

2016-02-08 Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Week 4 Contemplation

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SPEAKERS

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All right. Let's see. So how's that sound to you? Can you hear okay? And some people are really far away back there. If you want to use our chairs in here, if you want to come inside, if you're very welcome to come. Some people prefer to stay out there. So yes, but louder. It houses everybody else. Maybe if you come closer, you're sitting in the corner there, if you come closer over here near the speaker, maybe it would be easier for you because everyone else can hear. Now we it needs to be adjusted. But we don't know what is probably the soundboard has to be fine tuned. And we don't know how to do it.

So we'll live with this. So I'm in the middle of offering a series of talks on the four foundations of mindfulness. And these are the classic teachings for the or the kind of, kind of the core teachings of the Buddha gave, that became the instructions for mindfulness that much of the modern mindfulness movement uses. And the instructions there are much more involved in what's usually taught with 13 different different exercises. Some of them are quite different from each and themselves. And it's quite different than how mindfulness usually usually taught. And one of them I'm going to do today, which is the instructions in developing awareness, mindfulness, by contemplating corpses. So why would that be a mindfulness exercise? The most people associate mindfulness with kind of a non discursive, aware, non judgmental mindfulness awareness of what's happening in the present moment. And this particular exercise seems to be more of a contemplation or visualization practice, which seems very different than what we usually think of mindfulness. And one of the reasons why it's included in this set of instructions, is what we're trying to do with the practices, these practices of mindfulness is to cultivate a heightened sense of awareness. And it turns out that spending times with the corpse is one of the ways to develop a heightened sense of awareness. I see some action out there, the better out there was off. Okay. So I want to give a little bit background. Ken little story, personal story. When I was about 20, or 21, I lived on a farm, a small dairy farm. And while I was there, the two farmers who own the farm, took the occasion to take a vacation for seven days. And I was left in charge of the farm. And one of the use me and the gals, with the gals were the cows.

And we were quite intimate as I had to milk them regularly. And one of the so it turned out in my life, I was 21 years old, I had never spent seven days alone, the first time in my life. And the only person I saw during those seven days was down the road, I saw the mail carrier come once. And otherwise there was no one. And I would go out in the morning and take the cows out to pasture during the morning and leave them out there and go out and get them in the evening to come back and milk and otherwise took care of the farm. And I had a grand time was a wonderful time. But one of the aspects of

this was as the days went along, and near the end of that time, I started noticing that everything that I looked at sparkled. And just like everything stood out in the highlight, I saw the details of things that usually I walked right by and never noticed. And everything kind of sparkled. And it felt really nice. There's that that kind of there was something about just being present and seeing the world in this alive way was new for me. And then I also became highly sensitive To my thoughts, I'd never kind of been so aware that I was thinking as I was during this silent week. And my thoughts also sparkled. It was kind of like everything that I was aware of kind of like I had like a special, I don't know sparkle or light or clarity to it, they was quite kind of satisfying to see very happy to see. And I felt very peaceful. And what was happening to me that as my social life disappeared, and the usual, asking activities of the social life kind of stopped, and I was just left in this calm, quiet environment. That was some ways for like being on retreat. My, my attachment involvement, my thinking decreased. And as a decreased my awareness of the present moment and my awareness itself became stronger. And that heightened sense of awareness was deeply satisfying. I felt some I felt so like, like, kind of feeling like everything is perfect, was kind of the feeling of it. Even though maybe if I used my logic, I could have easily decided about many things were not very perfect. But this was not an illogical event, it was just this settling of the mind. And this awakening of this heightened sense of clarity, that was so nice. It was so nice that it became my task. My quest after I left that farm, to learn how to be alone that way, with others, I didn't see that I wanted to be a hermit. But I wanted to learn to be with people. And it made me able to maintain that heightened sense of awareness in relationship to other people. And because my friends came back to the farm, it quickly went away. While I was there, also, on this farm, I was present for the first birth of some creature that I'd ever seen in my life, the birth of a cow calf, and that was pretty, pretty special as well, then a cap was being born, His head was coming out first. And there was this kind of sack around the head, like a saran wrap or something, you can kind of see through it. And as the head came out, suddenly, the, you know, the head, looking through the saran wrap looked like it was asleep. And now we're not alive. And then the sack broke. And then suddenly, the eyes opened up, and this calf took a breath. And it was like, wow, you know, life, it just cut. It just happened in front of me just like boom, where did that come from. And, again, logically, I could have told you where it came from, I watch where it came from. But, but there's something special about seeing it get born that was stopped my mind. And again, this heightened sense of awareness, like time stopped, all my concerns stopped everything, anything that everything in the universe existed right there, just there because it was such a special moment. And then we had there had been some sheep that had somehow escaped, maybe the year before, and spent about a year living in the hills and mountains around the farm. And through the winter, cold winter and in and, and in the summertime in the spring, we decided that they were you know, they would belong to the farm, the farmers, we decided that we would go get them capture them. And that was a huge kind of comedy.

