

1st Foundation of Mindfulness



Our speaker for July 15th, 2009 was Susan Ezequelle. Susan has been practicing meditation since 1997. A student of Gil Fronsdal, she worked closely with Gil and other community members to found the Insight Meditation Center, where she teaches meditation classes and yoga.

The notes on the Dharma talk are entirely Susan's, except for the inserted references.

An Auspicious Day

*You shouldn't chase after the past
or place expectations on the future.
What is past is left behind.*

*The future is as yet unreached.
Whatever quality is present
you clearly see right there, right there.*

*Not taken in, unshaken,
that's how you develop the heart.
Ardently doing what should be done today,
for — who knows? — tomorrow death.*

*There is no bargaining
with Mortality & his mighty horde.
Whoever lives thus ardently,
relentlessly both day & night,
has truly had
an auspicious day:*

so says the Peaceful Sage.

(MN 131: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.131.than.html>)

When I was here last January I gave a talk on the Second Foundation of Mindfulness, Mindfulness of Feeling, and so when I was asked by Louise if I wanted to come and give a series of talks this summer I thought I would take these three successive evenings and cover the other three Foundations of Mindfulness –Mindfulness of Body/Breath, Mind States, and Mind Objects

These Foundations are just that -- they form the bedrock of Vipassana practice. They don't so much as describe mindfulness, rather they describe how we can develop it, how we do this practice.

These 4 foundations are found in one of the very earliest texts we have of the Buddha's teachings, the Satipatthana Sutta, which many consider to be the most important of the Buddha's discourses. In this sutta, the Buddha lays out the different ways in which we can practice mindfulness, the ways in which we can apply non-reactive awareness to our experience. This sutta contains really the Buddha's core instructions for our practice. This is really the "How To" guide to Vipassana practice. Of course Sati is the Pali word for mindfulness, Patthana means foundation, or the means for establishing mindfulness.

So let's take a minute and reflect on why it is that we do this practice.

- 1) It's good for body and mind – it's a way of caring for ourselves in a very deep way.
- 2) We want to be present for each precious moment in life and this practice is the path that leads to that presence
- 3) It helps us to see our lives, our experience more clearly and when our vision is clear we can make better choices in life, more skillful choices and by that I mean choices that cause the least amount of suffering for ourselves and those around us. So our judgment improves, our relationships improve, and we're happier, more deeply content, more at ease in life.
- 4) And mindfulness is what gives us our ballast in life, holds us steady and keeps us from being swept away by the winds of life.

And this was the intention behind the Buddha's decision to teach this practice. He wanted to share this practice so that all of us here tonight, as well as all those practitioners through the ages, could experience the same deep contentment and peace that he found through his practice of mindfulness.

So in this Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha describes this practice as "the direct path to the end of suffering." And of course that's why the Buddha offered us this practice, so that each of us here tonight can be liberated, can become free from suffering in this life.

"Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus as follows: "This is the only way, O bhikkhus, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of suffering and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbana, namely, the Four Arousings of Mindfulness."

"What are the four?"

"Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu lives contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending (it) and mindful (of it), having overcome, in this world, covetousness and grief; he lives contemplating the feelings in the feelings, ardent, clearly comprehending (them) and mindful (of them), having overcome, in this world, covetousness and grief; he lives contemplating consciousness in consciousness, ardent, clearly comprehending (it) and mindful (of it), having overcome in this world covetousness and grief; he lives contemplating mental objects in mental objects, ardent, clearly comprehending (them) and mindful (of them), having overcome, in this world, covetousness and grief."

(MN 10: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.soma.html>)

And in all the various ways that he describes this practice, the common element is this non-reactive awareness, this accepting of what is, this letting go, this ability to "Let it be."

Quick review of Mindfulness of Feeling -- the 2nd Foundation of Mindfulness.

And many people when they hear this word "feelings" they think this must be about, what???

Emotions. But what the Buddha is teaching as this 2nd Foundation of Mindfulness is really the "feeling tone" of our experience in the here and now.

And the Buddha taught that the feeling tone of all our experience in life can be characterized in one of 3 ways -- pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

Understanding this feeling tone and how it affects the mind is crucial really to the process of liberating the mind and heart from suffering. And the order the Buddha placed on these 4 foundations of mindfulness is actually quite key. Because it's necessary to first establish the 1st Foundation of Mindfulness, Mindfulness of the Body, so that we come to our experience of the pleasant and unpleasant embodied, fully in the body. This helps us to not get caught in the world of concepts and interpretations ABOUT our pleasant and unpleasant experiences. This practice is all about coming to our experience fully present, rather than caught in our thoughts ABOUT the experience.

