

2019-04-22: Foundations of Mindfulness

Part 11 Five Aggregates

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SPEAKERS

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So I'll continue my talks on the four foundations of mindfulness. And we're getting out towards the end of this series of talks and, and kind of the end of the journey. And as I've been emphasizing, the way that the mindfulness practice is taught in the sutta can be interpreted as providing a journey of deep, like I like the metaphor is going deep. So going deeper and deeper into the practice. Some people may use metaphors of height and higher and higher, but I like deeper because it's more grounded. It's more or less less disconnected high, sometimes people get high, they're kind of spacey and, and also, deeper for me, it's like you go deep inside deep really connect to ourselves and deep kind of way. And so it's a journey to this very deep connection. And at some point, in this connection, you get to a place With some choice, and you start seeing the place of choice, and, and the ability to see that we have some choice about how we relate to our life or how we use our minds, is a very powerful thing to see if we could also know how to exercise that choice. And in particular having to do with the attachments that bring about a lot of the suffering that people have. If we can see there's some choice about how to be involved in attachment, and choose not to be it makes a huge difference in our life. So a lot can be said that a lot of the earlier exercises of mindfulness have a function part of their function is to get a settled, calm and very sensitive, heightened sensitivity to our present moment experience, especially kind of internally, what's really happening inside of us, in our body, our feelings, our emotions, Our mind states and, and as we get developed this heightened sensitivity and ability to really abide or really kind of stay in the flow of the present moment, then it becomes easier and easier to see where there might be choice. And we can make a difference in, in how we relate to this world of ours and to ourselves. I find this mindfulness practice a remarkable thing to be involved in, and to have a way of not being lost and thought, to have a way of not being disconnected and abstract ideas and preoccupations, and really kind of begin to allow the natural functioning of our senses and our capacity to be settled and at peace. It's a beautiful thing. Today I heard a beautiful definition of the Dharma. See if I have it right when some of you were there when I heard it, but maybe I can never you

can tell me if I got it right. The Dharma is reality's way of finding its way to peace and close enough reality's way of finding its way to peace. So whatever, whatever helps reality, I like the word because the person didn't say, you know, I find peace, you know as much more encompassing Dharma is usually seen as being something you know, much more than just something personal. So, I kind of was inspired by that. So, so, to come into this deeper connection of not being preoccupied preoccupied many times, much of the preoccupation has to do with self and find this relief from self concern purposes. Self preoccupation and allow some deeper process to happen. That is not released as a part of it is we have choice and part of it is something that we allow that which doesn't have that which operates without our choice. We allow us to deeper process, that unfold natural process that's within us. It doesn't involve are doing so much. And the play between what we do, and the play, what we allow to happen. And unfold is this beautiful dance of meditation practice and mindfulness practice. So here we are practicing mindfulness, giving this talk after you've sat for 45 minutes, and most of you look kind of quiet. I hope that's a nice way. I hope you feel a little bit more connected to yourself a little more maybe aware of what's happening with more, maybe less preoccupied or caught up in your thoughts than when you came. They'd be less tense than when you came. So here we are.

So the fourth foundation of mindfulness involves five different perspectives or exercises for cultivating this deeper insight into what goes on inside of us. And, and I like to again interpret this as a journey because it starts with a coarser insights and then we get to it once the coarser Of course our way of the mind operates gets quieter, it gives us access to see something a little bit more subtle. And, and if that gets more subtle, but you have a chance to see something a little more subtle. And, and then you'll see I'll talk about at the end of today, then it opens up to something which is not so common for people to experience. But that is seven beautiful qualities called it that are kind of the treasures of Dharma practice, called the seven factors of awakening. So the coarsest of these is what I talked about last week. Here's the five hindrances. So these are five major, often major preoccupations that people have that keep people caught up in their thoughts, their concerns, their worries, their fears, their desires, their hates, and the mind will latch on. It's sometimes very hard to get out of it. People can hold resentments for decades. And that sense of resentment that second hindrance of ill will mean that it's so it can be so tenacious for some people, maybe it's not their mind every single moment, but all they have to do is kind of maybe relax, they find a reservoir, resentment, that kind of hustle still sitting there, reservoir of ill will reservoir of something that you know, it's we carry with us. There can be very profound addictions in the human being. And even if we're not every always addicted, always wanting, it doesn't take much to realize that the mind the heart is kind of always wanting something reaching out trying to get Something there can be profound sense of regret, of anxiety of worry that gray so we caught up in all the thoughts of worry and what, what what should happen? What do I do and how do I deal with things? How do I become safe. And the world of the five hindrances is very much a world of ideas, world of concepts and stories. And so often the fuel for these five hindrances are the story making mind. So and they're considered to be one of the primary mental forces activities that we want to quiet down, when we're going to start being able to really connect to this Fuller, deeper way of being aware of being attentive. And so it's kind of like the door to really being present is to learn about their hindrances and be able to put them aside, not be caught in them. As if they're the

