

# 2016-03-07 Four Foundations of Mindfulness

## Week 8 The Five Aggregates

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### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

awareness, shifting, people, aggregates, consciousness, ideas, world, mindfulness, mirage, cling, perceptions, changing, empty, called, feel, feeling, recognition, category, physicality, label

### SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

And today, Monday evening, there's a sitting and Gil Fronsdal is giving a talk. A lot of stuff going on here, boy. Okay. So I'm going to continue this series of talks that I'm giving on the four foundations of mindfulness. It's the comes from ancient Buddhist scripture. That's called the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness. And it's the kind of the core text for the whole insight meditation movement in most Vipassana teachers practice lineages trace their teachings back to this particular text. And the text is away describes ways of developing a heightened sense of awareness, heightened capacity for awareness. So that awareness becomes available almost like a force or a power or presence in our lives, that is liberating. That creates a different context for being in the world. Most time and we're in the world, ordinary life, we're quite involved with our thoughts, with our activities, with our feelings with things that's going on. And our awareness our attention gets subsumed into our concerns. So much so that we don't really see ourselves paying attention we just kind of completely involved in what we're doing. And when awareness or attention gets strong enough that it becomes bigger in a sense or stronger than what we're concerned with then the power of the power that we have the power of the concerns begins to diminish people sometimes wonder why they're so attached to things why certain things are so compelled to be involved in to think to do certain thoughts certain thought patterns, certain feelings certain emotional states there seem to be persist all the time. always angry always made me sad or depressed always, you know, some kind of way and it's very hard to see you know, what's going on clearly, it's also sometimes very hard to extract oneself from it and we're kind of like little bit imprisoned by it caught in it involved in it. But if we open up awareness and it gets strong, then rather than being claustrophobic, we enter into a much larger space. And analogy for this would be if you spent all winter long snowbound in a High Sierra cabin, one room cabin with all your relatives and all the extended relatives. It might be nice the first couple of hours but you know, all winter long you know, not being able to leave. And then finally, spring comes the snow melts. And finally you can open the door and finally you go out into the meadows and, and the high Sierras and the great blue sky and it feels so good to be out in the open like find me feel like this. The claustrophobia is guys like Ah, there's space to breathe and to think and to be in a way you couldn't when you're all kind of caught up there. And so the sense of vast space and open space and the freedom to walk through the mountains after being claustrophobic can feel liberating in a dramatic way. Big, big sense of relief. So the same thing with the mind of mine is can get so caught up and preoccupied with what it's what's doing. It gets claustrophobic and we get involved. And what we don't realize is that there is no cabin for the mind. We're not snowed in, except for, you know, the walls that we make through our preoccupations and our addictive ways of thinking and feeling and all that. And so when awareness becomes stronger, strong enough, then we then we become the we noticed how there's a strong sense of space openness, awareness, stillness, silence, peacefulness, people call it all kinds of things struck that with which we

can then you know, not be so caught in this kind of freedom from come from that. So the four foundations of mindfulness practices for cultivating this strong sense of awareness for the purpose of becoming Free.