So when we come to our experience fully embodied, and we experience something that's pleasant, an experience that comes through our senses and is pleasurable, there's a natural inclination of the mind towards that experience. We like it, we want it. And vice versa, an unpleasant experience causes the mind to want to swing away, to get away, to resist the unpleasant.

And you can watch this movement in your mind during the day, it's actually a great mindfulness exercise. To notice the movement of the mind towards and away from various experiences. And to notice – most importantly – when we cling to these experiences. We want to hold on to the pleasant ones and we want the unpleasant ones to go away. So, the wanting.....

In this sutta, the Buddha begins his teaching with the phrase-- "having put away covetousness and grief for the world." The world being what we know through our senses.

Covetousness -- this is the wanting and as we get deeply into this practice we come to understand at a very deep level that the source of our true happiness, of contentment and peace in life, is not out there in the world that experience through our senses. It doesn't have to do with getting what we want out there in the world, which I'm sure many of you have noticed, is not really even possible, given the constantly changing nature of the material world.

But there's this other kind of pleasure. The Buddha's practice gives us this UNWORLDLY kind of pleasure, that we cultivate through these 4 Foundations of Mindfulness. This is what we are talking about when we use the words joy, tranquility, bliss, peace, contentment, ease.

These are the qualities available to our minds when we allow them to rest. When we calm the swinging of the mind towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant. When we stop trying to constantly manipulate our experience, to fix things so that everything is to our exact specifications for the liking of it. When we can just "let it be."

So, that was a quick review of the 2nd Foundation of Mindfulness. Now back to the first foundation – mindfulness of body and breath. This is what embodies our practice, grounds us here and now, helps us let go of our preoccupations with "there and then" so we can be here and now, helps us let go of our interpretations ABOUT experience so we can be truly present for what is, so we can see clearly what's happening rather than allowing ourselves to get caught in our concepts and ideas ABOUT what's happening.

[Touch the floor] Mindfulness of the body grounds us right here, right now. In fact one of the characteristics of "Sati" or Mindfulness is described as "not floating away."

The Buddha said that just this practice alone, the establishment of the 1st Foundation of Mindfulness, Mindfulness of body and breath, that this is the only practice you need, really, that this practice all by itself will lead to enlightenment. He also said that the Deathless cannot be attained without Mindfulness of Body and Breath.

"And how does a monk remain focused on the body in & of itself?"

"There is the case where a monk — having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building — sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect and setting mindfulness to the fore [lit: the front of the chest]. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

"Breathing in long, he discerns that he is breathing in long; or breathing out long, he discerns that he is breathing out long. Or breathing in short, he discerns that he is breathing in short; or breathing out short, he discerns that he is breathing out short. He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the entire body and to breathe out sensitive to the entire body. He trains himself to breathe in calming bodily fabrication and to breathe out calming bodily fabrication. Just as a skilled turner or his apprentice, when making a long turn, discerns that he is making a long turn, or when making a short turn discerns that he is making a short turn; in the same way the monk, when breathing in long, discerns that he is breathing in long; or breathing out short, he discerns that he is breathing out short... He trains himself to breathe in calming bodily fabrication, and to breathe out calming bodily fabrication.

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or externally on the body in & of itself, or both internally & externally on the body in & of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that 'There is a body' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself."

(MN 10: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.than.html>)

This is what we just practiced during our sitting, right? Then following the section on Mindfulness of Breathing, the Buddha includes a section on the Four Postures of meditation – sitting, lying, walking and standing. And after he lists these four he adds “a bhikku understands accordingly however his body is disposed.”

And this “understanding accordingly however your body is disposed” can be a powerful tool for strengthening your mindfulness out in your daily life. I am constantly checking in with my body, noticing my posture, noticing the movement of my body as I go down stairs or walk through the grocery store. And this really helps me to be awake, to be present, to not be so lost in mental preoccupations. It’s actually quite restful to have my mind, my awareness centered on the body, rather than careening around the store, looking to alight on what I like and get away from what I don’t like.

"No other thing do I know, O monks, that brings so much harm as a mind that is untamed, unguarded, unprotected, and uncontrolled."

-- the Buddha

This mindfulness of body and breath, this bare attention paid to really simple things, like standing up or walking in the grocery store, is really the hallmark of our practice tradition. And we can use it as a tool or technique for staying awake, for staying present. Probably some of you are already practicing in this way – using a doorway that you walk through every day or a set of stairs that you use every day, using these as reminders, remembering to be mindful.

