Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:49

Tonight I want to talk about actually the very basic root of our practice, the Discourse of the Buddha on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

But first I just have to share something with you. It seemed to me such a perfect example of how outside of the normal stream we are—or I am anyway. I was watching the news tonight and an advertisement came on that showed a beautiful nature scene and then a beautiful sunset. The announcer said, "How can you put a price on a beautiful sunset?" Then it showed another beautiful nature scene from a distance, a wilderness and a river and a little trestle railroad going over, and said, "Can you put a price on a journey of discovery?" And then it got very upbeat and said, "This is America—of course you can." I thought, we're in trouble.

So countering that way of thinking, I want to talk about the very basics of our practice, the four foundations of mindfulness. Remember this morning I mentioned how the Buddha talked about the leaves in his hand and the leaves in the forest, and the leaves in his hand being all we need to know for freedom. I think this sutta, this sutra on the foundations of mindfulness—or the establishments of mindfulness, or it could be translated as four ways of setting up mindfulness—could maybe be one of the most important leaves as a tool for our awakening. Not as a measure of perfection that we have to live up to, but as tools to help us relate to our experience in a way that can open us to freedom within it.

The Buddha doesn't mince words. This is how he begins: "Bhikkhus"—which means monks, but it also is used to refer to anyone who is on the path of practice—"Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana, namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

So this is serious stuff. And it's also very practical, very simple and basic as a way to practice. He talks about four different areas that comprise the whole of our experience, our mind and body experience, and just gives systematic ways to be aware, to be in relationship to all aspects of our experience—these four foundations. This leads to a penetrating understanding of the characteristics of each and all aspects of experience, of the true nature of who we are, of mind and body. It allows for the unhooking of the mind from attachment or aversion to any and all of these manifestations. And it allows for recognition of our true nature. It's extremely profound.

So there are these four areas which I'll describe, which we're practicing. But it's not just the what—these four, and you should be with them. What's much more important is the how. Throughout the whole sutra,

after each specific establishment or domain of mindfulness, he reiterates over and over the how.

What are the four? They're mindfulness of body, mindfulness of vedana (feeling or feeling tones), mindfulness of consciousness and emotions (citta), and mindfulness of dhammas, which is usually translated as objects of mind. He mentions those, but he says it's the how. One abides contemplating each of these—feelings as feelings, body as body—ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. Or you could say having put away craving and distaste for the world. So it's not just glomming on with mindfulness, but in each moment of mindfulness there's ardency, the fullness of energy, fully aware, mindful, without craving and without distaste or aversion. This is a moment of mindfulness. And over and over he emphasizes these qualities.

I want to describe a bit about each of the four foundations. We're familiar with them all. It's what we've been doing. It's just putting it into a more specific context. And really getting it that there's no hierarchy. It's not like if you're doing better you're more aware of feeling tone, and if you're really not doing well then you have to stay with mindfulness of body. The point is it really doesn't matter. It's not the particular foundation or the object of mindfulness that matters. It's the quality of mindfulness connecting with each experience that lets any experience of our life be the potential gateway for the heart's liberation. Anything, everything, if we pay attention to the way the Buddha describes for being present with it.

In mindfulness of body, he actually talks about fourteen different exercises, and within those fourteen there are many, many other refinements. So you can see it's not about trying to get some particular technique. It's just whatever way helps us be present with the body. There's mindfulness of breathing—we're all very familiar with that. There's mindfulness of each of the four major bodily postures: walking meditation, standing, sitting, lying down, and the intervals in between. There's a practice called moving the attention through the body, paying attention to the thirty-two parts of the body, which is a really good way to work with the body if you're experiencing a lot of lust. Because the thirty-two parts go from hair of the head and skin and bone and nails and sinews and pus and blood and spittle and phlegm and the different organs.

And by the time we spend a good long while doing this practice, there's not a lot that one really wants to cling to. But it's not meant to generate disgust—it's simply to see things as they are.

There's clear comprehension, which is what we've been emphasizing in moving through the day: being fully aware of your body, the sensations in your body as you act, whatever it is you're doing. Being aware of bending, washing, stooping, turning, going to the toilet, dressing, eating. Being fully present in the actual sensations, not in a concept about what we're doing. All this is very familiar to you, I hope.

