

# 2016-02-15 Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## Week 5 Feeling Tone

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### SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Good evening, everyone. And this evening, I'm going to continue the series I'm doing on the four foundations of mindfulness. Those of you who are new today, the four foundations of mindfulness is the fundamental or they're the kind of root teachings that the Buddha gave, that gave birth to the mindfulness movement, or at least the Buddhist mindfulness movement, that were part of. And in this famous teaching, the Buddha gives, discusses how to cultivate a heightened sense of awareness, through attention to four different areas of our life. And these four areas are our body, what is usually called feelings. And then our mind states, and our mental and our mind states, and then our mental processes. And the, the, one of the primary things, we're trying to do some work, go get another one. And one of the primary purposes for this is to cultivate a heightened sense of awareness. So that we can be freer from the entanglements we get involved in when we are involved in all kinds of experiences, some in the present moment, some in the past and future through our imaginations. If we get entangled with them, then we're not free. There's something about the heightened awareness that can kind of set us free. And one analogy that sometimes used for this idea of heightened awareness is that being awake, the metaphor of being awake. Another one is that of turning on a light in a dark room, that you turn the light on, and suddenly you see everything is becomes clear. And so the idea of becoming awake, or having heightened awareness, kind of, is a way of turning on the light or shining the light on our experience. So we see with greater clarity, and in that greater clarity, we find ourselves somehow not. So I like the word entangled with whatever's going on. And we kind of disentangle the tangle. So, the first exercise is mindfulness of the body, which we've covered over these last few weeks. And the idea is that the body is the most accessible part of these exercises that you can kind of see your body is generally you can feel it, you can touch it, you can know what you're doing when you're doing when you're meant physical activities you're doing. So it's relatively easy to be mindful of your body. And so it's kinda like the outer incense the outer circle of who we are most accessible. As we get settled in, to being present for our body, then at some point, we become aware of some of the deeper activities of our body what's going on more closely, more intimately more subjectively, with ourselves. And this subjective experience where the first subjective experiences that becomes clear is what's called in English as feelings. The ancient Buddhist word is Vedana which also means to know or to experience, or to feel not emotionally feel, that emotional feelings, but rather to have the kind of subjective feelings that arise when we have sensory experiences. So if it's warm, then, you know outside, I feel hot. And the experience of hot is a physical experience. But if I'm tuned into my subjective experience, I might, I might feel that that sense of heat is pleasant, or I might feel it's unpleasant, depending on variety of conditions. And that experience ever that's pleasant or unpleasant, is considered to be a deeper subjective experience than just feeling the heat by itself. So it's called the

feeling tone, or the way in which we feel the experience either pleasant or unpleasant or likeable or not likeable.

And it's, they say in Buddhism that every experience we have, has a feeling tone and it has one of three possible feeling tones. It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant or unpleasant. Some people just call it neutral but either pleasant or unpleasant. And is it unpleasant to have the air conditioner going?

Neither, but requires action. Some people like it.

And it seems appropriate for the talk here. Because we're against it become free, regardless of what the feeling is. And so what how do we get entangled with these feelings. So it's one thing to feel warmth. It's another thing to feel, liking or not liking it, nothing to feel this is pleasant, or this is unpleasant. And then get involved in this kind of get entangled with a pleasant and unpleasant that has to react to it.

