The Obvious

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:38

We've been exploring our minds now for several weeks, and I'm sure many of you have recognized that a lot of what we get to see on retreat is the momentum of our minds—the habits, the patterns. Even patterns or habits that we thought were really old, long gone, sometimes seem to resurface as the mind gets quiet. As the strictures that we put on our mind in daily life fall away, these old patterns and habits can resurface.

As we get more familiar with our experience, we often have a sense that these habits, patterns, and experiences are layered. We have a sense that what we're experiencing—say, for example, a pattern of anger—has a pattern of fear underneath it, and that pattern of fear is perhaps born out of a resistance to a sense of vulnerability. We kind of know that these layers are there.

I'd like to explore this idea of layers as an analogy and as a way of thinking about our practice.

Last night Sally talked about the five aggregates. One of those in particular, the mental formations, is connected to an analogy that the Buddha uses, which I'd like to explore. The mental formations—this aspect of the aggregates—is really the area where our habits and patterns lie. This is where our emotions, our beliefs, our habits of planning, of judging, all of that lives: in that aggregate, that bundle, that group of the *saṅkhāras,* the mental formations.

In creating an analogy for this, the Buddha described this particular aggregate of mental formations as being like a plantain tree or a banana tree. In my exploration of the suttas, I have really found the Buddha to be a brilliant mind with respect to analogies. The analogies are so apt and can teach us so much if we explore what they're trying to say. In my thinking about this analogy of the plantain tree, I really see how it speaks to layering.

A banana tree, a plantain tree, basically looks like a pretty solid thing. The trunk might be as much as ten inches in diameter. It can be pretty big, and it looks solid. But if you start to explore this trunk, what you find actually is that it's composed of layers. All of the leaves have a stem that comes down and joins into this trunk. If you start pulling away, peeling away the leaves or the stem pieces—which are the bottom parts of what were leaves—you see that this trunk, this apparently solid thing, is just composed of these layers. You can keep peeling off layer after layer, and there's nothing solid in the middle of this plantain trunk.

Thinking about how this applies to our mental formations as an analogy: our habits, our patterns, our beliefs are layered like this. Like the plantain tree, they can create a sense of solidity through the very fact

of the layering. The sense of solidity that we experience is the way this layering aspect of the mental formations forms our sense of self. With so much accumulating, our minds have this sense of, "Yeah, this is really solid. This is a real solid thing."

Having a sense of these layers—the way that we understand our minds, for example, anger being laid on top of fear, being laid on top of resistance to vulnerability—we often feel that what we're supposed to do is really dive in and understand the core, get to the core of the thing. Find out about that resistance to vulnerability, or even what's underneath that, perhaps something deeper. We have this sense of diving in or wanting to go down. It's like we think, "This outer thing—that's not the important part. It's the inner thing that I need to really get to so that this whole thing can fall apart, so that I won't be bothered by this anymore."

In my own practice, I've found that this diving underneath is not really very helpful. What's most helpful actually is to just be with what is most obvious about whatever this outer layer is—to meet this outermost layer, the ways it manifests in our bodies, the way it creates emotions, moods, thoughts, beliefs. Just get to know it. Get familiar with it.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, talks about gathering data about our experience. It's most helpful to simply think of the process of investigation, of looking at our experience, as gathering information—not particularly with any agenda, but just gathering data. Perhaps with some agenda of understanding, but not with an agenda to change, to fix, to control, to get rid of. This gathering data in order to understand what we are observing.

One analogy that Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses I find particularly interesting because it points me to the vastness of our task in a way.

And he points to the first human beings who started observing the night sky to understand its patterns, looking up at the stars. Just imagine, before there was any knowledge about any of the stars, how patient they had to be, and how many times they had to observe the stars, and over what length of time they had to observe them before they started seeing patterns. There's the obvious pattern of the heavens that seem to be pretty stable. And then you might start noticing, oh, there's a few that are moving. How long they had to actually sit there and watch before coming to an understanding about what might be happening up there.