And so we've been going through the there's a series of 13 exercises that's given. And we've now done I guess about nine of them. And until we have four more, and today we're going to do what's called the exercise on the four aggregates. And it's a very, you know, people are unfamiliar with this idea, the four aggregates would be surprised, it's such such a I don't know what spiritually unsexy, a term should be considered in the early teachings of the Buddha, one of the most important kind of teachings that he has, it's repeated over and over again, in the texts. And the primary way in which often one of the primary ways that enlightenment is described, is having insight into these five aggregates. So, you know, it's a very important teaching, but it's, you know, it's, you know, it can get very uninteresting very quickly, so to try to describe it to you. So I don't know if that's going to help you pay attention to hear that or, or it's going to kind of discourage you, and so it might as well give up now. So five aggregates are, can be considered the five primary areas in our life, that we experience are life, through which we experience ourselves and the world around us. So we want to have insight into these five primary areas, because they're supposed to encompass every possible experience we have somehow, is through the through the avenue of one of these five groupings of phenomena. So these five, are what's called a physical form, the physicality of our world. So we can feel our body, in a solid, your body can slap my thighs, and I feel the physical physicality, my body, I feel the feel and see the physicality of the floor, the platform and you all and all kinds of things. And so the physicality of this world is one whole grouping, aggregate means a big grouping of things, big category of things. The second one is the affective, or subjective way in which how this feels to be to sense and feel and experience the world around us And the world within us. And so by how it feels, what I mean, what I mean by attrition, what's the what's the experience, so it's one thing to have an experience, it's one thing just below the experience, how it feels for us to have it. So if, you know, if it's, you know, really cold biting cold, we can feel the physicality of that cold in our body. And it might be depending on the context, that might feel very unpleasant. We might then go out and stand in the sun, and warm up. And after a while the physicality effect Oh, that's pleasant, that's nice. So it's how we receive it, how we feel about the experience. And they say that every experience we have, there's a has some kind of an effective effect on us some kind of way in which, Oh, that's nice. That's not nice. That's pleasant, that's not pleasant. And there's, so that's, so there's a, because it's such an that's a very, very important category in Buddhism. So that's good to consider its own aggregate its own kind of grouping of things. how we feel about the experience that goes on. And it's kind of a very simple how it's not like the complicated analysis, but just, you know, almost physically how it feels pleasant or unpleasant. The third grouping is usually translated into English as perception. But probably a better way of translating is cognition, or recognition. And recognition works well because the report means again, recognizing, recognize recognition. And that is, when I see something if I see this object here that I'm holding my hand you know, because I'm lived in a particular culture, particular time in human history. I recognize it as a glass. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a time not so far away, that our ancestors, your ancestors, maybe 10 15,000 years ago only if you'd hand in this kind of object labor like they wouldn't, or what is it? You know? You know, they wouldn't, they wouldn't have they, they wouldn't have the label class, they wouldn't recognize it as a class, even though for us, it's completely obvious. And, or, you know, all kinds of things you can imagine 10,000 years ago, your particular ancestors it, wherever they were, you gave them a smartphone. You know, oh, that's a smartphone. That's so nice. I'm sorry, we don't get any signals here. They wouldn't have a clue what it is, you know, they could maybe be impressed by it, but they wouldn't have a label for it, they wouldn't recognize it as something. We go around the world recognizing things all the time. And we just think we're seeing things as they actually are. But really, we're processing the sense data that comes in through our eyes and ears and everywhere, and

reconstructing it. And based on memory, we have a label for it, we recognize it as something. And it's accurate enough, some of these recognitions, and some of them are not accurate. I remember once in the forest, in the jungle of Thailand, there was a wide kind of dirt road that I was walking along and how long it was wider was but I would say it was five or six feet wide. And it was dusk, so you couldn't see very well. And various branches and stuff had fallen from the trees running on the ground. And there was one branch that crawled across the, the road and a crooked branch. And you know, I was just walking around, I think I was had my camera with me, I had my camera with me, maybe I was looking take photographs or something. And so I stepped on that branch. And it was a snake, huge snake. And I think I jumped faster and never had in my life. I jumped up high up in the air and spun around and threw my my my camera down the ground towards the snake just to get away have something between us. So I had misperceived Miss cognized, what was there. And, you know, so it really wasn't, it was inaccurate. But so this is a hugely important category, because how we perceive things, how we recognize things, has a lot to do with our reaction response to things. The fourth, grouping, fourth aggregate is it's the technical word is it's the world of mental constructions, sometimes called mental formations. But in particular, it has to do with the volitional aspects of the mind, the wanting of something wanting, not wanting our intentions. And that's a hugely important part of our life, the mind is constantly wanting something much more than you realize. And you feel uncomfortable in your chair, you shift, that had to be a movement of wanting in the mind, maybe almost subconscious, in order to do that shifting, you hear a sound, and you turn your head to look in that direction. And it's a volitional act, you can say something, it's a volitional act, all kinds of, so the whole world that comes along with those volitions, the thoughts, the memories, the planning, all those things are called the mental constructions. So it's a huge category. And it's a category, it's very important because the, the, what we want, and the world that we construct around our wants, and what we don't want the world of thoughts and memories that we construct around it has a lot to do with how we suffer. And so to get a handle on this is very important. So there's so hard on for the category, so our physicality, the feelings, the affective feeling out feels, the cognition, the perception, the cognition, the recognition of things, and then the mental formations. And the fifth one is consciousness. And consciousness is a hard one to get a sense of what it means in Buddhism. And it's hard to get a sense of what it means in modern psychology a little bit of steadied, I get the sense that different researchers and into the nature of consciousness have different definitions for understanding what it is. But it's kind of maybe the basic capacity to track all that to register all that to kind of take it in and become aware of it.