And what we are doing, actually, is directing the mind, giving it something simple and restful to focus on, just as we use the breath in our meditation. Because when we allow our minds to roam freely, to careen around, then the mind tends to get caught in distractions, to get involved – as the

Buddha described it, “fettered, entangled.” And sometimes this can result in wanting things that aren’t necessarily in our best interest. We may find ourselves acting and speaking in ways that we wouldn’t perhaps consciously choose. And when the mind gets all tangled up in thoughts about what it wants, what it has to have, what it doesn’t have, what it wants to get rid of, then we have an agitated mind, right? Not a peaceful mind.

And even as we use MENTAL NOTING in our meditation to keep the mind from wandering and to encourage non-reactive awareness, we can also note to ourselves while we’re in the grocery store, for example – step, step as we walk through aisles, noting the quality of our breath in a particular moment, noting what our awareness is drawn to – I love ice cream -- and what it wants to dart away from – oh there’s that checkout person I don’t like. Just simple noting without the reactivity. This is the way, after all, that the Buddha met Mara, the god of temptation and distraction. He simply said, “Mara, I see you.”

I thought I would read passages from sutta 138 that really address these tendencies in the mind.

“The Blessed One said this: “A monk should investigate in such a way that, his consciousness neither externally scattered & diffused, nor internally positioned, he would from lack of clinging/sustenance be unagitated. When — his consciousness neither externally scattered & diffused, nor internally positioned — from lack of clinging/sustenance he would be unagitated, there is no seed for the conditions of future birth, aging, death, or stress.”

“How is consciousness said to be scattered & diffused? There is the case where a form is seen with the eye, and consciousness follows the drift of (lit.: ‘flows after’) the theme of the form, is tied to the attraction of the theme of the form, is chained to the attraction of the theme of the form, is fettered & joined to the attraction of the theme of the form: Consciousness is said to be externally scattered & diffused.”

“There is the case where a sound is heard with the ear... an aroma is smelled with the nose... a flavor is tasted with the tongue... a tactile sensation is felt with the body... an idea is cognized with the intellect, and consciousness follows the drift of the theme of the idea, is tied to the attraction of the theme of the idea, is chained to the attraction of the theme of the idea, is fettered & joined to the attraction of the theme of the idea: Consciousness is said to be externally scattered & diffused.”

“And how is the mind said to be internally positioned? There is the case where a monk, quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful (mental) qualities, enters & remains in the first jhana: rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. His consciousness follows the drift of the rapture & pleasure born of withdrawal, is tied to... chained... fettered, & joined to the attraction of the rapture & pleasure born of withdrawal.”

(MN 138: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.138.than.html>)

So there are many ways to use this practice not just on the cushion, but out in our daily lives. And the Buddha emphasizes this way of practicing, moment by moment, as we go through our day.

After the Buddha has described, in the section called The Four Postures – here he describes the four postures for meditation – he talks about “Full Awareness.”

"...when walking, the monk discerns that he is walking. When standing, he discerns that he is standing. When sitting, he discerns that he is sitting. When lying down, he discerns that he is lying down. Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it.

"Furthermore, when going forward & returning, he makes himself fully alert; when looking toward & looking away... when bending & extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe & his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, & savoring... when urinating & defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, & remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert.

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or focused externally... unsustained by anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself."

(MN 10: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.than.html>)

So this practice is all about experiencing the body in and of itself, independent of our interpretations. Just as we practice with the breath in this way – letting go of our thinking ABOUT the breath – “oh, my breath is too sharp, it’s not relaxed enough for meditation. Or oh, my breath is so shallow, I know I should be breathing more deeply, I guess I’m just a bad meditator, and so on. Letting go of those types of interpretations and just being present for the sensations, not judging, not wanting something different.

So let’s practice this for a few moments:

MINDFULNESS OF BODY & BREATHING EXERCISES

- 1) Hand on belly
- 2) Hand on chest
- 3) Walking Meditation

So mindfulness of the body and the breath – a powerful practice. And I love the way the Buddha talks about the breath in this Sattipatthana Sutta. He talks about it as a way of tranquillising the body, as a very deep kind of pleasure. And the beauty of this pleasure is that it doesn’t require us to get something from “out there,” to take something from somebody else, to achieve something out in the world. It’s all right here. This is what the Buddha is referring to in this sutta when he says that we practice the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness “having put away the covetousness and grief for the world.”

