Layers

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:09

Much of what we see when we sit on retreat like this is the habits, the patterns of our mind, the momentum of years and years of our mind functioning in a certain way.

It seems to me, especially with this style of practice, this open awareness practice, that we really get to know our mind's patterns very intimately. Because we're not coming back to a primary object quite as much. Coming back to that primary object, we have the opportunity to bypass our habits and patterns somewhat. But just staying in the open awareness, we really get to see our minds. It's like mind 101.

Often we have a sense of our habits, our patterns, our beliefs, our emotions being layered—that there's kind of a layer upon layer of different moods, emotions, patterns. So we often have this idea or this structure in our minds of our experience being layered.

The Buddha also used this analogy of layers in one of his teachings, the teachings of the five aggregates. The term aggregate translates the Pali term *khandha*, which, while aggregate sounds like a very technical term, *khandha* is a very ordinary word. It basically means heap or bundle. What the five aggregates describe are five heaps of experience, five different ways to break our experience up, or five different categories or groups or heaps of experience.

These five are the body, consciousness, perception, feeling, and what are sometimes called volitional formations.

The body is pretty clear—the experience of the physical, in the physical realm. The other four aggregates refer to aspects of the mind. Steve has mentioned three of them several times: consciousness, perception, and feeling. These form the bare functioning of the mind. They're the core, bottom-level functioning of the way the mind experiences things. There's an object, and then the mind contacts that object. There's the bare knowing of that object, and that object is perceived, is recognized, and there's a feeling tone to it—whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the bare taking in of experience, these three of the five aggregates.

The fifth aggregate is sort of the dumping ground for everything else in our experience. It includes our habits, our emotions, our patterns, our sense of self, as well as other states of mind. And this is where the Buddha's analogy using layers comes in.

He had an analogy for each of these five aggregates. They're great analogies, and I don't have time to go through all of them, but I'll tell you the analogy he gave for this volitional formation. *Saṅkhāra* is the name of the aggregate in Pali. He said that this aggregate, these mental formations, these volitional formations,

are like a plantain tree, a banana tree.

What I understand the analogy to represent is that if you look at a plantain tree, it looks pretty solid. It's about that big around, at least the banana trees I've seen. They're pretty thick. They stand up. They're pretty sturdy-looking things. But if you start trying to find the center of the banana tree, what you do is peel away layers. Each leaf comes down and joins at the base of the plantain tree. You start peeling away the leaves, looking for the center of this banana tree. And when you have peeled away all the leaves, you've got a pile of leaves and nothing else.

There's no center. There's nothing there in the middle. The structure of the banana tree is created by this layering of leaves.

Much of our usual everyday experience of ourselves is found in this aggregate of the volitional formations—our emotions, our habits, our sense of self, the ways in which we normally experience our life, ourselves. Much of it is found in this aggregate.

So this analogy of layers is the one I'd like to explore this evening. I think this analogy is so interesting and so useful because, just as in the peeling away of all of the leaves from the plantain tree you find nothing in the middle, the structure of our personality, the structure of our sense of self, is created through this kind of layering effect. And there's nothing solid in the middle. You go through all the layers and there's nothing there—no solid core, no solid thing in the middle.

So often, as I said, we do have this sense of our experience having layers of sorts.

And we seem to think that what we need to do is get down to the core layer. If we just understood that core layer of our experience—the deeper fears, the deeper aversions, the deeper things underneath everything—then everything would be okay. So I think we often try to dive in to uncover the deeper layers of our experience.

But I found in my own experience of practice that that kind of digging is actually not as productive. What we really need to do in exploring all of these layers—whether it's a layer of habitual patterns of behavior or layers that create the sense of self—is actually just explore the outer layer. Just meet what is obvious in our experience.

There are several things I'd like to talk about with respect to exploring these outer layers of experience. Again, there's a quality of investigation that we need to bring to our experience. But what we often think of as investigation is digging—digging holes, pulling things apart, trying to uncover something deeper. But the way to investigate our experience is much lighter than that. Sayadaw U Pandita uses the analogy for investigation of rubbing a bowl with a soft cloth. Just that continual contact of the cloth with the bowl—that's investigation. It doesn't dig or penetrate or break. It does penetrate in a way, but it doesn't destroy the structure. It more just comes into contact with what is. It meets what is. And the curious part about that gentle rubbing is that it begins to reveal what is underneath.

