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The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Practicing Presence and Resilience

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What is Mindfulness: Myth Versus Reality

Over the years, I've worked with caregivers of all sorts: teachers, trauma workers, doctors, and therapists. Through it all, I've found that mindfulness is an invaluable practice for helping them to increase their capacity for maintaining present awareness and resilience through their emotionally demanding work. In my experience teaching mindfulness to caregivers, many basic questions predictably come up—not just about how it can help and protect them, but about what mindfulness even is and how it is practiced.

For caregivers and many other students of mine, one of the most basic questions around mindfulness has to do with the various meanings of the word. Many of the ways mindfulness is described—such as being with your experience without judging it or being in the present moment without reacting—seem to imply a kind of passivity or complacency, just being with everything without judgment. The fact is mindfulness doesn't really mean that. Real mindfulness involves a very dynamic, vibrant, and creative relationship to whatever may be happening within or around us. It involves a mode of being in which we are not bound to old habits, like tunneled ways of seeing or rigid ways of responding. Unfortunately, the word mindfulness as we commonly use it today does not necessarily imply such dynamic involvement.

A corollary problem is the meaning of other common terms in the practice of mindfulness like craving, wanting, or desire. When Westerners learn that the Buddha recommended that we move toward a state of letting go of desire as a driving force toward a state of desirelessness, we often hear it as something awful. It's important to be able to distinguish the precise sense of such

terms, including nuances that often are not present in English words like “mindfulness” or “desire.” The original terms used in Sanskrit, Pali, and other Buddhist languages often have a range of distinct connotations that may be spread across a range of different technical terms, while those meanings may all be lumped together in one English word that we use to translate all the different senses. For instance, having bold and intense aspiration and gathering all your energy behind it, in the traditional context doesn’t mean craving. Knowing the difference between things doesn’t mean judgment.

Mindful Judgment and the Urge for Real Happiness

Recently, when I was teaching, I began talking about the way we can distinguish pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, and neutral feelings. Somebody raised his hand and said, “I don’t think that’s mindfulness, because if you’re discerning, you’re judging.” I answered, “No, we actually make a particular point of distinguishing between discernment and judgment. That judgment, the immediate reflex reaction of holding on or pushing away, is different from knowing something hurts or feels great.”

Reactive judgment is a kind of mindless, preconceived judgment, which is really more like pre-judgment or prejudice than discerning or mindful judgment. We can tell the difference between an amazing narrative thread that is onward-leading, opening doors of possibility and bringing us together with others in a less fearful way, versus the oldest, most damaging story we have been telling ourselves about being unable to do anything well. The first is something we need to cultivate, the latter something we need to let go of. We’re constantly practicing discernment as part of the philosophy and psychology of mindfulness, and that doesn’t mean craving or judgment. Simply wanting to be happy is not craving.

One common complaint I’ve heard, especially about my last two books, *Real Happiness* (Salzberg, 2010) and *Real Happiness at Work* (Salzberg, 2013), is that wanting to be happy is somehow wrong, like craving; that it necessarily involves being selfish, self-preoccupied, or self-centered. Traditionally, the natural wish we all have to be happy isn’t mere craving. In fact, the Buddha said all beings want to be happy. It’s rightful, it’s appropriate. The problem isn’t wanting to be happy; the problem is the ignorance or delusion that makes it impossible for us to be truly happy. In fact, our urge toward happiness can be like the homing instinct for freedom. We can cut through many obstacles by saying, “I want to be happy. I deserve to be happy. All beings deserve to be happy.” We just have to figure out how.

The Truth of Suffering: Craving as Tunnel Vision

But what does craving mean in this context? It's got different elements: clinging, grasping, holding on. Craving also has an element of fixation: we're obsessed with an experience, an object, with people, or with something we hope will bring us a completion we feel we don't already have. When we get lost in the state of craving, we might overlook what it will cost us to get that thing, what we're losing in the process of getting it, or how we're mistreating others to get whatever it might be.