So, in thinking about this today, I was reminded of a field trip that I took yesterday on Friday, to San Quentin, once a year or so I go to San Quentin with people I'm training to become Buddhist chaplains. And we went to see a program of a year long program called guiding rage into power, where Chuck for death who comes and teaches or sometimes has gathered together all the different techniques, approaches, he's collected over 19 years, 18 years of teaching in San Quentin, teaching mindfulness, meditation, anger management, variety, different things this year alone program. And most of the people who come are lifers are in in San Quentin for having committed murder. So, you know, these are people who have, you know, who are have quite a history behind them. And it happened to be that this time I went that we they had a particular program, they were teaching them, which was quite moving, and relates this topic of feelings or feeling tones. And a little kind of footnote, or this person made a more personal note. In the teaching was a really great big, big, because I brought with me my 18 year old son, imagine bringing an 18 year old son Quinten, we let him out. And so he was just barely old enough to be had permission to get into the prison to get clearance. And I was so happy for him to sit there. And his room of men, Christ transformed me. So man, it's been transformed. And to hear them tell their stories around this teaching. And the teaching was the two kinds of pain, what they call the original pain, and secondary pain. And for these men in San Quentin, every single one of them, so we're 28 men there, in the room, every single one of them had experienced trauma has children. And their original pain, that was a pain that they experienced as children that set the stage or set the momentum of their lives until they came to San Quentin. And it caused them to create secondary pain for themselves. And the secondary pain was the way they try to avoid the original pain. Because by medicating themselves taking drugs and alcohol, by crime by being tough or being violent themselves, we're always trying to escape and not feel what was going on for themselves. And what was interesting was it for most of the men there that their primary pain had to do with their father, one way or the other, an absent father, father suddenly died, Father suddenly left a violent father, an alcoholic father, a variety of different kinds of relationships, their father was very, very difficult for them. And it kind of the pain of that, then they you know, they act it out. And And so, that was the beginning of the teaching and this the third part of the teaching, original pain, secondary pain. The third teaching was to learn to sit in the fire and namaste The fire was a sitting in the fire that of the original pain, no longer avoided, and to really own up to it, to be with it to process it. And then once they learned how to sit in the fire, then they had the fourth step. And the fourth step that they they love, it's like when they love acronyms. So the acronym is stop. And stop stands for stop to observe the process, then nice. So those three things, so you recognize the original pain, recognize a secondary pain, learn to stay with the original pain by sitting in the fire, and then observe the process of what goes on inside of you the reactions, the

responses and impulse and everything goes on. And these, these men, this teaching, they took to heart because for them, it has such huge consequences for their lives, I mean, it really makes a difference for them. This was not like a, you know, my son struggling over the fact that his younger brother has the iPad. You know, and you know, breathe deeply and just be with it. Right.

These are, these are some of these people were, you know, in the toughest of the toughest before they kind of got transformed in prison, and needed to be in prison, some of them. And they were it was quite impressive to be around these men who have taken these teachings in deeply and it really turned turned a huge corner in their lives. And we're now transformed. So here were people who had learned to sit with discomfort sit with pain to sit with unpleasant sensations, unpleasant, probably saying to mildly, and they learn to sit with it rather than repress it rather than push it away rather than escape from it. And just learn to sit with it. And in doing so, the men there talked about how they became free before leaving prison. And so one of them talked about how he wasn't ever free outside of prison. But after many years in prison now he learned to be learned to become free. And so you know, and some of the joy and some of their faces was contagious. It was quite something joy in their faces in their eyes. Some of these men It was so beautiful to see the men's and those who felt that they become free while still in prison. The so this idea of that there we have pleasant and unpleasant and other pleasant or unpleasant experiences all day long. The Buddha likened it to the shifting winds, winds can come from Southwest, northeast, they can shift suddenly. And so our feelings you know, constantly, they're constantly shifting and changing is like kaleidoscope. One moment, it's pleasant. next moment, it's unpleasant next moments, neither all these different things happening. Many of them, maybe we're too busy to even notice and recognize they're happening. But there's plenty of them that we recognize. But do we recognize it clearly enough to have this heightened awareness where the light gets turned on. And we're not entangled, we're not caught up in the experience. One example that I've, I've I've used and other people have found useful is to be in challenging situations, and very complex situations just seems like it's like so the social complexity of these kinds of crisis are challenging, you know, people arguing and angry and being mean to each other something. It's hard on it, what am I supposed to do? How do I sort this out? How do I be it's just so complicated. And then to kind of back off for a moment and just realize this experience, the totality of this experience I'm in right now is unpleasant. Oh, this is unpleasant. I know how to be with unpleasant, it's just unpleasant. And in that kind of separating themselves from it, and are turning on the light and then not being pulled into it or pushed around by keeping their equanimity keeping their balance in the middle of it. Sometimes it's the pleasant that we get entangled with sometimes because we want the pleasant we don't want the pleasant to go we're holding on to it. We're pushing for it. And I think for some of these prisoners they were pushing for the pleasant because they you know to try to avoid their pain they want to go where was pleasant with drugs with alcohol, with one man talked about how crime for him was there the rush and the power he got from from robbing was his way of avoiding his pain. Pretty, pretty powerful, you know, takes medicine I think you know if that's your medicine. So, to learn to have a healthy relationship with a pleasant pleasant experience and the way in Buddhism we find that healthy relationship is Learn how to sit, sit upright or stand upright, or be balanced in relationship to pleasant and unpleasant. So that we're not automatically avoiding the unpleasant or automatically going towards the pleasant. But we just stay present, turn on the light. That's the alternative, turn the light on in your room in your head, and really become, look what's happening be clear what's happening, become independent, in the middle of what's happening, by looking around what's happening now, oh, this is what's happening. So not leaning forward and fading away. They say that the experience which are neither pleasant or unpleasant, and the more neutral ones are not that common. But when they do, people tend to get dull. They helped people to fall asleep, they're not so interested anymore. And one of the very unfortunate examples of this is socially, that if someone criticizes you, that's unpleasant. But it's also very interesting. And most people don't fall asleep. When when they're being criticized.

