

# 2019-03-04: Foundations of Mindfulness

## Part 6 - The Four Elements

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sensations, stories, feel, mindfulness, body, mind, elements, experience, hand, pain, cultivating, concepts, ideas, world, people, mindfulness practice, exercise, operating, bad, migraine

### SPEAKERS

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So I'll continue today the series of talks I'm giving on the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness. As I've been saying, it's the considered to be the original text original teachings that lays the foundation for mindfulness practice. And it goes back to the supposedly to the Buddha. And it's a wonderful text. It has a wonderful series of exercises for cultivating mindfulness to cultivating a heightened sense of awareness. And it begins with a series of exercise around mindfulness of the body. And we'll continue that today with another one of the focuses on how to be mindful of your physical embodied experience. And as a way of introducing it I want to say That our bodies are pretty precious, that it's easy to take it for granted or to ignore it. And the way the degree to which our body supports us and carries us and carries us physically, in a sense, you can say, but it also carries on so much of our suffering. If you didn't have a body, you, you wouldn't know you were suffering so much. You know, you would have be mentally distressed maybe, but, you know, the, to feel, you know, pangs of grief in the heart or that tightness of anger in the belly or to feel the weight of our sadness. And all these different emotions we have been hurt. So much is felt in the body and the body never asked. for it, and the body, you know, just holds it receives it be's it. And some of us some of it not so much of it has its genesis in our minds, what we tell ourselves how the mind receives experiences of the world and interprets it and makes meaning out of it or something. And the mind reacts certain ways and, and it's like, the Buddhist image is that the mind is like a puppeteer with strings that go down to the muscles. And so they tug the mind tugs on different or those strings, and then we're, we feel tense or tight or hot or something in different places in our body. And so the body you know, holds, holds and experience with so much of our suffering. And, and to speak about it that way is if the body was kind of separate from ourselves, in a sense, it holds our suffering and experiences it Is to step back a little bit and try to get a little different perspective on it than we usually have. And, and maybe see it in a different way. And it's possible to, to experience the body as something vibrant and alive and pleasant. And that's quite wonderful to experience and feel and be with within. And a lot of that vibrancy and a

lightness to the body is best experienced without a lot of stories about it, without a lot of judgments and commentary and ideas. But it's take time to experience the physicality, the embodied experience, in and of itself, just allow it to kind of emerge and be there and be present and vibrant. And that can be something very deeply satisfying by doing that. But how often do we allow ourselves to do that, to feel the goodness that's there? Some of the first lessons I had when I started meditating many years ago was I had a lot of physical pain when I meditated. And I struggled with it pain, try to sit there with it and be present with it best I could. And sometimes it was quite excruciating my pain. And I didn't know that I could move. Somehow I just supposed to sit there with it. And I was glad that I didn't know I could move because at the time, I wasn't happy. But I learned such an important life lessons from staying with it, the physical pain I had. And one of the really important things I learned was my mind's relationship to the pain. The stories I told myself about the pain and one of the ones that I used to have that really would get me hooked into it or I would kind of almost like, like I would sink into it and just feel that pain so much worse. is when I told myself story stories of self pity

