Investigation

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 57:56

Tonight I'd like to talk about investigation, which is the second of the seven factors of awakening. As a factor of awakening, it is an important quality for us to cultivate because it is one of the factors that supports us in seeing things as they are—that *yathabhuta* that Carol was talking about the other night.

The English word "investigation" sometimes conjures up the meaning of thinking about or figuring out. Yet this is not what the Buddha had in mind with this quality of investigation, this second factor of awakening. In practice, in investigating our experience, looking at our experience, being with our experience, rather than trying to figure out why something's happening, we are encouraged to look at what is happening moment after moment after moment. This, I think, is one of the key ways we can recognize investigation: we are exploring what is happening in the present moment.

And yet again, as I was saying last week and as we've said all week long, it's not simply about being aware in the present moment. There's a perspective that we bring to make this looking at what's happening in the present moment a factor of awakening.

When the Buddha described this factor of investigation, *dhamma vicaya* is the Pali term, and it may be translated as "investigation of states." Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as "analysis of qualities." The word "analysis" also has that notion of figuring out and thinking about. I really think we want to look at this from the perspective of not figuring out but being with.

As the Buddha described this term, he offered for us what its nourishment is. He encouraged us to nourish the awakening factors, and he said that the factor that most nourishes this quality of investigation is something called wise attention. This brings the qualities of wisdom and awareness together, this wise attention.

One of the key definitions of wise attention is found in one of the suttas where the Buddha is talking about how one attends when one attends with wise attention. He says: One attends wisely, "This is suffering." One attends wisely, "This is the cause of suffering." One attends wisely, "This is the cessation of suffering." And one attends wisely, "This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering."

When I first heard this, I didn't really get it. I thought, well, he's just saying the Four Noble Truths. But the way it's phrased, when I read it and reflected on it, it's pointing to the present moment. He said, "This is suffering. This is the cause of suffering." And so I think what he's pointing to is that we explore the present moment experience, looking at what's happening from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. Is what's arising in the present moment suffering? Is what's arising in the present moment the cause of suffering,

the craving? Is what's arising in the present moment the ending of suffering? Or is what's arising in the present moment some of the beautiful qualities of heart and mind that support us on our path? Essentially using the Four Noble Truths as a framework for exploring our experience. He's pointing us into the present moment around exploring the Four Noble Truths.

The more I have explored this and reflected on this in my own experience, the more I have come to appreciate that this reflection—I'll just take one right now, "this is suffering"—is really a deep pointing to truth: that when suffering is arising, it's arising in the present moment. Suffering occurs in the present moment. It doesn't occur anywhere else. It may be that there is a thought of the past arising in the present moment and that reactivity has been constructed around that thought. But the actual experience of suffering is happening right now.

On one retreat, I kept having this memory come up. It was a repeating memory, one of those that came up over and over again. It was of a time that I had been acting in a play, and I had forgotten my line. The wall went down between myself and the audience, and I looked out at the audience and there they were looking back at me. Embarrassment arose. That memory—looking out at the audience and seeing people looking at me—embarrassment arose. On this retreat, that memory came and embarrassment arose over and over again.

Finally, I really began to clearly get it. Obviously there had been conditions in the past; I had been in that play and that had happened. But what was happening—this was on a three-month course, and seeing this over and over throughout that time—I really began to see that what was happening was that the thought was arising, the memory was arising for some reason, and there were conditions for that.

Things don't happen randomly, so the memory was arising. And the feeling of embarrassment was constructed all over again. It was being created right in the present moment. It wasn't as if there was some store of that embarrassment sitting there somewhere waiting to be dredged up. It was actually being recreated.

That's a pretty amazing thing. And it's pretty freeing, actually, when we really get that. Because the fact that it is constructed in the present moment means that there are processes going on in our mind that are putting it together right here and now. And when they can be seen, the mind begins to choose not to go down the route of suffering.

So this is suffering, arising in the present moment. Whether we're suffering, as Joseph said, over something in our past, or even more amazingly, something that we imagine out of whole cloth for our future, it's being constructed now. The cause of that suffering is also constructed now—the craving, the wanting.