merchant Or things and we settle down, then the next course thing. I don't know if it seemed unnecessarily so linear the way I'm saying it, but it is the linear sequence in the text. The next is seeing something that's a little bit technical for people who are unfamiliar with this. Something that's called the five aggregates, you probably didn't know that you were you had five aggregates and you the word aggregates is Kunda, which means something like someone like a heap, five heaps of things. And so what is these five heaps and why are they important? Their primary, one of the primary reasons why they're important in the Buddhist analysis of the human human of humanity of human activity, is that these are the five primary areas, at least in ancient India, where people have posited a self where people got identified themselves with this is who I am. And, and so here we're still involve with a little bit of ideas, a little bit of kind of, you know, ideas of things that I am this I am that I'm not this, I'm not that. And that's deeper and sometimes offers and more subtle and tenacious ways. Then, you know, desire for sex or resentment or my high school girlfriend or something. You know, it's a we carry the self with us is self identity. It's a very deeply seated, it's something we're partly partly we learn from our society or family, from whatever our psychological conditioning are, what we take to be the self. It was a remarkable experience for me to be

intimately living with 35 Japanese monks in Japan. We slept in the same room we ate in the same room together, we had free time together and free room we work together. So we're Intense in Japanese cultures, a collectivist culture. So the idea that, you know, and it was remarkable for me growing up in individualistic culture, to have an intimate experience of a collectivist culture, and could see a very different way in which people understood that themselves, they identify or got attached to who they are. I didn't think that the collectivist culture was necessarily better than individualistic one. There are many ways that can be easily seen that way. But some ways it's it's causes more suffering different kinds of suffering than the individualistic one. So rather than seeing if one is better than the other, they're just different ways that human societies organize themselves to get around and somehow get along well enough. We have to have some some kind of principles to organize ourselves with. And so this idea of a self identity, this is who I am. That seems like it's just automatic and natural for us. To have when we practice deeply and really see what goes on in the mind. Or if you go sometimes to different cultures, you see how relative it is, and how much it's a social construct that we're living under. And I saw this very dramatically. When I came back from well from being in Asia for some time. And then when after my first son was born, and when he was toddler and could talk and stuff like that, and maybe it was two or three, somewhere in there. And, and, you know, parents who have parents talk and how they relate to kids and how parents think that people should get along and operate in the world has a big impact on these kids. That's what they pick up they learned from them. And I could, I was kind of in are surprised to see how thoroughly I was raising my kid to be an individualist. That's the way I was raised. That's the way my cultural background probably four generations were, you know, so it's no surprise that I would do that. That's what I knew. What was was remarkable was that I saw it, rather than seeing it arise before it before seeing and I thought this is the way the universe was built, you know, just that's how it is. And isn't everyone like this. And then to have had the experience both have this kind of deep practice of watch the both subtle movements of the mind and how we construct our reality to a great degree. And to be in a different culture with a

