

2016-01-11 Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Introduction

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SPEAKERS

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I want to start an eight week series of talks on what in Buddhism is called the four foundations of mindfulness. The core practice of mindfulness that we teach here, and it's become popular in the West, is derived from a particular discourse that the Buddha gave. It's called the discourse of the four foundations of mindfulness, where it's a teaching about these four practices, or four sets of exercises, for developing a heightened sense of awareness. And this particular text is kind of the source book for many of the mindfulness teachings, at least in Buddhism. And it's often referred to and people kind of practice it. And it's a very important text. It's so important that in traditional Buddhist countries, it has become liturgy that people, monks will chant. And sometimes it's chant, it's so important that sometimes they chant it when people are dying, with the idea that knowing about this practice, being connected to the practice of mindfulness is one of the most useful things you can do as you're dying. And I've been with people who have gone through the dying process who have been strong practitioners. And it's quite wonderful to watch them call upon this practice of mindfulness during those last hours of their life, and what a big difference it makes. Certainly, my hope is to be as conscious as possible, for my own dying, and to be able to utilize this training I've had in mindfulness, for foundations of mindfulness at that time. And so I'm very happy to teach this topic because the practice of mindfulness in this traditional form has been probably among the most important things I've done, especially in terms of any kind of spiritual practice or Buddhist practice. It's helped me understand myself in ways I could never have imagined. It's helped me to explore states of mind and states of being that I didn't know existed. And it's taught me about freedom, in a way that nothing else has taught me about freedom. So we talked about spiritual freedom or liberation in Buddhism is being part of the ultimate goal of Buddhism. And it's understood in our particular Buddhist tradition, that it's the practice of mindfulness that leads to the ultimate form of liberation. We know I think many of you know now that mindfulness has become quite popular in our culture. It's kind of everywhere, seemingly, and lots of references to it. And that's a great thing. And it's quite remarkable, you know, when I started practicing, in the mid 1970s. You know, I was mostly doing zen, but there was the mindfulness was not part of the vocabulary, even in Zen back then. And certainly wasn't part of my vocabulary growing up in the United States speaking English. I mean, I kind of knew what it was. I mean, it wasn't like, it was a totally foreign word, I think. But it wasn't popular common word. Now. It's everywhere you go, it seems like there's mindfulness magazines. And, you know, there's, there's all these books on mindfulness used to be the popular title was mindfulness and Zen in the art of. And now the popular title is, you know, mindfulness. And the cute thing I thought was that a friend of mine wrote a book called, that was Thai. He was a he was a mindfulness student to be passed in a student for many years still is very devoted one, run acrobats. Next, she's taught here sometimes. And she wrote a very nice book called, that's titled The publisher gave the title of, I think it's called. Maybe some of you knows Zen and eating or the

center of eating or something like that. And so that was nice. That was made maybe in the mid 90s, or something. And Zen was still kind of popular. About 1015 years later, a Zen teacher in America wrote a book on eating. And she called it something like mindfulness kneading. So these trends change. And so when I did a survey some years ago, all the different books that you could buy on Amazon with titled mindfulness, and they even had mindfulness in Angry Birds. I don't think that's what the Buddha had in mind. But so it's kind of entered our society in some wonderful ways in some curious ways.