Even though we often have a sense of what lies underneath—or we think we have a sense of how our patterns are layered on top of fears and vulnerabilities and insecurities—I think we all have explored our minds to some extent. In this particular culture, we tend to have an almost psychoanalytic approach to our lives. Many of us have this understanding of deeper layers to our experience. But I find in the practice it's not so helpful to hold those assumptions. They are assumptions about what lies underneath. Or at least we should hold them very lightly, if possible, so that they are not operating as a filter through which we are exploring our experience. Often when we hold ideas, beliefs, and assumptions, our perception of our experience is altered by those beliefs. So it's most helpful in the practice, in that meeting of our experience, that direct contact with our outer layer, to have no assumptions about what is underneath. Just recognize and be with whatever is most obvious in your experience.

Another helpful way to explore this outer layer is through using a balanced effort. This balanced effort is very light. When we use the word effort, often it has a heavy sound. In our normal everyday use of the word, it's a marshalling of resources to apply our strength and energy to something. But in the practice, the effort is much lighter than that.

Just now in your experience, notice the sensations of your hands. Notice your seat on the chair or bench or cushion. How much effort did that take? It's very light. It almost takes no effort at all to simply direct the mind and contact experience. That is the kind of effort that is most helpful in this practice. It's very light, but it needs to be completely continuous in order to be penetrating—in order for the combination of that effort with the mindfulness to really meet the experience.

I came up with my own analogy about this effort. It's kind of like the effort you might make to hold a helium balloon if your hands were covered with thumbtacks. It's got to be really light. But it's got to be a continuous pressure. If you let up at all, the balloon will float away. If you push too hard, the balloon will pop. So it's that kind of effort.

It's not so much about marshalling our resources, thinking, "I'm really going to be mindful this whole sitting." It's more about recognizing how frequently we need to refresh our mindfulness. When our mind is drifting and dull, we may need to remind ourselves more often—every half second—using perhaps the noting as a tool to keep ourselves present, or using some kind of reminder to help us stay present. But as the mindfulness and the effort gain momentum, that more continuous reminding actually gets in the way, and then we can allow the effort to unfold more on its own. So we need to have some discernment about how to apply this effort. But in general, it's really helpful to think of it as being really light.

There were times in my practice—I tend to be one of those driver types—when I would be noticing my experience and recognizing that I was over-efforting. I would consciously let go, back off. How much can I let go of trying and still stay present? At some point the mind would wander. But I could let go a lot before that would happen.

So it's an interesting place to explore how much effort we really need. It's very light—much more about

the lightness, but also about every moment remembering to keep reapplying that very light effort.

Another quality that's very helpful as we explore the layers of our experience is acceptance. Just acceptance. If we could just accept whatever is happening. That actually, to me, in my experience, has felt like the path through all of the layers of experience. It's in the acceptance of an experience that it really reveals itself and reveals its true nature, and it potentially also reveals the causes and conditions that had it come into being. So acceptance can reveal the underlying causes as we just stay with the experience.

Non-acceptance is a kind of glue. I think of it as a glue that holds all of those layers together and creates that sense of solidity. Non-acceptance can take several forms. It can take the form of resistance, the basic aversive energy. It can take the form of wanting or desire, that holding-on energy. Or it can take the form of the delusional energy of basically not wanting to know, not wanting to experience.

Working through deep habits and deep patterns—we've spent years accumulating these habits and patterns, and it can take a long time to really see through and completely understand how they are put together. So they may not disappear suddenly. This is really part of the gradual cultivation that Joseph talks about.

There's one analogy the Buddha gives about this path of practice, this gradual cultivation path of practice, that's one of my favorites. I call it the rotting rope analogy, and I'll give you an impressionistic version.

