Investigation

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 59:00

The teachings of the Buddha offer us so many different tools and suggestions for our practice. There's a particular list that we're encouraged to cultivate—the qualities of the factors of awakening—which support us in this process of meeting experience, coming to understand our experience so that wisdom can grow.

This is really the purpose of our practice. We meet our experience, investigate our experience to cultivate wisdom and understanding. It's this wisdom and understanding that does the work of freeing our minds. We really can't do that work. It's more that we cultivate the conditions. We cultivate the conditions that support the development of wisdom, and then wisdom frees the mind.

It's kind of like creating the conditions for a beautiful tree to grow. We plant the acorn, perhaps, and then nurture the conditions. We offer it water and make sure it gets sunlight and make sure that the weeds are pruned away from it. We make sure we don't mow it over with a lawn mower. So we cultivate the conditions, but we don't make that tree grow. And so much of what the Buddha talked about was how do we cultivate the conditions for freedom?

One of the key supports for this is the seven factors of awakening. Tonight I'd like to explore one of those: the quality of investigation.

When we hear this word investigation—in the translation into English at least—we often associate it with a kind of thinking about or analyzing or figuring out. But that's not what this word *dhammavicaya*, which is the word typically translated as investigation, means. It doesn't mean figuring out or analyzing.

In practice, rather than trying to figure things out or figure out why things are the way they are—this is often what we're doing with investigation, we're in a mode of trying to figure out why something's happening—with the practice we turn towards a different question. And that question is: What is happening right now?

It's so simple. It is beyond simple in some ways. Our minds complicate things.

And so we're asked to look at what is happening moment to moment. In the texts it says that wise attention is the condition that supports the cultivation of all the enlightenment factors. And how does it support investigation?

One definition of wise attention is described in one of the suttas. It's a simple definition. It says: One who attends wisely attends to experience thus—this is suffering, this is the cause of suffering, this is the origin

of suffering. One attends wisely: this is the cessation of suffering. One attends wisely: this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

This probably sounds familiar. It's a version of, a kind of framework—it's the framework of the Four Noble Truths. And yet when I first read this, it kind of glossed right over it. It's like, oh yeah, he's talking about the Four Noble Truths. Then in reading it again and really looking at what it is saying—one attends wisely: this is suffering, or this is the origin of suffering, or this is the cessation of suffering, or this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering—this teaching is asking us to explore our present moment experience from this perspective of the Four Noble Truths, from this perspective of this framework.

In any moment of arising experience, one of these four things will be what's happening. There will either be suffering, or suffering will be in the process of arising, or suffering will be ceasing, or we'll be cultivating the conditions that support our practice and support the ending of suffering.

So we can look at our present moment experience through this framework. This was kind of an eye-opening thing for me. It's like, right, he's talking about the present moment here.

So this is wise attention: bringing attention to the present moment and studying our relationship to suffering. This wise attention is contrasted with unwise attention, and this is how one attends unwisely.

One thinks: "Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?" Or else one is inwardly perplexed: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

This is what we spend a lot of our time doing. These can all be thought of as variations on trying to figure out the *why* of experience, rather than looking right into the present moment and what is happening right now from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths.

Pointing into the present moment like this, as I began exploring this reflection, really began to show me that suffering is created in the present moment. I think it was my first three-month course—I had a lot of time, and I spent a lot of that time with my thoughts. Lots of those thoughts created lots of emotional storms. There was one particular pattern that came through repeatedly.

A couple of years before this retreat, something had happened that was a very embarrassing situation. I was in a play and I forgot my line. During this three-month course, I remembered that moment over and over again. I would be sitting, paying attention to my breath, and the feeling of standing on the stage and looking out at the audience and not remembering my line would come back. I'd be flooded with embarrassment all over again.

Over and over I saw this, and at some point it really sank in: this is not the same embarrassment that

happened three years ago. This embarrassment is happening now. It is being created. The conditions include that event three years ago—that's one of the conditions. But right now, in this moment, this embarrassment I'm experiencing is created because this thought arose and there's a reaction to that thought in the present moment.