And so I'd like to take us back Back to these ancient teachings called the four foundations of mindfulness. and explore it over this time. The whole tree, these, these, the way that this text lays out the practice of mindfulness, I think of it has a path. And it's a path that begins in kind of more obvious experiences of our life, and then moves deeply more deeply inside of ourselves to some of the deepest areas of our life that where liberation can happen. And it's a beautiful path of a deepening of awareness of opening up, of becoming free. And so in during these weeks, I'll take you along this path that this text presents, and the path of some ways a path of deepening inside of yourself to deeper, deeper areas. So that mindfulness is a translation of an ancient World word called Sati, s a t i. And it's not we're not really sure how this would best be translated into English. Nowadays, it's popularly translated as mindfulness, which gives priority to the word mind. And the word Sati doesn't have, you know, the word mind in it. So, you know, it's it may, it's possible that mindfulness is not the best translation. In fact, I've done you know, with my knowledge of ancient Buddhist language and ancient texts, I've done some cases, what I think is kind of careful study about this. And think that actually, the more appropriate word in English, for Sati is awareness, and what we're cultivating his awareness, and developing a strong capacity for awareness, and that these four foundations of mindfulness are the four ways for foundations or places in which ways in which we can establish a heightened capacity for awareness. And the Buddha said that awareness practice is mindfulness practice, is a phenomenal and important way to protect yourself. independent of becoming liberated, it's a protective practice. Because as you become more aware, you become aware of what's going on around you. And you get become aware of what's going on inside. And there's a much more information that you can take in about the impact things have the impulses that you act on, awareness of much more the consequences of what your actions are, and motivations you have for acting. And all that information tends to protect you from danger. And the most probably the most useful danger protects you from is yourself. And because you know yourself well enough, you can kind of take some more responsibility or care around the thoughts you act on the impulses, you act on beliefs that you carry, along with you. All kinds of things. The four foundations of mindfulness, these four areas in which awareness is practiced and developed. The Buddha call that one thing you call that you call it your home country, I just call it like your home, but you know, your native place. So you wander off into the wild world for a while. And for many years, you come back to your native place since you come back home. And, you know, if you had a conventionally nice native place or home, then it's nice to be home, you know, it's like, oh, this is my place, I can relax. This is where I am. He also talked about the four foundations of mindfulness as our pasture. You can imagine kind of a pastoral image of, I don't think cows but for the Buddha, probably deer, who are kind of at grazing on their pasture and, and, and, you know, feeling at home. And so, the four foundations mindfulness serve place we get nourished and supported and, and we can grow and develop. The Buddha gave an analogy, a story once of something like a little rabbit that was out on a plowed field, which means that all the clouds of dirt wrapped up in about them, and you're kind of exposed as a little rabbit in there. You know, there's no vegetation to protect you.

And sure enough, this Hawk came in and flew over and saw dinner and swooped down and picked up that rabbit. And the rabbit said something on that to the Hawk and said, Well, you know, I wasn't like, I wasn't even really paying attention. But if I wasn't paying attention, the middle of the field, I don't think you would have caught me. And the bribery that the Hawks said, Well, what do you think, of course, I

would have caught you throughout said, well try it. So Okay, the hawk said and put the rabbit down and, and middle of the field and the rabbit couldn't run away so easily and, and so the hawk went high up in the air, and then swooping down to really show that rabbit what it could do. And just before it was going to grab the rabbit, the rabbit jumped behind a big cloud of dirt. And then the portal Hawk, and I hit the cloud. And that was the end, we never hear about the hawk again. And so this kind of very violent story is, is, is the then the Buddha said something like, you know, if, if you stay in your past year of mindfulness, stay in awareness, then you're protected from the dangers that come, you're paying attention, and you can get out of the way and not get caught. More importantly, is that the path of mindfulness is a path of liberation. It's a path of understanding how we get caught, how we get contracted, and then learning with the forces inside of us of release, what releases the way we're caught. And, and, and unleashes beautiful forces, qualities are states within us that come with the increasing freedom, joy and tranquility and equanimity, and happiness, concentration, a variety of things that kind of get born, it's quite beautiful, this process of what happens.

The worst, the idea of mindfulness Sati is part of a constellation of mental factors, that Buddhism puts a lot of emphasis on having to do with attention. Buddhism has like a map or understands the psychology of attention. And the different elements that get put into place, or different kind of moving parts of attention, are studied or worked on, evoked for different purposes in different ways. And so, learning how attention works, is actually part of this whole path of Buddhism, we all have the capacity to pay attention. But our capacity to pay attention is often being it's always being used, it's always operating, it's very hard to turn your attention off. I just love to try to tell people to stop paying attention. And to cut it out. Stop being aware, and most of you you like, as soon as you're told not to pay attention, it's kind of hopeless, kind of, you know, you can't stop it. And, but often our attention is, is being used by what probably picking called unconscious forces inside of us or subconscious for subconscious, that we have our desires ever thoughts, we have our fears, we have our animosities, we have our concerns. And we're so strongly involved in those. And we use them to think and fantasize and imagine things. And we use it to negotiate the world to get what we want to do what we want to take care of ourselves. And we're so involved in those concerns, that we don't really notice that we're using attention as the vehicle to to negotiate all those. And, but with a with a growth of attention, we're beginning to develop a heightened appreciation of this capacity for attention in all the different ways that it functions. And it's a remarkable thing that happens when we shift our attention away from our preoccupations to notice the field or the terrain of awareness, that has to be there for us to have any concerns at all. So rather than being absorbed in concerns, it's kind of the difference between you know, being in or I think the great maybe example nowadays, you know, all these people are walking around with their, their palms cupped upwards. You know, and looking down and, you know, maybe the other hand has one finger and, and, you know, do pointing at that cup tan you know, it's quite something to watch, you know, and it's a very common So, you know, you're you're looking at your device and absorbed in what's going on there. And You're walking around and then you know maybe the battery dies and you put it away in your pocket and you look up and you're like wow it's beautiful here How did I end up in this beautiful park and it's a great big lawn and you know, pasture and there's you know, birds and rabbits and in this blue skies blue and this flowers and you know, some idyllic scene. Oh, this is peaceful, this is nice. I wonder where I can get my device charged. But you know, that said, You wake up and Oh, so So, to end to begin appreciating awareness, something we all we all have. And to kind of wake up and expansiveness, the openness, that peacefulness, that kind of beautiful feelings that come from being alert and aware in a peaceful way. It changes the context or changes the priorities of what's important for us in our life, from the preoccupation to a state of being unoccupied or free or spacious.