When people are praising you, that's also that's very pleasant. And most people don't fall asleep. When, you know, it's so pleasant, people are getting praised. However, if you get neither criticism or praise, maybe not any of you, but there are people when they get neither criticism or praise, lose interest, they get bored, like nothing's in here for me, I'm not being my sense of self is not being reinforced. And there's quite a said, if you're in the recipient end of that, you know, you're not particularly praising or criticizing or you're not, you're not a particularly pleasant or unpleasant experience for someone. And so they don't, they're not interested, they're going to focus on you, they kind of lose interest, it's kind of sad that when that operates, so how to stay alert, present attentive, in all three of these kind of places. So in meditation practice, as we settled in, to be present, and to kind of settle into the present moment, we're starting maybe with a breathing, physical experience of breathing. Sooner or later, as we get more settled, one of the things becomes clear is it's a subjective experience of things which are pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. It starts standing out in the highlight, the body begins aching, or the body starts feeling very soft and pleasant. When meditation is going well, or we have our feelings, our emotions, our thoughts come through as we're sitting here, and we start noticing what it feels like to have these emotions, these impulses, the kinds of thoughts and we start feeling in a very qualitative different way. This is unpleasant, to have this. It's a, it's some people are really fine, they grow up or mature a lot, when they finally understand in some deep inner way, that being angry is unpleasant. And, in some ways, you know, into real Oh, that's the cost of being angry, or all these unpleasant feelings, intentions in my body, this is real, this doesn't feel good to be this way. But it takes for some people it takes years before they somehow turn the attention around from what they're angry at, to really feel the consequences of being angry, subjectively, and how unpleasant it is. Same thing about pleasant some people are so involved with their thoughts concerns, the life, their activities, they don't recognize it when things are pleasant, that are nurturing or supportive. And so they don't take the time to be fed by that pleasant to be supported by it, valued by it. So as we settle into meditation, we start becoming more of a more of a heightened awareness to the subjective feeling tone of our experience. And that gives it gives us a chance to begin exploring how to have a balanced relationship to it, how to turn on a light on the light and just be with them without being for or against. And it's a fantastic laboratory to test a kind of place to explore exercise develop a capacity to be present for unpleasant without pulling away but are the habits the usual reactivity, pulling away denying, escaping, getting angry all these things. And the same thing being present in a balanced way with a pleasant or with a neither pleasant or unpleasant. So meditation becomes, you know, a place to develop Self understanding develop the skills to stay balanced with these things. That means in meditation, it's not a mistake, to feel, have an unpleasant meditation. In fact, unpleasant meditation sometimes are the best, at least from the point of view of a teacher who's interested in people grow up, you know, developing and growing and the practice. You know, for practitioners, they just weren't all pleasant. But usually that's the instinct, right? And then it's not not pleasant, I must be doing something wrong.