Now after the Full Awareness section there is a teaching called Foulness--the Bodily Parts.

"Furthermore...just as if a sack with openings at both ends were full of various kinds of grain — wheat, rice, mung beans, kidney beans, sesame seeds, husked rice — and a man with good eyesight, pouring it out, were to reflect, 'This is wheat. This is rice. These are mung beans. These are kidney beans. These are sesame seeds. This is husked rice,' in the same way, monks, a monk reflects on this very body from the soles of the feet on up, from the crown of the head on down, surrounded by skin and full of various kinds of unclean things: 'In this body there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, gorge, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-oil, saliva, mucus, fluid in the joints, urine.'"

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or focused externally... unsustained by anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself."

(MN 10: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.than.html>)

So what the Buddha is revealing here is that despite our preoccupation with beautiful bodies, really at the elemental level the truth is that the body is quite unbeautiful, right?

So why do you think this section is included in this most fundamental of all the Buddha's teachings?

It's an antidote, really, to our tendencies to be attached to our own bodies, or to lust after someone else's body. It enables us "to abide independent and not clinging to anything in the world." Not even to these beautiful and miraculous bodies that we've been given.

Because we know when we cling, that is the source of all suffering.

But I hope you won't go away with the impression that this practice is a rejection of the body. Because anyone who has practiced for awhile has had at least some experience of the simple pleasures of just sitting with the body, of soothing the body with the breath, of truly relaxing and letting go of tension.

And in many descriptions of the deep meditative states that can come with this practice, you read words like "refreshing upwellings" as from a spring, of a wonderful coolness that permeates the entire body. Of a physical sense of deep joy and delight. So the body can be a source of deep pleasure through this practice, and this "unworldly" pleasure that the Buddha talks about requires nothing from the world, requires you to take nothing from the environment or from someone else.

So following this section on Foulness and Bodily parts, the Buddha teaches about the four elements. Earth, Air, Fire, and Water.

"And further, monks, a monk reflects on this very body, however it be placed or disposed, by way of the material elements: "There are in this body the element of earth, the element of water, the element of fire, the element of wind."

Just as if, monks, a clever cow-butcher or his apprentice, having slaughtered a cow and divided it into portions, should be sitting at the junction of four high roads, in the same way, a monk reflects on this very body, as it is placed or disposed, by way of the material elements: "There are in this body the elements of earth, water, fire, and wind."

Thus he lives contemplating the body in the body..."

(MN 10: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.nysa.html>)

We can think of these elements as categories into which we can place all sensory experience. So for example when you experience heat you can think – Fire element. Heaviness, hardness can be placed in the Earth element category. Movement, expansion & contraction, the Air element. Pressure, the Water element. So in this way we have an elemental level into which we can place all our sensory experience.

So why would we want to do this? Because our practice is aimed at separating the elemental from the interpretations and concepts that mind overlays onto our experience. Another way to think of it is the way that U Tejaniya taught it – what is nature, what is mind? Because it is in realm of interpretations and concepts that the suffering begins, right? So the Buddha is giving us a way to discern what is nature, what is mind?

And the last section in Mindfulness of the Body is the section called the Charnel Ground Contemplations.

"Furthermore, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground — one day, two days, three days dead — bloated, livid, & festering, he applies it to this very body, 'This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate'...

"Or again, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground, picked at by crows, vultures, & hawks, by dogs, hyenas, & various other creatures... a skeleton smeared with flesh & blood, connected with tendons... a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, connected with tendons... a skeleton without flesh or blood, connected with tendons... bones detached from their tendons, scattered in all directions — here a hand bone, there a foot bone, here a shin bone, there a thigh bone, here a hip bone, there a back bone, here a rib, there a breast bone, here a shoulder bone, there a neck bone, here a jaw bone, there a tooth, here a skull... the bones whitened, somewhat like the color of shells... piled up, more than a year old... decomposed into a powder: He applies it to this very body, 'This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate.'

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or externally on the body in & of itself, or both internally & externally on the body in & of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that 'There is a body' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself."

(MN 10: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.than.html>)

I know that monks often keep photos of corpses for contemplation and reflection. Why do you suppose this is?

This practice is about being with this life as it is, not as we would wish it to be, imagine it to be, but as it is, and death is a very real part of life, though our culture does its best to hide it away.

Also the urgency that comes to our practice when we see how short our time here in this life really is. I'll end with the Buddha's last words, just before he died. He said,

"All in this life is impermanent. Practice with diligence."