This is our investigation—to begin to see that the present moment actually contains the information we need to understand why we're suffering. The *why* of the present moment, not the *why* of history. Yes, the *why* of history in that case involved the fact that I forgot my line on the stage. But in this moment, the *why* of the suffering was happening right here in the present.

This points us back into the present moment for an exploration, an investigation of our suffering as it occurs. Our suffering is created right in the present moment, and the origin, the reason for that suffering being created, is also happening in the present moment.

Another example from my practice: in the first few months after I began practicing, I was exploring a lot of emotional reactivity related to the breakup of a relationship. One of the patterns I noticed was that I would feel lonely when I went to bed at night. The *why* of this was not a mystery to me—at least so I thought. It made perfect sense that I was lonely when I went to bed at night.

And yet, because I was curious and interested in exploring my emotions through this new practice—a friend had sent me a book about practicing mindfulness with emotions—I started just exploring. This is a regularly occurring thing; what's happening? Each night I would watch this pattern unfold over and over again. Over the course of several weeks, I watched it. Each night I'd notice the loneliness and simply acknowledge: okay, this is loneliness.

This is what loneliness feels like.

And then one night I discovered—I don't even remember exactly how it happened—but what happened was that it became very clear that when I picked up my alarm clock to set my alarm for the morning, that was when the loneliness started. And it was like, wow, what is that about? That's kind of weird.

I kept watching night after night, seeing that very clearly: set the clock, loneliness comes.

One evening, as I was setting the clock, a memory flashed through my mind. I can only hypothesize that this memory had been flitting through night after night. This memory was of being with my ex-partner in Disneyland, looking up at a clock on a marquee in Tomorrowland. It was a digital clock. The clock that I was setting was a digital clock.

I could see that there was a connection between the sense impression of setting the clock and the memory. I could see this cause and effect relationship. And I could also see in that moment that the loneliness was a response to that memory. The loneliness didn't have much to do with the thing I thought it had to do with—which was going to bed by myself at night. Woe is me, I'm always going to go to bed by myself

forevermore. This is what I thought the loneliness was about.

The simple investigation of just watching the experience led to the understanding that it wasn't about going to bed alone. It was about a memory that flitted through my mind. The memory didn't even have anything to do with going to bed. It had to do with having a fun time with my ex-partner. And again, I could see that the loneliness was a reaction to the memory.

That surprised me. This was probably two months into my practice. It surprised me that I could see something that clearly just by observing my emotions in daily life.

But the thing that surprised me even more was that the next night when I went to bed, I remembered the memory, of course. But having seen that hidden link to the loneliness, the loneliness did not arise again in the same regular way. That really surprised me.

This is the power of investigation, the power of seeing conditions, the power of being willing to just watch our experience. This is wisdom. This kind of experience where the mind sees something, sees a connection that's leading one to suffering—the mind saw this pattern, this unfolding that led to that suffering of loneliness. And seeing through that, the mind didn't go that direction the next night.

I'm not saying that I didn't get lonely again. I'm not saying that at all. But that regular repeating pattern of loneliness that happened every night as I went to bed—that stopped.

Suffering is constructed in the present moment. The causes of suffering are arising in the present moment. All the information we need to understand about what's happening is available in the present moment. We do not need to think back on history. We do not need to figure out how our upbringing influenced this kind of pattern in our lives. There is a place for that; I'm not saying it's completely useless. But in terms of the practice, the power of the practice is to open into this moment and see what's available to be seen here and now.

And that is investigation. What is happening right now?

We look at the what of experience by simply meeting our body sensations. We know our body sensations as sensations arising in the present moment. We know our emotions as emotions arising now. We know our thoughts as experience arising now. All of the instructions we've been offering you is the exploration of what is happening in the present moment.

So we explore this, we investigate it, we get to know the nature of our experience in the present moment. This question of what is the nature of our experience is an interesting one for investigation. Whatever's arising—body sensations or emotions or thoughts—we get to know its nature as we meet it in the present moment. We get to know its specific nature, and we get to know its more general nature.

The specific nature is helpful for us to understand. For instance, regarding reactivity, it's really helpful to understand what is the nature of aversion. The nature of aversion is to separate. It separates us from

things. It has a belief that separation will be a condition for happiness—a delusional belief. And it orients us toward looking for things to separate from. Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls this "aversion doing its job." This is the nature of aversion. When aversion arises, this is what it does. This is the job description of aversion. And he suggests we get to know the job description of aversion really well, that we should get to know the job description of greed really well.