But pleasant, unpleasant comes and goes, depending what's going on in our lives. And sometimes meditation is unpleasant. And but the opportunity then is to turn on the light for the unpleasant sensations experiences, and learn how to be awake, rather than reactive to it, sit in the fire, and you learn to do that meditation. And then you might get developed the skills so that you can do it in regular life, when it really matters, when it really matters. So you don't have to go to San Quentin, you can just, you know, stay stay balanced and present for something that's very, very unpleasant when you're sitting in your original fire. The original pain. So interestingly enough, this teachings on being mindful of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither is one of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. He gave tremendous, I can't emphasize how much he emphasizes over and over and over again, as being extremely important doorway, into freedom. And it kind of makes things in some ways simple, it's kind of reductionistic. But it's ritualistic in the way that the narrow, the narrow, neck of an hourglass is

reductionistic. For the sand, all the sand has to go through that narrow, narrow neck to come out. And so if you want to watch the sand, you can see an image really, then you can you know, you can watch each grain go by because maybe one grain at a time is so narrow, right. So the feeling, you know, so much of our life goes through the neck of the woods, is these feelings of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. And it's amazing how much of our life is a reaction to pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. In fact, I suspect that some political philosophies, some philosophical philosophies, political stance, people have arisen not because of some deep philosophical consideration, but rather, someone is feeling unpleasant about something. And they want to justify getting rid of it. And so they kind of develop a whole scenarios, all the lawyers in the mind come up, and policymakers come up in the mind and you know, establish why we have to push this away, or why I have to get this. Because of this, or kind of very simple Amoeba like relationship to pleasant and unpleasant. If you sit quietly and watch yourself and watch how this works, it's actually quite, quite humbling. For those of us who might think we're very sophisticated beings. And everything we do is very deeply considered, and, you know, and wise and you know, and it turns out that kind of like amoebas we got this narrowed litany so much goes through that narrow neck. But the Buddhist teachings on this feeling tone, pleasant, unpleasant neutral, gets more interesting. Once we start understanding how this works is we could quiet and settled enough to see that the underlying all experience, there's some quality of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. And if we can be quiet enough, and still enough just to watch that process operating inside of us, then at some point, the Buddha says you can distinguish between two different classes of feeling tones of these feelings. So two different classes of things which are pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. And he used a very kind of physical word for this. It literally it's translation in English is those feeling tones which are of the flesh and those which are not of the flesh. And so that's kind of pretty graphic, you know of the flesh of the flesh, I understand to be that those feelings pleasant, unpleasant and neither that arise because our physical senses are stimulated by The usual kind of sense objects. So if I get a massage my flesh, that's a pleasure of the flesh. If I step on a nail, that's, that's something unpleasant of the flesh. So something has to be senses have to be stimulating the ordinary ways in which they get stimulated, not of the flesh, or those feeling tones, that kind of emerge or glow or arise out of us, independent of what's happening with the census.

And the primary example the Buddha use for this was the joy and happiness that can well up in deep meditation. So you're sitting there minding your own business, meditating, following your breath, and you start getting concentrated. And without any intention of your own without anything changing and the world around you. In fact, sometimes the world around you can be quite unpleasant. As the concentration deepens, it seems to trigger a kind of glow, or warmth, or joy is nice energy that kind of begins flowing through the body. And nowadays, people say it was just serotonin. But, but serotonin is, you know, that's nice. You know, it's, so it's not, it's not not the ordinary senses being stimulated. But some of the chemicals inside of us that are operating, it's kind of sends things through. And this, this, this kind of pleasant sensation, that's he calls it Buddha calls not of the flesh, in modern English translations, because that's kind of a strange translation. They've tried other translations. One that some of you who read these kinds of suttas come across. It's a Bhikkhu Bodhi translated his unworldly feelings. I don't know if that works any better than not of the flesh unworldly out of the world. But the some people have tried using spiritual as a translation for it, because it's often connected to people's spiritual life, how the Buddha talked about it. So when when it happens as we settle into practice, and deeper, deeper, way more connected and to ourselves, when we wake up the lightest turned on, there's a kind of very pleasant, enjoyable sensations that begin to well up, that are a byproduct of that. clarity of that subtleness of that sense of balance and harmony, they can come. And not only is a pleasant, but it's nourishing. And it kind of nourishes as it kind of feeds us in a good way. It's kind of like some god This feels healthy. This feels good. This is the Buddhist Buddha and the Buddha first experienced this for himself. His reaction to it was, oh, I don't have to be afraid of this. Because in ancient India, there