I often teach at Tibet House in New York City, which doubles as an art gallery. One day, I was sitting on the stage giving a meditation on greed or craving and I could see a Tibetan wall hanging off in the corner as I spoke. The process I was experiencing in my own mind at the time was a typical case of craving, so I decided to share it with the audience. "That is such a beautiful *thangka*," I remarked. "I can't see the price tag, but wow—it is so amazing, I love it; I think I have to own it." From there I thought, "Okay, I'm going to buy it." But as I remembered I was living in a teensy sublet apartment, and that I wasn't allowed to hang anything on the walls, it didn't occur to me to stop my thought process. My next step was to think, "I need a new apartment." And as long as the thought of a new apartment was on the table, I considered, "Why don't I get a bigger apartment? With more space, the *thangka* could have its own room with special lighting." But then I realized that if I was going to get a new apartment in New York City, I would have to be able to afford the rent. In order to make more money, I'd have to travel more, teach more. Finally, I realized with a bittersweet pang, "Okay, I'll never be in New York, never see my *thangka*, never have time to be in my apartment, but at least I'll own it."

When we're caught in the grip of craving, we get trapped in the fantasy that this object may finally be the thing that's going to make our really painful feeling of lack disappear. When we're so lost in craving, we don't even know what we want. We're counting on someone else, or society's message, to tell us what is going to make us happy. We forget the truth that everything changes, every ordinary, fleeting pleasure passes. It's as if we are saying, "Don't change, stay exactly the same—be static." This is not going to happen, and all our resentment and protestations are not going to work, so we suffer intensely. Craving is thus the engine of ignorance that makes life an inescapable cycle of suffering that keeps us constantly going astray from the path to real happiness. When we get quiet enough to observe our minds closely, we can see this cycle driving us deeper into the downward spiral of dissatisfaction and suffering.

This is what the Buddha meant by teaching that a misguided life of mindless craving and frustration is *samsara*. This is his first Noble Truth: our minds and lives get poisoned by ignorance, craving, and resentment. When we stop and pay mindful attention to what's going on constantly in our minds and lives, even for just a moment, we see right away that they have become living, breathing hotbeds of dissatisfaction.

Non-Reactive Mindfulness: Stop Holding On, Spacing Out, Pushing Away

The usual way of describing experience is our tendency to cling, to hold on, to want to keep or own what's pleasant, while wanting to push away, discard, and separate ourselves from what's unpleasant. When we experience something as simply neutral—neither very pleasant nor unpleasant—our motivational system typically just goes to sleep. That's where numbness or shutdown comes in as a common reaction to mere neutrality. In our collective life and society, where we're not trained to appreciate subtlety, we tend to count on intensity to feel alive. When things get more neutral, we want to hype it up just to have more stimulation, to feel a connection, and are not generally able to abide the subtlety. So, the fact is we have a wide range of conditioned reactions to pleasantness, unpleasantness, neutrality. Even though those three—holding onto to pleasure, pushing away pain, and numbing out in neutrality—are the reactions most commonly spoken about in the tradition, we know from experience working with people that the human mind is a complex world of conditioned reactions.

The shorthand for this complexity is that we learn to observe and say to ourselves, "I'm holding on to the pleasant," or "I'm pushing away the negative," or "I'm spacing out or numbing out with the neutral." According to this tradition, the Buddha taught that this is the moment when we have the chance to observe and respond in a fundamentally different way. We may feel the pleasure of something fully, but we don't have to add that extra conditioned reaction of clinging. We may feel the pain of something fully, but we don't have to add the conditioned reaction of shame, isolation, anger, dread, and so on—the reactions we tend to associate with pain. The question becomes: how can we actually wake up and connect and feel alive in the more neutral realm? We need to stop picking and choosing and start learning to experience and respond wisely to whatever comes.