The Buddha gives nine different cemetery or charnel ground contemplations, which I suppose was more possible during his time—sitting in cemeteries and observing corpses in varying stages of decay. This might seem an odd notion to us. But actually, when I was a nun in Thailand, they would let nuns and monks in Bangkok go to hospitals and sit in on autopsies as a way of honoring this aspect of the

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. I did that a couple of times. They would let us not only sit in the room like a classroom with students, but they also let us go in the back room where the bodies were laid out on tables before the autopsy. We could go right up and just be there.

It's really powerful. It's a very powerful practice for coming up against ideas one doesn't even know one has—perhaps, if you haven't spent time around dead people. I don't know if "dead people" is an accurate phrase, but around bodies that no longer have life in them. Just to be in that, to see how everything looks alive but something's really missing. It's a fascinating place for running up against our fears and attachments and identifications, and even just the questions of what life is. I really found that very powerful. In retrospect, it really puts one's own life and relationship to one's body into perspective.

Another way the Buddha speaks about mindfulness of body is to experience sensations not through interpretation—"pain in my knee," "sinus infection," "clogging in my chest," or even "breath"—but in terms of the four great elements, which the Buddha taught make up both the world and our body: the earth element, fire element, air element, and water element.

Now, this used to drive me nuts. I really thought, "Well, that's just as conceptual as talking about pain in my knee. I'm sitting here wondering, is this water element? Is this earth element?" It didn't seem worth doing. But if you just let the idea sink in, something shifts. The earth element is the sense of solidity—heaviness, tightness, constriction, solidness, weight. The air element is movement, pressure, any kind of motion. The fire element is temperature—coolness, heat, changes in temperature, and also decay. The water element we can feel in the fluids moving in our body, in tears, in saliva. Classically, though, it's described as cohesion.

I just really understood the other day what that actually means, the cohesive quality of water. I was watching someone pour water out of a tea kettle, holding it up high so the water would travel a ways before it hit the pot. It's interesting that the water stays all together in a little stream—it doesn't just go all over the place. "Oh yes, that's cohesion. It holds together." So that quality of cohesion is present in each moment of material physical experience, kind of holding it together. We might not always feel it.

One way this approach—experiencing physical materiality or body sensations on the level of elements—is really helpful is that it breaks down our sense of continuity. It's really hard to identify with "earth element." "My knee is killing me" is a solid "me" thing. But heaviness? Stabbing? Movement, air element, earth element—we don't get too excited about "my earth element is going wild now." It's just heaviness.

Even more, this practice can give us a real sense of interconnectedness. Because it's not that the earth element in this body is sort of like the earth element in the earth—it's the same. Same with the water, same with all of it. We can actually experience that we are nature, that we are part of nature.

I read somewhere recently that in humans, our internal environment is still chemically similar to the makeup of seawater. Even though we came out of the sea as amphibians or whatever, millions of years

ago—if you believe in evolution—internally, it's still like seawater. The different salts in the blood and tissues, the liquid in the tissues, the combination of salts and minerals in the cell are still a very similar combination to seawater.

I really like that. It gave me the sense that if we don't just hold on to our concepts about the body, but bring ourselves into experiencing it as it is...

The sense that we're separate somehow from the rest of the world completely goes away. And there are times when we can actually experience it as just a field of arising and passing elements, dancing around.

All these different aspects of being with the body—they're not for the purpose of being a perfect meditator, or because you have to get to some particular experience of the body. For instance, what I just said about experiencing sensations as dancing elements—that's not something you have to try for. Perhaps your experience of the body is one of simple, concrete pressure. That's the same. Pressure is air element, heaviness is earth element, and it's just what it is. It's not a particular experience but the way of being with it.

At the end of each segment in this sutta—each of the segments of being with the body, and all the others throughout the text—the Buddha puts in a little "how to be with it" called the insight section. Because the point of mindfulness is insight. Mindfulness isn't an end in itself.