Poor Gil and I would just get pulled into that. And, and it was and then it got much more acute the pain and there was kind of no separation from it. It's kind of like I sank into it or was like sinking into mud or quicksand or something. And I learned that if I could kind of not do the self pity thing and just sit and experience the pain without it, it was a lot easier. I learned that when I hated the pain that that was the hate of the pain made it actually worse. And sometimes I think the little micro muscles around that place I felt pain with just tighten up a little bit with a hate with hate. And, and so I learned that if I, you know, could stop hating it, that it was just a lot easier. And sometimes it was manageable, the pain I learned about fear and how that fear fear would operate that have feel, feel, feel pain and filled with fear. And because I was practicing in a meditation center, we weren't supposed to move. It was compounded by fear that if I moved, I would be ostracized by the community, you know that, you know that, you know, everyone else was sitting still. And so the fear would operate and certainly there was physical pain just from the fear. But that also involved the kind of getting glued on to it or overly identified with it or kind of overly entangled with a fear I was caught in its grip. Or it's you know, it's caught in its web or something. And I learned that if I wasn't afraid that it was much more manageable. And so I learned to kind of settle the fear relax if he or not believe it. And cut this in. I had a lot of experience going back and forth. Because I'll get pulled into it, and then I'll pull myself out somehow. And that was fine for a second and a half. And then how to get pulled into it and you know, try to be there. And slowly, slowly, I learned some distance from it. And I learned also one of the interesting lessons was the stories we tell ourselves. So we don't know or telling yourself stories, but we often have a framework, a perspective, an idea of what it's all about. That really is just a story that's kind of made me so deeply internalized, we don't even see it as a story. And sometimes I would, I would play around with coming up with a unique news story and see what that effect would have. And one of them I remember I had sometimes migraines. And it wasn't meditating but it was migraine in bed with a migraine. And, you know, in self pity operated, big time and all kinds of things. there and but you know it also, you know, the other thing that operated was a story that this really hurts. This is bad, you know, was reasonable you know and I want to be a little bit how painful would be for some people is sometimes pretty bad are laying in bed you know so I'm not I don't go to bed easily around pain right

so there I was in bed with my migraine and then at what point did I change this? And what if I imagine this is all this pain, sharp pain I feel in my head? What if it's just simply growing pains. Like somehow I'm just stretching and getting bigger my brain is getting bigger or greater capacity. And this is what this is the cost of kind of stretching into a great new capacity. So I'd lay there imagine and guess what we have stretching it? And it wouldn't feel so bad. It's like oh yeah, this is great. This is good. You know, I can I can live with Because it's gonna be good, good stuff is happening. I'm getting a better person because of it. And you're laughing at me. And it is kind of silly, right? I mean, it's, it's, you know, it's kind of silly to think, you know, however, it made a difference. It wasn't so bad. So what do we know? What's the pain? Is the pain.

Real is the pain, the intensity, that pain like a fixed thing, like the universe has a fixed intense intensity of pain and I have that fixed intensity of migraine. And that's what I have to live with. As long as the universe is like pushing that button that's fixed, or the intensity of pain variable, depending on many factors, depending on also the story I'm telling myself. I'm telling myself self pity. So stories if I'm sinking into it, All this is hopeless. This is bad. It's terrible, but a bad day ruined. That's kind of a story. Maybe it's true enough. And let's say it's 100% true. So you're kind of justified to tell yourself that story. But if you stop telling you that help the story, maybe made up another story that was better, the intensity wouldn't be so bad. So, you know, if your brother threw up from the migraine, and if you tell yourself a different story, and then you feel much better, what's the best medicine go along with a true story about how horrible and depressing and bad it is? It's bad enough. It's possible to change the story. The idea is that mental landscape that we have in relationship to what goes on in our body, and it makes it difference. I'm not advocating that we should always think of new stories. But it's a dramatic lesson of how much what goes on in the mind affects what we experienced in the body. What we can learn to do with mindfulness practice is not just make up new stories, creative stories in order to feel better. But we can learn, we don't have to tell the stories. We don't have to operate around some of the interpretations, some of the perspectives that we're operating under. And some of those perfect perspectives we have. A lot of them have to do with me myself in mind for me, or, you know, I really blew it. I knew that I shouldn't eat should not have eaten that food that I'm allergic to. And now I'm having a migraine and I just really am a lousy food eater. And so we tell ourselves a story that kind of little depressing and kind of makes it worse. But what happens if we just sit there and practice mindfulness? Instead, I kind of use of attention. focus of attention, that tries to see things in and of themselves independent of interpretation, interpretations, independent of predictions, independent of story that connects it to me myself in mind. It becomes a different body we live in. And the whole experience of being in a body can shift dramatically. So I want to do a little exercise with you. To give you a sense of this. Maybe I did this recently, so you'll forgive me if I just did it did it somewhere recently. So I do the hand thing here. Did you know I didn't know if you did it, but it doesn't hurt to do it again. So you know I think all of us here have hands. And, and some people have a relationship to their hands, their hands are getting older, they remember when it was younger and or the hands getting older, or the hand is too chubby, or too thin or too short or too long or too wrinkled. Or to this or to that too many freckles, too many age spots, you know, all kinds of you know, and it's pretty easy to kind of feel like you something's not quite right with the hands. So I don't know if some of you hopefully