The extensive definition of mindfulness I was taught (again, there are many definitions of mindfulness) is that it is a quality of awareness in which we are

not reacting with grasping, aversion, or delusion. We feel the pleasure, we feel the pain, we experience the neutrality, but we are practicing mindfulness of them rather than being lost in one of these habitual reactions. If we accept this traditional definition, a number of things follow. One, of course, is a better experience of our day because we're more connected, we're clearer. We're not fighting our experience.

We discover so many levels when we're looking at our experience truly mindfully. When we can let go of the big agendas about what we're going to find, the distortions of what we do find, or our preconceived need for things to be a certain way, that's real mindfulness, because we're paying attention without holding on, pushing away, or numbing out. Practicing this quality of mind creates the kind of internal environment in which we can see so much more than we could before. It's as if we're fertilizing soil for insight and wisdom to grow—and that's the ultimate reason why we practice mindfulness.

Mindful Insight: A Space for Metacognition

Mindfulness, too, is a relational quality. You may be resting your attention on the feeling of the breath and maybe this great wave of anger comes up. As a result, you find yourself not trying to get back to the breath but paying full attention to the anger. Interestingly, one way to avoid getting lost in the anger is to practice mindfulness *while* paying attention to it. Start with some questions: What does it feel like in my body? What are the sensations? What's the mood? Take a look at the anger, not just why it is there and what I am going to do about it, but what is the nature of this feeling. What do we see when we practice such open reflection or insight meditation? More likely than not, we will see moments of sadness, perhaps moments of fear, moments of guilt, moments of grief. Very likely, we see moments of helplessness which the anger is working to pick us up from. We see that the state of anger that gripped us in fact is a compound. With this broader and deeper awareness of our anger and its constituent causes, if we choose to take action, it will be based on a broader, clearer sense of what we're feeling, not just on the surface level of the experience.

According to the way I was taught, mindfulness is a compound process. That's something I like to say now to my students. Mindfulness is classically described as clear comprehension. It means that we're not just "present" (a buzzword that's often associated with the practice), but being present in a non-reactive way, a way that empowers us to see more deeply and more clearly

into things. That process of seeing or insight is what actually prompts our evolution on the path. From the point of view of mindfulness, it doesn't matter what we're looking at, but it does matter how we're looking at it. I'm sure every single one of us would love to spend time at a meditation retreat and be able to say to a friend who asked how it was, "Well, first it was peaceful, then it was beautiful, then blissful, then it moved right into ecstasy, and I entered this state I can't even describe." Rather than, "First my knee hurt, then my back hurt, then I got tired and fretful, then I got restless, and then I got sleepy." From the point of view of mindfulness, these two flavors of experience are potentially the same. The question is not just *what* happened, but *how were you with* what happened? How aware were you of what happened?

If we practice mindfulness, whatever comes up is potentially useful and profound. With mindfulness, all our experience offers many possibilities for change, for transformation. We can relate to pleasure differently, we can relate to pain differently, and we can relate to neutrality differently. In this way, mindfulness practice can open up a whole new world of possibilities for us.

Methodology: Practicing the Four Foundations

There are many ways of presenting the methodology of meditation. The classic way in my tradition is presented in a Pali text called the *Satipatthana Sutta*, which lays out the main teaching within the Buddhist Canon concerning mindfulness as a meditation method (Gunaratana, 2011). My colleague Joseph Goldstein wrote a fantastic book called *Mindfulness*, explicating what he called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness based on this teaching (Goldstein, 2016). There's a lovely passage at the outset of the text that begins, "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and distress, for the attainment of the right method, and for the realization of unbinding." That method involves the four foundations of mindfulness. These foundations begin with mindfulness of the body, which is described thus: "There is the case where a monk ..." or as I prefer to say, a meditator,

remains focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings ... mind ... mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

(Gunaratana)

Practically speaking, there are so many different ways one can approach this instruction. One of the great boons of our era is that people aren't necessarily locked in their little sectarian silo, thinking, "My way is the best way, the only way." That kind of sectarianism does exist, of course, and it doesn't even take two traditions for that to happen—it just takes two people. But nowadays, we know of so many different ways of being aware of the body, of feelings, of mind, and of mental qualities—that is, of all four foundations at once; and we also know of many ways of focusing on each one separately.