If there's a shipwreck and the ship is broken up into bits all along the shore—pieces of wood, pieces of rope, stuff just strewn everywhere—over the course of years, the sun, the sand, the wind begin to wear down all of these bits of debris scattered on the beach. I particularly like to think about the ropes lying there on the beach, and how as the rope is worn away by the sand, the sun, and the wind, it still looks like a rope. But it's losing its internal structure. And someday, at some point, one grain of sand, one breath of wind may finally let that whole thing come apart. But it's such a subtle release that it may not be very obvious. It's not a dramatic kind of falling apart. It's a very slow, gradual process.

The Buddha says that the rope is like the clinging in our mind, and the sun, the wind, the water are like mindfulness wearing down the clinging. Part of the reason this analogy is one of my favorites is because I seem to be shorter on the sudden awakening side of things and longer on the gradual cultivation side. A few of those sudden awakening experiences, but this gradual cultivation really resonates with me.

I've had some experiences that have so clearly shown me this is operating over time. One of the key habits and patterns in my experience is aversion, often manifesting as anger. I had a very strong anger at a particular person for years and worked with this pattern of anger over and over again for years and years. At some point I realized that my mindfulness was kind of weak in comparison to this pattern. When I tried to apply mindfulness to the anger at this particular person, the mind would just get sucked into the anger. I realized that bringing mindfulness to it wasn't so helpful, actually, because I would get lost in the anger.

So I came up with this little mantra for myself to put it aside. I shortened this mantra to "not now." What that meant to me was an acknowledgment of the anger: "I see you, anger. My mindfulness is not strong enough to meet you, but I will pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger." So it wasn't an aversive putting aside. It was a very gentle putting aside of the anger. This is the way I actually worked with this anger for several years. I didn't look at it directly. I noticed it when it came up—I clearly noticed it.

"Yes, there's that anger again. Okay, not now." And I would go to something neutral in my experience, putting my attention into my feet on the ground. It often seemed I was walking when I would get into one of these anger episodes.

Over the course of the years, I began to realize that the episodes of anger were getting further apart. I began to recognize, "It's been a few months since I've experienced that anger." And one day I realized it's been a very long time since I've experienced that anger. Even in the recollection in that moment of the person that I was angry with, I couldn't call up the anger. I was kind of amazed. I thought, "Wow, is it actually gone?" I didn't trust it. But it had disappeared. It has never come back. And it disappeared without my seeing it disappear—just through this being willing to meet the anger when I could, with what mindfulness I could, and not being aversive about it. This very gentle touching of this layer of anger proved to be very powerful.

Sometimes we can actually break through a layer in this kind of sudden awakening. We can have a sudden insight into the empty nature of a particular pattern, and then suddenly the whole thing just falls apart. I had an experience like this around self-hatred.

On one retreat, at one point I was in such despair around the self-hatred. I thought, "This is so deep." Again, I was seeing all the layers. I had seen how deep it went into my childhood and how many ways it was conditioned and put together into the structure of self-hatred. I thought, "I'm going to have to be fully enlightened in order for this to go away."

But on that retreat, at one point, just being willing to be there with it without that resistance, with complete acceptance of the self-hatred—at one moment there came the recognition of the pattern appearing as just an empty phenomenon. The pattern fell apart in that moment. And in that moment there was this little surge of complete bliss: "Never again, it's gone, it's gone forever." Then fortunately the mind was a little aware of that tendency and realized, "No, the causes and conditions have come together for me to see through it in this moment, but it doesn't mean it's gone forever."

In that particular case, that insight into the empty nature of that self-hatred cut pretty deeply into the pattern. The way I see it now in retrospect, looking at what is happening for me around this now, is that it cut the belief in the self-hatred. Those thoughts still appear—"You're no good"—they still come up, but there's no belief around them. There's not that formation of layers upon layers of self-hatred that arises because of a thought. These kinds of insights can be very penetrating and can really allow a sudden

dropping of huge patterns that we've held for years.

So we don't know how long it will take to work through our habits, our patterns, these layers of experience. But there are some basic instructions for whatever we're paying attention to: observe what is obvious about what is actually happening with as much acceptance as possible. And if there is non-acceptance, notice that. We can often check into this non-acceptance through checking the attitude to our experience—a simple way of noticing what our relationship is to what is actually happening.