So these five areas are five areas when we get attached to things and cling to things. We can only get attached to those five areas, there's nowhere else to get attached. Everything, everything is supposed to fit into those five. So you know, our mental world, much of it of thoughts and stuff, it has to do with the fourth one mental formations. But our perceptions, we cling to ideas. And what's fascinating, I think, is if you're really if your mindfulness gets really sharp and clear, you'll discover something that is rather amazing or maybe humbling. Unbelievable. That the only thing that we ever cling to get attached to are actually ideas, thoughts, concepts related to these five areas. So of course, if you're on the edge of a huge cliff, you might be physically hanging on to the railing. But much of the time, we're clinging, reacting, responding not to what's going on in the world, we think that we think that's what we're doing. But a lot of the response and reaction has to do with everything gets processed through the brain, the mind, and then we have thoughts and ideas and the meaning behind it, what it means what we hope, what our intentions are, how it fits into our, what we think is important. And when we react and response, it has a lot to do with the inner thoughts, the inner world of ideas, that you know, that we have in relationship to it. So these five aggregates, five areas, and the Buddha gave a simile for them. That the physicality, our physical form or body is like a foam on top of a running River. The our feelings that affect the way it feels of how it is for us to take it in experience it is like bubbles, just individual bubbles, soap bubbles, our perceptions, our recognitions are like a mirage. Our mental constructions,

our ideas and thoughts and emotions are like a banana trunk. a banana trunk of a banana tree. And why is that is that a banana trunk is hollow inside. And so are our inner world of thoughts and have no core to them. There's no essence there's no solidity there. And consciousness is like a magic show. So those are the analogies by ancient that the Buddha gave. So the physicality is like foam. You know, our body our physical experiences, shifts and changes all the time. And maybe have to sometimes you have to get really old to start feeling of this body of mind voice shifting and changing faster than I want. Yeah, foam is right. And, you know, feelings are pretty ephemeral. They come and go, like a bubble that can pop in a new one gets formed. And perceptions are sometimes accurate, sometimes not. But they're kind of like a mirage that we can kind of relate to and react to. And it's kind of amazing to appreciate how much so as I said, you know, our, our ancestors might not have recognized this as like glass. But, but I see it as a glass. But is the glass really in the object? Is this really a glass? It's a glass because functionally, it's a glass, we define it as a glass. But it could be something else, I could have it on my table at home and use it as a vase for flowers. And it makes it a base and someone might actually walk by and say oh, it's nice space you have or it could be, you know, back in the 1950s it could have been an ashtray. You know, and you know, very, very good You don't have to empty it very often.