The First Foundation: Mindfulness of the Breathing Body

So, we begin with mindfulness of the body. At a very basic level, mindfulness of the body is largely about posture—being mindful of when we are bending, stretching, standing, or sitting—this involves a kind of overarching sense of what your body is doing at any given moment. Classically, mindfulness of the body also focuses specifically on the breath. Finally, sometimes it involves awareness of the different qualities in your experience of your body. The text says, "The body is made of earth, water, fire, and air." What this means is that we actually experience the body's solids, liquids, heat, and gases, in their various manifestations. The fire element, for instance, refers to our experience of temperature. Sometimes we experience our body as cold, sometimes we experience its heat. This reflection on the elemental qualities of the body is one whole aspect of mindfulness meditation on the body.

Another involves a practice Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013) popularized: the body-scan. This is a practice you might learn in your first retreat, where you move your attention throughout every part of your body gradually and systematically, just feeling the presence and sensation of each part. This is simply meant to train a nonreactive, nonjudgmental experience of being in a living body, in which we practice not clinging, not condemning, and not spacing out, as we move our attention through our whole body.

Another aspect of mindfulness of the body involves walking meditation. It is said that the Buddha taught we can meditate in any one of four postures: sitting, standing, walking, or lying down. They're all equally valid platforms for practicing body mindfulness. Traditionally, all four postures are integrated into a whole system of practice. It's not like one is remedial and one advanced. If you have trouble being mindful while you sit, you may have an easier time lying down. The difference is simply one of energy and doesn't affect the integrity of the process. We tend to have the most energy while walking, the least while lying down, and a moderate amount while sitting or standing.

So, by adjusting our posture we can modulate our energy. I read a story in a traditional commentary on mindfulness about a monk who fell asleep every single time he sat down to meditate. According to the story, his entire practice became walking meditation—for sixty years. This story helped me realize the good news that there's a practice for everybody!

Recently, I've spent more and more time working with people who are very close to a traumatic experience. My work with these people tends to be a lot like the work of that monk. I find they can get more easily grounded by making simple physical contact with the world. I often ask them simply to feel the weight of a cup in their hand, its heaviness. The work can be very concrete and very physical, making a grounding connection with their bodies in the present moment. Given that grounding, our work together can more easily move from the concrete level to something far more refined, like feeling the fine sensations within your body, even letting the seeming solidity of your body dissolve. It all depends on what your experience is and how you can most easily work with it. Your body will go to work with you, your breath will go to work with you. So, this kind of mindfulness practice is a tremendous tool for integration.

The Second Foundation: Mindfulness of Feeling Tone

When we combine body mindfulness with the second foundation, mindfulness of feeling tone, it opens the door to deep understanding. Given this combined practice, we can ask ourselves,

Where is the gravest suffering when I am feeling physical pain? Is it in my knee, or is it in my mind? Is it in my experience in the present moment, or is it in my projection—what do I anticipate it will feel like next week, the week after next, and the week after that?

These are all powerful arenas of investigation, especially when we integrate them with the reflective aspect of mindfulness, “How am I responding to the pleasant feeling in my body?” Here again, mindfulness opens up a concrete arena for that exploration. “How am I responding to the unpleasant feeling in my body? If my feeling is neutral, how often am I paying attention?” These two foundations, mindfulness of the body and of feeling tone, go together very powerfully when we really look at our day and investigate what is bringing us to greater confinement, tunnel vision, and isolation, versus what is actually freeing us, even in the face of adversity, when things are difficult or unpleasant.

