

2019-01-07: Foundations of Mindfulness

Part 1 - Intro

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good evening everyone and welcome time see and happy new year and it's the first Monday talk of the year. is the volume Okay, everyone. Okay.

So starting this evening, I'm going to give a series of talks on the source text for mindfulness practice that we teach here. That mindfulness practice in Buddhism comes from a particular text called the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness. And it's a marvelous text and it provides the instructions that are interpreted in many ways in the modern world, and including how we teach here at IMC. And I'm very fond of this text. It is very important text for our tradition. And it's a long text, you know, it's a long thing. So it'll be a series of talks that I'll give whenever I'm here. And until I'm done. And so the example I won't be here next week. And so whenever I'm here, I'll come and give these talks.

And thank you, when Jim announced that I was going to give a class on concentration starting Wednesday, I realized that it's a nice coincidence that I'm going to at the same time, kind of do a series on mindfulness and the series on concentration. The concentration series will finish long before the mindfulness one. But it's nice their starting together.

These are the two primary faculties that we have, attentional faculties, that are engaged when people do meditation practice, specially mindfulness meditation, the faculty of mindfulness and the faculty of concentration. And these two are wonderful partners, and work together in important ways. It's possible to practice mindfulness without a lot of concentration. But to take mindfulness to the depth or

the fullness that it's can reach, it requires the partnership of strong concentration, then these two work together.

So to start this series on the teachings, Buddhist teachings on mindfulness, I want to tell a Buddhist story that comes from Mahayana Buddhism, a very different form of Buddhism, to make a point. And this story goes this way that there was a young person, young adult, who decided to leave his village to go off and explore the world. And person had a friend in the village who is concerned about the welfare of the traveler. And so while the while that shouldn't be traveler was sleeping, the friend sewed a very valuable jewel, gem, into the inner lining of the traveler's coat while the traveler set off across the lands and was gone for a long time and got lost and all kinds of adventures and lost money and lost food and after many years, came back very impoverished and limping back into the hometown. And there was his friend waiting and friend said, you know, how have you been? And well, it's been rough and you know, I've been pretty poor, not much, not much going on. And the oh really but You're not so poor you in your lining after your coat, there's this well, very valuable gem that you could have just taken that and sold it then you would have been a wealthy person. So that's the end of the story. It's not a very satisfying story. Why would take your linings and the story is is used and as with it have conveyed the idea that we ourselves travel around the world, travel through our lives and in some ways can be easily become impoverished. Not maybe monetarily, but certainly spiritually impoverished. And it's an unnecessary to do this because in the lining of our hearts, in the mind, there's this valuable gem, priceless gem, that's there and all you have to do is you know, turn to something as close to to the inside of your coat, and that closely you can find this gem and have it be spiritually enriched in great ways.

And now this gym that we have is our capacity for attention. And we have phenomenal capacity for attention. We use it every day, in all kinds of different ways. And in Buddhism, we're taking this very ordinary capacity, we have to pay attention and highlighting it, pointing it out to us and developing it. So it becomes bright and shining gem that can support us and bring us lots of certainly inner wealth that can come.

And we have a range of attentional faculties that our faculties add up together, to become what we call attention is not a unitary singular thing, but it's a kind of this composite. There is some total or a variety of different attentional faculties that come into play. And so we have the faculty for recognition, we can recognize what's there. That's, you know, I'm holding a, you know, transmitter, I'm looking at my glass, I can see all of you in this room, I can recognize what's here. And, and that capacity for recognition is shouldn't be taken as being a lightweight kind of thing. It's actually part part of the apparatus that's used for cultivating this high quality attention that we're doing in mindfulness practice. We also have the capacity to simply kind of kind of lean back in a sense in the mind, and observe what's going on. And without interfering with it, and just have the observational power and just feel that things come kind of a passive receptive awareness that just watches or sees or perceives what's there. sees how things come and go, we have the capacity to feel, which means to feel physically to sense what our