was certain fear that some of the religious people had about anything that was pleasant, because it may trigger some kind of attachment and desire too much. But this is plan this this is this I don't be afraid of. And so to be able to be to be able to tune in and recognize pleasant inner sensations of our inner inner quality of our inner life or our inner life, starts feeling pleasant is one of the stepping stones to going deeper into this mindfulness practice. Now, this feelings, not of the flesh, there's also unpleasant ones. And the primary one that Buddha gives as an example, is for someone who wants to have a spiritual life wants to go and be able to go deep more deeply in this and but for some reason, their life circumstances, prevent them from doing it. And so, their strong longing and desire is frustrated. And the unpleasantness of that is is called unpleasantness not of the flesh. underworld the underworld a spirit now I know spiritual unpleasantness and I think some some people maybe some of you have had that experience of somehow feeling frustrated or feeling like somehow you can't follow through on on what you really want to do. Right like this gentleman here. Right? How many years were you wanting to follow through but you didn't over the years? Did you did you want to follow through on your spiritual longing but you didn't? decades right. Yes. So this man here waited a long time, good things are worth waiting for. And so so. So what happens here is that, so in this four foundations of mindfulness, the first six exercises are about staying connected to your body, using your physical body, your body as an area to develop a heightened sense of awareness.

Then there's a turning point that goes on, where at this feet at this juncture of feeling tone, we start dipping into the inner subjective experience that we have. And at first, it's a little bit more the more obvious feeling tones of that of the flesh, which could be said to be a little bit on the surface surface pleasure. But as we get more settled, then we start going underneath the surface to the deeper quality of our being in our life. And that also can be pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. And we've become more sensitive, more aware of a higher quality of an inner life. And that high end becoming aware of this higher quality, I see it as a, as a very important piece of information that then makes sense of what we're doing in the second half of these exercises in the four foundations of mindfulness. So because the next exercise, we're becoming aware of our mind states, and then the inner mental processes that affect our mind states that affect the quality of our inner life. So we want to become more and more aware of this inner life. Because the quality of our mind, the quality of our heart, is one of the most precious things we can be the caretaker for no one else can be the caretaker, for the quality of your own heart, quality of your inner life. And so if you want to start becoming the caretaker fourth responsible for it, then cultivating a high inner quality of quiet inner quality of inner life. And these, this practice of mindfulness that goes from the body to feeling tones, the mind states, is moves in the direction of being able to be the caretaker for it. As we become more and more a caretaker for our inner quality, quality of heart mind, we get the information of how to be even more caring of it. As we get more caring of it, we we we prepare the mind we create the kind of inner life, inner quality of mind that has more and more access to wisdom, more more access to understanding, what do we do that causes us to lose that quality? And what's it what do we do that supports having more of it. And that's one of the definitions of wisdom is to become a caretaker of the quality of your heart for yourself. And then one of the doorway into this is to become aware of our feeling tones, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. So on the surface, it might seem that exercise to be mindful to pleasant, unpleasant and neither is kind of simplistic reduction lipstick, kind of maybe not so interesting, because it's a more important sophisticated things to be interested in, in life. This is really that hourglass neck in which that opens up for at least the Buddha Buddhist terms into a deep inner spiritual life. As that sound we have about five minutes. And if any of you have any questions about this, or comments or testimonials about sitting in the fire or anything, please.

Thank you for your for your lesson today. One of the things I struggle with is that the neutral aspect of emotion that you talked about, and how to how to differentiate between where you are dissociating from

something or whether you're neutral or not. A lot of times a field and neutral on something and much later I figured out that I was just trying to not address it.

Yes. Great. That's a great, great topic. So how do we associate being neither pleasant or unpleasant with being neutral or being numb? In this regard, I learned many years ago that That, you know, I would practice letting go, I'd let go of certain feelings, ideas, whatever they had. And I would be neutral. I felt good. It did it. But I learned that if I let go, and don't feel some modicum of joy, feeling lighter and joyful, it's going to come back and bite me. Because neutral is not really neutral. So this association going numb, I think that the best thing I know is to be mindful of it. So we, we spend a lot of time in mindfulness exploring what's going on. So if you explore what you think is neutral, then as you get to know it better and better, you start feeling or this is off, this doesn't feel good. There's a closed down, I'm resisting. I'm, you know, trying to, you know, you know, spin out in my thoughts I've lost, I've lost connection with my body. Those are all kind of symptoms, or signs that we're more dissociated than we are either present or unpleasant. There's a part of the lore of Buddhism, I, you know, I don't know how all this works so well, ahead. But part of the lore is that experiences which are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, are quite rare. So you might be careful. If you have a whole bunch of neutral, it's probably not neutral.