Last week I talked about this story of noticing loneliness when I went to bed every night. I'll mention it again briefly in case some of you don't remember. My partner had broken up with me, and I was going to

bed lonely every night. It didn't particularly strike me as odd that I was going to bed lonely. I thought I understood something about why. In my mind, it was something like, "Well, of course I'm lonely. I'm going to bed alone."

Yet through the exploration of the feeling of loneliness, as I described noticing that it arose when I was setting my alarm clock, and then seeing over the next few nights this memory of being with my partner in Disneyland looking up at the clock, I could see that the actual present moment cause of the loneliness had to do with the reaction to that memory. It had nothing to do with going to bed alone. The cause of that loneliness was created, again based on this arising memory, in the present moment. And as I described, when that connection was seen, the mind chose not to go down the path of loneliness. I couldn't have done that. I couldn't have said, "Don't do that anymore." But the wisdom that understood "that way lies suffering"—the mind let go of it.

Now it doesn't always happen that quickly, as I will describe going through some of these examples in investigation.

So suffering and its cause are happening in the present moment. Through the witnessing of what's happening in the present moment, the mind begins to let go of the causes. When the causes are released, the suffering is released. The fact that pretty much everything that we can know happens in the present moment really is encouraging us to do this investigation here and now, looking at what is happening—just what is happening moment after moment.

This is what we've been talking about almost every day. How do we look at what's happening in the present moment? We notice our bodies, what's happening underneath the level of concept. We notice the vibratory energy. We notice the hardness, softness, coolness, heat, pressure, tension, tightness, burning, aching, stabbing, pulling, twisting, tearing—all of these physical sensations. We notice our emotions, our moods happening. We notice how those impact the body. We notice thoughts. All of these arising.

And as these arise, we often see that there's a tendency in our minds to want to understand *why* something is happening. This is something to watch for. The tendency to try to figure out "why is that happening?" tends to take us into story, tends to take us away from the present moment, the *what* is happening moment after moment.

We can construct all kinds of reasons why we're feeling a particular emotion. We can go back to the causes from our past, our history. We can reconstruct, "Well, of course I'm feeling this way. This is like when I was a kid on the playground. This is the way people teased me. This is kind of reminding me of that." We can think about that kind of thing. And yet that's taking us away from what's actually happening moment after moment.

The more we are willing to actually explore what's happening moment after moment, we start to see that all the information we need to understand the suffering of this moment—how the suffering is created in

this moment—all the information we need is found right in the present moment.

is the best way to uncover what we could call the "why" of the present moment.

In a sense, the more continuous our mindfulness gets, the more natural this aspect of investigation becomes. The more continuous our mindfulness gets, the more it reveals these causes in the present moment. We see a thought. We see that we are reacting to that thought in the present moment. It's actually quite amazing.

In the earlier days of my practice—like that example of the play, where the thought of forgetting my line came up—at first it seemed like there was no distinction, no possibility of that memory arising without the embarrassment coming along with it. They seemed intimately connected, as if one came packaged with the other. But the more I observed, the more I was with the present moment experience, the more I could see that there was the arising of the thought, and that was just thought. And then there was a reaction to that thought—the embarrassment was recreated all over again. It wasn't that the thought came with embarrassment as part of the package. There was a little gap.

So the continuity of mindfulness begins to reveal these cause and effect relationships, begins to reveal how our minds get hooked into the patterns of suffering. This exploration of looking at what's happening in the present moment, as opposed to trying to figure out why things are happening—this is one of the ways we can get confused about investigation, about that word "investigation." So I simply want to encourage you to have the interest to explore, moment after moment, what is happening.

Another way we may try to figure things out—perhaps a habit that at least some of us have around our experience—is that as we do hang out with our experience, as we start looking at what's going on moment after moment, we begin to see that certain patterns, certain habits, certain familiar conditioned habits of suffering and struggle—we all have our own favorites; one of mine was self-hatred—we see that they're fairly complex, rather layered.

We may have a sense that there are so many layers to this that what we really need to do, in order to have the whole thing fall apart, is to get right into the middle of it and see what's at the root. This may prompt us to go digging for what's there.