hadn't haven't caught on thinking about your hands too much like this, but, but you can have ideas about hands or some other body part. There's a lot of suffering in the world but body parts. You know, this there, that somehow they're too big, they're too small, they're too long or too short. Too much, too little too wide. Too narrow just you know, just go on and on right? And people get depressed and upset and worse and worse and you know, some people really pull some down down down down when they think about their body. So if you close your eyes and take your right hand and try not to think about it any ideas you have about your hand instead How does the hand experience itself?

What are the sensations that are showing up in the hand? Is there any tingling or vibration or warmth or coolness? Is there pulsing? What are the sensations on the palm of the hand? know that whatever says in the palm of the hand, do they stay fixed? Are they dancing and flashing in and out what happens in the back of the hand, they're different sensations in the back than in the front of the hand and the fingers, what happens there. So feeling the sensations of the hand if you really feel intimately the sensations of the hand, you probably don't feel any boundaries. sharp lines boundary to the hand edges of the hand. might have some general sense of where the edges are, but there's no sharp edges diffuse with your eyes closed. And you might feel that the sensations of your hand just appear calm and they go and vibrate and post the vibrancy of it. There might be some aching, but without any just stories just to just ache bouncing around. Chances are because of the focus of this exercise, you're much more aware of the sensations of your hand than you would have been if we just I just kept talking and gave a riveting talk and you wouldn't even notice your hand thought about your hand four minutes. The whole time maybe. But now there's lots of sensations. As you feel those sensations of your hand the sensations themselves in and of themselves, do they contain within them any of your judgments and ideas, concepts about you have about your hand and I hope you say no. sensations are in themselves. They're just vibrating and pulsing, doing their thing quite independent from This is an old hand or new hand or a big hand, small hand or it just sensations, vibrancy and a lightness of sensations. With your hands to be the eyes still closed, put your hand down. What would happen? What happened to you if you experienced your body this way, almost like experience in your body from the inside out. The body's experience of itself, the sensations of your body pulsing and vibrating and tingling and appearing and disappearing. separate and distinct from any judgments and ideas of your body and your thoughts about what's wrong with your body or even what's right with your body. Just the vibrancy of physical sensations in your body.

into the degree to which you can feel the physical sensations of your body, in and of itself. And feel the simplicity of that immediate immediacy of your physical sensations, your body. And you're not carrying with you a lot of the baggage of your judgments and thoughts and stories and comparisons to other people and everything just the body by itself. What are some of the baggage extra things that you've put down for these few minutes? About your body? What's not operating? When all you're doing is feeling the aliveness and tingling and sensations pulsing of your body? Can you notice some of the things that for these few minutes you weren't operating? That thought you About your body and

so then if we can begin the exercise you can open your eyes. So if some of you would be willing to say, Did you could you notice that the difference between just sensing your body in and of itself versus some of the baggage through which you usually interpreted the body or judge it or something? And what did you put it what was put aside for those few minutes to just experience the body that was like easier than experiencing it with your judgments and stories and you have anybody want to share what what was put down little bit?

Yes, please.

I was able to feel my body relax in a way that I haven't relaxed physically in quite a while.

So we can relax just feeling sensations into themselves. Fantastic. So there was no tension that you're used to having. Yeah. Are there other other things you noticed about that and what was not operating it might usually often be operating and makes it more difficult. Your relationship to your body. My ideas about my emotional state disappeared have a louder many ideas about my emotional state disappeared. It was just like emotional state. So you still had an emotional state. But I had sensations, sensations that yes, so this is also interesting the idea to which we can have emotions often come with sensations, but we make up stories and ideas about what those emotions are and then we have a relationship with those emotions. And they have meaning and purpose and all kinds of things. And it gets a complicated little universe in there. It's not It's not some of the stuff is not required, you know, you're not required to make it so complicated. Maybe a couple of more if you're willing, over here.