The point of this is to understand it, to understand its nature. Again, the understanding. It's an understanding not to get rid of something. We're exploring: what's the nature of aversion? Not to get rid of aversion, but to understand aversion. And again, the understanding is what allows the mind to begin to release, much as that example of the loneliness showed. I didn't do the letting go of that loneliness. It was the seeing of the pattern. The mind released the loneliness. Wisdom released the loneliness. And so we explore the nature of our experience to cultivate this understanding. What's the nature of greed? What's the nature of confusion?

A curiosity about this supports what we would call a wise attitude, or a perspective that allows us to just watch what's happening so that we can understand it. As we get to know the nature of our reactive emotions, it creates the space for us not to be so entwined in them. The very act of investigation helps us to take a step back. Curiosity has us looking at something from the perspective of a naturalist again. We talked about the perspective of the naturalist—just what's arising here? What's growing here? As we have that perspective, we can watch the pattern unfold without being so caught in it. The interest supports that. Disidentification helps us to meet the experience without being entangled in it.

In investigating our experience, sometimes we can use questions to help us investigate. When I ask myself the question, "What is the nature of aversion?"—it wasn't a thinking-about asking questions. Sometimes asking questions, and you can look in your own mind to see what happens, but sometimes asking questions tends to create a pattern of trying to figure out an answer. That's not the point of asking questions. Sometimes I like to describe the way questions work as if we have a still pond. That still pond is a somewhat quiet mind. The question is like dropping a pebble into that still pond, and we just see what ripples arise from dropping that question into our mind.

So we drop a question such as, perhaps while aversion is arising, "What is the nature of aversion?" And then you don't do anything in particular. You just keep looking at what's happening right now. What is the mind noticing right now? What's obvious here? The question is just a spark for curiosity and interest, and it can also organize the mind. It can have the mind naturally start to be interested in information that may be related to that question. Words are powerful in our minds, so we don't have to do a lot with them. Sometimes dropping a question in like that, you may have some response. When I explored this, it was actually quite interesting to really recognize the separating nature of aversion. It was an experience of separating.

What is the nature of aversion? And the feeling was separating, separating, separating. So it was an

experience that answered the question, not a thought.

Often I encourage people, if you use questions in terms of evoking curiosity or orienting something to investigate: if the response arises as a thought, put it on a shelf and hold it lightly. If the response arises as an experience—that, in my experience, is the way questions really lead us into investigation. There's an experience in which we understand something about the question.

So we can use questions to help us explore our experience. How does this emotion impact the body? What purpose is this emotion serving? What is the nature of this experience?

As we explore and investigate our experience more, we begin to see into its nature as being impermanent, unreliable—a process, causes and conditions unfolding. Not a solid, stable self driving the show, but just a set of conditions unfolding. This is another aspect of the nature of experience that is revealed as we investigate. It's not always about the specific nature of a particular experience. Sometimes what we see when we explore "What's the nature of this?" is simply change. A general understanding rather than a specific understanding about that experience.

And yet so much of our investigation happens around our conditioned patterns, the habits of our mind—often habits and patterns that are very old and deep. Ones that don't seem so simple as just loneliness arising in a moment, but feel like this big mess of layers: aversion and fear and anger and confusion and hostility and desire, all just in this tangled mass.

Sometimes we may create a theory about that big mess. Like, "Yeah, this big mess is about my deep inner fear of being intimate." Something like that. We're great analyzers in our culture, and we come up with theories about a lot of our patterns. And sometimes, as we see these big, messy patterns—these convoluted, multifaceted, many-layered emotional states—we might get the idea of needing to get right into the middle of it. "When I get right into the middle, when I know just what's right in the center, when I can really see that deep inner fear of intimacy—that's when this pattern is going to fall apart. That's what I need to find. That's what the investigation would have to do."