very different understanding of self really helped me to see what I was doing to my child and I tried very hard we tried my wife and I tried very hard to modify how we raised our kid to somehow not convey the you know, the worst of individualism individualistic through to my son, but, you know, and so, the city itself, I am this who I am, that we often take for granted, gets questioned in Buddhism is one of the really big explorations questionings that we do in Buddhist practice is to take a good look at who do I think I am and what is the self, what do I take to be me myself in mind, and, but not to do it like by taking a class in philosophy, and work out the logic of it, but to get quiet enough, and still enough and attentive enough to watch the formation of self in the moment. The You know, it can be a simple, you've gotten very calm and settled sitting here. Maybe you've gotten calmer than usual. It feels quite good. You feel like you're really present after sitting. And you get up and it feels like you're like the whole world's getting up with you because you're so that's so attentive in here. And you quietly go out Get your shoes and your very mindfully it's kind of pull out your shoes from the shelf and you put them down and just use the shoes the floor. And it's so precious. The simplicity and actually it turns out the shelf is kind of exquisitely beautiful. But ever noticed the shelf was so beautiful. And your shoes look at that you know shoes and sometimes meditator is gonna like have this wow factor supposed to you know you got put in your shoes but you're putting on your shoes majority thinking about you know, tomorrow and what you can say to who tomorrow and you can have the fact you putting on the shoes is just like a boring thing. You know it's an interesting

as you put down your put on your shoes. You notice that someone's watching you. Oh, I better show than I know how to put on shoes. I need to be a good shepherd her honor. And I need to do it mindfully. Because, you know, after all, this is a mindfulness center. And so I better you know, I need to be, you know, I might be mindful person here. So not only have to be good at putting on shoes I have to do it very mindfully, I hope this person notice that I'm having mindful I am. That's a lot of I mean, my you know, that I have to be and I want them to see me this way and I have to do it. So I'm seeing as a certain kind of person. it you know, it's, you know, and that just has to do with shoes. But this idea of me, myself and mine, goes on for some people all day long and subtle ways, many times unseen. It just automatically just assume that that's how things are. But when we meditate and get quiet and are mindful, what we think is normal we see that is a activity of the mind, and we have some choice over it. You can speak to putting on your shoes and you see the thought arise. To be the perfect shoe putter honor today, because I'm being watched. You see that thought arise. And you say, That's ridiculous. You know, why should I care what other people think I'm a good shoe put her honor. And so the thought that arises, you see it and you let it go. If you're there, if you're already thinking about tomorrow and the conversations you have to have with people and the concerns and worries that a little thought about being a good shotput runner might be there in the corner of the mind kind of subconsciously. But it's not really loud enough to be seen because your loud part of the mind is thinking about tomorrow. And so there's all these kind of back corners of the mind subtle subconscious, subconscious things going on that accumulate that have a lot to do with me myself in mind. So These five aggregates are five areas of our life where people tend to use an ancient India according to the Buddha, where people would identify this is who I am. So the first one is the body, our physical bodily experience, and it doesn't take a lot of reflection to think that there's a lot of attachment

connected to self in people's bodies, and how they look what they are. People's people's self worth is sometimes connected to their body, their form their hair, their skin, color, their nose, they're all kinds of things that a lot of suffering around this and we perpetuate in our society. But you know, people end up so identified with their body. I'm too tall I'm too short. I'm this I'm that. I'm only appealing I'm only likeable because I'm not likable because of, you know, I have a wart. And so there's a lot of concern about body it's, some people say that our culture has effectuation with youth and staying young. And so some people are exercising a lot and dieting a lot, and not because they want to just be live a healthy good life, but in order to keep themselves young and attractive, because that's where it's at is to be physically attractive. So it's a lot of a lot of attachment around body that goes on. Little more subtle to see is attachment to our feelings, the feelings of things being pleasant and unpleasant, the sensations of pleasure and comfort and discomfort, and some people are very preoccupied by that. And the idea of them being comfortable or, or pleasant, is kind of what drives their whole orientation in life. And they're constantly trying to become free. Trouble and have pleasure. Some people think that only five pleasure in my successful pleasure a pleasant experience is a proof that I've got everything going okay for myself unpleasant experiences is proof that somehow I failed. Some people think that somehow identify strongly with his comfort and pain and discomfort, and they somehow wrap up around, this is who I am.