I sensed foreignness in the Latin word, more fullness, more fullness, my hand, especially by hand, it's not so much my body, but my hand just felt larger because I was aware of more things going on there than normal.

Great, great, the fullness of it all. And so in feeling that fullness. What do you if you're willing to say something and you can say some Things minor, but what do you what do you happens in your mind when you're reflecting about your body that where you lose the fullness

I think it's just not it's the lack of attention to the hand or the bottom. By putting the attention on it, I experienced more things going on. And it just enters my mind as though it were an expansion.

Great, beautiful. didn't write thanks to you. I was just gonna say the I felt like my thoughts felt much more real when my body sort of recede into the background. And it's kind of interesting to be like, no, the body is what's real or and then, and then it's like the mind went to the back. So the more you're in your body, the thoughts that you have, aren't so substantial, are so strong are so invested in are and they don't have they don't dominate. And if you're like most people chances are your thoughts are not hundred percent accurate.

Okay, great. So hopefully that gave you some sense. So it's possible to experience one's body in different ways we can experience it through the filter of the lens of our concepts and ideas. And it's also possible to, to drop those concepts and ideas and experience in much more in the immediacy of the sensations as they occur. If we have a concepts of at all, those concepts might not be so accurate or so useful. One of the less useful ones from a Buddhist point of view are concepts that have a lot to do with me. myself in mind, self conceit for example around the body, ideas of what it means for me, all kinds of you know I'm in the body this the body defines me and then if it can't over overly identified with the body and that has its own suffering to do that if we want to cultivate the heightened awareness of mindfulness, we have to find out some we have to somehow put down, always experiencing our life, through the filter through the lens of all these concepts and ideas and conceits and me myself in mind and predictions that we have, and start being willing to be much more simple and direct. Not only so we can feel the fullness not only of the sensations, but the more fullness we can feel of our experience, the immediacy of it, the richer and bigger in a sense awarenesses and we're living It becomes that lucid awareness gets clouded over when we start living in these thoughts and ideas and concepts we have, which are, you know, usually less than 100% accurate. But more importantly, they're not needed all the time. What is for this practice of four foundations of mindfulness that the Buddha taught. He is really interested in taking awareness, cultivating strong for a particular purpose. In modern society where we teach, you know, mindfulness has taught almost everywhere now. Mindfulness is being presented as something that's useful in everyday life, which it is, and it's supposed to be applicable in every all situations you bring mindfulness in, helps you out. I think the Buddha would have been happy with the saying that, but he was actually interested in in this text In using mindfulness to cultivate a very heightened kind of awareness, it's not really so useful for walking around in everyday life and filling out your taxes and getting your car oil change cards, you know, figuring out what to buy at the supermarket. He wanted to develop such a heightened sense of awareness that the mind or how we perceive the experience becomes a very, very, very simple without a lot of concepts and ideas and judgments, just the simplicity of the experience in the moment. Not because we're supposed to live that way all the time. But because in meditation, especially if you can have this very radical simplicity of just the immediacy of the experience, that turns out to be a very good means to cultivate a very stable, peaceful Aquinas mind, a mind that is not troubled by anything. Mind which is not bothered by anything, mind. It's not being pushed around by desires and wanting something, a mind that's not being pushed around by your version and, and not wanting things and to be able to, to drop into a mind that has that level of peace NECK WHEN empty and stillness. It really helps not to be spinning around a lot of these thoughts and concepts and judgments that we have. And if we can have that level of equanimity, and stillness of the mind, that's when we can have discover something about the minds capacity for a radical experience of not clinging to anything not being attached to anything. And that is very healing, it's very powerful lesson that our mind that we take for granted. That it is the way it is, has a potential for a wonderful sense of happiness and peace. That's independent

of anything at all. Our happiness is not dependent on winning lottery or getting a good partner or having a good job or having, you know, there's a radical deep sense of satisfying, nourishing



