

# Intro to Mindfulness Pt 2 (12) Bundle of Feelings

March 19, 2024

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS** *khandhas*, aggregates, addiction, clinging, grasping, attachment, tension, contraction, pushing, ideas, attitudes, beliefs, stuck on, comfort, discomfort, pleasant, unpleasant, avoiding, reactive, self, identify, validated, leaning, balance point, seesaw, wakefulness, clarity, observing

**Gil Fronsdal**

Good morning. Welcome to our second talk on mindfulness of grasping and clinging.

There are many synonyms for, and many members of, this family of attachment. One of them is compulsion. Acting on compulsion means that we're not quite in charge, and we're not quite involved with the choices we make. In extreme forms, compulsion can be called "addiction." Some people have addictions to the words they speak and the things that they do – there's a compulsive quality to them. Some people lose themselves in the activity they do.

The Buddha addressed this very directly. He wanted us to be mindful of the whole dynamic of how compulsion, grasping, and attachment arise in us. Clinging and grasping are not abstract ideas. They are physiological events that occur within us. We can feel it. I'd like to propose that when we tense our bodies, we're usually actually grasping onto something. Maybe the tensing feels necessary for us to be safe in some situations.

However, chronic tension is not about our immediate safety in the situation. Chronic tension has to do with grasping, clinging, or attachment where we stick to certain kinds of ideas, beliefs, attitudes, or feelings that we have. Sometimes the compulsion is so strong it can feel as if we're stuck to something. We have the expression in English "to be stuck on" some topic, idea, or feeling.

So attachment is a physiological event as well as a mental and emotional event. The ecology of grasping and compulsion is what we start to become aware of as our mindfulness develops. This is natural. As mindfulness becomes more sensitive, we become more sensitive to where the tensions, contractions, and pushing are, and where the restlessness is. They are all symptoms of this compulsion.

One area of compulsion that's very common for many people, maybe everyone, is around what's pleasant and unpleasant – pleasure and pain, comfort and discomfort. For the Buddha, this is the second of the five bundles of clinging that humans collect.

It's one thing to want to have something sweet to eat; that's fine. But there can also be a compulsion to have it, where something takes over and we don't just have one. We have two, three, or four sweets because something has taken over and we're on automatic pilot.

Each act of compulsion is a new grasping onto something as we gather together these bundles. Some people live with these bundles of clinging and compulsion. The compulsion is not only for something sweet; it's also for certain kinds of pleasures and delights. We compulsively cling to avoiding discomfort at all costs and go to great lengths to make ourselves comfortable in all situations. Some people are more oriented to comfort and discomfort than others. But everyone is oriented to comfort to some degree. We gather many things into these bundles of attachments and compulsivity. It only takes the slightest little change in our circumstances for the compulsion to be ready to act up.

So we can start becoming mindful of our relationship to the pleasant and the unpleasant, to comfort and discomfort. In many ways, it is very fundamental to the human mind to react to pleasant and unpleasant, wanting more of the pleasant and getting away from or attacking the unpleasant. Some people push away the

pleasant. They may have some association with the pleasant that it's wrong to feel the pleasant experience. Some religious teachings seem to encourage people to think that they're not supposed to experience pleasure. In some ways, our attachment to the pleasant is always operating. When you sit down in a chair and it's a little uncomfortable, you want to make yourself comfortable. When you go into a room with people, you might look around to see where it's comfortable or uncomfortable to sit, based on the people who are there. There might be more complicated assessments going on. But for some people, it's just the simple sense of pleasure and pain that's operating.

That can drive a lot of behavior. Sometimes people spend days planning ahead to have a certain kind of pleasure. Or they might go to greater extremes to avoid a certain kind of discomfort that they don't want to deal with. With people who are conflict-avoidant, it might be more complicated than simply avoiding discomfort. But some of the behaviors might just be about avoiding discomfort. They just don't want to be uncomfortable.

