Not Knowing

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 52:00

Tonight I'd like to begin by doing a guided meditation—essentially an exercise in expanding awareness as a pointer to a kind of awareness that can be very broad and very relaxed.

You don't need to alter your posture. Just find a place or a way to sit where you'll be comfortable for about fifteen minutes or so, perhaps as long as twenty. While we go through this exercise, it's really helpful to relax and keep coming back to that relaxation as we go. For now, go ahead and let your eyes close.

I'd like you to just allow your awareness to take in the sensations in your head—whatever physical sensations you're feeling there. Pulsing, tingling, vibration. Dryness, coolness. Just experiencing the sensations in your head.

Now I'd like to invite you to expand that awareness to include the sensations in your neck, almost as if your awareness were a bubble that you were allowing to relax and expand from just encompassing the sensations in your head to now include the sensations of your head and the sensations of your neck. Relax and widen the awareness.

Allow the bubble of awareness to expand now to include your shoulders, so you're taking in the sensations of your head, your neck, and your shoulders. See if you can relax your mind. It's easier to not try to do this so much, but more relax into it.

Allowing the bubble of awareness to expand to include your torso—all aspects of the physical sensations in your torso, from top to bottom, front to back, and side to side. The interior dimension, the three-dimensionality of the experience, including your head, your neck, your shoulders, and your torso. Pulsing, vibration, pressure, movement. Relax.

Allowing the awareness to expand outwards to include your arms. Staying connected with the sensations of your head, your neck, your shoulders, your torso, and your arms. You might envision this awareness as an expanding cognizant fluid bubble.

Now allow your awareness to stay connected with the physical experience of the upper part of your body, and also notice any emotional or mental experience or responses to the process that we're going through. Allowing this expanding bubble of awareness to take in not only the texture of the physical experience, but the texture of your emotional, your mental experience. Relax. This isn't something to do. Just see what you can open to.

Allowing your awareness to expand to include the physical sensations of your hips, your buttocks. Staying

connected to the experience of your head, your neck, shoulders, torso and arms, your hips, your buttocks, as well as any mind states that may be coming. Relax and allow the awareness to expand to include your thighs and your hamstrings.

Staying connected to the physical experience, noticing the impact this has on the mind, allowing the awareness to expand to take in the whole body—including your knees, your lower legs, your feet, along with your head, neck, shoulders, torso, arms, hips, buttocks. The internal physical dimension of the body and the texture of the mental experience.

Now I'd like to invite you to allow this bubble of awareness to expand beyond your body, beyond the confines of your body. Allow yourself to let go of the idea of the edges of your body. Let yourself feel into the texture of awareness—the feeling of knowing.

Staying connected with the bodily sensations and the mental experience, allow yourself to open to include the experience of hearing. There's not much work that you need to do to hear, to include hearing in this practice. You've already been hearing without much effort during the course of the guided meditation. From time to time, you might notice the experience of hearing producing a kind of ripple through this field of awareness. And you might notice also sometimes a change in the mental experience producing a ripple through this field, this feeling of knowing. Relax.

Staying connected to your physical bodily experience, the experience of the mind, emotions, thoughts, moods, and hearing—I'd like to suggest expanding this field of awareness still further by opening your eyes. Notice the impact that opening your eyes has on the experience. Relax.

Allow yourself to take in the physical experience of the body—the vibration, pulsing, tingling, heat, coolness, pressure, hardness, softness. Recognize and acknowledge any emotional experience, any moods, mind states, or thoughts. Stay connected to all of that, taking in the vibration, the pitch and tone of hearing.

the form and color of seeing.

Relax. The body actually does all of this by itself. You might notice awareness moving rather rapidly between experiences, picking up on something here, then something there. Or you might notice a sense of awareness just suffusing in a very light way the whole of the experience. The experience can be very ordinary—very present but very ordinary.

Staying connected to your bodily experience, your mental experience, especially your mental experience right now, allow yourself to start looking around, noticing the movement as well as what you're seeing. Actually look at things. Notice how the mind responds as your eyes land on certain things. Notice how the body responds. As much as possible, stay connected to all of this experience.

You can break your posture if you like and start to move a little more, noticing again how the mind and

body respond to that movement. I'd like to encourage you during this talk to see if you can stay connected with some sense of this awareness while I explore the topic of not knowing.

The more we practice, the more we come into our experience, the more we really deeply see and recognize that we just do not know what is going to happen to us. We feel this, we recognize this, on both the obvious, more gross level of our lives—really recognizing and understanding that we don't know from moment to moment what's going to happen to us. In the conventional sense, in all likelihood, five minutes from now we'll all still be sitting here. But we don't actually know that. There's a way that we really can connect with that truth the more deeply we enter into this practice.