"In this way, one abides contemplating the body as a body"—or some people translate it "the body in the body"—"internally. One abides contemplating the body as a body externally." And it goes on to say, "One abides contemplating the body in its arising factors, or in its vanishing factors, or arising and vanishing factors." So it's seeing that nothing is existing on its own—the quality of cause and effect, which I'll say more about in a minute. "Or else mindfulness that there is a body is established just to the extent that it's necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness."

Two aspects I want to bring out of this insight paragraph. Mindfulness of the body, I think, is a good avenue for understanding and experiencing both of these aspects, although we can with all of the four foundations of mindfulness.

This first phrase—"body in the body" or "body as a body"—whichever translation you use, I kind of like that they can't quite decide which translation is accurate, because I can see a good meaning in both of them. "Body as a body" means just that: no apprehension, no interpretation, no big story about my body and what it's like and what it's compared to and what it means. Just body. Materiality. That's it.

"Body in the body" points to an extremely important aspect of mindfulness that sometimes takes us a long time to get. True mindfulness, being with the body, is participatory. In other words, it's not being mindful of the body somewhere over there, from a distance. Being fully present within the experience is really the quality of mindfulness.

Thich Nhat Hanh explains it well. He quotes this same paragraph: "Observe the body in the body, feelings in the feelings, mind in the mind, objects of mind in the objects of mind." He says, "This means that you live in the body in full awareness of it, not just study it like a separate object. Live in awareness with feelings, mind, and objects of mind. 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 and warms its bud, becoming one with it. Meditation reveals not a concept of truth, but a direct view of truth itself."

That's the quality of mindfulness I think the Buddha is pointing to—directly being at one with the body in whatever way it's manifesting in any moment. It's not about whether we like it or we don't like it, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, but just living in full awareness in our body, really embodying mindfulness.

In some ways the body is an easy way in, to get a feeling for this quality of mindfulness, because it's much more tangible. And even so, I noticed today how often I'm as if aware of what I'm doing, aware of my body, but the attention is holding a little way back. There's a line from T.S. Eliot: I don't remember the man's name, but he lived a short distance away from his body. We're like that.

Even though our culture is so obsessed with bodily image—how the body looks, whether the body is healthy—the effect on so many women, at least those I know, is that in trying to have the perfect body, they all hate their bodies. I don't know any woman who could say, "I really like my body. I'm really at ease being totally present and open in the way this body feels in this moment." I'm just saying women because I know women, but I suspect it's much the same with men—for whatever reason: sickness, or the way it looks, or weight.

Participatory mindfulness is not rejecting the body. It's also not attached to the body. And it's not mistaking the experience of the body for any of these ideas and interpretations we have about it. It's just bringing attention to the bare experience and melting into it, letting it be what it is.

Someone told me a lovely quotation from a Zen nun of the last century who said, "I meet life with my whole body." Just that—can we meet each moment with our whole body? This is the quality of mindfulness of body in a moment. And again, there's no clinging, there's no aversion. This is the last line of that insight paragraph.

And she abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides, contemplating the body as a body.

It doesn't mean independent, not clinging forever—just in this moment, meeting whatever physical experience is arising. In that moment of clear, participating mindfulness, one is abiding independent, without clinging to anything in the world. And in this way, the heart is free.

So that's the first foundation of mindfulness. And as I said, it's got nothing to do with whether the experience is pleasant or unpleasant. A lot of the time it's not pleasant, which is another reason we're often a little bit away from the body.

This brings us to the second foundation, the foundation of vedana, which we call feeling—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality of experience. I'm going to try to use the expression "feeling tone," because in English we so often use "feelings" to mean emotions, and it gets confusing when we're talking.

We've talked about feeling tone, vedana, quite a lot—just how important this aspect of experience is, present with every moment of contact. A quick review: contact is a sense door—the eye, the ear, the nose, the mouth, the touching of the body, the mind—coming into contact with a sense object: seeing, hearing, thinking. There's consciousness at that moment. When those three come together, contact, there's seeing. That moment of seeing is experienced as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

And that's just what it is. It's no big deal in one sense, yet it's so key that the Buddha made it the second out of four foundations. He picked it out of all of our experiences to highlight, because as you know, on the chain of dependent origination, the way that suffering arises is created in a moment of mind experience. Beginning with ignorance, going to contact, to feeling—when there's not awareness of the feeling tone, of the pleasant or unpleasant or neutrality, the habit of mind is to go into clinging, or aversion (which is really wanting something else), which leads on to the whole realm of suffering.