happiness, well being that can come from this deep letting go. That's what the Buddha was really pointing at. So in this four foundations of mindfulness practice, he's presenting these ways of being mindful and paying attention that's supportive for getting to that place. The exercise of me To talk about today, the, the I think it's a sixth exercise in the, in the body section is called Mindfulness of the elements. That's how it's usually translated to English, dhātu in Pali Buddhist language. And, and they and before I tell you what these four elements are, I'll tell you this simile that the Buddha gives after he describes them says it's like a butcher, that you know, this is the ancient world. This is back in the Bronze Age A long time ago. a butcher who there's a dead cow on the road, somehow that's somehow they say in the road, you know, didn't have refrigeration then. So that and the butcher slices up that cow Make all these cuts then lays them all out for people and come and buy the cow but buy meat once the cow is cut open and cut up and all these pieces the butcher doesn't see a cow anymore just sees the individual cuts of meat distinct you know the cow doesn't exist anymore. So it's a rather maybe unfortunate simile for us but but it's possible that rather than seeing ourselves as Gill or as myself me myself in mind is a it comes it's a magnet for so many complicated ideas my history and my future and what people like of me and don't like of me and I'm I can be rejected and you know once it's just me thing. It's like, quickly depressing. But what about if we don't think that way? There's some other way of experiencing ourselves. And so the Buddha says you can, you can start focus on yourself and experience here and experience not the self who's suffering, not the self who's happy, but experience the sensations, moment moment living immediacy of sensations in themselves. And just like the maybe butcher book cuts the cow in four pieces. So, for that, for us, there are four elements, the four categories of sensations that we can experience physically enters our tuning into the sensation level of Oh, this is a means to experience fullness, and means to begin putting down and reorienting ourselves. So we're not so oriented through the concepts and judgments and get the benefit of feeling the vibrancy, the immediacy and fullness of life in the simplicity of the experience. There are four elements. And, and. And there's earth, water, fire and air. And people who teach this often say that this is an ancient kind of physics, you know that this is the elements of the world. With its bow, it's all built up on these four things like atoms or something. The way that it's usually understood in Buddhism is that is that these are sensations that we experience. So the earth element, or those sensations of solidity that we have in our body, hardness and solidity. Anything that's hard and solid in the body is the earth element. That anything that's liquid or fluid or cohesive, that holds things together like sticky stuff. That's the water element. The fire element is temp, anything has to do with temperature. The movement air is anything to do with movement. So the blood moving through the veins, the heart beating. Anytime you move, you're walking or something. So there's the movement, the movement of air, like the wind is the exposure that we say that's the movement is the air element.

The word dot, which is translated as element, it's probably shouldn't be translated as element. Because then we think we're talking about ancient kind of, I don't know physics, the word is used for many other things. equanimity is it.to. renunciation is a.to. Wisdom is a dot two. I think a better translation for dot two is a quality. It's there's different qualities of experience we can have, or maybe even characteristics. And so we have these different characteristics of experience, and physically we