experiences, that's different than observing different than then recognizing that we can have an intimacy with our experience. Just like if you go in a cold day and stand in the sun to get a warm, you know, you think most people don't just stand there, you know and look at their phone and wait to get warm. I think if you're cold to really enjoy it, you kind of open up face the sun as quietly as you can, and let them kind of kind of let the warmth absorb into your body through your clothes perhaps. And you can kind of feel the physicality of that the warmth coming in and seeping in and warming you up. So that's feeling which is also part of the attentional capacities we have another one is the capacity to use our Attention wisely to know which of those different faculties use at different times, when to use recognition. And that's what's helpful, when to use observation, when to be present for stuff with intimacy of feeling something very almost physically being present for it. And when to have attention, be very close to the experience when to have attention be very far from experience, look at it from a distance. There's all these choices we can make about how these different parts of attention are used. And as we develop mindfulness practice, we're actually learning the different faculties, how they work, how they come into play. So we can have wise attention, we can choose wisely, how to engage and be present for what's going on at different times. Together with the attentional faculties, we have part of it is the capacity to become concentrated. And these as I said earlier, work together We have the capacity attentional capacity to hold the attention steady. So it doesn't waver and get very stable, focused and very centered centered attention. We have capacity for peripheral awareness. And sometimes it's useful to have the peripheral awareness. Sometimes it's useful to have a central focus steadiness of focus. And I can go on and on. But I think that the lesson I was trying to give here is the idea that there's many different mental functions that are operating, that add up to what we would, you know, conventionally called attention, someone says, pay attention. You know, you now you know, you can ask him, What do you mean? You know, what specifically do you want me to do when you say pay attention? So in my in mindfulness practice, is a practice of using these different attentional functions faculties, we have and engaging them in such a way that awareness becomes elusive. That awareness becomes quite strong and supports us in our lives in important ways, and is very strong when it's strong. This lucid awareness is what Sati is. Sati is the Pali word for mindfulness. We have now, you know, since the time I started studying mindfulness, when I was young, only the Buddhists were mindful.

Or use that word that I knew back then. But now, we kind of, you know, you know, we've lost the word. It's not our word anymore. And now it's a word that's used all over everywhere. Clinically and settings people teach mindfulness and there's mindful you can go if you go on Amazon, I did this five years ago, or something, you go on Amazon and you could I draw up a list of all the books that have mindfulness in it. And so I did when I did it, I guess six years ago, I did it. I had a very, very long list, but it's longer now. And it's amazing. What, back then what field of human life are associated with mindfulness, mindfulness and x, right. So there was a book back then on mindfulness in poker. That was kind of interesting to the Buddha. Think of that. And there was even a little book, mindfulness an angry bird. That was pretty interesting, I thought. And so there's mindfulness about money and sex and relationships, and you name it, they seemed like it was something you know, mindfulness in this thing about, it's wonderful. I think it's probably a good thing for our society overall. But the thing is that

mind with mindfulness means in those settings, turns out to have evolved and is quite different. What it means in the Buddhist settings, and generally mindfulness in the secular settings where it's used, they have in terms of the range of attentional faculties that we can engage in. They're using only a small subset of it. And they call that mindfulness. Whereas in Buddhism, the word mindfulness is a general term, not for a particular thing that we do with the mind, but rather a state that arises strongly as we develop the practice of attention, these different attentional faculties. And this strong state is a strong state of awareness. When a Buddhist teacher calls it a lucid awareness, and awareness is something you don't do. It's more something you allow to happen. It's something you can establish. You can dwell in awareness. You can have strong awareness present, but it's not necessarily like you know, you let's be aware, if you if you be aware, you're actually choosing one of the other attentional faculties in order to kind of bring on this thing called awareness. You might observe you might recognize you might feel, you might hold your your attention steady, you might use peripheral awareness, you might use a central attention, all these different things. So the purpose of the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse in the four foundations of mindfulness is to engage the attentional faculties we have strongly enough and well enough so that Sati awareness becomes strong and stable, that it becomes a lucid experience of awareness, lucid awareness, and what I mean by lucid is that awareness becomes such a highlighted phenomena as you're aware that you know that you're aware. You're not lost and preoccupied with your, your things, what you're thinking about or your activities or your desires or your fears or fantasies or whatever. Everything else kind of stands out. In our say awareness is what's highlighted. And what's in awareness. You can see it very clearly, but you're not lost in it. It's like being in a very, very big spacious room or cavern or a cave or I don't know what space and what stands out is the clarity and the peace to the stillness of the of the space in the room. And in that spaciousness, you can kind of see clearly the objects of the room. But what stands out the most is the spaciousness. That's cool, and it changes your whole mood to be in certain very spacious, open peaceful spaces. But if you go into these big open spaces, and you're really concerned about some particular detail, maybe you lost your keys last time you're in there and you're looking for your keys. You know, you're not you don't notice the space, you're just like staring and studying for your keys everywhere, especially if it's important to get somewhere with your car. Right? You're preoccupied, you don't notice. Human beings spend a tremendous amount of time preoccupied.