And or it can be a pen, it can be a pencil holder. I only pencils and pens or kind of screen. It can be many different things. And I could easily imagine that glass, maybe not this one so easily. A glass that kind of because of how it's constructed. It's kind of ambiguous exactly what it is. And depending how it's used, you would see it you'd recognize it in different ways. If you If you have see the same object in different circumstances and see it with different labels, then you start dawning on you that I'm projecting a label on that. I'm not an innocent bystander, when I say this is a glass, there's a part of me that's constructing it or seeing it or, or painting glass on it overlaying on it. So I guess that's kind of like the Mirage that the painting on it the filter we put on top here, which is we say it's accurate enough. But this, but you know, it's not always accurate. You know, what we do to our fellow human beings. And what we do with our concepts or recognitions, is pretty awful sometimes, and how we see them and to judge them and categories who put them in, and we see them through that filter. And they're like, going No, no, no. But, you know, it's, we often have these recognitions, which are not very helpful or supportive, some Mirage, you don't really see the real person there. plaitain, I said, and then the magic show, everything's kind of arising and passing in this magical way, in the field of consciousness. So the instructions in this exercise have to develop stronger awareness is first to see your experience in these five categories. Not to not to have everything just be all a big buzz all kind of organized together. But just say, oh, now I'm having a physical sensation of cold and hot. Now, that's a feeling that feels pleasant, I feel the pleasant that of it. Oh, that's a perception, the recognition. Now I'm involved in the inner world of mental formations and relations and ideas. And now I'm just feels like a kind of unconscious of it all, there's a sense of consciousness of awareness that kind of holds it all within which it occurs. So the idea is to become aware of that. But what's more important in that tradition, is to start seeing how these five arise and pass they're impermanent, the nature, when we don't tease these apart, we often live in the solidity of things, when we can kind of take it apart into the component parts, and we start seeing that they actually are shifting and changing all the time. So maybe these are useful analogies. That if I'm walking down the street, empty street, maybe it's dark, it's middle of the night. And I see the shape of another person walking towards me. I get pretty interested to back alley someplace, I you know, I'm gonna keep my eye on that person. gotta know what's going on. I can't tell it's just a shape Stark. And we're going to meet the darkest part where you know, the LA and you know, and then the shape reminds me of something that scares me and then I'm pretty focused on that person. And that what it means and everything this person just like an everyday person is called like a solid real person. It's like, by preoccupation fixated on the person. Another time, you're on a very busy, you're at work, you're a tourist, a very busy metropolitan city, you're in New York City, just near the entryway,



maybe have subway, rush hour, people are walking, your streets are packed, people will come in and go and walking up and down. And so you're a tourist, you're kind of like just looking at the sights and, and all these people are passing you by, and you start losing any sense of like, a focus on any individual, there's passing by so fast, there's so many of them so many different kinds of people from all over the world. And it's just amazing to see the humanity of people in New York City's passing, and your calling and all of that, of the diversity and the change, and you're ready to celebrate, you know, how wonderfully diverse human beings are. And just like, you know, but you're not focused on one, it's like a change that makes a difference to you. And you're very different perception, very different relationship.