can experience Since the level of sensations, the way that mindfulness practice was taught in Burma, at the pre eminent academic, there was one particular teacher and place in Burma, from which the modern mindfulness movement exploded. Academy kind of in place It started in the 1940s. And from there that monastery produced hundreds of monastery meditation, monasteries in Burma and the world and, and started by teaching them Mahasi Sayadaw, kind of my grandfather in the Dharma. And, and then when he taught this mindfulness practice, he was teaching a four elements meditation. That was his primary focus on what what the meditation was about. And it looked like he was telling us to focus on breathing and he'd have us focus on the our abs And as we breathe, we'd feel the lifting and falling of the abdomen, the movement of the abdomen as we were breathing. But we weren't, it wasn't supposed to be the breathing we're focusing on, we're supposed to focus on these four elements, the sensations, and really tune in to the sensations that are at play. When the valley is moving, the pressure, the hardness, the tension, the release, the movement, the lightness, the temperature, that all these different things are coming into play. And as the day was a tune into that more and more, and if if something else arose elsewhere in the body, to do the four elements meditation there, to really feel the sensations of it. If we went to see our teacher and said, Oh, you know, I had a lot of pain. It was hard, it was depressing. You know, I've always having a hard time, my life and he didn't want to hear you. He basically sent you back to your Christian to meditate more What he wanted to hear was, I was sitting, and there was a lot of burning sensations in my knee. I felt that as burning, I felt that as tension and tightness. And as I started feeling it, it started to dissolve some of the hard solidity of it. And it became more of a tingling vibrating flow of temperature. When we came and told them, I'm having such a hard time, and I'm always having a hard time and you know, here I'm having a hard time again and has to do with my parents. That's going off into the story that's going in the opposite direction, into a more complicated world, which has some truth to it has a time and place where that's the needs to be looked at. But it's not the direction that this practice was focused on. When we're trying to get to this deep place of peace and equanimity that we're learning to put down. These things, we're learning this radical lesson, that we don't have to always experience ourselves through the filter of the standard concepts and ideas that we're operating under. And one of the some of those have to do with me and myself and mine. And it's a radical thing to do, to learn a whole other, like learning a different language, of how to experience ourselves, through this justice sensations and simplicity of sensations. And so to, you know, just meditate and close the eyes, and just feel the immediacy of sensations independent of what that means that they're having those sensations, independent on, you know, it being you who's experiencing them independent, where it's going, independent of, you know, any interpretation or concept. Just the simplicity of it. It's hard, I think, to be convinced that this is in important and useful to do. But there's a lot of lessons from that

really important life lesson is to start seeing really clearly, the influence of these stories and ideas, we have the concepts, because they're often in quite invisible to ourselves how much they're operating, and how much they bring. Costs are difficulties and suffering. And to be able to do this exercise, we're trying to intentionally not to focus on them to focus on sensations, just sensations. As we get better at it, then we start noticing much more clearly, the difference between the sensations and the overlay of thoughts and concepts that can creep in. And to be able to see that distinction and see concepts and



stories for themselves, rather than having them be invisible is a fantastic life lesson. It gives us a lot of freedom, a lot of actually choice, a lot of power. It's very empowering to do that. The Nazi the stories interpretation It's actually disempowering, because we don't see where we have choice. We're just kind of stuck in this world that we're kind of constructing. It also is very powerful, to be able to have an experience of well being of peace that's experienced independent of all these stories and ideas, we have identities that we live in. And it's very powerful because it sets the stage for this very peaceful economists mind that the Buddha was hoping people would cultivate and develop this very simple, simple guy. So shouldn't say simple mind that no one will come back to meditate again. But, but very simple experience. So that the mind can start discovering it has it can relax more, it can let go more. So these four elements, these four qualities or characteristics of our sensations, And enter tune into them at this tune into since they are experienced here in this sensation level. And to feel the fullness of it. So if you're experiencing your breathing, all the sensations that are coming into play as you breathe, if you have a headache, all the sensations of your headache, as opposed to pour me, if you have, if you're feeling warm, all the sensations of warmth, all the detailed manifestations of the warmth, you know, hot flashes in and out, moves around into us all this stuff. And it becomes a rich, interesting world to get absorbed in that and focused on that and be with it. So that's one of the important exercises in this four foundations of mindfulness texts. I've known people who absolutely love doing this focusing on this. Some of the people I've known who love it a lot. Love Because they feel that connects them very deeply with the natural world. The you know, the earth, water, fire and air. And then somehow they feel that there's this kind of intimacy with the natural world that's in themselves. The people I know who really kind of love the natural world going for hikes and being with it, and to feel that realize that what they're experiencing and these sensations is kind of like the natural world as it appears and manifests in us. And they find it very comforting to feel that and be that experience. So, that was my effort to try to convey how this is an important way of cultivating mindfulness practice. And then we'll go on From here as we go through this text, and all these different exercises, approaches for cultivating mindfulness. So thank you and I hope you will spend this week enjoying your body by not thinking so much about it, but feeling it instead. Thank you