So the whole night of the flesh thing is a little hard to I mean, it feels a little cerebral. So is like generosity, compassion to those fit into the that which qualifies as

pleasant, but is not of the flesh.

Not the in and of itself. But if you practice generosity, and the result of that, is that there's a nice warm glow a sense of well being stoy, sort of the afterglows word, yeah,

this is the subjective way in which you feel about that. That would be not of the flesh. Okay, that's my understanding. Okay. That works. But if they say, Oh, thank you, you're so generous. That and that feels really Oh, I feel no one so special. That feels good. That would be of the flesh. In this categories? Yes. One more thing to notice.

So how do you actually get into the fire? And is it recommended that you not do it alone? not do it alone? Yeah, like, dude, should you do it in a group? I would, because I would think it'd be a very painful experience. Yeah,

I think sometimes it's important to have a lot of support, it depends how strong the fire is. Sometimes a lot of not necessarily do it with a group. But knowing there's other people who understand it, who support you who are going through the same thing can be very helpful. You know, in this group in San Quentin, they could do it together really nicely in this group that their program they're in, but they have to be careful about doing the same thing up in the yard. You know, because they talked about this, because if they, you know, in the group, they could cry, but out in the yard, if they cry, they're seen as weak, which is not a good thing to be seen as weak in San Quentin. And so getting support depends on the kind of fire you have. Somebody else depends on you, you know how you are. Some people find it a lot easier to do it alone, they're willing, then some people find much easier to do it with supportive others. Some people find it easier to do it in small pieces, kind of first, you get to the edge of the we're just kind of hot, you know, and then get comfortable there. And then take another step closer. And so kind of you don't just jump right in the middle right away, sit in the fires, like, you know, maybe that's like jumping into deep into the pool before you know how to swim. So first, you put your toe in and get used to that, and then, you know, slowly, go further. But I think that it's important to understand that there is a

fire there is an original pain, there is something that we carry with us that needs to be addressed. And to recognize that even if we can't address it or ready to sit in it, it's a it's a huge step to even to read or to recognize it. Or this is my issue, this is my pain. And because of us recognize that then you start making maybe a wiser choices, as opposed to impulsive choices or escapist choices or whatever. So Do you want to ask more? So I can ask, I can respond better?

I think because I feel like I know. So I'm there, I recognize what my fire is. But I know I, I feel like I'm not getting into it, because instead I'm seeing, I keep seeing all the issues that come up because of my fire. And I'm really mindful of that now. So I guess that's plus, but it's very painful to be mindful of the issues and know your fire, but not seem to be able to get to the fire.

Yeah. So a couple of things occurred to me, I don't know if it's relevant for you, sometimes it's necessary to clean up some of the some of the secondary pain, it takes a while before we can get to the original pain. And so something cleaner to clean up and take care of things and kind of kind of remove and maybe even remove ourselves situations where the secondary reactions are predominating. And might take a while things settle down so that we're ready for the, you know, the original paint thing. That's one thing, the other thing that some people find very useful, is to go into retreat. And, you know, go in and seven day 10 day retreat, and then you don't as you're not necessarily going to sit in a fire there, but you might. And that's a great place to have things come up there because it'll come up, if it's really needed, it's time for it to come up. And then you're not distracted by all the other things. And not to kind of negotiate all the other things. And there's a there's a silence context of people sitting together and retreat, many people find it's a fairly safe place to open up and let this stuff be there. So that's a possibility too. And, and, you know, I know you have a young child, so that makes it difficult to go. But you know, maybe talk to me about it. Maybe there's some way to buy some ideas I have for that. Okay, so pleasant, unpleasant and neither that happens from time to time. When it does, turn on the light and see what happens. Thank you.