This is the kind of patience and sense of contact with experience that we need in our practice—just gathering the data about what is happening in our experience. The more continuous that data gathering can be, the more clear the understanding is. The continuous contact with our experience begins to reveal its nature.

All of you have been seeing the impermanence of experience, recognizing that things change—not just intellectually, but actually seeing the changing nature of experience. This comes through the contact, the

continuity, meeting our experience moment to moment. We also can start to see, with this continuity of mindfulness, cause and effect. We can start to see how one thing causes another, causes another, causes another.

Seeing that cause and effect relationship begins to show us how these layers are put together. We start to see—not just intellectually with the idea that "well, yeah, I think that underneath this anger lies fear"—we start to actually see the fear, and then the anger being created on top of it. We start to see the actual process by which these layers get created. This supports the recognition of the cause and effect relationship. And seeing the cause and effect relationship supports the understanding that there's not a self here doing this, that it's just a process of cause and effect unfolding in our experience.

As we explore our experience, it's really helpful not to make assumptions about what might lie underneath, what layers might be beneath this outer layer that we're looking at. Even if we have some idea about what might be underneath, it's really most helpful just to meet that outer layer, just touching the most obvious experiences without any agenda or any idea about what we might find beneath it. And if we are noticing that there are assumptions present, we can at least recognize that we have those assumptions and hold them lightly.

On one retreat several years ago, I was watching a pattern of mild depression that was arising kind of regularly. This was a retreat in Burma with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and he encourages that there not necessarily need to be absolute silence on the retreat. So there are periods of time during the day where people are talking, having dharma discussions with each other. There's particularly one time of day in the early evening, after it's cooled off, that seems to be the promenade time. Groups of people, twos and threes, get together and walk up and down.

Sometimes I might not have somebody to walk with. And I began noticing that this depression seemed to be triggered by seeing some of these pairs of people. I could see that there was a trigger—I could feel that connection between the depression and seeing the groups of people walking up and down. My immediate assumption was that it was getting back to the sense of high school: "Oh, I was always an outsider, I was always an outcast, this must be related to that." But this was an assumption. I didn't actually see that. So I knew that it was an assumption, and I was very skeptical of it. I was holding it very lightly.

As I continued exploring this pattern of mild depression, particularly while I was doing walking meditation, it went on for several weeks. So I really got a chance to observe it, spend a lot of time watching this pattern come and go, finding ways to observe how I was caught by it and when I could just be with it without feeling caught by it.

Then one afternoon I was simply paying attention to the feelings manifesting in the body around this depression. I felt these feelings, and I was just able to be with them without any resistance whatsoever. I felt this pressure in my chest just start to expand, and there was no resistance to that expansion. I just watched it expand, expand, expand, and at some point in that expansion, the feeling flipped and became

an expansive feeling of mettā.

This surprised me. This was not what I expected to find underneath that depression. But the next split second, the next moment of my experience, I heard my mind saying, "This is stupid, this is corny, this is sappy." This beautiful feeling of expansive mettā—there was reactivity to it in my mind. What this seemed to be pointing to was that some degree of this depression had to do with a kind of repression around the feeling of connectedness that mettā brings.

Not holding my original assumptions tightly helped me to just be with the experience as it unfolded. If we have expectations, or if we're looking for something particular underneath in the layers, we might miss what's actually there.

Another lesson for me around this particular experience—and I've seen this in other situations as well—is this surprising sense of a beautiful quality underneath what felt like a painful pattern. The beautiful quality of mettā, and a skewed response to it, were part of this pattern of depression. That's another piece I have really come to respect as I work through various layers of habits and patterns in my experience.

To not simply assume that everything about this pattern needs to be gotten rid of. There may be some beautiful quality underneath.

A quality that's helpful with respect to working with these layers in our experience is acceptance—non-resistance, simply being able to be with whatever's happening. We've been saying this over and over again; I think most every talk has touched on this topic. Be with your experience as it is. Don't hold on to it. Don't push it away. Accept your experience as it is. This same quality supports us as we work through our layers of experience, just meeting what is obvious about our experience.