A story I like to use to describe how mindfulness works came from a *New York Times* article I read a number of years ago, when mindfulness programs in schools were very unusual. The story involved a pilot program in Oakland that took place in a fourth-grade classroom, and featured two quotations I especially liked. One quote came from one of the researchers, who said, “All day long, we tell kids to pay attention, but we never teach them how.” Another came when they asked one of the kids—who must have been eight or nine years old—what mindfulness is. He answered, “Mindfulness means not hitting someone in the mouth.” I found that a great definition, because it implies that mindfulness helps us know there’s a problem when we’re starting to feel angry, not after we’ve said or done something regrettable, like hitting someone in the mouth. Here, too, awareness of the body is a tremendous tool, perhaps not for everybody but for most of us. When you learn to tune in to your experience, you feel a sensation in your body as it’s just beginning. In this way, mindfulness offers a great feedback system, well before there’s any higher cognitive understanding. With mindfulness of the body and feeling tone, you can sense implicitly what’s under the radar—such as “I’m getting really angry now!” Once you feel it, you know it, and can respond accordingly.

Another aspect of mindfulness implied by that schoolboy’s statement suggests the benefit of having a balanced relationship to painful experiences like anger. If every time you get angry, you get caught up in it and wind up being overwhelmed and reactive, you may end up hitting a lot of people in the mouth, literally or metaphorically. On the other hand, if you fear anger and try to suppress or deny it, you run the risk of getting wound up tighter and tighter until you simply explode. What we want ideally is something in the middle. We’re better off when we can keep our balance, without getting caught up by our experience and without pushing it away. Given this balance, we can recognize our experience quickly and be with it skillfully. The balanced awareness gives us a space, and in that space we have greater choice. Within that space, there is time to reconsider: “Well, I hit someone in the mouth last week and it didn’t work out that well.” That kind of mindful experience is very far from an automatic reflex reaction. There are many ways in which people try to describe this balance, space, or gap, but I like this one—mindfulness means not hitting someone in the mouth.

Mindful Balance: Don’t Just Be with Pain

Some people mistake the middle way of mindfulness for a kind of bypassing or suppression of emotion, but that’s not the real intent or effect of the

practice. Yes, there's a fine line between feeling the feeling clearly and long enough for it to register without holding on too long that we begin to indulge it, and I can't say exactly where that line is. I think it's a very complicated issue, and certainly this kind of monitoring process can be utilized to bypass feeling—many people do use it that way. But perhaps that isn't always wrong either. I think it's all a question of balance. The idea isn't to suffer for the sake of suffering, but to be able to be with pain as well as pleasure in a different way. That different way has certain components to it, including some positive energy, as well as a degree of self-compassion or self-respect (Salzberg, 2002). This practice is not about repressing emotions or hating what you're feeling. It's about seeking a different kind of balance, realizing, "I'm overwhelmed, I'm getting close to being overwhelmed. I need to pull back. I need to do something else."

In 1984, we invited one of my teachers, Sayadaw Upandita from Burma, to the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts, to teach a three-month retreat. We were all going to sit under his guidance. None of us had ever met him before but we all had heard that he was a really great teacher. In fact, he was a great teacher, but he also turned out to be fierce, intense, and incredibly demanding.

One day, we were in the hall doing a question-and-answer session and somebody asked him, "How long should I be with pain"—physical pain in that case—"before I move my attention to something that's easier to be with? Listening to sounds, something lighter, something like that?" Given Upandita's personality, I thought he was going to say, "You should be with the pain until you keel over." But to my astonishment, he said, "Don't be with it for very long. Be with the pain, then move your attention to something that's easier to be with." Then he explained, "It's not wrong just to be with the pain, but you're likely to get exhausted, so why not build in balance along the way."

That was an interesting reflection for me because at that time I had a warrior spirit in practice, as many do. I thought, "I'm just going to hang in there. I'm going to break through this suffering no matter what." I approached my pain the same way when I was in psychotherapy. And once again, there's a healthy balance. We don't want to be afraid of the pain, whatever kind it is; we don't want to take the easy path of avoiding it or denying it. But we also need to face it within some sort of healing context. We need to keep restoring ourselves along the way, regenerating ourselves so there's renewal, resilience. In order to do that, we need to be with our pain—physical, emotional, or spiritual—in a different way.