And so we don't really we know we're aware. But you really feel the strength of awareness. So that's this highlighted sense of spaciousness, openness or clarity is is not available to us to to take our practice or our wisdom or insight to a whole different level. And that's what mindfulness practice is doing is taking this capacity for awareness, making it lucid, making it strong, and stable. So you really when you end up You're really in the present moment, not just to be in the present moment. But to have this clarity of awareness while I'm here. And there's a paradigm shift for many people a paradigm from thinking what's most important in life, or the objects to appreciating and maybe what's most important, is the awareness that holds the objects that experiences the objects and sees the objects is there. And to go down the street, you know, and grab someone off the sidewalk and say, Hey, by the way, the most important thing you could ever do in your life is to be you know, have this lucid open awareness. They probably think you're crazy. You know, there's no context for it. So it's kind of a

foreign idea for many people, but to people who start meditating. This is one of the things that we slowly begin to cultivate, develop and appreciate. a paradigm shift is another way Being living. It's almost like a different life that we get to live, if we can live in strong awareness. And there's a lot of benefits to it to this, and the Buddha listed a number of them. One of them in terms of the three trainings that Buddhism is about trainings in ethics trainings in Samadhi, and trainings in wisdom. Mindfulness supports all three. The Buddha said that as the mindfulness practice is cultivated and become strong, it tends to make people more ethical, it becomes easier and easier and more natural to live by the five precepts. Not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct not to lie and not to get involved in toxification. And rather than a duty or an obligation or a moralistic requirement, to be ethical, there's something about the cultivation is very strong sensitivity awareness that lucid awareness that creates a moral sensitivity or an ethical sensitivity in us that it becomes kind of natural, of course, I'm not going to do these things that are, are a certain kind of agitation, agitating forces within me. They're constricting, they're actually limiting me or diminishing my wellness, diminishing my openness, my bigness, to be involved in unethical things. Of course, I'm not going to do that, because I know something better. Mindfulness is very effective for developing Samadhi. I can the Buddhist time was one of the means for somebody who was cultivating these four foundations of mindfulness. And to be able to be really to hold your attention or keep your attention in the present moment. Hold it steady and see what's going on. tends to calm the mind. Study the mind, focus the mind and, and develop a lot more capacity for concentration. This is useful certainly in meditation to enter into Samadhi. But it's also useful in daily life. I can see in my own mind these days still, that there are days where my meditating more and I have a much, you know, deeper states of concentration I've touched into and when I come out of those states, my mind is much more nimble. quicker, more creative. make connections quicker, seems kind of smarter. And when I'm not, we don't I don't. Yes. The other day I came back from retreat and I I my wife gave me a crossword puzzle. And I just whipped through it like I'd never done before. And I attributed it to coming right out of retreat. So I don't know if that's motivating but and so the

Sona helps us in our daily life that way and so and yet when I notice when I'm not don't have that concentration going so well, that I'm not as you know clever or smart or not going so well for me maybe like today so it helps us some money. But the key thing that mindfulness is supposed to cultivate and why the Buddha really emphasized it was for the value of cultivating wisdom. A word which we translated is wisdom. interest as well be translated as insight, to have really deep penetrating perception of what's going on here in our human life. What's really here, what's really deep? What's the underlying structures, what's the underlying operating systems of our hearts, our minds our reality, in a way that only only for the Buddhist Buddhist idea, only by touching into that depth that's often not available in the ordinary states of mind. Do we touch into the understandings and the wisdom that are liberating they can free us from how we cling and how we get attached, how we get constricted, how we get caught and preoccupied in very profound deep ways like attached to self into life into all kinds of things. And most people most of us are probably more attached to it than we realize. And one of the functions of meditation is to get quiet enough and still enough to see The depth of how attached we are. And that really helps because many people are mystified why they