Working through these layers of experience, these patterns, these habits that feel like an accretion of stuff—sometimes it can take a long time. After all, we've been practicing these habits and patterns and beliefs for many years. We've had a lot of practice with them. Many, many years have put these patterns together. And so to expect that a few weeks of retreat will completely unwind years, decades of practice of anger, aversion, hatred, and greed is expecting a little much. So patience is helpful.

I've found in my experience of my own practice that this slow process of working through habits and patterns has been the norm. There's a sense of gradually, slowly wearing down these habits and patterns. This is mostly how my own experience has unfolded.

There's another analogy that I love in the suttas about this gradual process. The Buddha says that if you think about a ship that has gotten shipwrecked and the parts of the ship are all strewn across a beach somewhere—the wood and the rope for the rigging and all the parts of the ship just lying on the beach—over time, the wind, the sun, the sand, the water all wear down these parts. In particular, he focuses on the rope, the rigging for the ship, and says that over time, this rope will simply rot.

I love this rotting rope analogy. Thinking through it, if you consider how long it takes for this rotting to happen, and how imperceptible it is day to day, the change—this gives you some idea about what's happening in our practice, this slow process of wearing down our habits and patterns.

Sometimes it's a slow process, perhaps seeing subtle, slow changes, and then we may not actually see the last little bit of that pattern fall apart. Again, like with the rotting rope on the beach: it's lying there for years, perhaps, and looking at it, it looks like a rope. But one day you go to pick it up and find it just falls apart in your hand because all the fibers have worn out. They're no longer holding each other together.

Sometimes our patterns can fall apart like this too. I had one very strong pattern of anger toward one particular person that went on for several years. I worked with it a lot in my practice. I looked at it directly. I explored it in many different ways. And at some point I realized that when looking at that anger directly, the mindfulness wasn't quite strong enough to meet the strength of the anger. Trying to bring attention to that pattern, the mindfulness just got overwhelmed and I was swept away into the anger.

So at some point I realized it wasn't so skillful to turn my attention to try to be mindful of that anger. What I would do when I saw the anger arise was simply recognize it, acknowledge it, meet it for just a moment, and then turn my attention to something else, staying mindful in my experience by putting my attention on something neutral. In most cases for this particular pattern, it was arising when I was walking. So I just put my attention in my feet, over and over again.

Whenever I noticed this pattern of anger arising, I would acknowledge it, meet it, and without any aversion, without any resistance to the anger, it was like meeting it and saying, "Yes, I see you. This is not the time to pay attention to you because I can see that I'll get swept away." I actually made a bargain with my anger. I said, "I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger."

And so I just redirected my attention, put my attention in my feet. Over the course of several months of engaging in this practice, I started noticing that the bouts of anger got further and further apart. They weren't coming up so frequently.

And then one day—and I don't know how long this process took—one day I was walking up my sidewalk to my house, and I recollected that it had been a very long time since I had felt that particular anger. In recognizing that, the person I was angry with came to mind, and I couldn't find the anger. I was surprised. Where did it go? I kind of checked around. I couldn't find it. I didn't believe that it was completely gone, but it has never returned. This was years ago now, years.

And it's actually been replaced with a feeling of metta, wishing for the happiness of this person I was so angry at. So it is completely gone. And it disappeared without my ever noticing it disappear. I just noticed one day that I hadn't seen it for a long time.

Sometimes our layers fall away like that. There isn't always a sudden exploding insight where we see everything completely clearly with a sense of complete understanding of how everything was formed.

Sometimes it just falls away. And in my experience, that's a lot of how our practice works. There are times when we have these sudden awakenings where we see deeply into a pattern or habit and it falls away, but in my experience, those are much more rare.

So we don't know how long it will take to work through a particular layer in our experience. But basically the instructions are always the same: if we can meet that outermost layer with acceptance, just be with it. Notice what's obvious about it. No need to dig, no need to jump over it, no need to try to go underneath it.