For example, there might be a feeling of resistance, and that resistance may be covering up—just to give an example of how this works—there may be a feeling of resistance, and we have a sense that there's some anger there and we're resisting the anger. Maybe we've seen in the past that often our anger is related to fear. So we may have a sense of, "Well, there's resistance. Maybe I need to go find the fear." Not really respecting or acknowledging that what is actually being felt right now is resistance. Instead, we try to dive into the middle of it, try to figure out what's there, assuming what's in the middle based on history, on things we've seen in our experience before.

I've seen in my own practice that this approach is actually not often helpful, because if we go looking for

something, we can usually find it. It's almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy. We say, "Okay, I'm feeling resistance, so there must be fear underneath." And then we're scanning, looking for the fear.

In investigation, our practice is to—I think of it this way: if we've got a big mess of whatever it is, a big mess of self-hatred, a big mess of confusion, a big mess of anxiety, it's like we put our arms around the whole thing and simply ask, can we take in what is obvious about this experience? Rather than trying to dig for what's in the middle, just what's obvious? Rather than assuming there's something underneath to be found, we allow our wide arms to take in the entirety of the experience and simply notice what's obvious.

In my own experience, my own practice of exploring in that way, investigating in that way, what I've seen is that there's a very natural, gentle revealing. As we are able to put our arms around it and be with the most obvious thing, just being with that most obvious thing, sometimes the underneath pieces begin to show themselves.

Being with resistance, hanging out with resistance—"There's resistance. This is what resistance feels like"—and then there's a little flare of anger. "Oh, anger's here now." Now we can look at anger because it's here, it's in the present moment, it's clear, it's obvious.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, offers an analogy for investigation—I think it may actually be for the meeting of experience, for the quality of mind that stays with experience. He talks about it being like rubbing a bowl with a soft cloth. That's a very different way of exploring experience than picking it apart, pulling it apart. It's more trusting that the mind's meeting of experience, the continuity of mindfulness being like that soft cloth, will reveal what needs to be known, what needs to be seen.

So it's helpful, I think, to not make assumptions about what lies underneath the outer layers. For instance, feeling a sense of depression arising, we might assume that a feeling of loneliness must underlie that depression.

I had a situation like this at one retreat. I was experiencing some low-grade depression, and I had some theories about what it might be connected to. I saw the depression arise when I was watching people walk together. So potentially, I thought, maybe it has to do with loneliness. But fortunately, at that point I was experienced enough to set that aside and say, "Well, maybe it has to do with loneliness." Rather than going and digging, saying, "Where's the loneliness?" I'm sure I could have constructed loneliness. But just being with the depression, noticing the obviousness of what was there, I learned a lot about my mind. I learned a lot about how that depression came into being. In fact, it was rather surprising—I found it came into being when the mind was really calm.

For several weeks, this was one of my main patterns that kept re-arising. Just willing to meet it, be with it, notice it. Noticing when it's present, noticing when it's absent, noticing when I felt caught by it and struggling with it, noticing when it felt like, "Oh, it's just depression, it's fine, it's no problem." Just being

with it over and over again. Feeling my heart expand, feeling my heart contract, just being with it.

And then one day in the exploration of this, I felt like the depression began to get really big. I thought, "Oh wow, look at this." And there was absolutely no resistance at this point. There were bodily sensations associated with this feeling of depression, and the bodily feelings—it felt like my body got really big as I was exploring the physical sensations of depression and the mental state of depression. It felt like it was just expanding, expanding, expanding. And at some point in that process, the experience felt like it turned inside out. And what was there in that moment was a beautiful, expanded feeling of mettā, of loving-kindness.

Now that was not what I expected to find in the middle of that state of depression. The very next thought that came up was telling about what was perhaps going on, because the very next thought that arose in my mind was, in the midst of this beautiful, expansive feeling of mettā: "This is stupid, this is sappy, this is corny." That gave me a little clue, perhaps, as to the depression potentially being around not being able to connect with that feeling of expanded mettā.

So holding assumptions lightly about what is in the middle, the willingness to just meet what is happening—that was the key for me in that exploration. And more times than I can probably even recall, I've been surprised by what I found when I've been willing to just settle back and let go of the assumptions, let go of the ideas I have about what my mind is about, and instead just observe, just notice what is happening.