suffer so much. Because they don't see the operating principles of what's really going on in the depth of their mind. Because if you really have to have a very still focused, clear mind to see the underlying structures of attachment that are operating that really need to be touched for the kind of liberation of the heart that the Buddha was talking about. So this mindfulness practice, that's the you know, it has many different functions and values in our life. And the last one I mentioned that the Buddha taught is that mindfulness practice is a preeminent practice for protecting oneself and for protecting others. There's a delightful little story or vignette that the Buddha told he said there was an acrobat and Acrobat asst and they would you know, the acrobatic tricks you For, I guess, for donations, and they were going to put on their show one day. And the apprentice said to the assistant, the apprentice, the Acrobat said to the apprentice, apprentice, let's go do our tricks. But while we do them, why don't you pay attention to me carefully. And I'll pay attention to you, because acrobats they do on top of each other. And they were they were the one who called the devices they were using for acrobatic was their bodies. So they would climb up on each other instead of each other's hands and heads and do things. So they did was if you Why don't you watch over me and I'll watch over you and that way, we'll stay stay safe. And the apprentice said, No. I'll watch over myself. And you watch over yourself, and that way, we'll be safe. And so they went to the Buddha and said, You know who's right And the Buddha said, this is how it is, at least, you know, outside of I don't know if he wouldn't do but acrobats. But he said, if you if you pay attention to yourself through mindfulness, that's how you protect others. That's a powerful statement. And one of the ways it protects others, it protects them from you. Which is not us. And it's not a small thing, right? To become a safe person in the world. So in this discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha opens up by saying, there is a direct way for the purification of beings to purify the mind and heart to overcome sorrow, distress limitation, to realize liberation, to be experienced Nibbana To the direct way. And that direct way, he said, is to practice. The four foundations of mindfulness are the four foundations for cultivating awareness, this lucid awareness. And then he enumerated what those are. So the first foundation is the foundation of mindfulness of the body awareness of the body. The second is mindfulness of

fear, what's called feeling tones. And we'll talk about that in a few weeks. And then the third is mindfulness of the mind. And the fourth is mindfulness of what's called damas. A simple way of discussing it maybe is the inner mental processes that either bring us suffering, the ways we contribute to our own suffering in our own how our minds operate, or the inner processes that lead To liberation. And to be able to have one of the one of the values of this deep mindfulness is to see these paths that the mind can take. And the mind can take a path towards more suffering and a path to freedom. And to see those paths makes a world of difference. Because now we can take one more than the other, we can support one rather than the other to really know it for ourselves from the inside out. What's nice about these four areas is they go kind of from the outside in to deeper, more subjective areas of ourselves. And it's a beautiful path, the route of mindfulness, that as we do this practice, we become more and more intimate, more deeper, we touch ourselves in a deeper subjective ways, then, in a more a higher quality ways that many people have in their ordinary life. So the body in a sense, in this kind of framework is kind of like The outermost circle of who we are, for the first thing we contact the easiest thing to experience. And in this May, Buddha talked about mindfulness of the