I'd like to go through an example of how this unfolded at one point in my practice, of how using this very gentle approach of just seeing what's there and looking at the resistance unfolded in a particular retreat for me. There's a lot of instruction—useful tips, I guess—in this example, which is why I'm going to use it. When I went back through it I realized there are a lot of good little tools that are helpful here.

This example took place on a long retreat I was doing in Burma at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's monastery. I was doing this practice that you are working with here. And I was noticing that my walking meditation was not so pleasant. I would be doing the walking meditation and I'd notice these contractions in the heart, these contractions in the throat. I began noticing that it was primarily happening every time I turned around to start the next path. I just kept observing it, noticing all of this, noticing as much as I could about this unpleasantness I was experiencing. It wasn't physical unpleasantness; it was clearly some kind of emotional experience that was unpleasant.

Finally I realized, "Oh, I should check my attitude." After a while of doing this, I checked, and what I recognized was not wanting to practice. I didn't want to be meditating. I didn't want to be practicing.

Now this is a really useful attitude to recognize. When this attitude comes up, we often think we either have to believe it or we have to get rid of it. But we can just notice this as an arising experience—just not wanting to practice, arising in our experience right now.

When I finally realized that this was a possibility—a way of relating to this mood or mind state—it was hugely freeing. Just noticing: not wanting to practice, not wanting to practice. That's what's happening right now. So in this case, while doing this walking meditation, I simply began noticing "not wanting to practice." That became my object. That was what was really happening.

Days later, hours later—I can't remember exactly; this whole episode unfolds over some weeks—more walking meditation, more unpleasantness. Aches in the head, resistance. And in this particular time, I began noticing with that resistance that what seemed most helpful was not actually trying to be with the resistance, but rather allowing the resistance to be there and recognizing that it was one among thousands of things going on in the present moment. My lens of the present moment got quite big. There's the breeze on my cheek, and there's the sun, and there's the movement of the walking, and there's the resistance, and there's my feet on the ground, and there's seeing, and there's the resistance—so that I'm just touching into it occasionally.

I find this technique extremely helpful when something is either hard to be with, when we are pulled into something if we try to bring close attention to it, or when we've got this agenda of "I'm going to pay attention to this and figure it out"—which is a very common one for me. So it's more like just letting it be at a very light level and touching into it as the mind naturally touches into it. Really, a lot of what we're doing here is noticing what the mind is already doing, connecting with what the mind is already doing. And the mind is already noticing many things along with the resistance. So not trying to have an agenda about fixing the resistance seemed to be most helpful for me in this particular scenario.

Then again, some days or hours later, I began noticing while walking—the walking did not get pleasant for quite a while on this retreat—a low-grade depression that was happening. This was new. I hadn't really seen the depression before. I'd seen the physical aches and the resistance, but it took a while to actually contact this depression. Through this gentle being with the outermost layer, this gentle touching of the outermost layer, the depression began to reveal itself.

I noticed these physical sensations I described earlier—the contraction in the throat, the contraction in the heart. I noticed resistance; I didn't like the depression. I noticed that I thought it wasn't supposed to be there. As a good meditator, I should not be experiencing depression. I noticed that when the depression wasn't there, when there was happiness, there was this feeling: this is the way it's supposed to be. And there seemed to be a direct connection between the "supposed to be" of the happiness and the "not supposed to be" of the depression.

I noticed that depression could arise when the mind was calm and tranquil and peaceful. That seemed to be one of the places where it appeared. This kind of thing happens more often than you might recognize. When the mind gets settled and calm, equanimous, peaceful, we can be drifting in that peaceful state and not really connected to it. In that state, the mind is actually not so comfortable sometimes. It's much more used to drama. And in that space, it will find things to be averse to or find things to crave. It's not so happy just hanging out in that space.

So it's really interesting to pay attention closely when the mind gets into that peaceful state. Don't just ride it and hang out there—that kind of gives the habits room. The way I look at it is that when we get into that very peaceful state, the habitual tendencies we have are just waiting to find a moment of non-mindfulness to erupt. Not that it's bad for them to erupt, but notice when they do.