Trying to corral them and catch them and so we did finally, and we brought them back. I think we forgot all of them, we got one of them back at least and brought it back. And what we didn't know was that sheep that have escaped into the wild and kind of gotten wild don't do well when they come back into captivity. And so when we caught died, not too long after. And so then I saw death. And there again, in a different way can move more heavier away. It was also like time stopped like everything's seeing this this the sheep You know, this is like, I know it's a very special moment for this heightened sense of presence and awareness. So this Few days ago on Friday, I took a bunch of people to Sameer here went with us. I don't think anybody else went to the anatomy lab at a local community college to look at cadavers. And the people I brought or people who are being trained to do chaplaincy to offer spiritual care in places like hospitals and hospices and prisons and places. Like that. And so every year, we take them to this anatomy lab for a few hours. And we see corpses in various states of the applique. But in various states of dissect dissection being dissected, we saw one that had not been detected yet. We

saw one that was quite taken apart. And we saw one that was mostly the skin was taken off and see all the muscles.

And some of these people, chaplains and training wanted to know, they want to know why are you taking us to the anatomy lab to see corpses? What is it? How does this what is this to do with it? chaplaincy training? And I didn't answer the question. I just turned the question back on them. This is what do you think I said? And they came up with great answers on their own. But one of the answers is that chaplains need to have dealt with some of the reactions, they have to be in the presence of death, before they enter the hospital, and are supposed to offer spiritual care for people who are dying or in situation where someone has died. And so they have to kind of kind of be able to be present and comfortable, comfortable the right word, but not reactive to be able to be maybe one of the calmer people in the room at that time. Because you can't really offer much spiritual care if you're the most agitated one. And so to be able to kind of meet the reaction, see what's going on. But also to be able to contemplate what is this thing about life and death? What is it that we're being present for? Who are we to be able to kind of drop into some other to contemplate or consider some of these deep questions about life and death. And maybe begin kind of seeing people in a different way than you would see if you don't have that. And the many years ago, I did a weekend, kind of workshop on death and dying with Steven Levine, who just died a few weeks ago. And he was one of the he was a master at what he did was a quite an awesome, quite amazing to watch him. But what was most impactful for me was that before it started in, I've been a hippie and then I had been a Zen monk and before going there, and, and so I found myself in Marin County, with all these, what looks to me, like ordinary people, completely ordinary people, whatever that is. And, you know, the courtyard before we went in for the workshop, in southern all the nice, the nice people, ordinary people living an ordinary life. And then we went into their workshop, and they started to speak. And their lives were not ordinary, their lives were, you know, their child had died, or they were dying, or their story after story of death and dying came out. And these people, most of the people there were really confronting something very profound and important, lots of grief and lots of powerful things. And Steven Levine would meet them fully present, and somehow the ability to counsel them or guide them or support them to somehow work through or resolve or touch something that really profound in them that had to be touched. And I was kind of wide eyed. And after that experience, I no longer think people are ordinary, you know, just I don't know run of the mill people, just people whatever. Now I don't take people for granted. Because I you know, I had I had you know, who knows what is going on in the depths of people and their life experience and what their struggles are and their their issues are and you know, you can't really tell just from the surface. So now I feel much more much more kind of cautious of the right word, but much more respectful of, you know, I don't know this person Let's find out. So going to the CDs cadavers on Friday. The anatomist who was guiding us to it was quite a generous, very generous and very kind person, very supportive person. And one of the first things she told them was the bodies we were going to see where were bodies that represented the offering the gift of someone who wanted their body to be used for education or for research or for medical purposes. And so the context of going into the anatomy lab was one of kind of respecting the generosity of the people who had died, and what they were offering us to do. And so there was I wouldn't say necessarily was a Reverend, I was reverence and going in to see them. But there was a kind of kind of real care and attention to what we're doing. And I said, I said, I came in and looked at these bodies that were there.

