

## *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*

*Dharma talk by Maylie Scott, Roshi*

*April 18, 1996 Arcata, CA*

I want to talk today about a very old tradition in Buddhism, The Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

I begin with a story about a man who was walking down the road and saw the Buddha. The Buddha was radiant; he had a wonderful, open, peaceful and radiant look. The man went up and asked him, tried to figure out who he was. "Are you a god?" and the Buddha said "No." "Are you a king?" and the Buddha said, "No." "Are you a man?" and the Buddha said, "No."

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"I am awake."

So this is our endeavor: to be awake. Buddhism is not a theistic religion so it doesn't ask that you bring any belief to it at all. In fact, it asks the opposite: that you simply make the effort to be awake and, in the light of that awakening effort, you examine all the beliefs that you have, and you see what holds and what doesn't hold.

So what does this business of being awake mean? It means that we make an effort to see things as they really are...to be with what is, to be in the present, whatever the depths and the boundaries of that present are. This is a pretty radical effort because we are all bound up in our self-habit. We all have particular points of view and particular feelings and habits and histories, causes and conditions that brought us into the world. We look different, and our attention patterns are different, and our abilities are different, and so on.

We have a tendency to get enclosed in those differences, to be enclosed in our self-habit and therefore to see the world from that point of view. We all have the different spectacles of our self-habit that we see through. The spectacles are so close and familiar that much of the time we don't even notice we're looking through them. Buddhism asks us if we are awake. Can we suspend that self-habit? To what degree can we suspend that self-habit? Can we take that self-habit lightly enough so that we can be in the present, so that we can see things more as they really are?

That's what the exercise of this day is: to notice the self-habit and suspend it. We have had several hours now of sitting in one place and watching our body-mind habits. This effort is an unusual effort because it's just for the sake of itself. If we put some kind of expectation or some kind of goal on this effort, we are still bound to self-habit. For example, we think, "I should be able to keep my mind clear of thoughts; probably everyone else is already doing it." Or "I should be a better person after this day." "Maybe I'll sleep better." All this kind of expectation. It's impossible to be without expectation but still, we should take that lightly because the point of what we are doing is just to be, to suspend the doing and just to be and see what happens.

Our effort is to be mindful. Mindfulness, awakens, is a quality we cannot have too much of. Mindfulness means to just be aware of what is coming and of what is here and of what is gone. And mindfulness has several aspects. There's a very sharp, clear aspect of mindfulness. One teacher says it's like throwing a rock against the wall and when you hear the rock hit, that moment, that's mindfulness. The complete moment of contact is mindfulness.

Another aspect of mindfulness is awareness, a broader aspect, just being aware of your toes and your scalp and your waist, a kind of inclusive awareness. And another aspect of mindfulness is called bare

attention, just shining a light on, just bare attention. So the right effort in this day of sitting is simply to be mindful, to be present, and that involves, as you are finding out, balancing, a continual kind of balancing of all the aspects of your situation. It's like being in a sailboat: when there's a strong wind, you take in the sail; when there's a big wind, you let it out, and you're steering and constantly making adjustments to what the changes in the weather are. So in this day your mindful effort is, from moment to moment, to know what's going on in this system and to balance it in the most awake way possible.

I'm going to talk about a very old teaching called "The Four Foundations of Mindfulness," using Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. I'll read part of the Sutra translation.

The Buddha said: "Bhikkus, there is a most wonderful way to help living beings realize purification, overcome directly grief and sorrow, end pain and anxiety, travel the right path and realize nirvana. This way is the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. "What are the Four Establishments?"

1. "Bhikkus, a practitioner remains established in the observation of the body in the body, diligent, with clear understanding, mindful, having abandoned every craving and every distaste for this life.
2. "He remains established in the observation of the feelings in the feelings, diligent, with clear understanding, mindful, having abandoned every craving for this life.
3. "He remains established in the observation of the mind in the mind, diligent, with clear understanding, mindful, having abandoned every craving and every distaste for this life.
4. "He remains established in the observation of the objects of mind in the mind, diligent, with clear understanding, mindful, having abandoned every craving and every distaste for this life."

These are the four foundations. You notice that there's a little tag with each one of them, "with clear understanding." That is, one sets one's intention, one sets one's purpose very strongly. You say to yourself, "I'm going to stay here, no matter what. I am going to sit on this cushion. I am going to be here awake for this day," and that's just a strong intention. Mindful. Making that effort.

"Having abandoned every craving and every distaste for this life." We're just continually buffeted between our wanting and our not wanting, between our craving and our aversion, so this is a request to give that up for this time, to suspend wanting and not wanting and just apply attention.

The first foundation of "observing the body in the body" is what zazen instruction persistently emphasizes. It means to put your attention just on the body sensation and to be aware of all that kind of body music, sensation, energy that is always going on underneath the skin, that we're often only slightly aware of. Just be there, be in the breath, be in the body, to be in the presence of the body, putting effort into keeping the body open.

The second foundation of mindfulness is "observing the feelings in the feelings." Now, what are feelings? We have emotional feelings: we're happy, we're sad, we're tired, we're excited, depressed. We have physical feelings, physical feelings of anger, desire and so on, and so there is a whole continuum of feeling.

We can use these foundations of mindfulness by first just putting the attention on the body, just the body sensation, and then in the body base, you can move to the feeling foundation. What are the feelings? What are the feeling sensations? What are the feeling energies? What are the emotional feelings? Are they positive? Are they negative? Are they neutral? There's always something going on. If it's a neutral feeling, it's kind of transparent, but it's there. Observing neutral feelings is a very subtle practice.

The third is the state of mind, examining the state of mind, the feeling states-of-mind such as excitement or torpor or anxiety, faith, hope, irritation anger, contentment, restlessness, etc. One way to be mindful of states of mind is to name them. If I'm irritated, I just notice that and perhaps say "irritation" or if I'm sleepy, I notice that and say "sleepy." So you always know the state of mind you're in; very often we don't know the state of mind we're in; so we carry it around, and it is actually what we're acting out of, but we don't know it. Can you notice what the state of mind is? And you may even be able to notice how it changes; you may notice that your state of mind at the beginning of the first period of zazen is quite different from what it is now, and so on.

And then the final foundation is the contents of the mind, what it is we are actually thinking about, the stream of contents. It may be that it's a very extended daydream or plan, or it may be it's a thought that has a lot of juice in it. For instance, you may be thinking about a close relationship, feeling very loving about that person and missing that person. How does the body respond to that thought? If the thought is about some unresolved situation that you're trying to work out, and carries some anxiety and maybe irritation about it, what's the feeling in the body which is associated with that?

If you find yourself becoming preoccupied and carried away by the thought you are thinking—that it persists and dominates—you can try cutting the thought off, just not thinking and just feeling the feelings underneath, breathing with the feelings underneath. That can be very releasing.

So those are the four traditional foundations of the mindful effort: the body, the feelings, the state of mind and the contents of mind. That's the kind of sieve you can use to let the day go through. Sometimes your experience will be that malleable; other times the experience just takes over. Sometimes all you can do is take one breath at a time, and that's valuable too.

The important thing is to be awake and aware of your own state of body-mind, moment by moment.