I observed this depression, and what seemed to be happening—this wasn't something I was doing so much as what seemed to be unfolding in my awareness—was that I was recognizing this depression when it was there through three basic frameworks: either the depression itself, or the resistance to the depression, or the absence of depression. Just noticing those three valences, I tracked them. When am I depressed? When is the resistance there? How did that change the feeling of the depression? And what is it like when the depression is gone? Sometimes there could be a very rapid oscillation between these different states.

Some time later, again in the walking, I began to notice or recognize that the resistance to the depression

was a natural process of the mind. It too was simply created by causes and conditions. And that recognition actually showed me that I had considered the resistance to be a problem—that the resistance was something that needed to be gotten rid of in order for me to be properly mindful.

Recognizing the resistance itself as a natural process of the mind didn't change the experience of those three different valences—the depression, the resistance to the depression, and the non-depression—but it allowed the observation to flow much more freely. There was much less contraction or any kind of holding around the experience of those three states.

This points to a teaching that Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about. He actually points to a mantra of sorts to use at times, and that mantra is: "This is nature. This is nature." I use that a lot in my experience when I'm practicing in this style, as a reminder that whatever is happening in my experience is simply a natural process of causes and conditions. It's just as natural as a flower blooming, or as natural as a tree aging and rotting and falling in the forest. "This is nature"—a very helpful pointing for the mind. It can open the mind to that more balanced, equanimous space of just being with experience.

Some time later, doing walking meditation, I noticed that I was calm. And almost immediately a very strong vigilance arose to keep on the lookout for depression arising. I checked into the attitude around this vigilance because I wondered, is this skillful or not? I didn't see any particular unskillful attitude around it. But after even just a few minutes of this vigilance, the mind got tired. There was a kind of exhaustion that began to set in. So I got a sense that something was a little off here, because there was too much energy going into this vigilance.

Checking into that vigilance a little more carefully, I saw there was fear underlying it—a fear of the re-arising of the depression, a kind of wanting to track the calm really closely so that I could catch it just as it arose so it wouldn't get out of hand. There was that fear underneath. And just hanging out with the fear, I could simply hang out with the fear, and the depression did not arise. Just hanging out with what is most obvious.

In the sitting period immediately following this particular walking, I went back to my room and got into my meditation posture. I immediately noticed the sensations I had been feeling in the walking arise. There was the contraction in the heart, the squeezing in the throat. This was unusual because I had not been experiencing these sensations in the still posture, only in the walking. But the mind was pretty open and was able to just be with that experience of the contraction. No resistance whatsoever. And I watched it get really big, that feeling of the contraction. It felt like it grew and grew. I let it get as big as it wanted to. And at some point it flipped and turned into metta.

It was a beautiful, open state of metta. And there was this thought that arose almost immediately: "This is stupid, this is sappy, this is corny." And I laughed. But I saw in that moment that the pattern of the depression had been through a resistance to the metta—a kind of sense of sappiness, that Hallmark greeting card feeling about metta. "No, this isn't me." There had been a resistance to opening that

connection, that feeling of connection.

After that moment, the depression didn't come back again. Now, I'm not saying that I was in a state of expanded blissful metta. What I saw in that moment was that I've got a lot of work to do around this. But having seen the resistance to the metta, having seen the attitude toward the metta, it was no longer operating underneath, hidden away, and no longer had the power to create that feeling of depression.

Sometimes when a layer drops away, we can get complacent about a particular pattern, about paying attention to the habits and patterns. We can feel like, "Oh yeah, I figured that one out." Sayadaw U Pandita often talked about three layers of habit. There's the layer of habit that erupts into bodily action. There's the layer of habit that erupts into thought but may not trigger bodily action. And there's the underlying tendency toward a habit. One of the layers—the layer of habit erupting into bodily action—can fall away. But the underlying tendency is still there. The thoughts arising in the mind are still there. And if we get complacent around those layers, the pattern can reform itself.

So it's really helpful to keep track of this, especially when a pattern begins to unravel—to pay more close attention to the subtle thoughts. Like in my self-hatred example, the subtle thought of "you're no good" arising.

Even though there's not much belief associated with it, I try to take care to recognize that thought.

The solid sense of self can be created through a reinforcing cycle of habits—of identification with habits or belief in a habit. A solid identification around a pattern happens because of layers upon layers of these beliefs and reinforcing identifications.