For example, with that pattern I used at the very beginning, talking about the anger and having a sense that there might be fear under the anger—sometimes, having a sense of that fear, we feel like, "Okay, well, this anger is here, but really what's happening is the fear underneath, so I should be with that fear." But the anger is still present, layered on top of the fear. So being with what's most obvious about our experience: if anger is the most obvious thing, be with the anger. Be with how it feels in the body. Notice the thoughts it produces. Over time, you might start seeing fear thoughts and feeling the fear more obviously. Then we can move into that layer and start exploring those aspects of the whole pattern of layered experience.

Just noticing what's obvious about our experience—this gentle holding, this gentle touching of experience. I think in my first talk on effort and energy, I talked about that rubbing quality of investigation. Just being with the surface, staying in contact with the surface of what's obvious in our experience. Not trying to chip or dig or pull apart or figure out what's underneath. Just meeting the experience that's obvious.

The other aspect of this instruction around meeting experience is that if there is resistance to the experience, if there is non-acceptance, then that's what we have to pay attention to. It's almost as if the non-acceptance to anger—"This anger is not acceptable" or "I need to get rid of this anger," this sense of resisting the anger—is actually a layer on the outside of the anger that's holding it together. Sometimes these non-accepting attitudes can be hidden from us. We think there's just the anger in our experience and we're paying attention to it, but we don't particularly notice, as Winnie talked about, the agendas underneath. It can be helpful to open our minds to exploring, checking into whether there's some agenda happening. And again, we've all talked about this: checking the attitude, checking the relationship to the experience.

I haven't heard anybody in the hall talk about the technique that Sayadaw U Tejaniya recommends for this. It's possible somebody mentioned it on a night I wasn't here, so if you've heard this before, just take it in again. This is basically a way to uncover some of these hidden agendas, these hidden attitudes that might not be so obvious to us as we're hanging out with our experience.

The technique Sayadaw U Tejaniya recommends is to ask ourselves the question: What's my attitude about this experience? Another phrasing might be: What's my relationship to this experience? In asking this question, it's like dropping the question into the stream of our experience. The instruction is not to do anything with it. You just drop the question in and then continue your practice. Sometimes just dropping

that question and inclining the mind to notice—is there something else happening here?—is enough. That's another way to explore the attitude: a sense of dropping back and opening up.

Is there something else happening? Is there something else going on that I wasn't noticing?

So in putting this question in, we simply notice whether it becomes obvious to us once we ask. If there's nothing obvious, there's no need—and it's not helpful—to try to figure out the answer to that question. If you drop the question in and there's some obvious response, an obvious sense of, "Oh yeah, I want this anger to go away," then you can include that sense of wanting it to go away, that sense of resistance, in your practice. Including that is simply recognizing: okay, resistance is what's happening. What is resistance like?

In this checking of attitude, there are roughly four flavors you might find. They come in all different varieties, but they fall into roughly four categories. It will either be wanting to get rid of something, wanting to hold onto something—so aversion and greed—a sense of delusion around it, of not wanting to experience it or not connecting with it, or a sense of a view or filter underneath it. Carol, I believe, talked some about delusion. And the fourth flavor is balance of mind.

Sometimes when I've given this instruction to people, they say, "Well, I don't see an attitude." And I ask them, "Did it seem like your mind was balanced?" "Yes." "Well, that's the attitude." Balance of mind can be an attitude. So you may see obvious greed or aversion, maybe not so obvious delusion, or you might see balance of mind—or it might not be clear to you. If it's not clear, don't worry about it. Just keep going with your practice.

This checking of attitude is usually helpful to do just occasionally. It's not something to do every thirty seconds. Perhaps every few minutes you might check into your attitude, particularly if you're feeling caught around experience. If there's some kind of struggle around being present for your experience, that's a good time to check your attitude. Another good time is when it feels like things are going really well. Just check in and see if there's some agenda around that experience.