We have beliefs like that. But what I've seen is that this kind of investigation—where we're trying to dig and pull, where it's like we're trying to pry everything apart and put something under a microscope and see all the little pieces and bits—that's got an agenda to it. And often that agenda is based in greed or aversion, wanting to get rid of it, wanting it to go away. Sometimes I would feel like this pattern is wholly bad. "What I need is a scalpel. I need a scalpel to cut the whole thing out and just remove it like it's a tumor or something."

So we have these beliefs, these views about our patterns. And what is helpful—no surprise—is this: can you just notice and meet what's obvious in a moment, as opposed to having the idea that you need to pull it apart, need to figure it out? It's more like this big messy ball of mind confusion. Can you hold that with wide arms and just notice what's obvious? What's the most obvious bit of that mess in this moment?

Because the pattern is changing and evolving and shifting in moments, as you stay with it, different pieces of the puzzle, different pieces of the mess kind of rotate to the surface. We get a little flavor of that one, then a little flavor of that. "Oh, there's some anger in there. Oh, there's fear in there. There's confusion in there." Just settling back and being willing to have a wide view, as opposed to trying to dive in and figure out what's in the middle—that's really helpful.

It's helpful not to make assumptions about what's in the middle. The making of assumptions is often related to our habit of looking for the why. Why is this happening? If we have an assumption and we're looking for something—like, for instance, that deep inner fear of intimacy, which was a belief I had about myself—if I go looking in my experience for that, I'm likely to find it. Our minds will construct what we look for sometimes.

It's quite interesting when we are willing to set our assumptions aside, willing to just say, "Okay, that's a theory, I'll set that on the shelf," and just meet what is happening. Moment after moment, just the what. Over and over again I've been incredibly surprised by the way the whole pattern is put together. Like that example of the loneliness—I had no idea that loneliness was put together from a fleeting thought about Disneyland.

So if we make assumptions about our experience, about what's going on, the assumptions may or may not be true. Hold them lightly.

Just recognize whatever is obvious about the experience in the present moment. Patience. Patience with this investigation.

And likewise with that idea of some pattern being wholly bad that I talked about—just the idea of wanting to take a scalpel and cut something out and say, "Just get rid of it. That's what needs to happen with this." Many times when I've had that perspective on a pattern and I've been willing to hang out with it, willing to sit with it, willing to just open, open, open to depression—willing to just be with that depression, willing to see it there, watch myself get caught by it, see the patterns around it, notice that it came when I got really calm—it was just a whole variety of things over the course of weeks on one retreat where I had this low-grade depression.

And the willingness to just explore that... at one point I was feeling that depression in one sitting and it was like, "Oh, this wants to get big. This feeling of depression, it wants to get... wow, it wants to get really big." Let it get big. Let this depression just get as big as it wants to. And at some point in that experience of the depression growing and becoming vast, it turned inside out and became mettā. That was not what I expected to find inside of depression. More often than I ever would have expected, inside of some confused pattern is some flavor of mettā, some flavor of compassion that is confused—that is being repressed or having something demanded of it.

We find our way into the structure of our experience by being willing to meet it without agenda, without

assumption. If we have assumptions—because we will have assumptions—know that it's an assumption. "Okay, yep, I have an assumption about that. Let's just see if we can not go searching for that assumption."

I think we have to have patience with these multi-layered patterns in particular because they grew over a long period of time. They came into being over years, if not lifetimes. And so one sitting, or even one three-month course compared to lifetimes or years of a pattern putting itself together... there's a very gradual nature to the unfolding of our practice. It's a gradual cultivation of the wholesome qualities, a gradual cultivation of the wisdom that allows us to let go of things, that allows us to see things, that allows the seeing then to help support the mind to release the suffering.

The Buddha gave an analogy around the gradual nature of the path. He compared it to a shipwreck. There's a shipwreck—you think about a shipwreck, the parts of the ship are strewn all over the beach. And he said those parts of that ship are daily being subjected to the sun, the sand, the wind, the water, the waves. Just to reflect on the analogy a bit: if you were to go to that beach every day and look at the rope, for example, the rigging, it's not going to look any different day to day. But the course of the inexorable nature of the sun, the sand, the wind is to wear away at that rope. And the nature of the mindfulness, the investigation, the wisdom, the wholesome qualities that we cultivate is grain by grain to begin to release our suffering. Maybe not seen day by day.