body. He talked about things like being mindful of when you're walking. You know, it's not too difficult to know you're walking stuff doesn't require a lot of sophistication. When you're sitting when you're standing, when you're putting on your clothes, when you're urinating when you're deprecating so all these different parts of life are included. You want to become aware of what the sensations and experiences of your body are. So that's kind of a little bit course. So a little bit like you know, the course body what's here you can tap and feel yourself a little bit more subtle. It takes a little bit more care and attention to notice is not just the physicality but what the, the what it feels like to experience physicality. So there's experiencing what it feels like to experience it. Is it pleasant? Is it unpleasant. And that's a little bit more getting a little bit more under the skin in a sense, to experience something a little more subjective. As we settled in more than more subjective and deeper inside closer to kind of what some people might say, who we are, is the state of our minds or the quality of our hearts. The quality of our mind is one of the things we were hoping to become the caretaker of terms of this jewels that we have in our aligning in the quality of our mind is one of the most important things that we have. It turns out the only person who can really safeguard and care for and be responsible for the quality of your own mind, quality of your own heart is yourself to forfeit that responsibility and expect someone else to take care of it for you. makes people kind of impoverished and sets up a conditions that can just make a lot of suffering. But to learn how to be the caretaker of your own heart is one of the great tasks of our lifetime. And to be able to track one's mind, heart, the quality and keep it Good, keep it open, keep it in a way that you feel really comfortable to live in your own heart comfortable to live in your mind is a beautiful thing. But then going even more subjective, more deep than the quality of the mind is the all the different little movements of extra factors activities of the mind, with the mind actually does that contributes to the quality of the mind. And these are movements of desire, or movements of joy, movements of equanimity and peace, movements of mindfulness, movements of aversion, movements of clinging movements, of letting go movements have a real insight into experience. And that's the fourth foundation. And this now we're really getting into something feels very intimate, very personal, very satisfying to really be here, because of this is where this is where the liberation begins to happen, where can it really unfold? So I like

to think of the four foundations of mindfulness, when we do this kind of practice is we're setting forth on a journey. The Buddha talked at a path he said it was a direct path, but I'd like to think of a journey. And that it's not a quick fix. It's not like just you know, find the button and push that button and you'll be happier ever after. But it's a journey that can take years of developing and cultivating awareness, different attentional faculties we have developing it to a degree that we want More more useful for us. And also, as we do it, a lot of self understanding a lot of deep, not just self understanding but understanding of our life in some deep way. And, and it's a fantastic journey, it's a journey of a lifetime. To do this, there's no end to it. But I found that in these, you know, now over 40 years that I've been doing this kind of practice, it just seems to get better and better. And I just, I'm just delighted by it all, and, and, and it's not uncommon for me to promote occurred to me as I go about my life, you know, and getting busy and stuff. And so, you know, Gil, you know, maybe you shouldn't be, you know, so preoccupied in your thoughts so much as you are, why don't you just kind of, you know, relax and be aware, a little bit more, be aware of what's happening. And so I will do it. And, and I kinda like Begin to

smile. I'm just so happy. It just like a little bit amused a little bit delighted, little bit, kind of content a little bit just makes me happy. This and I, you know, maybe that makes me weird to be to be happy just like babies being aware. I mean, you know, there's no monetary value. But it's a beautiful thing. It's like this treasure, this jewel that's there and to be able to feel it and so there it is. And part of the jewel of it part of the treasure of it. And this is, is at some point what you might discover that inherent in a lucid state of awareness is freedom. Maybe not 100% freedom, but you can have a palpable feeling of The Freedom the openness to non attachment and non clinging, the spaciousness and least my experience I think it's true is that it's one of the most deeply satisfying experiences that a human being can have. It's also when you do it really well and deeply. It's the most beautiful experience you can have the most beautiful things I've seen in this universe, I haven't been a lot of places in the universe. But I've been in a lot of places on this planet. Been a lot of beautiful places. And, and the most beautiful thing I've ever seen is a pure mind. The pure mind that's free. It's a wonderful thing. So even the tastes get a taste of it, and it's the smell of it sometimes makes me so happy. So feel lucky to do this thing. So that's a little bit of an overview of this text called the text and four foundations of mindfulness. That's how it's usually translated into English. I like to translate it a little different these days. I like to try to translate it as the four ways of establishing awareness. We establish awareness through our body. We establish this wonderful awareness, through attention to the feeling tones of our experience. We establish awareness, through attention to the quality of our mind or heart. And we establish awareness, through paying attention to these inner inner mental processes of this operate. And to have this awareness established, that's the that's the great thing. So

