mind, and knowing when it's absent. Not getting lost in fantasies of desire, but rather the process being that you're having the thought, "What would the perfect lunch be? If I could dream up the perfect lunch to make here, what would it be?" And then you're aware, "What would be the perfect zafu? How can I get my sitting arrangement just right so there's no pain? What would be the perfect concentration experience?" And then suddenly, "Oh, wait a minute. Desire. Sense desire is present in the mind right now." That's the knowing, the bare knowing of the objects of mind, of dhammas—fourth foundation of mindfulness.

It could be the same knowing of the presence or absence of concentration, of investigation, of energy, of calm. Not judging, but simply knowing when it's there, when it's not. Knowing the absence of sleepiness, the absence of restlessness.

You can see that as we begin to become aware on this subtle level of the presence or absence of these objects of mind, it gets very subtle. And our awareness of the balance of our experience also begins to get

accordingly subtle. This bare recognition really cuts into the power of identifying with, for example, sense desire. When we see, "Oh, the presence of the hindrance." Or when it's gone, it's like, "I'm doing so great. I haven't had any desire." You notice, well, there's the absence of that particular hindrance—but there's the presence of pride at this moment. Simply noticing it, the experience becomes much more one of cause and effect, one condition leading to another, and much less "I'm doing so badly" or "I'm doing so well."

Another very interesting part of being aware of the dhammas, the mental objects, is this: as we allow careful and repeated observation of the presence or absence of these mental objects—not trying to do anything but simply noticing, without a lot of fighting with the experience or judging it—we begin to notice, to understand through repeated recognition, what conditions (both inner conditions, qualities in mind and body, and external conditions) lead to the presence or absence, the arising and dissolution of these various qualities. This can be a very useful experience in our practice. It's useful information.

We begin to see from our own experience which conditions favor the arising of desire, which conditions keep it going, which conditions favor desire's dissolving away, which conditions inner and outer favor desire not arising so much. So we find, for example, that when desire has arisen and we just let ourselves keep thinking about all the different nice things we could have, suddenly desire has gotten incredibly strong. After a while, we see there's a moment of choice where we've noticed that desire has arisen, we're fantasizing about what we're going to do when we go home, and suddenly we think, "Oh, this is desire." And we know that if we keep going like this, it just gets a lot worse. We have that moment where we say, "You know, I don't really want to do this." And we come back to just noticing the desire itself rather than the fantasy.

Our experience becomes much more that it's a series of conditioned processes. It's not personal. We begin to know what conditions allow sloth and torpor to arise. Instead of it being, "Oh no, I'm this slothful, decrepit yogi," we start to notice—as one yogi said this summer at a retreat we were doing in England (it was very warm and these big bumblebees would come in and just buzz all around the room), this person said,

They recognized that something about the sound of a bee buzzing brought up associations of fields and lying around and sleeping, and they would get incredibly sleepy listening to this sound.

It's just kind of interesting to notice. It's a very personal thing, but we all have our personal conditions that will bring up either the hindrances or the seven factors of enlightenment, or contribute to their dissolution. So just notice this. Notice what brings energy. Notice what sustains it. And notice all the different qualities, the factors of enlightenment. It's very helpful. And again, we could talk much more about what these are, and we will later on.

So these are the four foundations of mindfulness in brief. And as you'll see, these four include everything in our experience. There's nothing left out. It's important to give attention to whichever one of these four happens to be arising predominantly in the moment—not to have the feeling that sadness is more

important to pay attention to than tingling, or that unpleasantness is really where it's at, or that feeling is better to be with than objects of mind. Just allowing ourselves to be fully there and recognizing whichever foundation is arising predominantly in our experience.

This leads into a really harmonious, broad, direct seeing into all aspects of our life—physical, emotional, mental—as well as a deep seeing into the laws of nature: the impermanence, the unsatisfactoriness, the sense of not-self that we often don't see when we're not paying such careful attention.