The Third Foundation: Mindfulness of Mind

The next two foundations are mindfulness of the mind and mindfulness of mental objects. The precise distinction and intersection between these two have confused people for centuries. These two foundations are described in a lot of different ways in different teaching traditions and contexts. In Buddhist psychology, and certainly in classical versions of it, there are six kinds of consciousness. These refer to the different types of consciousness that arise when there is contact between one of the six sense doors—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or mentally intuiting the world—and its respective kind of object. For instance, visual consciousness arises when the eye encounters a visual object, auditory consciousness when the ear encounters an auditory object, olfactory consciousness when the nose encounters an olfactory object, and so forth.

The term “consciousness” and “mind” are often used synonymously. They both refer to a quality of knowing awareness, so mind in general is considered to be any kind of perceptual capacity. Part of the practice of this particular foundation is to know when we have an experience of seeing, to know when there’s hearing, to know when there’s smell, to know when there’s taste, to know when there’s touch, and to know when there’s something arising through the mind—that is, the sixth sense of bare reflection on prior moments of sense experience. So, the first level of mindfulness of mind means simply being able to identify which of the six kinds of consciousness is predominant at any one time.

The Fourth Foundation: Mindfulness of Mental Factors

Although there are many factors that surround or co-arise with any given type of consciousness, they are in fact considered to be mental objects of the mind, rather than the mind itself. In other words, the factors we add to simple consciousness—such as thinking, emotion, memory, and so on—belong to the fourth foundation of mindfulness, the foundation of mental objects. One of my teachers, Munindra, always used to say, “The mind itself is pure.” What this means is that mind, or consciousness, is simply knowing awareness, even though arising along with any and every consciousness there are various mental factors, some of which arise quite a lot. When we move to this fourth foundation, we learn to recognize what these factors are, and to discern whether they are positive, negative, or neutral. Neutral factors like attention are simply part of the basic workings of perception. Others are negative functions,

including emotional or motivational factors like greed, hatred, and delusion. Some of them are positive, such as love, compassion, joy, equanimity, and insight or wisdom. One subtle aspect of the fourth foundation of mindfulness is that it's always co-arising with consciousness. It's like a filter in many ways, and consequently it is very important to notice. We can hear a sound with hatred or disappointment on one day, while on another day, after a good night's sleep, we might hear the very same sound with amusement or love. None of that variability is fixed, none of it is irrevocably or intrinsically tied to the sound, but as we hear the sound, along with a feeling tone of pleasure, pain, or neutrality, there arises some combination of these mental functions or ways of relating to that primary experience.

As you can imagine, actually recognizing the filters that color our conscious experience is a very useful part of our mindful awareness. Among the most relevant filters for practitioners to notice are the five mental functions known as the five hindrances, which are not only very common but are also talked about very often. I'm always happy to hear about them because they make me reflect, "If the Buddha described those hindrances, then it's not just me!" The first two common hindrances are grasping and aversion; the latter of which, in the Theravada system refers to both anger and/or fear. Next comes sleepiness or sluggishness, which is sometimes called sloth and torpor, and often described as a lack of the brand of courage that gives us energy when we're feeling sort of inert. Number four is restlessness or distraction, which could also be thought of as agitation or worry. The fifth hindrance is doubt. These mental factors are called hindrances not because they're intrinsically bad, but because they tend to be seductive and derail practice. If we get lost in them, we tend to veer off from the reality of things. We can easily get lost in greed or clinging, get intoxicated so we don't stop and reflect, "You know, maybe that wall hanging won't make me perfectly, finally, forever happy." So, we can easily get carried away with the seductive influence of greed or clinging, and taken very far from the reality of change. Likewise, when we get angry, we naturally become lost in hostility and aversion to what has angered us, so we can get carried away very far from reality.