It's a beautiful thing. So how do we do that? How do we develop our capacity for awareness, so awareness becomes a resource awareness becomes a jewel awareness becomes like, you know, a

clear, cloudless sky that we really feel so expansive, just looking up and being at. And the way we do it is by cultivating these four foundations for awareness, these four foundations of mindfulness. And these four are the foundation of mindfulness of the body, the foundation of what's called feelings, the foundation of mind, and the foundation of mental states. And the way that this works is a path is we start with a course this aspect, almost like the outermost aspect of who we are our body. And we start becoming embodied, we start feeling our body living in our body, waking up the body. And as the as we become more familiar with our body, and the breathing, then almost naturally, even without constructing it, we become aware of what's called the feelings. And I'll describe in a few weeks what that means, what it feels like to be in a body, what it feels like to be alive, it's hard to, to recognize the living experience, or living experience and what it feels like, if we're preoccupied in thoughts. Or if we're preoccupied in their device, which doing a thing or doing the thinking for us. But to, but to begin kind of slowing down, showing up for ourselves and really tuning into what's here, then sooner or later, we'll start noticing what it feels like things are pleasant and unpleasant. And then as we kind of tune into how we're things feels like, at some point, sooner or later, we start becoming aware of the quality of our mind, or a quality for heart, the queen or quality of our state of being. And so we're kind of going inwards body, what it feels like and to be embodied, and then deeper into the kind of the inner quality state or state of being. And then as we kind of become aware of the quality of our state of being, then as we stay there and be present for it and pay attention to it, then we sooner or later we start becoming aware of what goes on what goes on in our minds, that affects the quality of our being state of our mind. What are the impulses, thoughts, desires, wishes, what are the things going on, that have some bearing on whether we are free, or whether we're caught up. And that's we're getting to kind of the heart of the issue, the place where we make the most difference for our well being our sense of spiritual happiness and contentment is really get down in there where we're really kind of making the choices making the operating system that makes it all work. So it's a movement kind of inward. And as we go inward, the remarkable thing that happens with concentration, your mindful meditation practice, there's a kind of beautiful process of settling and going inwards, that at the same time is an opening up and expansiveness. You have almost experiences to kind of understand what I'm talking about. Rather than a narrowing into a narrow world. It's like we open up into a fee it kind of felt sense of it of much more expansive, wide or bigger world you ever could have imagined. The world is much bigger than they know when you enter into this amazing field of awareness. And it's just a pleasure to swim in it to play in it. to graze, and it's in our pasture. So, mindfulness in this tradition of this practice is much more much more than learning how to play Angry Birds. Well, it has its we really, it's one of the most things sacred if you like that language, sacred aspects and sacred practice sacred states that come into play by cultivating, developing a capacity that's ordinary, completely ordinary capacity we all have that is underutilized. And that is simple capacity for being aware.

In this text, the four foundations of mindfulness, the text, makes some grand promises the right word, but it makes a grand statement about where this practice leads. And I like to read this to you. So the book, The Buddha said, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and limitation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of Nirvana, namely, the four foundations of mindfulness Nibbana is the word for Nirvana in this tradition, enlightenment, liberation. He said, this is a direct path, I love this idea of the direct path. If you want to go to you know, sometimes it's nice to go directly rather than taking the round about, you know, back roads, which takes a while, and you might end up in a dead end. But this is a very direct thing. And no, one of the ways that makes it direct, is that it does not require a lot of learning. It doesn't require you to understand a lot of Buddhist beliefs and tenants, ideas that Buddhism has, it doesn't you have to believe in metaphysics and but the nature of reality or true statements about you know, God, or rebirth, or heavens, or hells, or there's all this kind of kind of more things that are considered more the unseen world that we can't really know for sure, we can easily share together because some people may be, you know, that's so