We've gone over this a lot, but it's so key because in any moment of this dependent origination arising, in any moment of contact and the potential of suffering, the potential of cutting that chain of suffering, of seeing through it, of being able to just come out of the tangle and rest with things as they are—that possibility is always there if we can be aware of the feeling tone, if we can just be with it as it is.

I know that can sound either simplistic or impossible when the tangle that's arising from pleasant or unpleasant contact has gotten quite big. And it's true: if we've missed the unpleasant and we're way down the road in a whole aura of self-judging, and we don't even know what the unpleasant contact was that triggered it, well, it might not quite be possible to just start noting "unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant" and have the whole thing evaporate. So that's why we have the third foundation of mindfulness, which is consciousness and mental states.

But I want to say a little more about the tangle that's created from the feeling tone when we don't notice it, because actually it often is very possible to cut the whole field of suffering in that moment if we can come back to pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral and just notice it as it is.

I remember one time I was doing walking meditation. I'd been in retreat for quite a while and was moving very slowly—one of those types of retreat where I was just noting every moment. It was summer, and we get a lot of flies here in the summer. We haven't really had a fly plague this year, but sometimes we really do.

I was walking, and a fly kept landing on my face. I would get annoyed and go to brush it off. But because I was moving so slowly and noting everything, it was a lot of work: intending to lift, lifting, lifting, lifting, intending to brush. The fly would be long gone by then. I'd put my hand back down, and then the fly

would come back. You know how that goes.

I was definitely getting irritated. The annoyance was building, and I could see I was moving into a state. At some point I remembered: oh yeah, right—unpleasant. It's actually kind of fun with a repetitive pleasant or unpleasant experience, because you can keep coming back to it and explore getting to the feeling tone. So next time you have a repetitive pleasant or unpleasant experience, you can be really happy about it, because then you can explore.

I came right into the little tickle tickle, the little feet—tickle tickle tickle. And once I could feel the tickle, I thought, "Yeah, this is unpleasant." Unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant. And then it got kind of amusing. "Oh, tickle tickle, unpleasant." The whole state that was building up just evaporated. As long as I could stay right with that tickle tickle, unpleasant, unpleasant, there was really no problem.

Granted, it's easier with the little things. But we practice with the little things, and it works the same way with pleasant. Sometimes, for me, this is harder to see—being outside and looking at a really beautiful scene, like a beautiful sunset. It's seeing, seeing, and it's really nice.

And pretty soon, we're either into kind of la-la land, spacing out—maybe I'll take a walk, maybe I'll have a cup of tea, maybe I'll write home—and it just starts escalating. We don't quite realize that we need to simply come in and notice the pleasant. Beautiful, pleasant. Beautiful, pleasant.

That doesn't mean pushing away the beautiful or not appreciating it, but noticing that pleasant quality. Because without noticing it, so easily the mind just moves into its habit of craving and clinging. And then, since it can't have the beautiful scene, it'll start to crave something it can have—like a cup of tea or a walk or whatever it is. Just noticing pleasant, pleasant, and that whole potential tangle just falls away.

You can also begin to see that sometimes we get in a tangle because we don't quite recognize which sense experience is unpleasant. For example, the sound of the shower running here. There might be a time at 5:30 in the morning when you're in your room, you hear the shower running, and you just hear it. It's actually relatively neutral. Nothing much comes up.

The next day, it's 4:30 in the morning. The sound of the shower starts running. And you get really, really annoyed. 4:30! Even if you were already awake. Even if you were already up. *I* can't take a shower at 4:30. Why are *they* taking a shower at 4:30? Don't they know it's not shower hours? You get really annoyed, come back into the hearing, and it's not really unpleasant. But we just label it unpleasant, unpleasant—not recognizing that it's actually not the sound at that point. The sense contact that's unpleasant is the *idea* that this isn't shower hours.