The other thing I want to say is don't make it complicated. Please don't sit here with a checklist and make sure that you're running through all the four in the right order. They're actually so interrelated that in my experience I find it quite hard not to be in touch with all four. For example, there's a sensation in the body. You're aware of that. It moves into unpleasant feeling. Moves into aversion. Moves into restlessness. You recognize that—oh, there's the hindrance of restlessness. Right there you've covered all four foundations. And it just keeps on going. "Oh, I'm really good. I recognized restlessness." Then there's pride. Back to the sensation in the body, back to a pleasant feeling, up to desire, into fantasy, into recognizing it. It just cycles around and around and around. The sense of interdependence is so strong you can't really isolate one from the other.

The Buddha said once: mindfulness of breathing, developed and repeatedly practiced, perfects the four foundations of mindfulness. The four foundations of mindfulness, when developed and repeatedly practiced, perfect the seven enlightenment factors. The seven enlightenment factors, developed and repeatedly practiced, perfect clear vision and deliverance. It's a strong statement. Mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of the four foundations, perfects clear vision and deliverance.

Why? How? In each moment of mindfulness, there's that clear, direct, intuitive knowing of the arising experience just as it is. And because in that moment of mindfulness the mind is undistorted by greed, hatred, or delusion, we can know the experience as it's actually occurring. This repeated, moment-by-moment direct experience, direct knowing of what's actually occurring, repeated over and over and over, allows us to have a very deep, visceral experience of the laws of nature—of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, anattā, not-self. Not thinking about it, but viscerally experiencing on a deep level how these laws are present in each moment of our experience. And this understanding—this intuitive understanding, not a thinking-about-it understanding—can open the mind as it deepens to liberating insight.

I want to use an experience of the breath as an example of how we experience these things over and over. The taken-in breath, just breathing in, breathing out. And continually, over and over, this deep intuitive knowing of the bare experience of it. It could be the breath, it could be a sensation, it could be anything. After a while, you just really become aware each time of the arising of the breath, of the dissolution of the breath, the arising of it, the dissolution of it. Impermanence isn't a thought anymore; it's the actual moment-by-moment experience. And then the breath breaks down. It's not just an in-breath.

There's all these different sensations that comprise an in-breath—perhaps experiencing them more finely as different elements: pressure, tingling, vibration. And then each time one becomes aware of the arising and the dissolution of each of these smaller experiences in the breath, sensations rapidly arising and passing, over and over and over.

The more we keep bringing in our attention and simply being with the experience, the more it keeps breaking apart. The more we see there is no solid breath there at all. It's just coming and going. And then even the gross breath itself is changing all the time—from long to shallow, from deep to rough to smooth. Where is there any substantiality there? Any substance?

There's no I. There's no sense of who's in charge. Can we control the breath? Not for long. We can hold it a little bit, but we can't determine whether it will be shallow or rough. Am I going to feel pressure or tingling with this breath? There's no control over what will arise.

And in a way, there's a deeply unsatisfying nature to this. It's all shifting, moving away. There's nothing solid there. We experience this over and over with each breath, with each sensation that arises, with each mental state that comes and goes. A really deep wisdom—intuitive—is being developed through this experience.

And even further, we begin to see that there's no separate existent entity. We see the interdependence of everything: that the breath arises only due to conditions. There are lungs, there's the heart beating, there's a body, there's air, there's life, there was food that kept the body going. When conditions change, the breath will change. When the physical nature changes—if we get sick, if we catch a cold—the breath will change. If the state of consciousness changes and we're really lost in fear, the breath will change.

Nothing exists separately. It's all dependent on previously arising conditions. The more we look into it, the more the illusion breaks apart. And we repeatedly have a deep personal experience of anicca, dukkha, anatta from any one of the four foundations of mindfulness in any moment. It's very powerful.

So as the Buddha said, the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and repeatedly practiced, perfect clear vision and deliverance.

I have to say, in reading the sutta and seeing how the Buddha could break all this down for us in a way that's really comprehensible is amazing. It's such a comprehensive and practical instruction for the realization of liberating insight.

I want to end by saying again: don't get complicated. Whatever is happening, whatever is arising in this moment is one of the four foundations of mindfulness. There's nowhere else to go but this moment—being fully present with whatever is presenting itself as the truth of this moment. That is one of the foundations, and it's a sufficient object of our attention to contribute to the arising of liberating insights.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.