This exploration of what is happening is like gathering data. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, whom Carol has referred to a couple of times, has used this analogy of data gathering. He used this example: Think about people—the early, early people, probably as far back as caveman people—going out and looking up at the stars. The first time you go out and look up at the stars, if you didn't have all the history of stargazing behind us, the first time you look up, it's like, "Wow, there's a pattern. There's some pattern up there." And then the next night you go out and you see the pattern. And the next night you go out and you see the pattern. And each night you see the pattern, and probably you see little shifts as you go. You see little shifts in terms of when the stars are coming up. You may see shifts in terms of a few stars up there that don't seem to behave like all the others—they wander through the field of stars rather than being in fixed places.

So night after night, looking up at the stars, the understanding begins to grow of what is going on up there. It's similar here: we gather the data, particularly around patterns of experience, familiar patterns of experience. Each time something arises—like that depression, for instance—each time that arose was a new opportunity to gather some data. Each time we see it, we get a little new bit of perspective on the situation, and the mind begins to understand and put together the patterns. It can happen quite organically that the mind begins to understand the patterns just through the patient witnessing of our experience.

So one of the things we sometimes see when we observe our experience in this way, watching patterns over and over again, is a pattern vanishing.

On one retreat, I was feeling a lot of wanting when I was doing walking meditation—wanting to look at the people who were around me. Is that familiar? I had been keeping my eyes down, definitely looking at shoes, but I really wanted to look at faces. For the first few weeks of this three-month course, I was telling myself, "I'm not going to look." It was like I had blinders on. I was a good yogi. I was not going to look at people's faces.

After some weeks of this, finally it hit me upside the head: wanting is happening. Maybe I should look at wanting. I had not really been cognizant that wanting was happening. I had such an agenda of being a good yogi that I did not recognize or acknowledge the wanting itself.

So at some point I began being curious about wanting—wanting to look. I got really interested in the feeling. It actually felt like a magnet. When somebody was walking nearby, I was deciding not to act on the wanting, but to just feel into it. I would be there doing the walking meditation and someone would come into my field of vision and I'd feel this pull. And since I was not acting on it, I really got to feel that feeling of the pull—the unsatisfying feeling of wanting, the uncomfortable feeling that this isn't the way I want it to be. I want to be able to look. I got really familiar with that pull.

I also began to notice clearly when it arose. I had actually put myself outside away from people because I didn't want to be dealing with this all the time. So I was doing the walking meditation, and then somebody would pop into my peripheral vision. The wanting would spring right up. There it was. I'd feel that magnetic pull, like somebody described as a tractor beam from Star Trek—this pull to look. The person would walk in front of me, right in front of me, really tempting to look up. And then they'd walk past, go up the stairs, through the door, and the wanting would vanish.

That was an interesting moment. It felt like being released from a vice grip.

This is something we can begin to see—the ending of our struggles, our suffering. We can begin to see through investigation what the causes are that put it together, what the causes are that have it fall apart. This is in the terrain of that aspect of wise attention: seeing the ending of suffering. I'm not saying that was Nibbāna. I'm not saying that seeing the ending of that wanting was Nibbāna. But it is in the terrain of realizing how suffering falls apart. We can witness this in our observing what's happening.

Now, that experience continued, and there was an interesting lesson here too. For a little while, I really got into watching this because I would watch the suffering appear and then kind of wait for it to disappear. It was fun—I got to watch it go away when the person disappeared. At some point I realized an interesting thing: I was actually holding on to the wanting in order to watch it disappear. And when that became seen, the whole thing fell apart. The pattern of wanting to look at people just ended.

There's a lot we can learn from looking at what is happening in the present moment. In that example,

seeing something disappear kind of quickly—that doesn't happen often, at least in my experience. Particularly with some of these habits or patterns that are really familiar, these multi-layered patterns that are so sticky, often we have to look at them over and over again. A lot of patience is asked of us to keep exploring these patterns.

This is the gradual cultivation that Joseph was talking about last night—this gradual cultivation. And in my own practice, this gradual cultivation has been the main way that the path has unfolded. I've had a few of those really big insights, seeing something kind of mind-blowing. But most of the insights, many of the insights, much of the freeing that's happened, particularly around the personal dukkha—the dukkha around personality and who I am and how I was raised—that has been a more gradual wearing away.