So we have to bring our noticing of unpleasant to land on the actual experience that's unpleasant. You can't just note it randomly—unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant—and not have the note landing on what's actually unpleasant. It doesn't really do any good. I think we do that a lot. We know something's unpleasant, but we don't know what it is.

So the mindfulness is actually meeting what's happening—pleasant, unpleasant. And it all happens so quickly. That's one of the ways we miss this, because it's a very quick experience.

This is from Ajahn Chah, talking about this whole chain of dependent arising and the importance of the feeling tone. He says: "The whole chain of dependent arising—beginning with ignorance, going to contact, feeling, wanting, clinging, becoming, all the suffering—all of these things are simply events in the mind." It's a whole chain, but really, in truth, when you come into contact with something you don't like, there's immediate suffering. That feeling of suffering is actually the result of the whole chain of paṭicca-samuppāda, of dependent origination. But the mind passes through all this so quickly that we can't keep up with it. The changes are happening so quickly. All we know is, "I don't like this and I'm suffering."

He says it's the same as when you fall from a tree. Before you know it—thud—you've hit the ground. But on the way, you've passed many branches and twigs, yet you couldn't count them all. You couldn't remember them because you're falling so fast. That's his analogy for how dependent origination works. We hit something unpleasant or pleasant, we fall out of the tree and hit the ground. We're at the end of suffering, and we don't see all those little links along the way.

One of the benefits of our intensive practice is that—I don't know if we actually fall a little slower, or if our awareness gets a little keener—but instead of freaking out when we're falling, we can kind of notice the branches a little more. So at least you might be able to notice the feeling tone more often and experiment with coming in on it, noticing it, right in the middle of it, and just see what happens. It really can, at times, untangle the tangle.

And then at times it cannot untangle the tangle. That's when we are working with the third foundation of mindfulness: awareness, mindfulness of citta—of mind, of consciousness.

For purposes of speaking about it, we could think of a moment of consciousness as having two components. Consciousness basically means that quality of bare knowing. If there's seeing, just the knowing of the seeing, prior even to recognition. It's not necessarily the perception, "Oh, I'm seeing an apple"—just the knowing of seeing itself. Just the knowing of hearing. Hearing is a good one to play with, this quality of knowing.

The times when you're sitting and there's just sound arising and you don't quite even get to a name for it. Just knowing of hearing. That's this quality of bare consciousness, of bare knowing. It's arising spontaneously when sense objects arise and there's a sense base. We don't have to make it happen. We don't think, "Oh, there was a sound, now there needs to be knowing of it." No, as soon as there was a sound, it just happens by itself.

Okay, that's one component. And it arises together with—and is colored by—whatever mental factor or mental state or emotion is present in the mind in that moment of knowing. So when the Buddha talks about bringing mindfulness to this aspect, he talks about knowing, for example, the mind with lust and

knowing the mind without lust. And then he doesn't say we hate the mind with lust and we like the mind without lust. He just says knowing the mind as it is in this moment. So we recognize whether there's craving or no craving, whether there's greed or no greed, hatred or no hatred, love or not love, calm, boredom—whatever any of the mental states are. This is being aware of, in that moment, being aware of consciousness, being aware of mind.

And as we've said, it's so important—not just the knowing, but also recognizing and being present with the mental state, because it colors, in the moment of its presence, the knowing, the recognition. It's like a dye in the water or wearing colored glasses. I was talking to someone today about how sometimes the dye or the glasses are really vivid—you can't miss it. Rage, bright red, we know it's there. Sometimes it's very, very subtle, just barely a tinge of rose, and you can hardly recognize that there's any coloring of the knowing happening. This is when our practice gets more subtle, but we also need to notice that this too is a coloring, an aspect of mind coloring how we know things.

You can see in your own experience how the mental state colors the knowing. I'll take a big example. If you're in love—that state of newness of being in love when everything is so wonderful and everybody that you meet you love and the world is just so beautiful. And six months later, when the whole thing's over and it ended badly, you think, "What did I see in that person?" You can't actually even look at the person and see with that rosy color. In fact, if it still isn't completely over, if it's in the negative phase, you think, "That person is such a jerk. There's not one redeeming quality about them." And in fact, the whole world is bleak and harsh and dull. This is how much the mental states color the aspect of knowing.