For example, I used to think of myself as a miserable person. That miserableness, that belief in being a miserable person, made me perceive my experience as miserable and reinforced that miserable self. Even times when I was happy, I had such an identification with being miserable that I would recognize, "Well, yeah, I'm happy now, but I know I'm really a miserable person." This layering can create self-fulfilling prophecies. Our habits, our patterns, our beliefs affect how we perceive the world.

So if we start paying attention to the outer layers of our experience, these habits and patterns can start to dissolve. Bringing attention to the happiness without that belief of being a miserable person—or at least suspending the belief—we actually begin to see that we are not in the states we identify with a lot of the time. I began to discover I wasn't miserable a lot of the time. It began poking holes in that identification.

Really allowing ourselves to be with what is happening, letting go as much as possible of beliefs—or at least recognizing that the belief is there so that it's not operating unseen—as we keep exploring, we see layer upon layer dissolving. And like the plantain leaf, there's nothing in the middle. There's nothing in the center. Just simply a process of things being experienced and things being known.

This layer-like quality can also manifest in our meditation experiences. Beliefs can get built up around our

meditative experiences that then, like my belief in my miserable self, begin to alter our perception of our meditative experience, and we view our experience through this framework.

Sometimes in our practice, especially in early times, we start to experience very interesting things in meditation. Our body might start to feel really big, or very heavy, or really short—just some very interesting perceptual experiences that happen in meditation. Sometimes they're accompanied with pleasantness, and they're often accompanying concentration. We start to think that these experiences mean concentration, and we think that in order to have concentration we must have those experiences.

But what seems to happen over time is that as we get familiar with these altered perceptual experiences in meditation, they are no longer quite so startling or unique or interesting. They begin to become less predominant. I don't know exactly what happens to them—whether they just don't appear or whether they're simply not attended to, like, "Oh yeah, there's that, and it's no big deal." So it doesn't become such a big thing in our experience. But if we have the belief that these experiences need to be there in order to be concentrated, it will disrupt our ability to get concentrated.

Trying to get back to what something was like is suffering. It's grasping after some idea of a pleasant experience, perhaps, or some belief of good meditation: "This is what good meditation was. Even if it wasn't pleasant, it was flowing and clear. That's what good meditation is." Assuming our meditation isn't working because we're not having one of these touchstone experiences is not so helpful.

I've found that every time I get stuck in one of these patterns, every time I get stuck in these beliefs about not really meditating properly or not being able to do this now, the way through is to just notice the most obvious thing in experience. Not trying to dig, not trying to get anywhere, not trying to do anything. Just notice what is actually happening. What is most obvious about what's actually happening.

Sometimes in meditation we land in a new space, one we haven't been in before. Our experience gets really strange, different. It feels like we can't be mindful anymore. It feels like the mind is just continually wandering. Now, the mind continually wandering—of course that means things are going backwards. Obviously it means things are going backwards. But maybe not. Sometimes the mind settles into new spaces where it's like the mind has settled into a more subtle level of experience and doesn't quite know how to be there. It doesn't quite know how to connect with it. And because of that, it gets lost. But it's not because we've suddenly lost our mindfulness or haven't been paying attention. It's because our experience has shifted or we've landed in a new space.

So again, just seeing—can we notice? It's like, "Well, the mind is wandering a lot. What's happening?"

Oh, I see that as I pay attention to the breath, the breath gets so subtle it almost disappears. And that's when the mind wanders. Just notice what's happening. Just what's happening. Beliefs, ideas—put them on the back burner. Assumptions are not usually very helpful in our meditation practice.

So just to stress again, really the theme for me of this talk is: meet what is most obvious in your

experience, whatever it is. It doesn't matter what it is. It might be peace and calm. It might be boredom. It might be not wanting to practice. It might be self-hatred, frustration, disappointment, irritation. Just meeting whatever it is, is the path. That is our path. That is our next step.

And being in that place of being aware, mindful of our experience without that resistance, without the wanting, in that place of acceptance of our experience—essentially that's the wisdom side, meeting with the mindfulness. And those two together take us right to freedom.

Let's sit for a few moments.

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