On a more subtle level also, this is true. We really begin to see, as we touch into our moment-to-moment experience, the deep truth that we have no idea what the next arising experience will be. So entering into the present moment, really coming into our experience here and now, we can enter into it as an exploration of not knowing.

When we come into the present moment—particularly at the beginning of a retreat, but often during the retreat as well, over and over again—we often bring baggage with us that obscures this not-knowing quality of being in the present moment. We bring our views and opinions and ideas about who we are into the present moment, about what we can and can't do. Then we take those views and opinions from our past, from our history, from our conditioning, and we create a future in which we can and can't do things.

In a way, that historical conditioning, that baggage we bring into the present moment, conditions our experience to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We find we can and can't do these things that we think we can and can't do, because these views and opinions are operating. So in a sense, with this conditioning and these beliefs, we think we know who we are. We think we know. We don't give ourselves much room to not know, to not be bound by those views.

I know that most people have had this experience of coming into contact with a friend or someone you've known for a while. That person, having known you for a while, has views and opinions about who you are and what you can and can't do. We bristle sometimes when we meet that kind of energy from a friend. It's like, "You don't really know me." And yet that same thing we do to ourselves. We do that to ourselves quite often. And we do it to our friends also. So this holding to views of who we are obscures the possibility of opening to this not knowing.

Not only do we bring in baggage from the past and project it into the future, we also have views, thoughts, and beliefs about what's happening to us in the present moment. One way this comes into play is through the assigning of meaning when we meet an experience. Something happens and it's about me. What does it mean about me? How does it relate to me?

Then there's the perceptual process that happens in the present moment. There's a very natural process

that occurs: when something happens—the sound of a bell, the sound of a bird, the touch of a footstep, the arising of an emotion, a feeling of pressure or tension or tightness, the seeing of color and form—as soon as that happens, the mind recognizes it. It labels it. It's a very natural process of the mind. And yet we so often make the mistake of confusing that perception with reality.

Perception is something that simply arises in our minds. It may or may not be correct. It may or may not be accurately perceived. And from that movement of perception, which is just a natural functioning of the five skandhas, the five khandhas that Sally talked about, we very quickly move from perception to thinking about, to creating whole stories about. We move into that world of papañca where we create a whole world in our minds and often believe it.

So we're several layers removed from what's actually happening in the present moment, from what's actually being contacted with our present moment experience. We mistake the concept for reality, thinking that we know something. Concepts are useful—I'm not saying concepts are not useful. We need to use concepts. But it's also very helpful to be clear on the difference between the actuality of experience and the perceptions arising around it.

In a sense, I think partly we really count on these concepts because they stabilize our world for us. Things are actually changing pretty quickly. Through the use of concepts, we come into a place where we feel like things are kind of grounded here. We know what's happening. We have this sense that we know what's happening. And again, entering into the present moment, coming into contact with actual experience, we start to see that we don't know. The mystery, the mystery of experience.

There's a famous story in the suttas about mistaking perception for reality—the story of the blind men and the elephant. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the story, so I'll just review it briefly. A king asked his attendant to bring all the blind people together in the kingdom and to show them an elephant. To one person he showed the legs, to another the tail, another the ears, the tusks—all the various parts of the elephant.

After they'd been shown the elephant, the king asked them, "So tell me, what's an elephant like?" And the people who'd felt the legs said, "Well, an elephant is like a post." Those who'd been shown the tail said, "It's like a broom." Those who'd been shown the ear said, "It's like a winnowing basket." Those who'd been shown the side said, "It's like a storeroom." And having felt these things in their own direct experience, they started fighting among each other. "No, an elephant is like this!" "You're wrong, an elephant is like this!"

Part of the teaching aspect of this story is about the danger of creating views out of your own direct experience. We may not have the whole picture. So even though we have a sense of something true from our direct experience, creating a view and saying "this is the way it is" can be misleading—misleading at best, perhaps, and dangerous at worst.

So it's helpful to understand this process of perception, how it works, what the mind does around perception, so that we're not fooled into mistaking it for reality. And understanding also how prone to error concept can be. I have one story from my own experience around this mistaking of perception, how prone to error it can be.

I was on retreat in Burma, at a monastery relatively close to some houses in the nearby village. Every evening around dusk, or at least frequently in the evening around dusk, I would hear this squealing sound. And in my experience, the squealing sounded like a pig. This is the process of perception—the mind matches up what we understand from the past to our experience and does a search. I'm a computer programmer, so I think of things like this. It does a search through our experiences: "Okay, that's this." It matches it up. So that's what my mind did with this squealing sound. It matched it up with the idea, "That's a pig."