So our practice here, the practice of being aware of the mind, aware of the consciousness, in the consciousness—it's the same as with the body, the same as with the feelings. It's participatory. It's not recognizing the contracted mind or the mind of anger somewhere over there. And it's also not pretending it's not here and being taken over by it. It's a very tricky balance that we find.

This is again Thich Nhat Hanh on being with the emotions: "Mindful observation is like a lamp which gives light. It is not a judge. It throws light on our anger, sponsors it, looks after it in an affectionate and caring way, like an older sister looking after and comforting her younger sibling."

Can you relate to your anger like that? Or your lust? Or your contracted mind? Or your self-hatred? Or calm? Or bliss? Or peace? Or concentration? Just shining the light of mindfulness on it, warming it, taking care of it and letting it live its own life. That's all the mindfulness is doing. Not changing or trying to prolong or trying to make something different happen.

And realizing that, as with each of the foundations, it's not about which mind state we're being present with. It's about knowing that no matter what the mind state, no matter what the state of consciousness, it's our avenue in for knowing the nature of mind. Whatever mind state is present, recognize that knowing is also present. And although the way we experience things through the knowing is colored by the emotion, the awareness itself isn't touched. At times in this third foundation, a lot of the time, the mind state, the

mental factor, is going to be the predominant aspect. So just being with that as it is, like an affectionate sibling.

Whether it's horrible, beautiful, subtle—not holding on, not pushing away.

At other times, though, the mental states might be quite tranquil, alert, receptive, but not really strong or very much coloring experience at all. And at those times, the knowing quality might be more predominant. Just this fact of simple knowing arising with each arising experience.

So there are times in practice when our mindfulness, our being with this third foundation, can take the aspect of just knowing the knowing. For instance, when we open to hearing, it's a way to help us move in that direction, to get a feeling for that quality of awareness. Because so often with sounds, it's easier to just be receptive and alert without putting on a story, without having a huge reaction, without personalizing. So we simply recognize: a sound arises, immediately there's the knowing of it. Just that. A sensation arises, right away there's the knowing of it. When an emotion arises, there's the knowing of it. At times, this is the aspect of being with the third foundation, and this can be really interesting.

At other times, forget it—that's not what's happening, and we're just being present and accompanying our wanting mind. But we know that all mental states help us see this quality of knowing.

And again, as with feeling, as with body, as with mental states, the object isn't just to be the most mindful person and win the prize. The mindfulness is taking us into the deeper qualities, the deeper aspects of experience.

When we really look at feeling tone, when you really notice it, you see how impermanent it is. Pleasant feeling doesn't last very long. That's our big problem in life—it doesn't last long at all, and we've got to try and get another one. And you might not believe it, but unpleasant feeling tone also doesn't last very long. It might arise again soon, but each instance doesn't last long.

And also, when you're just being with feeling tone, it really cuts through identification. When there's an unpleasant sound—the shower running—and we're really upset, and we get back to simply "oh, unpleasant," very few people can get really worked up about "this unpleasant feeling is who I am, my unpleasant feeling, and I've got to do something about it." It's just so much an aspect of nature. So attending to feeling tone really cuts through the sense of permanence and the sense of identification.

Just in the same way, when we're paying attention to the aspect of consciousness, of knowing and the mental states that color the knowing—and a lot of you have been mentioning it in interviews—it's like one of the benefits of sitting a long time. We can't avoid the fact that mental states are constantly changing. A lot of people have been coming in this week a little thrown back. "I can't believe how quickly the mental states are all changing." And they can go from being really lost in aversion, to the next moment really peaceful, to the next moment really judging, to the next moment starving, to the next moment there's a lot of wanting, to the next moment there's boredom. And we wonder: when does it stop? Where can I rest?

Because the thing is, we want to keep identifying with each one of them. And when they last a little longer, we can sort of delude ourselves. Each mental state feels so real—that's sort of how they trick us. It feels so real, it's got to be me, it's got to be true. And then when the next minute the exact opposite one arises, we think, "Yes, this has got to be me, this has got to be true." And after a couple of hours of that, it starts to feel really flippy. Well, what is me? What is true? We'd almost rather be able to grab hold of some highly unpleasant mental state, but at least we could take a stand on it. "This is me, this is real, this is true"—better than all this change.