To this four foundations of mindfulness, this text that we'll be talking about is kind of like the anthem of the, vipassana movement. And I think of it like a poem, though you if you read through if somebody went home try to read it today, you say what is guilt thinking a poem. You know, it probably if you've never read it before, you probably won't get through it. It probably put you to sleep. But you know, if you live with it for a while to do this practice, it comes alive. It's an artificial text. It isn't like the Buddha sat down and just started teaching, you know, like this is how we taught. Rather, it was probably composed some, maybe some decades, centuries after the Buddha had died. And it was an attempt by the tradition, to bring together a lot of the different attentional practices that the Buddha taught and housed them in one place and coordinate them together. They're in such a way to show how they can work together to develop this lucid awareness, this this path of practice. And so it's very, it's very intentionally constructed. It's, it's one of the most kind of, it's almost numerically constructed, and organized. But the reason I kind of think of it as a poem or a song is that there are 13 main verses, kind of nut verses, but then my funny way of thinking and then the in between the refrain. And the refrain gets repeated each after each exercise. So 13 exercises for each exercise or refrain. And therefore refrain. I wouldn't for years when I read this text, I ignored it. It's kind of boring. It's kind of technical and But it's a thing that gets repeated over and over again, you repeat things because it's important. Turns out this may be that it's that it's the zingers. It's pointing to what's most important, as we kind of developed as mindfulness practice. So over these weeks that I do this, we'll talk about the four foundations of mindfulness, the four established ways of establishing awareness, and how we engage as different attentional faculties to kind of go along. And, and then we will also talk about that

refrain and, and especially as we get further along, and now that refrain, points are things very important. I hadn't what I have in mind to do also is the second half of the sitting that we do this Monday evening, like we sit from 730 to 745, the last 15 or 20 minutes, so 20 minutes to do a guided meditation that kind of relates to what I'm going to be teaching that evening. And maybe that will make it a little more alive or more meaningful for you and, and give you more sense of how this can be done what, what this being talked about. So that's the plan when I'm here, so you have to look if you you know, just come all the time and then I'll be here sometimes. So, we have about five minutes before nine. Do you have any comments questions or protests about this?

I tried to answer this question myself.

Other people, but I think on successfully when I think in terms of, I'll just describe the way I think in terms of our thinking mind. Which is not, I believe is not the mind that's doing the observing. But I think that there's maybe is there a technical word or description for a mind the place where the observation is coming from? It's actually doing the observing, which is separate from the conscious thinking mind.

There might, you know, if we, you know, in this ancient texts, ancient teachings, it's possible there might be something but it nothing jumps out. Because I think they prefer not to posit such a thing where it comes from because Then it's then you get into the danger of, of then assuming that whatever that is, is some kind of essence as some kind of eternal essence permanent essence, like a soul or a self or something like that. And this ancient tradition is very reluctant to assimilate, solidify anything into some thing. It's all process. And so it's all this stuff working together and, and so and so.

But you know, you used to be him. I'll say this, and we'll stop it because you brought up thinking, and it's one It's okay, no one's asking. I'm just gonna, I'm gonna be the last word here. Give

that's a strange, strange job. I have I get to talk and talk and no one else in my life can go and just talk like this. But

let's see. So this thinking thing.

I wanted to say this, this is something I was, I've been thinking about lately. I noticed recently that I've been, you know, I said, I've been doing this for over 40 years, right. And I still forget. So one of the things I forget sometimes is. So we don't say about thinking, there are different kinds of thinking. So if we just make a kind of categorical statement about thinking, as you know, just as if thinking just one thing, we do ourselves a disservice. But one form of thinking is discursive thinking. We're having conversations We're planning our meals where we're arguing with our boss where, you know, remembering our wonderful, whatever. And, and so it's kind of like, you know, like, like having conversation or showing a movie to yourself or something. And that's a relatively coarse way of thinking. And it's easy to get pulled into that world planning, thinking, figuring out, solving problems,

chasing after desires, and all kinds of things that we do. And one of the end there's a wonderful way in which this discursive thinking camouflages itself, because we get so interested in it, either positively or negatively, that we kind of get pulled into it and we don't even know we're doing it. And so I can do that still, you know, I'm doing some important things that to do. You know, and I forget until I sit down to meditate sometimes. How good it is not to do that. Oh, this is good. You know, but what struck me was after 40 years I still forget this somehow I get so caught up to me not dramatically but if you like, oh, oh, here we are again. Great. It's so May your discursive mind take frequent vacations and provide you with more peace. Thank you