When you see it all changing and passing and you feel safe and just like all these right, or you have a gallon of water, to me gives you a gallon of water. you're thirsty, I've been drunk for a few days. Can't believe you're good luck and you're really focused on that. Water is really great. Or you have another purpose for the water. You know, I'm so glad I have a square gallon I can water my garden isn't water and so you focus on the water. This someone upriver from you pours that gallon of water into the river. And you're like Siddhartha sitting on the riverbank, watching the water go by. And you have a whole different relationship is watching water flow by flow by flow bites, it's it's kind of very relaxing, it's pleasant, you see kind of as a metaphor for the flowing of life. And us kind of the whole different relationship, you're not fixated on the gallon and protecting gallon from other people are going to take it from you, whatever it is, you see it the water flowing, flowing, very different relationship with it. So if we can see how the five aggregates are constantly flowing, constantly shifting and changing, will have a very different relationship to it to them, then if we kind of just are fixated on them, or this is it. So if I'm fixated on my body, that thing or thinking about my body, my body is too much this too big, too small to this and that and my body concerns. It's very much focused on the body through our image of the body. We identify with our image and everything. And some people suffer a tremendous amount because of their body image. But if you close your eyes and feel your body, you feel that your body is shifting and changing the feeling experience over the physicality is constantly shifting and changing. And you have a very different relationship to your body. And if you see it through an image, feelings, if you have if, you know I can be fixated on a particular feeling, I feel I feel you know, certain kind of pain. Sometimes I've painted my foot, and you know, I get home, my pain, my foot is so important, I'll end up being a cripple and won't be able to walk anymore. And it's all fixated on that pain. But if I'm really pay attention to the pain carefully, I still need to be concerned about what's happening to my foot. But I see actually the pain comes and goes. It's actually impermanent changes and shifts. And then there's a loud sound outside. And for a few moments, I don't even know I have a foot because of the sound. And then something happens. It's really important. And I guess they had the last episode of Downton Abbey, is that right? You know, and so you didn't notice your foot. And so bear with you, things are shifting and changing our attention or awareness of it shifts and changes. It's like bubbles of pop. And our relationship to it becomes very different than we were fixated on it. Our mental formations, we have ideas about ourselves, we have ideas, I am this kind of person. I am. Someone gave me an example. So I'll use her example. Feeling a little bit kind of out of harmony with the world. So wanting to have something yummy. searching for something yummy. And coming across an ice cream store, going getting a quadruple Decker scoops of ice cream because you know, and eating it all and then feeling miserable. And then how could I have been so stupid? I am a stupid person. Thank you. And so there's an idea, a label mental formation, a construct of the mind that we put this label and I'm this kind of person, as opposed to simply says say, Oh, I'm a person who made a poor choice. And now I have to live with the consequences for a while. Kind of that's pretty simple. And so and we can get stuck in this label that we have for ourselves and suffer for a long time. But if we can watch carefully how the inner mental landscape functions, we see that it's constant stream and flow shift and change of ideas and perceptions and coming and going. And so the question, so you know, are you you know, you're always holding the idea that you're, I'm a stupid person. I'm always holding that idea. No, you know, Downton

Abbey goes on TV and I don't think about myself for an hour. I don't have I never. I don't watch it. So I don't know.

And so you know, so things are constantly interrupted realities constantly interrupting our fantasies and our what we think we're, you know, and so it's crazy. It's shifting and changing. And you see it's shifting and changing ideas are not solid. These ideas are constantly fleeting and moving and becoming different ones and returning. It's only because we kind of project continuity onto this. We think that we're continuously the same thing then our relationships are shifting. The relationship that we're interested in Buddhism that wants to shift is how we cling to it, we grasp or resist. And when we see other things, these things in their elemental level at the foundational building block level of experience, before we get live in abstract abstractions are constantly shifting and changing, then we begin to relax, soften, rounded, open up, and don't cling so much. And as we do that, awareness becomes stands out and I in stronger and stronger. Awareness gets lost when we're attached. Awareness gets covered over, or become invisible to us when we're preoccupied. But if we're not caught in the field of these five aggregates, then awareness becomes clear and clear. The stronger awareness becomes, the more we can see the shifting changing nature of the river going by flowing by and into into rest in the flowing changing river of our experience, is one of the in one of the more one of the more fulfilling, satisfying places of becoming free of becoming a piece of resting. So in this five aggregates, to see them, it's not just to see them, but to see how they arise and see how they pass. And that's the exercise to cultivate strong awareness. Generally, it's something that people experienced, kind of keenly on meditation retreats, because this is the kind of takes a little higher level of attention, focus concentration, to call the attention, to see this kind of the five aggregates, the stream of them flowing and moving. But it does require that we shift our priorities from focusing on the concepts and ideas and stories that we think are important to the process in which all this is being experienced. with physical experience, the feeling, the perceptions, the mental formations, and the consciousness. So I'll say again, what I said before, this is one of the most common and central teachings of the Buddha gave, it can seem kind of for and difficult to understand difficult to understand how relevant it is. But it took me many years to really understand it, I really got into it, once I started, I started started to practice it to the practices be personal. And then I was sidetracked by my Zen practice, just a little aside, but not too stuck. In Zen. They, they do a, almost every morning, they do a chant as part of the liturgy called the Heart Sutra. And part of the Heart Sutra says that these five aggregates are empty. Form is empty. Feelings are empty perceptions are empty mental formations, empty, cautious, empty. So I chanted that for years when I was in student. And that no one that knew no initially, no one told me what they were. I just dutifully chanted it. But I came to the conclusion that because they were empty, I didn't have to know what they were. So I just ignored their teachings. And then when I was introduced to this practice, we do here vipassana. Here, they didn't say, just offhand, they're empty. They say they're like, foam, like a bubble, and come mirage. Like, you know, they're not drunk, and magic show. A little bit more poetic than just saying empty. So we have six minutes. And what can I clarify that would make this come alive? more for you? Anything you'd like to ask? Yes, please. Microphone.