accessible. What here the direct ways we enter into what's accessible, what's immediate, or we can be touch here and see here and know here. It's what's immediately available. The Buddha said the Dharma that he teaches, is visible here. And now. It's evident here and now. It's so welcomes our inspection welcomes our investigation, come here and take a look here, here. So it makes a direct what's directly available here now. And they said he had directly available here is such a big hallmark of his mindfulness tradition, if it's not available here, now, it's probably not relevant. So directly here, so to connect here, so the body, feeling your body here. Most people don't doubt they have a body, you know, it's a direct and immediate thing you can experience. So the cultivation of this mindfulness, then there's a kind of a goal of liberation and freedom. But the stepping stone to it is described in this text through a refrain, that reappears some 13 times in this text, spike, the refrain of a song, same thing happens over and over again, indicating that it's important. And this refrain ends, talks about how much we're supposed to develop mindfulness. And he says, We develop mindfulness to the point where we dwell without depending on anything, not clinging to anything in the world. dwelling independent, out clinging to anything in the world. And so as the mindfulness as awareness gets stronger and stronger, it's kind of like,

you know, maybe like a snake that grows. And as it grows, it sheds its skin. So as the awareness grows, we shed the old scaly attachments and cleanings we have, and they just kind of some of them begin speeding the fall off. As we become bigger and stronger. There's a kind of way in which mindfulness practice as it gets, as it develops, helps us to feel confident, strong, upright present, were things that begin to kind of fall off the scales begin to fall off or fall off or not. Things fall off, so not clinging to anything in the world. So it begins by by being aware of the body, here, and in terms of being aware of the body, it begins by being aware of our breathing. And so the instructions for the first exercise here he goes like this. And how does one abide? observing the body as a body. Here, a person going to the forest or the root of a tree, or to an empty hut sits down. Having folded one's legs crosswise, sets one's body erect, and establishes mindfulness. Ever mindful when breathe in, mindful when breathe out. Breathing in a long breath. When understands I'm breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, one understands I breathe out a long breath. Breathing in a short breath, one understands I breathe in a short breath. Breathing out to short breath, one understands I breathe out a short breath. When trains oneself thus I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body. When trains oneself thus I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body. When trains thus as you breathe in, relaxing the bodily formation when trains thus I shall breathe out, relaxing the bodily formation just as a skilled Turner or an apprentice like a leaf Turner. When making a long term understands I make a long turn when making a short turn understands and make a short turn. So to breathing in long person understands how to breathe in long, breathing out and so forth. So begins with this exercise and breathing and I'll talk about it again two more next week. But I want to read the whole thing because it gave us a simile at the end of a returner think it meant to like a late turning piece of wood and delayed and so they have the knife and they're kind of attentive, very present there. In the you know, I've done I've made bowls on the lathe and you know, it's this piece of wood spins around. And it's exact, there's only one point where the knife touches the lake, one little place. And eventually you touch the whole piece of wood as it goes around around. But the place of contacts always just one place where the where the knife rests. And so this sharp point is developing the sharpness of awareness, we sharply see the cycles of turning of breathing, breathing in breathing out kind of like a circle. And the Buddha likened it to a craftsperson is quite wonderful. This idea i think i talked last week about are developing ourselves like a craftsperson develops themselves. We are the craft, we're the we're the medium that we're developing ourselves with. And so the first place where this craft of mindfulness begins, is beginning to tune into our breathing. And the breathing is a beautiful thing to practice wins for most people. And I've spent now 40 years of my life, practicing mindfulness of the breathing. And it's been one of the treasures of my life. And I love it. And it seems like the more I do it, the more I appreciate it,

the more valuable it is, you would think that that's a long time to pay attention to something as boring and simple as the breathing, you can just get through it. You can see me just you know, watch two or three breaths and you have the basic idea of 40 40 years this skill must be slow on the uptake.