The Buddha offered an analogy for our practice that I love because it so speaks to me. He said that much of our practice unfolds in a gradual way, and he uses this analogy of a shipwreck—of a ship that's been strewn around the beach, the parts of the ship kind of all over the beach. And he said that over the course of months, the sun, the sand, the wind, the water wear away at the parts of the ship. Day by day—and this is an extrapolation from my understanding of the analogy—you're not going to see much change in any one part of the ship. A board sits there, you go look at it every day, you may even take a microscope to it, it's not going to look like it changes much day after day. But gradually, gradually, the wearing away is happening.

And imagine some of the rigging, the rope that holds the sails together. Day after day, you look at that piece of rope, it may not change at all. But a year later you go and you try to pick it up and it falls apart in your hand. Much of our practice unfolds in this gradual way. And sometimes I've seen that things fall apart without my knowing they fell apart—until kind of later.

So an example around this: there was a period of my practice where I was really exploring anger, anger at a particular person. And I began to notice at some point that my whole way of exploring the anger was kind of hooking me back into the pattern of anger. I recognized that the mind states and the thoughts were stronger than my ability to be mindful of them. And so I began bowing to my anger and saying, "I see you, and now is not the time to pay attention to you, but I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger." So I kind of said "not now" to that anger, and then just turned my attention to something else.

This was a skillful setting aside of the pattern. I just turned my attention—I was often walking when this came up—I turned my attention to my feet on the ground, just letting the anger be. It's like, "You do your thing. I'm not going to try to stop you, but I'm not going to pay attention to you either."

And in this way, I noticed the anger come up over and over again. "Oh, I see you. Not now. I see you. Not now." And I did begin to notice—I think in retrospect a little bit—I began to notice that it wasn't as much of a problem. It used to come up a lot, coming up every day. And then maybe it started coming up every few days, and then maybe every week. The bouts of that mind state got farther and farther between, at least with respect to that particular person—the anger at that particular person.

I didn't particularly think about it too much. It's like, well, maybe that person isn't coming up in my mind so much. It just wasn't arising; this anger wasn't arising as frequently. And then one day, I was walking up to my front door and I realized, wow, I haven't felt that anger in a really long time. And even thinking about it—thinking about it brought the person that I had been angry with into my mind—and I still didn't feel the anger. I was kind of like, wow. Where did it go?

And I didn't actually trust that it was gone. But it never came back. It had ended without my seeing it end.

So this is another way that—I mean, I had met it each time, kind of like, "I see you, not now. I see you, not now." I had met it each time, put it aside without aversion, and it just lost its momentum.

I don't know if some of you have seen the film *What the Bleep?*

It talks about these neural networks. And what the Buddha said: what we frequently ponder becomes the inclination of our mind. That's kind of what this film was pointing to—that when we engage in a pattern over and over again, the neurons shore it up. It's like, "Oh yeah, that one must be important. Bring more neurons in to support that." It fires again. "Oh, that one must be important. Bring more in." So that's the way our brains work. Whatever we frequently ponder becomes the inclination. It's a very natural process.

The interesting piece about this from the perspective of neurobiology is that when a pattern stops being engaged with, the neurons begin to rewire. Like, "Oh, that one's not important." When they're not used in that pattern, they begin to put their tendrils out elsewhere. A pattern can kind of fall apart in that way.

Another area that's important to investigate—I've been looking at the difficulty, but it's also really important to investigate the wholesome. To investigate happiness, calm, peace, equanimity, concentration. The investigation here is really about being with.

There's something beautiful about the factor of mindfulness. It has this amazing quality that... I'm going to take a step back for a second. You know, we talk about the four right efforts: letting go of the unwholesome, abandoning those unwholesome states that have arisen, avoiding unwholesome states that have not yet arisen, cultivating wholesome states that have not yet arisen, and maintaining wholesome states that have arisen. Winnie talked about this the other night. And that sounds very much like a doing. And it can be. We can actively cultivate wholesome states of metta, for example, using the metta practice that we've been doing.