And the anatomist told us how the bodies got there. And we can kind of calculate they probably died about nine months before, that takes about six months to prepare a body for, for to go into an anatomy lab. So six months, you know, it takes a while. So about nine, six to nine months before. And I thought, I bet these people have relatives and friends who are still alive. And maybe, if I'm walking down the street, maybe I'll walk by them, maybe our paths will cross. That's one of the reflections went by my, in

my head this year, when I went to anatomy lab. And again, I felt all these these connections and people and how special it is, you know, to be present for someone when they're alive, especially is to be present for someone when they pass. And so it became kind of a greater kind of sense of reverence or care or, or appreciation for just life, and the connections and the relationships, and the friendships and all these things that can be there. For some of the chaplain students who went and became a powerful contemplation, about the difference between being alive, and being dead between a living person and a corpse, because it's really clear that you can look at a corpse that's been dead for nine months, that well preserved but still dead, is there's no life. In it, you touch them, and they're cold. And there's, you know, the spark of life, it's not there. What's what I think about is a spark of awareness, consciousness is not there. There's various theories about what happens to consciousness when we die. But certainly, whatever consciousness is, it's not there in that body anymore. And if consciousness is not so connected to the body, because you know that, I don't know, I don't know what it is. But it's, I have it now. You have it now. And there's something about being in the presence of death. And thinking, is it considering Oh, I'm going to be like that one day, one day, I'm going to be just matter, lifeless, inanimate matter. And laying there probably in some, laying somewhere. Most people are laying for a while once they're dead. And you might even, you know, so they might be, he might be in a morgue, you might be all kinds of places you might end up and so what is it we have now? What's the difference? What is that that makes, it's what's unique about being alive now. And some people when they contemplate this, start feeling much more kind of feeling, kind of the reverence or the specialness, of the spark of what it's like to be conscious. Now, it's very different than thinking about where you've been, where you've come from, what's happened to you in your life, or where you're going and what might happen to you. Now, those kinds of thoughts, in some ways take you away from the spark of awareness or attention, which is only present in the present moment, something that we often overlook. And to have a sense of the specialness of being alive and present, is quite a powerful thing. Some people when they come in, in encounter death and dying is to they reflect about their own lives, they think reflect about their own death. And in the context of death, and life. How do you want to live now, and some people begin changing their priorities in their life, when they've think about they're going to die? I lead it to death and dying weekend workshop many years ago. And we did some exercises and various things. And about a few years later, I met a woman who had been at it and she had been kind of a high level executive type person. Some Non very, very big nonprofit. And she said to me, oh, Gil, thank you so much for that workshop you lead. I came back from that weekend, and resigned my job. And the first thing I did was golf. But oh, no, what have I done?

And, and she said, No, I'm so happy. This is the best thing that could have happened to me. She was able to retire she was getting close to the age, I guess, was the he could retire. And she said, You know, there was a best thing I could have done, I realized my priorities changed. And it no longer made sense for me to kind of engage in this kind of work. I wanted to spend the last years of my life doing something much, much more meaningful for me, and what I was doing that work. So sometimes public encounter with death changes people's priorities. And what's most important, then stands out, why Wait, do it now. Sometimes in the, in the context of death, we view issues in our life in a different way. The resentments we have, the hurts that we hold, the desires, we have the ambitions we have the addictions, we have the you know, all kinds of things start sending out in highlight. And the question is, is it worth holding on to these things? Is it it is it worth it to be under the burden of certain kinds of attachments, certain kind of ways of thinking. And this is where the wonderful way that for sometimes in the presence of that the thinking mind stops, the usual thinking mind stops, you know, and a few some of you might have been with someone who's dying, or soon after they die, they've died. Most most people thought that's not true for everyone. But most people find that, that, you know, you're sitting there at the bedside of someone who's just died. And you're wondering where good places to change your oil your car, because your oil needs to be changed, and you haven't done it for a while. And you