Sometimes patterns can just let go so gradually that we don't even see them disappearing. I think I told the story of that—I'm not sure, I'll just briefly mention it—a pattern of anger around this same relationship. Just watching this anger over and over and over again. And at some point recognizing that trying to bring mindfulness to that pattern was creating the conditions for me to spiral in and just get lost in the anger. So I began setting it aside. I think I did talk about this in the hindrance talk: "Not now, not now, not now," over and over again. And that pattern disappeared while I wasn't looking. I began noticing it getting more and more spaced apart, that anger arising less and less, and then one day just realizing, "Wow, it's gone. When did it go?" So sometimes our patterns disappear so gradually we do not see when they disappear.

Other times there's an experience of a kind of rapid disappearance of a pattern. It feels like that moment of insight is so clear. And sometimes that happens—a clarity of seeing into something, and there's an experience of release in the moment. You really, in that moment, know the ending of suffering. You see the mind release. But those patterns too often happen after a long time of gradual cultivation.

Gil Fronsdal gives an analogy for this kind of moment where suddenly we see something so clearly and the mind just releases. He talks about chopping a piece of wood. You have a hatchet and you hit at that piece of wood. The first time it's probably not going to just split. Or the second, or the third, or the fourth. And we might think, "Well, I just haven't quite got it in the right place or something."

But every time you hit that log, the fiber of the wood is weakening inside. And at some point, the fiber is weak enough that the log splits. We think it's all due to that one chop, but it's the whole gradual wearing down of the fiber that allowed that to happen.

So much of this is what happens in our practice. Really, the gradual nature of the practice is where it's at. We like the big flashing insights—they feel good, they're like, "Oh great, this is working!" But it's working anyway. Really, it's working anyway for every single one of you. You are being steeped in the Dharma here, and it is working you.

Sometimes we have a tendency to create meaning related to the assumptions that we make. Our minds are meaning-making machines. That's really helpful to know as we explore investigation.

For example, there's such an interconnection between our minds and our bodies. As an emotion arises, physical sensations often arise with it. And because of that back-and-forth pattern, sometimes we can attribute a particular emotion to a particular constellation of physical sensations. Again, it's a meaning. "Ah, my heart feels heavy. I must be sad." Maybe, maybe not. When the heart feels heavy, notice the heaviness, the pressure, the tension, the weight. Explore what's actually going on before making this attribution of emotion to physical sensations.

Sometimes, because we've explored a particular pattern so much in our lives, the body can have a habit of going into a particular constellation of physical symptoms even if the emotion isn't there yet. For me, efforting was one of these. I tended to effort so much, and it created this kind of tight band around my head—the efforting to really look at things closely would create this tight band and pressure. Then at some point, I began noticing there was just this tight band of pressure, but as far as I could tell, I wasn't making effort. It was almost like the body saying, "Okay, we're used to doing this now. You sit down. This is what we do." At that point, I realized, "Oh, this is just sensation. This is just sensations. I don't have to attribute that I'm over-efforting here. This is just sensation happening right now."

Sometimes particular states arise or experiences arise in the practice that we attribute meaning to. The thought, for instance, not wanting to practice. "I don't want to practice right now." When I first started experiencing that thought and was conscious of it, I felt betrayed by my mind. It's like, "Oh no. Oh no, I don't want to practice. What does this mean? It means I'm a bad yogi. It means I'm a failure. It means I have to reorient my whole life." It's just an arising mind state. The next time you notice that you don't want to practice, you don't have to convince yourself that you want to practice. Just notice: not wanting to practice is arising. You don't have to create meaning around it. It's just an arising mind state. It happens to all of us.

Another piece—and this is the last piece that I'll mention—that I wanted to explore with you: as the mind settles more, there are periods of time where the mindfulness is pretty stable. Perhaps not for days at a time, but for ten minutes in a sitting, or maybe even a whole sitting. And then suddenly it seems like the mind just starts wandering. What happened?

My mindfulness was so strong, and now it's wandering. I've seen my mind do things like this—creating stories about how there's something I want to avoid, something I'm afraid to see. Again, creating ideas, creating meaning, creating beliefs. Why is this happening? There's got to be some meaning, some reason,

some deep meaning, some historical meaning, some pattern about my life that explains why the mind is wandering right now.