It's very subtle. But there's a wonderful exercise that I'll sometimes give to people on retreat. When the mind is a little bit more sharp a little bit more can see the subtle differences, what's going on. And that is, when we're sitting in pain, sometimes you sit meditation whose pain and to tell yourself to refer to the pain, not as my pain, but as the pain and some people by changing that language From my pain to the pain, we'll find that there's a lot more ease with the pain, a little bit more relaxation, a little more space for it. There's less preoccupation, less contraction around it. You know, it's the whole idea of my pain, my my, my, you know, is comes along with a lot of baggage, a lot of complications, but thought pain makes it kind of simple. So, there can be a lot of me myself in mind around pain and pleasure. There can also be some kind of identification with our perceptions of things than what I perceive as accurate. I, I'm the perceiver, the one who perceives is the real self, or I'm right because I see it this way. And it's somewhat connected. That's a third heap or the aggregate is the heap of our perceptions or concepts or ideas of what is going on. identification with ideas, conceptual ideas of what's what's happening, what's here and there. The fourth is kind of the whole inner world of mental activity. The most simple way of understanding it has to do with our thinking. As the tradition puts a big emphasis that has to do with intention, intentional thinking, what their motivations are, what we're trying to accomplish and do. And this is a whole inner landscape that's quite complex, the thoughts, ideas, memories, plans, projections, ideas. And they have a lot to do with stories that's where the stories can reside as well. And there can be a very strong identification with the stories you know, and ideas we have and interpretations we have and about ourselves and other people. And so, the simplest may be way of talking about attachment, self attachment or identification with the so heap of the inner thoughts is to see how deeply identified some people are with their opinions, their political opinions, opinions about anything. Some people need to really insist they're right about their opinions, because that's who they are, that kind of defines who they are. Some people hold on to stories because stories

reinforced for them who they think they are. It's hard sometimes to feel, you know, people, some people really feel they need to be someone. That's how they become safe. That's how they find their way in the world. And so we hold on sometimes to ideas and stories about ourselves that from our life, some of them which are dysfunctional, not so helpful, helpful. I've known people who have held on tightly to stories of their suffering to being a victim. And on the surface, it seems like they're, you know, they're suffering and they don't want to suffer. But some people if they go deeper inside and see what's driving their, their stories around being a victim is that's all they know. That's how the world has to relate to, to play it to them how they got the attention, how they've gotten to be someone clear that there's a clear sense of I am this person who's a victim and not having that creates chaos. And so, some people get identified to the stories and ideas This is who I am. So the fifth of these kind of these heaps, the fifth area of our inner life that is a strong place of identification. This happens specially for people who can be deep meditators or have scars, very strong spiritual practice, but other people as well. And that is identification to consciousness, that the consciousness is who I am. Yes, all these other things, stories, ideas, perceptions, the experience of the world. That's not who I am. But there is something there is a kernel. There is a CORE Center to all this. And that's the consciousness that knows it all. And everything else seems to come and go, but the consciousness doesn't seem to come and go, it's always there. And that's who I am. And that's some people who use language like us the true self is this kind of abiding awareness or consciousness. So the Buddha pointed out that even that it can be an attachment to self holding on.

So as the hindrances quiet down and people meditate, get quieter and do mindfulness at some point, it isn't a matter of believing ideas that shouldn't identify or identification is bad or wrong or this me myself, my my profit, preoccupation is somehow you know, philosophically incorrect. Sometimes in Buddhism, the Buddhist teacher sometimes will give the pass on the idea that there is no self and then people chose to believe there is no self now and it has nothing to do with it. What happens is as the as this is power of mindfulness to be settled and quiet to sharp mindfulness really here, we start seeing that these, the identification, the movement of clinging on to ideas of me myself in mind, we see for ourselves that there's an ouch in it. It actually is uncomfortable. There's a contraction, there's a stress, there's tension, in this identification that can can happen. Even even appropriately. identities, we all have identities. So having identity is not the problem. It's the act of identification with the identities, the act of kind of latching on to them, which is where this ouch can be, the stress can be. I like to think of it as wind drag. And, you know, it was someone Someone asked me once and what's the self and Buddhism? And my answer was wind drag. Because when we had when we were involved Active identification with me myself in mind, then it slows down our mental processes our thinking, regardless, we're not as fluid and flexible with what's happening in the moment, because we have this kind of like this, this tightening around something that we're holding on to or needing to be needing to. You need to inhibited a little louder. return a little louder. And