Sometimes our attitudes can be really subtle, such that we don't even see them, that we might not recognize them. That's one reason not to try to hold on to finding an attitude. Sometimes we can't see them. Sometimes they're a little more subtle than our mindfulness is capable of seeing.

I had an example of this around that same period of depression I was referring to a few minutes ago. On my retreat several years ago, before I noticed the shift to mettā, I was just watching the cycling of the depression, the resistance to the depression, and the absence of depression. I was seeing those three things happening. Sometimes they would cycle pretty quickly. I would notice, "Oh, there's depression. Oh, there's resistance. Oh, it's gone." And then, "Oh, there's back in it." It was like watching this pattern unfold.

Watching this for quite some time, I felt like I was just right with it. It didn't feel like there was any particular attitude or agenda about watching it. But at some point, I recognized—I saw—that the

resistance to the depression was simply a natural phenomenon arising like anything else. It was no different or more special than any other phenomenon arising in my mind stream.

And at that point, in seeing that the resistance to depression was just something coming and going, I saw that I had had an attitude: the resistance to depression had been a problem. The resistance was a problem, and I needed to do something about it. But I hadn't seen that until it fell away.

So sometimes we can't see our attitudes until there's a shift and we see the absence of that attitude. Sometimes when a layer drops away—a layer of a strong habit or pattern we've known for a long time—we feel like all traces of it have disappeared.

I had this happen with one particularly strong pattern around self-hatred. I had a very strong pattern around that. On one retreat, I had a deep insight into the nature of the thoughts around the self-hatred—simply that the thoughts were just thoughts. They were just empty phenomena. In seeing the empty nature of those thoughts, the pattern just crumbled. This was one of those sudden awakening-type insights.

I didn't trust it for a while, but it was years before I felt anything like that self-hatred again. There was a sense, for a little while—I mean, I didn't trust that it was completely gone. I kept telling myself there must be some vestiges of this; it was such a strong pattern. But it was several years before I noticed little filaments of thoughts arising in the mind. "You're no good"—that thought that had been so devastating to me. At this point, the thought was simply arising, and there wasn't a belief attached to the thought, which is what really got truncated in that insight about the self-hatred, seeing the emptiness of the thought. It was the belief in the thoughts that was cut. And yet the pattern of thought still kept arising, those thoughts.

This points to another way that layers work in our experience. My teacher Sayadaw U Pandita describes different layers of defilement in our minds—defilement being all of these habits and patterns of mind that create suffering. He talks about the most gross layer of defilement being the layer that comes out into bodily action, where the pattern of that defilement is so strong that it comes into our behavior. We act on that pattern. The next layer down is the layer where the defilement comes into our thoughts but doesn't come into our bodily action. And the next lower layer is what's called the layer of underlying tendency toward that pattern.

So that underlying tendency can be there even if the pattern is not arising in our mind stream. There's a way in which if we get close to that place in our minds, we can drop into that pattern, that habit again, because that underlying tendency is there. It's really helpful, even in seeing a pattern fall away suddenly like that, to keep attuned to movements that are similar to it.

In my experience now with this pattern of self-hatred, it's pretty much only when I'm on deep retreat that I see these little fibers arising and sense, "Oh yes, there's actually still a very subtle kind of belief around that pattern." So not getting complacent when it feels like a pattern falls away. Noticing with care when

we see those tiny little fibers. In my mind, I looked at it as like a bunch of this plant got uprooted, but there were still some roots left in the ground. Those were the underlying tendencies, still ready to sprout. And if we're not careful, they can sprout again.

As a layer falls away, we can experience a huge amount of relief, a sense of freedom when we find that we're no longer being whipped around by a pattern or habit that was so strong for us. It can be this real sense of freedom. Usually this is not enlightenment. It's simply the relief of letting go, of no longer being at the mercy of a particular pattern. But over time, and with more mindfulness, we sometimes can start seeing these deeper patterns underneath. We start seeing subtler kinds of suffering underneath, the next layer, which perhaps have been masked by the more obvious layer of suffering—the old pattern.