But in fact that this tuning into the breath and all that all that comes from it is really some of the most beautiful things that beautiful thing that can happen. So it begins with breathing and then goes into the body feelings, states of being the operating system underneath and comes out to liberation. So that's it. That's the kind of the introduction to what we'll do over these next seven or so weeks. And there are 13 exercises for developing awareness here in this text, so we'll go more than one point at one a week. But we'll go through these 13 exercises and describe it and doing so I hope that it does a number of things for those of you come. One is it helps you to appreciate and recognize your own capacity for being aware, for paying attention, and begin to treasure to value it to see that it's actually very important. And to be able to recognize awareness, as opposed to awareness operating, but it's kind of in the background. And beautiful things happen when we started really clearly recognizing awareness itself. And that you'll be the other thing I hope it'll happen is that you'll become aware of how these four foundations of mindfulness can support you in so many ways in your life, clarifies things makes things a lot easier, protects you, helps you become wiser, and helps you to understand yourself in a deeper way. And if at the end of the eight weeks, this also liberated you, that would be great. Or at least set you on the path of liberation, because you appreciate it understood, understand it. That's the task. So we have about 10 minutes left here. And I've kind of given you this introduction. And if you have any questions you'd like to ask about that or clarification. Nice to hear, or your concerns about this topic. So I can hear your concerns as we go over this next week. So maybe I can address those.

I can use the mic.

And my question is, as we're learning the 13 practices, will you be incorporating that into the silent meditation practice as guiding us today?

Perhaps that would help. So, you know, I've almost never done any kind of guided meditations Monday night. Because I think silence is so great. And I think a lot of people get a lot of, you know, so I'm a little bit reluctant to kind of, you know, add something, but maybe I'll think about a little bit, and maybe some like the last 10 minutes. So the sitting, maybe I can get away with it, then. Thank you for the suggestion. And I agree it might make it come more alive or meaningful if we experienced it that way. Or maybe we can do a little bit of it. During the talk, I don't have to talk so much.

Yeah, I'm wondering about being how you stay disciplined on being mindful. I often times had night will take a walk for a couple of miles. So and I'm really mindful, very mindful for the first 50 feet. And then I come back and make a circle and come back to my place. And I said, Well, what happened?

And years ago, I bought a watch that had a little beep every hour, so I thought, well, that little beep will remind me to be mindful. While after a few days that that didn't happen. So I don't know what else there is except maybe wearing a little battery pack that will shock shocking every five minutes or so. Oh, yeah. Gotta be mindful.

But it's it's really really incredibly difficult to remember to pay attention. Yes.

And can we can be they say that. Mindfulness is easy. Remembering to do it is what's hard.

Yeah, exactly. It's just just amazingly difficult.

And you're doing that as on a walk where you kind of casually walking around as opposed to something where people working are involved in social situations. And you know, it's much more even harder there. Yeah. So for your particular thing, you know what you're saying, and I could offer a couple of suggestions. The first is that it's very helpful to, at some point to stop trying to be mindful. But rather try to understand how you lose your mindfulness. Huh? And so what you might do you recognize 50 feet is all you can go. So let's say that's to the end of the block. So when you get every time you get to the end of the block to the corner, stop, and review what just happened over the last steps and see what what happened. What did I get caught up in? What are my thoughts? What were the feelings? And try to see if you can understand what is it what what went on for you, that was so important that your mind kind of lost the present moment and went off into someplace. And really tried to get really familiar with that. And in order to do that, as an exercise for a few weeks, you might have to actually stop and really take a look back what just happened, what just happened. And you might need to do something, some kind of probably, there's some kind of key, some kind of thing you have to understand about yourself, about how you leave the present moment. And once you understand that, then we can talk about discipline of staying mindful.

You know, one of the things that has occurred to me about this is that being in the physical plane, we've all been through various traumas, and so forth. I think being unmindful is almost in a way, the same thing as an alcoholic drinking, if you want to be someplace else, because being present, is painful.

Yes. So that's why that's why so so. So maybe start make sure you stopped early enough. Maybe it's you know, maybe, maybe, maybe it's even, to say you are able to be mindful 50 feet, maybe it was being generous to yourself. And so you might as an exercise over some weeks, you know, figure out how far you need to walk. So you can then really stop and see what just happened. And slowly, you might discover if that's the case for you that yes, you're so uncomfortable in your body, so uncomfortable here. And then you start then and once you start recognizing that or get a hint of that, maybe you already have that hand and use the big word, you know, trauma is a big word. So if there is some important trauma, then sometimes it's really helpful to go get some professional help. People can help you be mindful, be present, and give you the resources giving you support. So there's a container support, love, acceptance, wisdom, that can help you because sometimes with things like that, it's very hard to do it on on. Yeah. Great. Thank you. So that's the journey will take. So thank you all very much. And I hope that this week while you're preparing for these talks, that you will get curious about what is awareness? How do you know when you're paying attention? What is what is attention for you? Just kind of be curious, what is awareness? What is attention? When does it when does it operate? Can you recognize it? And what happens which shifts for you with that kind of curiosity then investigation during this week. Thank you