so,

so to sit and meditate and become quiet and then watch the little thoughts arise. Something like something as simple as, you know, my knee really hurts. I'd like to move my knees but I can't, because I need to be a good Buddhist at the Buddhist center. You know? No, because if I move People think I'm not a good meditator. That's a lot of selfing going on a lot of self. So if you can watch that and see those thoughts arise, it gives a chance to us to put a question mark after those thoughts. Is this really true? Do I need to operate on these thoughts? Is this really wise? Is this really how I take care of my situation is by believing those thoughts automatically? When I was about 13, or 14, my father took me aside a little bit from one of these father son talks. And he said to me, Gil, from time to time as you go through your life, you might notice that you have bizarre thoughts. And if that happens, just know that that's normal. You know, that's, that's what happens periodically bizarre thoughts. I thought that was kind of I didn't understand anything. I didn't know. I was 13. And what was he talking about? But years later, lo and behold, I had one or two or so bizarre thoughts. And, and I had been warned about them. So rather than saying, Oh no, I'm a terrible person because I had those thoughts. You know, I'm a bad person that thought that having that thought is a proof of my true nature as being an awful person to think that it was like that, that's bizarre. That's a bizarre thought. I've been told us was supposed to those will happen. And so I could see them with much more ease. I didn't make them into myself and latch on to them. And so to get quiet enough to see how this operates, is what I'm keep emphasizing over and over. So important that I keep repeating myself here. So it's not a matter of believing It's a matter of seeing when we do this practice, and seeing how we hold on and how we claim. Now in this text where it talks about these five areas, body feelings, perceptions, they call it sometimes translated to me sometimes in English as mental formations, and consciousness, these five areas. What it says in the text, the instructions for mindfulness practitioners, is to watch how these phenomena arise and pass. They there, they come and they disappear. And some of them you can see come and go quite quickly. You can watch and see. You know, perceptions come and go. Or, if you really pay attention or feelings are really fleeting, if you really pay careful, careful attention to them. Some might be a little more enduring. But as the practice gets deeper, we see much more the fluid, the flow of it, the river of these things coming and going. And the advantage of that is once you start getting the flow them, you see them arise and see them go, it's a lot easier to see the wind drag, or you know, if you see it as a stream, and you're trying to paddle a boat or flow down the river and you put something heavy into the water, that slows you down. It's much easier to see how we get caught. And we stopped the momentum of the flow movement. The image I like is going down to the river river bank with a bucket and you're watching the river go by, and then you take a bucket and you scoop up the water in the bucket. And then you walk around some more. And you save to tell everyone look, look, here's the river.

The river is not in the bucket, it's waters in the bucket. But you didn't. You didn't capture any River at all in the bucket. The river is still back at the river. And so this idea so if you can watch the momentum or operation of the directrix experience of bodily sensations are the feelings that come along with the sensations, the perceptions that we have with them, the mental formations, the attitudes, the ideas that we have around all things, and even consciousness flow, then you can see the times when you, you take your mind's bucket, and you've left the flow of the present moment. And if you can see that,

then it's easier to settle back into it, and continue to stay in the flow stay in the flow. Most importantly, not because we're supposed to stay in the flow is if that's the point. The point in Buddhism is to see how we get caught and how we suffer in getting caught around ideas of self. So we can let go. I don't know what percentage of human suffering has to do with self. But self identity, self ideas, but I would venture to if I was going to you know, have to vote or something. I would suspect that it's more than 50% of our suffering is related to self. So just this one exercise, even though it's a little technical, and maybe a little difficult to understand if you've ever heard about what I taught us now, it's really powerful, can be a great help in our lives. So when the hindrances get quieter, then it's possible to see this more subtle operation of identification that goes on around these five different areas. And we don't maybe that was true in ancient India, or that's the framework or the way that the Buddha categorize these things. They might not work for us exactly the same way how we understand our experience, but the principle of paying attention to how we identify with some aspect of our experience is the same. And that's really where it's the heart of it is see Oh, they're making yourself out of this. This there. I'm claiming this is mine. And there's where I pulled the bucket out of the river. The wind rack, this is where I've left the flow of it all. And then getting wise with that. So then, with that as a, that when this idea of identification gets simpler, it doesn't happen so much because it's a little bit of a complicated thing me myself in mind, when the meditation gets quieter and calmer, then at some point, we can go to the next exercise, which is a much much more simple exercise. And, and we'll save that for next time I talk. It's a it's an exercise where we get to notice how we get knotted up. And then literally word is knots, the knots how we get knotted up in our experience. And that's a kind of more simple than these hindrances and identifications. So we'll leave that for I'll be back in a couple of weeks for that. And then once we get learned about that knots and the knots untangle. Then the untangling of the knots. The loosening of the knots liberates frees up the seven factors of awakening. And so these beautiful qualities of mind that are kind of cherished in Buddhism, not only because they're quite beautiful, but also because they're on board leading to liberation are the penultimate exercise. So we'll have another three weeks or so to get through all this. So we have about five minutes before the end. And if anyone would like to ask any questions about this or comments or testimonials about working with identification, we lovely to hear