The Mind Itself Is Pure, Our Afflictions Are Visitors

As I said, these five mental factors are not intrinsically bad. They may be hindrances or not depending on how we relate to them. They come up in meditation because they come up often in life, and the purpose of seeing them certainly isn't to condemn or belittle oneself but to learn a

different relationship with them. Fundamental acceptance of ourselves and our basic goodness is a vital ingredient of Buddhist teaching. This is clearly conveyed in one of Buddha's teachings that I find perhaps the most helpful and beautiful: "The mind is naturally radiant and pure; the mind is shining. It's because of visiting forces that we suffer." The hindrances are just such visiting forces, and the traditional approach to these factors typifies the amazing optimism of the Buddhist tradition and mindfulness practice.

There are several layers of profundity to the Buddha's pronouncement about our luminous minds being visited by afflictions. First of all, it affirms that those forces, however familiar, are just visitors, including the greed, the jealousy, the hatred, the fear. They may visit a lot, perhaps visit nearly incessantly, but they're still just visitors. They're born out of conditions coming together in a certain way. They're not inherent to our being. Conditions shift, and with those shifts these forces or factors come and go. Another element of that statement I find very profound is that Buddha did not say, "Since we are visited by negative forces, we're negative people, we're bad." He said, "It's because of visiting forces that we suffer." Thanks to this image, I can imagine myself sitting happily at home minding my own business and hearing a knock at the door. When I open the door there may be greed, sloth, anger, whatever. I may even fling open the door and say, "Welcome home, it's all yours," forgetting I actually live here. More often, I'm so ashamed and so upset by the arrival of that visitor that I desperately slam the door and try to pretend I never heard the knock, only to find that the visitor has come in through the window, or down through the chimney.

I often think of the skill of meditation practice in terms of what happens when we're at that door, when we open it up and there's an unwelcome visitor. Not all visitors are unwelcome, there's a whole range of mental factors, but let's say it's one of the hindrances, or maybe a couple arriving together. What do we do? Can we remember who actually lives here? Can we have a kind of centeredness? Presence? Can we recognize what's happening right now, that this is what's visiting, without freaking out, "Oh my God, I'm so bad," or just caving in, "Take me, I'm yours"? Mindfulness involves a kind of balanced awareness that isn't frightened by what's come up; it's not trying to push it away, and it's not just giving in either. In this sense, mindfulness must have elements of compassion, a kind of tenderness (Salzberg, 2002). This may be especially true if your tendency is to be frightened by negative habits of mind, to feel they shouldn't be there and to blame yourself. In that case, we need a kind of balancing exercise to invite them in.

Open-Mindfulness: Greeting Visitors from Inner Space

Once I was practicing at IMS with my teacher Munindra, who was visiting from India. I was very upset about something or other, some anger that was arising in my mind, and I said, “I’ve been meditating for five years, I shouldn’t be here anymore.” He said, “This is how you should be with your anger: imagine a spaceship just landed on the lawn and some Martians come out and approach you and say, ‘What is anger?’ That’s how to be with anger.” I often ask myself, “What do I feel in my body right now? Where is the compound that is my anger?” We may hang a single label on it but let’s take a deeper look. Typically, moments of anger come all mixed up with moments of sadness, moments of fear, moments of guilt, moments of grief, moments of helplessness. And within that moment-to-moment process there’s the reality of change—always, inevitably. So, we use the vehicle of anger to see more deeply into the nature of life on lots of different levels. In this sense, mindfulness practice serves as a platform for insight meditation, and it’s this insight that forms the real path to healing and freedom.

When practicing mindfulness, we need to train ourselves to approach our experience—positive, negative, or neutral—with the kind of open-minded inquiry Munindra recommended. That can then become a feedback system for making choices, for taking action during the day, at work, with my kids, whatever. We don’t just notice but observe, and ask, “What’s the nature of it? What’s that rich texture of all these other feelings? And what are the deeper truths about life?” Since, classically, mindfulness is designed to lead to insight, to understanding, then even a conventionally undesirable experience, like anger, can be a vehicle for very profound insights about life, insights like the truth of change, or conditionality, or contingency, or transparency. Of course, if somebody stopped me on the street and said, “Would you rather see something deeply about the truth of change through looking at bliss or at anger?” I would say, “Bliss.” But since no one stops us and asks us—we don’t get a menu—we can use anything as a vehicle for deeper understanding into the nature of things. And so that’s really what mindfulness of the mind and mental objects is all about. It’s paying attention to whatever is arising predominately in one’s experience, paying attention to awareness itself.