wonder how long you can go without changing it. And, you know, you don't kind of go down that track very long. You know, it's a lot of the petty concerns or small concerns of big concern stop. And there's a whole different kind of heightened awareness and presence, that maybe is some can be something like what happened to me on that farm. When I was left alone a week, it's kind of like being on retreat. And to feel that incense that and to appreciate that this is valuable, this is a very satisfying way to be alive, to be alive in this clarity, without attachments, without distractions, preoccupations to be fully present, and awake now, to be here with your awareness, the spark of it, without fear without considering the future. And even considering that we're going to die just here in a full way, is very powerful. So this change over priority, this development of heightened awareness, in the context in that contact with that is, I think, is one of the reasons why in these 13 exercises for cultivating a heightened awareness, this mindfulness, a contemplation of death is included into as one of the exercises. So with as an as an introduction, I'll read you the contemplation. And the and this, the way it's presented, is it's not presented as if you really go to a charnel ground. In ancient India there charnel grounds not everyone could be afford to be cremated. Because you know, that takes a lot of wood and stuff. So it was very common for people just be taken out to this charnel grounds on the edge of outside focus far enough away from people lived, and they've leave bodies there. And then nature would take care of it. What's going to happen there. But this isn't to imagine this.

It's interesting how it is remember this is this was written in India. And I think India, even to this day, compared to in probably what it's like in much of the world until recent times, that was much more part of ordinary life. There wasn't so foreign to ordinary life. I grew up in the suburbs, very much in suburbs and didn't see anything like that. Until I was 11. And I went to happen to go to cut one do. And there they were carrying a young child through the streets on a stretcher, down to the river to do the cremation. And I've never seen anything like that. So this kind of going to seeing a trial and ground or knowing a charnel ground and it might seem strange to us, but it was probably a little more common in the ancient world. So, this is a more of a visualization than actually going there. So, as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside and a charnel ground, one two or three days dead, loaded, livid and losing matter, a person compares this same body once on body, thus, this body to my body to is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate. So, this is the reflection, you visualize this kind of corpse, and then you think, Oh, this will happen to me too, and this is the practices being offered. So, this refrain appears after each of these like five or six visualizations, this body to is of the same nature, it will be like that it is not exempt from that faith. As though one were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, and various kinds of worms, a person compares this same body with the following thoughts, this body too is of the same nature, it will be like that it is not exempt from that fate. Again, as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews of or a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews, or a skeleton without flesh and blood held together with sinews. Or as a bunch of disconnected bones scattered in all directions, here a hand bone, their foot bone, their shin bone, their thigh bone, here, hip bone, their backbone here, rib bone, their breastbone here, and arm bone, their shoulder bone, their neck bone, their a jaw bone, here a tooth, there the skull, a person compares this same body. Thus, this body to is of the same nature, it will be like that it is not exempt from that faith. And then one last one, as though one we just see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel, ground bones bleached white, the color of shells, or the bones heaped up more than a year old, or bones rotted and crumbled to dust, a person compares this same body with it. This pie too is of the same nature, it will be like that it is not exempt from that fate. So it kind of goes through a whole process of decay, starting from just you know, a day or two old corpse to just being going to dust. And this too, is our feet. And somehow, and so to contemplate this, in a way that's not morbid to contemplate this in a way that's not depressing. For the other company contemplate this in such a way that it helps us really be present for this life we have right here to really kind of take

this life and more serious. So we're really kind of give ourselves to be fully present. They say that the people who are fully engaged in life are the ones that are least afraid of that kind of interesting kind of statistics that's researchers have found out. It's be fully here to this life this moment. What is it to be alive? What is it to be conscious? Do we know that we're going to live some way after be alive or continue after we die?

Maybe we don't, maybe we won't. If you believe in rebirth, maybe you'll come back as an earthworm. And, you know, so what kind of, you know you don't know what kind of consciousness you'll have then. So what we have now is considered Buddhism considered very special. To be a hoot to be born as human being is considered one of the most or the most precious births to have. And so what is it to be a person? How do we what is it just squander this opportunity of being a person human being? What is it we can discover? Not through what we do not through accomplishments? Not through who we connected to. But what is it we can wake up to? What sense of aliveness and presence and more importantly, a sense of freedom. Can we wake up to so that this moment as we walk through this world in this life, this moment, that we are find? Some kind of clear, maybe they quote, some kind of some clarity, that preciousness, the, the heightened awareness, the satisfaction, the peace, the at homeless that I experienced when I was on that farm in Norway, you know, that you've probably some of you experienced in other ways. So, one of the exercises in mindfulness exercise to help with the developing mindfulness is to do this contemplation practice of contemplating thinking about or visualizing that the corpse the process of decay. Some of you might find this interesting to do, you might find it helpful. Some of you might find it unhelpful to do. And there's no requirement to do it. The approach in Buddhism is you do what's helpful, not what is unhealthy, what's unhelpful. But you might see if this contemplation of corpses and death and decay, whether there's some way of contemplating and considering it, that is for your betterment support you in some important way. And you might even find good friends who doesn't mind talking about these things, and explore this topic of death, decay, corpses, banality of life, and see if you can have a conversation and explore it and then and have a conversation to see what is it about how we can really face up to face this issue of mortality? And what's gonna happen to us, so that it's for our betterment, it enhances our life, rather than diminishes it. So those are my thoughts on this exercise of mindfulness, we have about 10 minutes, if any of you would like to ask some questions or make some comments or express some reactions to this, you're welcome to you can use the mic.