And the same is also true with the pleasant. As practice goes on, this gets into the seductions, the corruptions of insight and of concentration. We all at different times get a taste of calmness or peace or some pleasant experience, some sitting that meets whatever idea we might have of what practice is. And this—even though it's obviously all too impermanent—can really be grabbed hold of as "this mental state is what I'm practicing for." Forgetting that there's no such thing as any mental state that's worth practicing for, because they're all going to pass.

The only point of being fully present with our mental states, with our consciousness, is to be able to know it in its true nature—which is that there's nothing here to take a stand on. There's nothing that's going to last. There's nothing that can give any lasting satisfaction. And in the moment of recognizing that, again, as the Buddha says, we're abiding independent, without clinging to anything in this world. That's the purpose of mindfulness, the purpose of mindfulness in all of these foundations.

The fourth foundation, the foundation of dhammas—a word which can be translated in many ways—is usually rendered as "objects of mind."

It's somewhat difficult to wrap up and explain concisely, so I'll simply share how the Buddha talks about it. I'm always looking for the best explanation for this fourth foundation, because the Buddha simply gives a series of lists. He says one is aware of objects of mind in terms of the five hindrances. One is aware of objects of mind in terms of the five aggregates—the five aspects of experience arising in any moment that we call a human being. These are form or materiality, the body, feeling tone (so those are the first two foundations), perceptions and mental formations, and the fifth is consciousness, which corresponds to the third foundation. Some people, in describing this fourth foundation, say that it's a way of talking about perceptions and mental formations, which could be, because perceptions are recognitions, the labeling of things, and mental formations are all the thoughts and attitudes and constructions of mind, volition.

The lists the Buddha gives in this fourth foundation are the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the six sense bases and the six sense objects and the fetters that bind—basically greed, hatred, and delusion—the seven factors of awakening or enlightenment (the seven wholesome qualities that we're developing: mindfulness, concentration, calm, equanimity, energy, investigation, and rapture, all of which we talk about, all being developed), and the four noble truths. It's a lot.

I don't want to go into talking about each of them, obviously, but you can think of it in a way that helps

me: not trying to hold a list in my mind, but seeing that this is a way of holding experience, seeing how it functions, how the process unfolds in the categories of the Buddha's teaching.

To give an example using the hindrances: awareness of aversion—that's the third foundation, awareness of consciousness, awareness of mental state. But if you're thinking of it in the terms of the fourth foundation, you could recognize it not just as "oh yes, it's a hindrance" without thinking about it, but recognizing how it's functioning as a hindrance to concentration, a hindrance to being present, a hindrance to awareness. Again, this is not to lead to analytical thinking, but it's a way to see how things work. To see how that anger, that aversion, is actually leading to suffering in this moment is a way of seeing it in terms of the Four Noble Truths, for example. This isn't about getting into thinking about it too much. You can also see how it's describing the process of our experience in terms of the formulations of the Buddha's teaching. It points to discriminating wisdom, investigation of how experience functions.

Very interestingly, the way he describes knowing the hindrances—knowing mental objects in terms of the hindrances, knowing when craving is present—he also goes on to describe knowing the conditions that help craving to arise. For example, a lot of pleasant experience that goes unnoticed. Noticing what feeds the continuation of craving in your experience. Noticing what helps craving to diminish, to be abandoned. And noticing what supports the non-arising of craving.

He's really asking us to look at cause and effect here, to see that nothing is really functioning in isolation. Craving doesn't just drop from the sky out of nowhere and then vanish. It arises from the tendency of mind to move into clinging when meeting pleasant experience and being totally unaware of it. And it continues when that is fed through lack of awareness. When awareness comes in, that favors the abandonment of craving. Continued awareness, continuity of mindfulness, favors the non-arising of craving. This fourth foundation is actually very profound.

The most important point to remember, I think, is that these four foundations cover our whole experience, and there's no hierarchy. They're all just different ways of talking about how to meet this moment's experience in a way that can enable our heart and mind to experience freedom from clinging and identification in that moment. The Buddha repeatedly emphasizes this: being present fully in the experience without adding all the extra of interpretation and story, of me and mine, without clinging.