What I've often seen happening as the mindfulness starts settling is that there's something being missed. That is true. When the mind wanders, we haven't noticed something. And the investigation can be simply: What is being missed?

As the mind is settling in this way, there's been a period of continuity. If at that point the mind starts wandering, rather than doubling down and saying, "Gotta keep the mind present, gotta force the mind to stay present," get curious about what you're missing.

As the mind settles, when the mindfulness is more continuous, the mindfulness and what it's knowing are kind of in sync. It's familiar in a way. And at some point, with the settling of the mind, experience gets a little more subtle. But our intention of being mindful is still looking around up here—and the mind wanders, because it's actually interested in something more subtle.

In that kind of place, rather than trying to force yourself to stay present, it's more like asking: What is actually happening here? With this kind of experience, where things are getting subtler, we don't know what we're looking for. We can't have an agenda and say, "I'm going to see that thing that I'm missing." By very definition, when we're missing something, we don't know what we're missing.

So what might it mean to settle back and be curious? What's happening here? Sometimes the very act of trying to find something will obscure the thing that's happening.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya was visiting here a few years ago, and somebody was driving him around the country roads. They were talking about the deer that run out into the road, and the driver said, "I have a deer alarm on my car." Sayadaw asked what that was, and he explained, "It's a very high-pitched tone. The deer don't like it, so they stay away from the car." Then he said to Sayadaw, "You might be able to hear the tone."

Sayadaw tried to listen but couldn't hear it. He was listening, trying to find the tone, and he couldn't hear it. Then he gave up. He relaxed. And there it was.

The very act of looking had obscured what was happening.

Sometimes investigation is like that—settling back with curiosity. What's here? Being willing to be present and available for something you don't know. This kind of investigation, by definition, cannot be directed. We cannot choose what to look for. We have to receive what's happening. Where's the mind right now?

As the mind settles more and more, this kind of investigation supports us—rather than the kind where we're directing the attention, saying, "I'm going to look at this right now, I'm going to look at that right now." That can serve us, and boy did it serve me for a long time. But at some point in the practice—and it will come and go—there's a time when we have to stop that directing and settle back and receive what we

don't know.

It can take some courage to not know what we are going to be seeing.

It really doesn't matter what's happening in your experience.

We say that a lot, I know. But we really mean it. We do.

Just keep noticing. Just keep observing. What's happening? What's happening? Moment after moment.

Wholesome mind states too—investigating wholesome mind states. What's the nature of peace? What's the nature of calm? What's the nature of love? It's so easy to get caught with very subtle craving for wholesome mind states.

At one point on a retreat, I was watching—I was in a pretty quiet, very quiet state—and at some point the mind, I don't remember whether I did it intentionally or whether it just arose: "Oh, what's my relationship to this state?" And it was wanting it to continue. Trying to make it continue. Subtle, subtle. Then that fell away. And there was fear that it's not going to continue. I felt the fear. And then joy, because it was like, "Wow, I had no idea there was defilement in the midst of that. That's so great that the mind could see that."

I think this is a hallmark of investigation too—the joy that can come just from whatever we're looking at. Just moment by moment knowing: this is what's happening. Setting aside ideas, setting aside agendas, setting aside assumptions, setting aside meaning, and just being with what's actually here.

This will lead us to freedom. Moment by moment, grain by grain, very gradually most of the time.

Let's just sit for a moment. I'll read a poem—a Fernando Pessoa poem:

The mystery of things, where is it?
Why doesn't it come out
To show us at least that it's mystery?
What do the river and tree know about it?
And what do I, who am no more than they, know about it?
Whenever I look at things and think about what people think of them,
I laugh like a brook cleanly plashing against a rock.
For the only hidden meaning of things
Is that they have no hidden meaning.
It's the strangest thing of all,
Stranger than all poets' dreams
And all philosophers' thoughts,
That things are really what they seem to be.
There's nothing to understand.

Yes, this is what my senses have learned on their own.
Things have no meaning, they exist.
Things are the only hidden meaning of things.

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