And not only that, this squealing sound had a sense of distress to it. So I envisioned that this was a pig being slaughtered for dinner or for the butcher. Compassion was the result of this experience. Each evening when I heard this, perception arose that it was a pig being slaughtered, and compassion came up.

Then one evening I was out walking around at about dusk, and I saw bats flying through the air, and they were squealing. I realized that was what I had been hearing. It had not been pigs being slaughtered. This perception process is very prone to error.

So coming into the present moment, recognizing this perceptual process as a process, can we just meet our experience without this clinging to what we think we know? Opening to the possibility of this not knowing. Opening to the possibility that these views we hold of ourselves don't have to constrain us, that we don't have to be boxed in by these views, that we don't have to box other people in by our ideas about them. Opening to the possibility that we're not what we think we are. Freedom from views. Freedom from the known, as Krishnamurti says. Freedom from the known.

In our moment-to-moment experience, opening to the possibility that we have no idea what we're looking at and what we're looking for. The very nature of insight is that we don't really know what might happen around an insight. The very looking for something can obscure the insight. We actually have no idea what we're looking for. We have some ideas about it. We think we know.

I remember on one retreat I'd heard a lot about this phenomenon called arising and passing, a phenomenon where you start to see clearly, moment to moment, things coming into being and disappearing, just in a continual stream, a flow of experience. I'd heard this described in quite a few dharma talks. I'd probably also read about it in books. And I really wanted that experience. I really wanted it.

One day I was doing walking meditation, and I realized that this wanting was expressing itself through a fantasy of describing to my teacher how I had had the insight of arising and passing. Waking up into the

midst of that thought, I had to laugh, because at that moment I really saw that I had no idea what I wanted. I had no clue what this experience was. It was an idea in my mind. It was a thought that I wanted. I really wanted to be able to tell somebody I'd had this experience.

So it can be easier in some ways if we stop looking for insight and just meet our experience with this open mind of not knowing.

My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya tells a story about how this works. He was visiting Massachusetts a year or so ago, and one of his students' father had taken them out for a drive in the countryside. They were talking about all the deer wandering around, and there was some concern about the deer getting in front of the car. The father said to U Tejaniya, "Well, I've got a deer alarm." U Tejaniya didn't understand what that was, and the father explained, "It's a very high-pitched sound that disturbs the deer, so they won't come near the car. Can you hear it?" U Tejaniya said he listened and listened and tried to hear the sound, and he couldn't hear it. So he stopped trying to hear the sound, and then he heard it.

It's that kind of relaxation. When we look for something, we don't know what we're looking for. The very looking can obscure what we're trying to see. So relaxing, settling back, and just meeting experience.

In this place of just meeting experience, coming into our present moment really fully like this, where we get a deep sense of not knowing, it can be unsettling. We can have a response of even fear, a sense of insecurity, a sense of vulnerability, because it is so clear to us that we don't know what is going to happen. We just don't know.

So what is this fear? It's worth looking into this fear. The fear might result from the mind creating an idea about something that might happen because we don't know what will happen. It might create a disaster scenario.

which would then create fear as a result of meeting that disaster scenario. So that fear isn't really about the not knowing—it's about fearing a thought in the mind. If you can see this process, that can help allow the mind to settle again back into the present moment.

And yet, settling into the present moment, there may not be any sense of a disaster scenario out there, but just this sense of vulnerability. Or a sense of: how do I move forward if I don't know what's going to happen next? This sense of almost being paralyzed because we don't know.

In my exploration of this, I think this is about a reaction to the idea of not knowing, and what we think that means—that we don't know, that we don't have control, for example.

On one retreat, I found my way into the space of just really recognizing that I had no idea what the next split second of arising experience would bring. And it took me into a place of quite strong fear. At one point I decided: I'm going to meet this. I'm going to meet this not knowing. I'm going to really be with this not knowing.

And what I discovered in this process of really trying to meet the experience was that there isn't anything that's not known. In the moment, everything is known. Now, it is true that we don't know what the next moment will bring. But the processes of mind and body just pick up the next experience kind of automatically. When we're not creating a future and referencing it back to me, a sense of self, this truth of not knowing ceases to be a problem.

It's kind of like we're standing on the edge of an abyss, surrounded 360 degrees by this abyss, and we have no choice but to take a step—feeling like we're going to step into the abyss, not knowing. And we step into the abyss. And we find ourselves standing at the edge of the abyss, surrounded by the abyss.

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