And there's another way to cultivate wholesome states and abandon unwholesome states, and that is through mindfulness. Mindfulness itself is, as my teacher Sayadaw U Pandita said—I'll say wise mindfulness—the most wholesome mind state. And so cultivating wise mindfulness, we are cultivating a wholesome state. When it's not present, we're planting the seeds for it to be present, so we are cultivating that state of mindfulness.

And mindfulness has this beautiful capacity, this beautiful quality, that when we have that wise

mindfulness, wise awareness of unwholesome, unskillful states, mindfulness of those tends to create the conditions for them to appear less frequently in our experience. And when we bring our mindful attention to wholesome states—to joy, to happiness, to love, to compassion—when we bring our mindful attention to those states, it creates the conditions for them to appear more frequently in our experience. And so the cultivation of mindfulness contains the four right efforts.

One of the most beautiful ways to encourage wholesome states is to be mindful of them when they have arisen. Be with them, recognize them. It's so easy to get lost in those beautiful states, to kind of bliss out or just be in the experience rather than really with it, aware of it. The awareness of those wholesome states—we can look at as being this other aspect of wise attention, the aspect of recognizing the path. Because these wholesome states are the path. They're pointing the way. Recognizing, cultivating the path. This is the path leading to the end of suffering.

This is one of the things about wise attention. Essentially, any experience that we're having in this moment can be seen through one of these lenses of the Four Noble Truths. Either what's happening in the moment is suffering, the cause of suffering, the ending of suffering, or—maybe these qualities, these beautiful wholesome qualities—the path leading to the end of suffering. So cultivating the path in this way, mindful of these qualities, these beautiful qualities of mind.

We do have a tendency to cling to some of these states. I'm sure you've noticed that. And so one of the helpful tools for us in observing these wholesome states of mind is to recognize our relationship to them. Not just settle back and kind of go into the bliss and think, "Oh yeah, this is really good." I mean, if you're noting, it's like, "Oh yeah, bliss, bliss." Okay, that note is going to give you a clue, right?

You know, a little bit of attachment going on. So noticing our relationship to these states—not to beat ourselves up about it, but to disentangle ourselves from the craving around these experiences.

Actually, in my own experience, when I'm feeling joy or happiness and wanting it to continue, having that kind of holding around it, it really doesn't allow the feeling and that state to flower fully. The clinging seems to dampen it down a little bit. I'm sure you've seen this with concentration. It's kind of a classic thing that happens: you're paying attention to the breath and noticing the experiences that are happening, and it's starting to feel really good. "Oh yeah, wow, this feels really good"—and then it's gone. That sense of "ooh, more of that, I want more of that" kind of gets in the way for us.

Sometimes the clinging to these wholesome states can be really subtle. It's kind of amazing how subtle it can be. I was at Shwe Oo Min, Sayadaw U Tejaniya's monastery, and at one point I had a state of mind that was quite peaceful—very spacious, very quiet, very tranquil. As far as I could tell, it was pretty pure. But I did think to ask, "What's my relationship to this experience?" And there was a very subtle leaning in, trying to make that state continue. Very subtle. When that was seen, the trying fell away. And then there was immediately wanting it to continue because I was no longer actively engaged in making it continue. "Oh no, wait, no, I want it to continue." There was fear it wouldn't continue. So boom, boom, boom—the

mind saw these ways of clinging to this state. And the next thing that happened was that all this joy arose because the mind had seen the clinging. I think Joseph mentioned that: sometimes in the midst of seeing the clinging, the mind can get really happy because it is seeing things being released.

So sometimes the clinging to wholesome states can be really subtle. This tool of checking our relationship to our wholesome experience is really supportive, really helpful.

We've said, I think, many times already: it really doesn't matter what is happening in your experience. We can bring mindfulness to pretty much anything. Self-hatred, depression, loneliness, confusion, bliss, joy, happiness, calm, peace, ease, boredom, confusion. What's important is to know what is happening, to observe what happens to it as you observe it. This process leads us through to the discovery of the impermanent nature of experience, the unreliable nature of experience, seeing how suffering is constructed, seeing how it falls apart. Moment after moment: What is happening? What is happening? This investigation is a crucial tool that leads us towards understanding, towards wisdom that frees the mind.

Let's sit for a few moments.

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