And mindfulness is not for its own sake. Sometimes we can really get caught in thinking, "If I could just note everything that's happening, then I've got it made. Then I'm the perfect yogi. Then my practice is really going well." And we're getting lost in the technique. It's not about how it looks. It's not about noting everything that happens. It's about this quality of presence with whatever's arising—skillful means to help us awaken. Any of the four foundations is fine, and any aspect is fine.

As Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "When the object of our mindful observation is totally clear, whether it's breath or sensation or anger, when the object is totally clear, the mind which is observing is also revealed in great clarity. To see dhammas clearly is to see the mind clearly. When dhammas reveal themselves in

their true nature, then the mind has the nature of the highest understanding."

That's really what we're doing here. We're using the avenue of mindfulness of these four foundations to reveal the nature of mind clearly, to reveal the nature of heart, the nature of reality clearly.

Because when we really look with continuity of mindfulness—and the continuity is extremely important—we see with any one aspect of experience, we see past the superficial appearance. Anything reveals the whole nature of reality.

Take a sensation. Take the breath. With continuity of mindfulness, we see that what at first seems solid breaks down, dissolves into many different sensations. What at first seems like a solid breath breaks into countless sensations, and even these sensations begin to break down, arising and dissolving, arising and dissolving in any moment. It breaks down into elements coming and going. There's nothing really there that one can find that is breath. Breath is a total concept—as is any other experience when we really look at it.

Even an emotion, when we really look with continuity of mindfulness, breaks down from this solid thing into a thought, a physical sensation, a tone in the mind, a different thought, another sensation. It's this whole conglomerate of arising and dissolving experiences we call anger or happiness or whatever. There's nothing really there, nothing solid. In that way, it's unsatisfying in terms of anything I can land on to call "me."

But in seeing this, there's a real freedom. This is how the heart and mind let go of our subliminal grasping and aversion, let go of our clinging to any aspect of experience to make a sense of self, to make a sense of "me," to try and hold on to any aspect of our experience to be happy. In the continual mindfulness—whether it's breath or body or emotions or hindrances, whatever it is—the continuity of it breaks down all aspects of permanence, any aspect of something to hold on to, any aspect of me, of separate self.

And it also highlights the interconnectedness. Seeing that what we call breath is totally dependent on conditions. Without a body, there can't be breath. Without lungs, there can't be breath. Without air, there can't be breath. And dependent on the emotions, the quality of the air, whether we have an infection in the lungs—the breath is changing all the time. All of it is totally out of our control, which is something we notice in every moment. We can't sit down and say, "Now I will have calm breath. I will only have pleasant experience. I will just feel these sensations in this hour." Totally out of control.

What this participatory mindfulness does—it's not that we want to perceive the perfect breath or the perfect sensation—but just by meeting experience over and over and over, these truths become so obvious. On a cellular level, they're already obvious. It's just our hardcore minds that are holding out. They're the last to know what's already true. On some level we're experiencing truth over and over and over, and every now and then a little shoot comes up into the thoughts: "Oh yeah, things are changing."

And then we have to keep observing over and over and over, and then another thought: "Oh yeah, I can't control this."

That's what the continuity of mindfulness is doing—highlighting interdependence, emptiness, transparency. Even without our knowing it, the clinging, the aversion, the identification is loosening. We're really experiencing a weakening of our entrancement, our obsession with appearances, with objects, with experience. This entrancement naturally fades, and the mindfulness opens us up to recognizing, as Thich Nhat Hanh was saying, the true nature of our mind that is untouched by appearance.

Whatever's arising in this moment, it's one of the four foundations. It doesn't matter which one. It doesn't matter whether you like it or not. It can be this knee pain, this bliss, this anger, this pleasant feeling. It can be the gateway into the recognition of the true nature of the mind and heart that is absolutely untouched by appearance. And it becomes our direct encounter with reality. That's the point of our practice. The foundations of mindfulness are all our tools for awakening. They're not an end in themselves.

Just to end with Thich Nhat Hanh. He says, "Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. It is a result of the long process of conscious awareness."

Let's sit for a moment.

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