People have beliefs around comfort and discomfort or pleasure and pain. Some people feel like they're a failure and they've done something wrong if they're experiencing unpleasantness in their lives. They have to fix that at all costs to prove that they're a worthy or successful person or have a good life. For others, their sense of self gets validated when there's a lot of pleasure and joy. Pleasure might mask some deeper anxiety that they carry. They like who they are when there's a lot of pleasure. However, when there's no pleasure, then they're left with something deeper about themselves that they're not comfortable with.

Some people identify very strongly with discomfort. Some people actually look for discomfort and pain and want to have it, in an odd way, because it's so familiar. Maybe they grew up in a way where that was always their companion. On the surface, they don't want to have it, but they don't know who they are without it. That's how they've navigated the world. They've set up their social relationships around their pain or the difficulties they have. People get attached to these things a lot. For the Buddha, we don't only grab onto one thing. We grab onto lots of things over and over again, and we live carrying these bundles of attachments around.

Feelings are the second of the five bundles (the *khandhas*), often called the "aggregates." To practice with them, it's central to insight practice to start becoming mindful of how things are pleasant and unpleasant so we can see whether or not we're reacting to the pleasant or unpleasant. A lot of human reactivity and motivations are built on the very simple idea that something is pleasant and unpleasant.

I suspect that some political philosophies had their start when someone thought something out in the world was unpleasant for them and they built a whole philosophy to get that to go away and not be there so that they could be more comfortable. Occasionally, some of the more complicated, sophisticated things people are doing are that basic. I've known people who've done great work in science and they said that basically, they're pursuing pleasure. They find tremendous pleasure and delight in their work. The pleasure of the mind is what keeps them going.

But that doesn't mean there's attachment. Pleasure is a beautiful, wonderful part of life. When it's there without attachment and without causing any harm to anyone, there's no reason not to allow ourselves to feel the full extent of the pleasure. This comes into play in meditation. When meditation becomes deeper and more concentrated, a lot of pleasure happens. The idea is to experience it without any for-or-against, without any attachment, and not to make another bundle of grasping around meditative pleasure as we would with many other things.

As we sit quietly in meditation, being mindful of what is, settling into what is, relaxing into what is here, with time we start seeing and feeling how we're reacting, how we're clinging, how we're for or against things, leaning this way and that way. We see how we lose our balance point – that quiet still point in the middle that is where a certain thing comes alive. If we're balanced on the playground seesaw, and the seesaw is parallel to the ground, there has to be continuous wakefulness for us to stay present there.

For people who are sleepy, the sleepiness or dullness in the mind probably goes away if they manage to find that balance point on the playground seesaw. There's something about waking up to that balance point inside of us where we can see and know clearly what's happening. We can feel the difference between leaning forward and leaning back – *literally* leaning forward and leaning back. We kind of cringe and we pull back, or we lean forward when we feel happy. There's nothing again wrong with that; it's instinctual sometimes. But it's the early

warning sign that there's a possibility that compulsivity or grasping is happening and we're getting stuck on something.

See mindfulness as staying in that balance point between pleasure and pain, between the pleasant and the unpleasant, and between comfort and discomfort. It's fantastic when the wakefulness and clarity of mind are strong enough that we're not caught in the orbit of anything. It's almost as if we can see clearly what's happening. The clarity is not caught in what's happening. Some people call this "observing." There's an observing mind that has this balance and clarity. We can find ourselves balanced and wise on the seesaw of life because of that.

I hope that these talks this week will give you some inspiration to respectfully, kindly, and curiously look at how you grasp, how you cling, how you're attached, how you lean in one direction or another, and how you lean into being for-and-against things. For today, look at how you react to just the very simple fact of pleasant and unpleasant, pleasure and pain, comfort and discomfort. How do you live with this? Do you have some compulsivity around this? You might think ahead through the day and consider where during the day you are most likely to be caught up in the issues of pleasant and unpleasant. As you go into that situation, you can prepare yourself to remain mindful and try to understand it better. Thank you.