You've used the words, you know, for the for the fifth aggregate of consciousness and you've also used the word awareness. Could you talk about if those are the same thing or different things? And

thank you hard to do in two minutes.

Yeah, I think No, thank you for that for asking. That. It's a pretty obvious question. And I don't, you know, I don't know what they are. Really, I can't put my finger and tell you what consciousness is or what awareness is. However, functionally, as I live my life, I have a general sense of what you know, what I'm pointing what I'm what I use the word awareness, I have a general sense of what it means.

And consciousness, I have a general sense of what it means operational understanding of it. And I asked here once Monday night, some years ago, the group here, how do you know that you're aware? And it was very interesting for me to hear all the answers that people gave, because of how different people respond to that question. And that became aware, you know, I think people when you, you know, use the word awareness, different people have different reference points for it. They mean different things. And generally, it's in the ballpark well enough, that if I say, you know, be aware, they do something that's useful. But I don't believe anymore, therefore, necessarily, they are doing exactly what I think I'm doing what I'm aware. So, you know, there's an operational kind of general idea that we kind of in the ballpark, maybe maybe it doesn't maybe say, helpful to define it exactly. That? No, that's very unsatisfying.

I mean, I guess at the very least, what I was looking for, is that these aren't the same thing. Right? May I mean, or at least are like, are they two different words in the ritual scriptures, that sort of thing now?

Yeah, yeah. What words we've worked, I tend to use the word awareness and mindfulness, synonyms, I tend not to use the word consciousness very much. It's not a word that I find so relevant, except sometimes in deep states of meditation. And then, then it's then I have a clear sense that this is the consciousness is operating here now. But in and outside of very deep states of meditation, then I'm content, we're using the word awareness. And I think of awareness as basically, I use it almost sentiment synonymously with mindfulness. But that depends what you mean by mindfulness. And that is, you know, then it gets semantic all these definitions. So it gets very complicated very quickly, if you start asking these kinds of questions. And hopefully, it's good enough to get us all on the same page. And people get a sense enough, it does. I don't think we have to have exact definitions of some of these things. We have to be close enough to engage in it, and, and practicing attention, using our attention engaging and clarifying what's here for ourselves. And as we get deeper and deeper into it, it'll become more obvious for us personally, what we're seeing what we're experiencing, rather than kind of fitting into what someone says this is exactly what it is. So anyway, that's kind of how you know, I've been doing this for a very long time. 40 years, I have a PhD in Buddhist studies. So I you know, I've put my time into try to understand these things. So hopefully, the fact that I say I don't know what consciousness is, or awarenesses hopefully, I'm not just gonna be dismissed as being some shirt, you know. ignoramus. You know, that there's something something something something significant about the fact that I would say, I don't know, about what were the subnets. So it says something about what we're trying to talk about, that it's kind of slippery.

hope you come back to one more and then we'll stop. Yeah, maybe Phil.

So I'm curious how you hold that not knowing is it just fine to not know is it something that you dig down and trying to find out or just kind of curious and let that slipperiness be something to explore? What How do you What's your relationship of that?

I think that the first and the third that I'm fine with not knowing. And I'm also still curious. I'm curious, can we refine it, we understand it better, can we? I know, what can we understand? But, you know, I'm not concerned with digging down. You know, You know, I'm curious. So I'm fine. Find out knowing and then I still would like to know better. I'd like to know better why I don't know. I think it's a fascinating topic. What is it about these things conscious and awareness that that defies really clear understanding. I'd like to know that. So that's that. Yeah. Great. So thank you all very much.