Hello. Okay.

Having just lost both of my parents, and one more recently, and contemplating the body of a parent and knowing most of their life, having seen it.

My question is, how to shape the thoughts that tend towards suffering as a result of the death and the loss? Because what I hear in me is resentment, that I have to suffer this loss.

And so it gets back to how to approach that kind of suffering.

Yeah, I think you know, it's important to be very respectful, respectful. For the loss, especially loss of a parent, the grief of all the different feelings that can come, there can be a wide spectrum of emotions that come up as a result, they're all allowed, they all they're all important to allow them space and time and not be in a hurry to, you know, get rid of them or fix them or something like that. Because you don't know what's working through you. You don't know what, what needs to kind of digest and percolate. And a lot of what the mindfulness practice does in this regard, is to help us identify ways in which we interfere with the grieving process, interfere with what we're feeling what's going on, oh, I shouldn't feel

resentful to my parents after all, you know, I shouldn't be resentful. For example, someone might think, or some people are just so happy. Finally, you know, and that's, you know, you're not supposed to think that way about your, you know, your beloved parents that you're finally, you know, don't have the burden having to care for them or something. Anything is allowed. So you kind of get out of the way, get out. Don't judge it. Don't second guess it, don't try to fix it, and give it time and support. And sometimes it's helpful to have other people you talk to and, you know, offer you support, you can offer that kind of presence, you're comfortable not trying to, you know, fix things when you're grieving. So I think that's really important. And then in addition, what you can do, and a little bit more directly in relationship to your question is sometimes it's useful to not as a way of pushing away the thoughts or resentment you have, but to see if there's other ways that you can look upon the death, especially if someone who is a parent's right. In what way, might it be a gift that they die? What? Why am I what kind of gift is that and their death towards their daughter?

An answer that comes is that their whole life was a gift.

And how does it? What does that perspective do for you?

I guess it allows that there can be an ending.

It's an ability to appreciate what was instead of resent that no longer is, yeah.

And then it'll be as this as this exercise says, you'll, you'll also have the same fate, this will happen to you. And I don't know how your parents died. But sometimes death of a parent is also a showing the way that you know, so maybe prepares you for getting your time. I mean, I think it's one of the gifts a parent can give to their children is to help them show them that dying is a natural part of life, and show them that they're not afraid. If they aren't afraid, they are afraid maybe that's a different different lesson. Or they're not angry at dying, but show them how to meet and face that in a peaceful way, you know, beautiful way. And then then that becomes a gift. Yeah, you can't hear or you can't hear out there. Oh, I see. We're just about done, that one has just finished one more thing, and then we'll stop. And I saw, you know, dentist, you never know when death comes and the death of the electric equipment. I told this story a number of times. So I counseled a woman who was dying of cancer. And she had an 11 year old son or daughter. And she was really angry at having to die because of because of her daughter. Mostly it makes some sense, right to some terrible thing to happen to a child. And I told her that the most important the most important influences she was going to have on her child's life was how she died. And if she died angry, that would have probably affect a child's view of life for the rest of the child's life. But if she could die peacefully, then that would have a different conditioning different lesson that a child would get. And so some weeks after she died, her husband called me up and explained that she had died. And she died peacefully in bed. And when she had died, the father went out with a child out into the garden, they got a flower and brought it back and put it on her chest. And when I heard that, I thought that probably she heard she had taken to heart when I said, and she had figured out how to die in such a way hopefully sincerely, so that they could be a gift to her daughter rather than a burden. So, you know, we're all going to die. And some people lead the way. And hopefully they can show us the way and it can be a gift. So I don't know about your parents, but one way or the other, even if they had a hard time dying. There's something about that also that becomes a gift if we learn the lessons of that. So I don't know if that addresses your question well enough and But I hope that I was the least respectful of your question. Thank you all.