So it's a testimonial, I guess. I had an experience where I realized what I was identifying with. And it's funny because it was Vipassana, like it was the meditation. And one of my cousins told me, you know, people who practice the past now go for 10 days sit alone. They're selfish. And I could, they're selfish. And I could like feel myself identifying with it. Like, I felt like a pinch in my heart. I was like, How can she see that we're trying to improve us? But I didn't say anything. I could like, sit back and watch my identification with the practice

by watching it. Who was there more peace.

Um,

I don't know I but I could Just see that there was suffering, I guess, huh? Yeah, great. I didn't have to react. And I didn't have to justify in that moment. So a little bit.

Fantastic. So that's where you saw a place of choice and you chose not to go along with it. And just to watch it. Yeah. Great. Let's think I love hearing that. Thank you. So I hand over there.

So, one of the aggregates the sort of the mental formations, it seems like that could like also, essentially, like contain all the other ones, like all the other ones could manifest as like you could have mental formations about other aggregate.

Absolutely, yeah, you can have stories in stories or intentions or these about the other things, writing rather than just having a simple, you know, hear a sound outside and it's just a simple sound. It's suddenly it's like, you know, there shouldn't be a meditation center or urban center where there's car traffic, you know, I think I read a letter and tell them, we should move to a sub quieter place, you know, and Something's definitely wrong here. And I chose the wrong meditation center to meditate in because there's car traffic sounds, you know, that's, that's a lot of mental formations for just the sound of a cover room going by.

So like, for example, like so then sort of the distinction if something's like, I guess, like a pure perception versus a perception that like leads to mental formation. Yes. Yeah, that's sort of the way you think about that a little

bit. Yeah. So I'm a little bit hesitant to use the word pure as if there is such a thing. But we get closer to that simpler, simpler, less less baggage connected to it. And that'll be a little bit the topic for next time I talk in two weeks. Because this, these knots have to do with learning how to be in the most simple flow of direct experience, which is what you're describing. Thanks.

So, be sure to put your shoes on well what? Yes, yeah, good be good little Buddhists. Now please don't be Buddhists save the world from you know, you know you from being Buddhists, we have to do something like that. Be a Buddha or be be compassionate, be caring please care for Here, the world that you live in, to actually actually today's Earth Day, right? I gave an Earth a talk yesterday, and I MC but this is a, you know, so I think it's a very important day Earth care day and, and to, to care for this world as a way of caring for our fellow human beings, fellow living life on the planet for the planet itself. And also a way of caring for ourselves with Buddhism teaches as a spirituality of a system that we're all in it together, are all inter interconnected and very interdependent in very profound ways. And so this practice of mutual care, and the hope I have this kind of practice of mindfulness, you know, again, the metaphor of going deep inside and becoming liberated is not just the personal. We don't do it personally for ourselves, but you can't just do it for yourself, because that's the more identification, to freedom from identification, to this entire process goes through, and there's a wonderful way I think of it when we go into work. And it turns out turns us inside out. And then we come out and we're, you

know, you know, we're sensitive and open and connected in a whole different way. And we were before when we were maybe late sighted shell. So, maybe we'd be turned inside out so we can care for this work care for this world or this earth. Thank you.