For myself, the old pattern of self-hatred falls away, and it feels for a time like, "Wow, there's no problems anymore." Everything that comes up feels like no problem. Everything feels very easy, partly because we're so used to responding to things through that old layer, and we're feeling such freedom from not having it. And yet there's still subtler clinging underneath. We're not fully enlightened.

After some time of getting familiar with this new state of no longer reacting through that old pattern, we start to see, "Oh, there's new suffering here. There's new patterns that I hadn't noticed." And this is not a mistake. Sometimes people say, "I feel like I've gone backwards. For so long I wasn't experiencing much suffering, and now suddenly I'm experiencing all this suffering again."

There are many, many layers of subtlety to our clinging. The obvious levels of clinging are at the strong mental formations, the strong sankhāras of greed and aversion, which manifest in what we might call the afflictive emotions: anger, frustration, hostility, cruelty, wanting—some of these very strong patterns that we have. Those are the obvious layers of clinging. Over time, through the practice, some of those can get much weaker. Some of them even fall away. And then we start noticing subtler levels of clinging. We can start noticing clinging to wholesome mind states, a wanting to construct wholesome mind states.

Whereas before, that wanting to construct the wholesome mind state wasn't experienced as suffering—in fact, it supported us to be with the more obvious layer of suffering around our afflictive emotions—as the afflictive emotions fall away, we start experiencing the suffering of holding on to these wholesome mind states. Many, many layers of holding. Many layers of clinging.

And an even deeper layer of clinging: clinging to being the one who feels, the one who perceives, the one who knows. When the mind gets very quiet and very still, then we can start to see these more subtle levels of clinging.

And again, I'll say it again: no matter where we are in our practice, whatever is happening—whether it's clinging to knowing, clinging to consciousness, fear of the sense of self being lost, or whether it's obvious anger and frustration—the instructions are the same. We meet what's obvious about our experience, and we check our relationship to that experience, to see if there's any subtle attitude in the mind holding it in

place. Just keep being with, being with, being with whatever is coming up in experience.

So seeing through this solid sense of self—if we keep looking, if we keep looking at our experience, like with this analogy of the plantain tree, we find nothing in the middle, nothing in the center that's solid, that can be called I or me. There's simply a process of things being experienced and being known, experienced and known, experienced and known.

One teaching by the Buddha around this, seeing through this solid sense of self, is a very famous sutta that many of you, I'm sure, have heard of. It is a teaching that the Buddha gave to a monk called Bahiya, who came to him after a long journey saying, "Please teach me your Dharma in brief." And after a few more requests—he had to request three times—the Buddha finally gave him this instruction:

"This is how you should train yourself. In the seen is only the seen. In the heard is only the heard. In the sensed is only the sensed. In the cognized is only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself."

That is the instruction. Meet experience. Just be with what is happening. Without filters, without views. Look at the attitude to uncover those filters and views. Just be with the seen, the heard, the sensed, the cognized. The bare being with experience.

So that was the instruction: be with your experience in this simple way. And then he went on to tell Bahiya: "When for you in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized, then there is no you in terms of that. When there's no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

So he points to this instruction of just noticing our experience. Notice the seen, the heard, the sensed, the cognized. That will reveal that there's no you there. You don't have to believe in this teaching of not-self. The Buddha pointed to simply being with our experience. When this is the case, there will be no you there. And there's no you there, no self, no problem. This leads us to freedom.

Very simple, very simple practice. It doesn't matter—we say over and over again—it doesn't matter what we're mindful of. It can be boredom. It can be bliss. It can be equanimity. It can be anger, frustration, irritation. It can be disinterest. It doesn't matter what we bring our mindfulness to. What matters is that we contact our experience with the mindfulness.

Whatever you are experiencing in this moment—that is the path to freedom.

So let's sit for a couple of minutes.

Thank you.

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