The Fourth Foundation as an Arena for Mindful Insight and Change

This fourth foundation of mindfulness is admittedly a little tricky. It’s like an arena or field of learning and change. Some traditions take most of what I just

said about mental factors—thoughts, emotions, memories, fantasies—and put them in that arena. Other traditions consider all those factors as part of the third foundation, mindfulness of mind, and consider the fourth almost like sets of insights or principles for reflection. According to the latter approach, in the fourth foundation we’re observing processes like the arising of suffering or observing elements like the causes of suffering. In that process of mindful inquiry, insight, or reflection, we can see it all happen: the clinging, the holding on, the resentment, the being hostile in some way to how things are. And we hopefully can also see some kind of letting go, which is the relief. We can see all those patterns and configurations in the fourth foundation, guided by some great lists of relevant factors, lists like the four noble truths, the seven factors of enlightenment, or the five spiritual faculties.

Whichever approach we choose, this fourth foundation shows that the psychology of mindfulness is not filled with negative factors. Within the seven factors of enlightenment, for instance, we find an array of truly positive, healing factors. Three of them are considered arousing positive qualities, energy, investigation, and a factor usually translated as rapture or raptness, meaning an intense interest in something. There are also three quieting qualities: calm, concentration, equanimity. And then there’s mindfulness in the middle, which brings all the others into balance. One of the classical themes in the description of that last foundation is, “You can be mindful of the presence or absence of equanimity.” As I hear it, that theme expresses a kind of radical acceptance. It gives me the option to be mindful of my complete absence of equanimity right now, rather than accelerating it, escalating it, compounding it, and judging or hating myself for the absence of equanimity.

This is just one example of how this foundation of practice allows us to appreciate how many different ways the factors of mind can come together. I also think seeing mind and mental factors combining in all kinds of patterns helps us appreciate the causality of the mind in a somewhat different way than the third foundation.

Despite the conventional wisdom that we’re afraid of the unknown, I’ve found through observing my own mind that fear is much more likely to visit when I think I do know what’s happening and expect that it’s going to be really bad. It’s the stories I tell myself that most terrify me, until I remind myself, “Actually you don’t know.” Then there’s some space to observe, and from there, real relief. It’s like watching something over the course of time: as you observe the changes, you can say, “Oh, look at that! It turns out it’s just a story not reality.”

In terms of practice, the way of doing this I'm most familiar with is to begin by simply sitting. Next, you pay attention to something neutral, like the breath, taking that as a home base. Then you include feeling tone, then tactile consciousness, which we call physical sensation. When your consciousness of physical sensation becomes really prominent, you then switch your attention to the fourth foundation. I usually offer the option of placing a mental label on whatever seems to emerge with predominance, whether an emotion comes up strongly, or a thought pattern comes up strongly. The fourth focus or arena of practice is to be with and investigate that predominant object. When this works, your meditation may come to resemble looking at an anger movie or looking at a joy movie. We apply words or labels as expressions of curiosity or interest. As an illustration, you could imagine you're in a movie theater and there's the screen and you're just going to watch those scenes go by, just like subtitles in a movie. Or you could imagine you're watching the sky, and see the beauty of the sky and the clouds. There are many, many ways to do this fourth form of mindfulness practice.

All of this is in the realm of mindfulness. And again, from a particular system or tradition, there are so many different ways of categorizing meditative styles and practices. One of those ways is to consider that all these practices are geared to help us see the reality of things more clearly, just as they are. And that's how I see the whole range of mindfulness practices—not just simply as minding the present, but as insight meditation—with the help of which freedom comes from becoming aligned with reality.