Attitude

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 37:18

This morning I'd like to offer some reflections about attitude—a little more exploration of that side of the practice.

Exploring attitude is a way of beginning to look at what our relationship is to experience. That's another word that could be used for attitude: relationship. What's the relationship to experience? Or maybe simply: How am I with this? There's what's happening, and there's how we are with it.

In terms of that relationship, there may be a very direct kind of connection. Something's happening in the present moment—a body sensation that's unpleasant, and a relationship of not liking. A sound or a sight that's pleasant, and a relationship of appreciation or enjoyment. That's probably the most direct kind of attitude: What's the experience, what's the object, and what's the relationship to that object?

And then there are attitudes that are more like habitual patterns. They may not be directly related to the experience but may in fact flavor the experience because of a kind of coloring that's already in the mind. In my own case, I had a very habitual, aversive mind, and when it was in that state, even very neutral experience—such as seeing somebody's sneakers at the end of my walking path—could have a very aversive relationship to that experience. So sometimes the attitude is much more of a habitual flavor. Some of those we carry around with us for quite a while.

Another way that attitude can show up is not so much directly about the experience or our habitual relationship to things, but more about our relationship to the meditation itself. This can be connected to our habitual relationships to other things, because we tend to carry our habits of mind into our meditation. Our relationship to the meditation might include agendas, beliefs: I need to pay attention in this way. Some other experience should be happening. This is the wrong experience. This is the right experience. I'm doing well. I'm failing. These thoughts, beliefs, and relationships to the meditation itself are also forms of attitude, forms of this relationship. If the unpleasant experience isn't going away, I must be doing it wrong. I need more clarity. So many of these kinds of thoughts and beliefs—because they are about the meditation—can sometimes be seen not as something to know. Oh, believing it needs to be more clear—that's what's happening right now.

And then of course there is the balanced relationship to experience: the okayness, the ease that whatever is happening is not a problem, that there's ease with whatever is happening. A flavor of allowing, a loving attention, a kind attention—all of those relationships to experience are also really useful to notice when they are happening. Again, that might go right by us, because "that's the way it's supposed to be in meditation." Almost that belief—that this is the way it's supposed to be—might prevent us from really

seeing: Oh, this is what kind attention is like. This is the experience of kindness. This is the experience of allowing and okayness. No problem. That's what this is like.

And so we check the attitude from time to time. Sometimes when we check the attitude, ask that question—What's going on? What's the relationship?—something is very clear. And again, this isn't something to think about. It's not something to try to figure out, but much more to just invite an attitude to show itself, to come into conscious awareness. Sometimes it's very clear. When we ask, "How am I with this?" sometimes it's just right there. Most surprisingly, we haven't really clearly seen it. Oh yeah, that's what's happening. I don't like this. Okay, not liking—that's also happening.

And sometimes it's not so clear. We orient to exploring, opening to the attitude, and nothing particularly shows up. We've rung the doorbell and nobody seems to be answering the door. If that happens, don't go digging. Don't try to figure it out. Just continue.

What am I aware of? Am I aware? What's here?

Sometimes an attitude might not be so obvious because, while there's always some relationship present, it will either be some flavor of greed, aversion, or delusion, or some flavor of balance of mind. One of those will always be there. But sometimes they may not be so clear, perhaps because they're subtle. The attitudes can have a wide range. Sometimes it might be the subtlest form of leaning in—"Oh, what's that?" Or sometimes the attitude is more in the flavor of wise attitude, where some of those wise attitudes are a little subtle too. Calm. Okayness. We don't tend to recognize those kinds of experiences.

Sometimes an attitude might not be so clear because it's in the realm of delusion. Delusion is harder to know, harder to see by its very nature. Delusion can be expressed as disconnection from experience. It might be expressed or felt or known or experienced as confusion. But quite often, I would say, delusion expresses itself not in terms of an emotional flavor but more as a belief.

This can be a way in sometimes—a kind of deepening question around attitude: What is being believed right now? What is being believed? And if a belief is revealed, again, with all the experience of opening to attitude and recognizing something's here, that's what's happening. Believing is happening right now. We don't need to try to change a belief, and it's useful to recognize it as a belief.

Another question that can be supportive if it's not so clear what the attitude is—and again, it's not a problem if it's not clear, just continue—I've also found another broader question. It's even really more broad than checking the attitude: a broader question of "What else is happening right now?" Sometimes that can shake the mind from its habits of what it's inclined to look at, what it's used to looking at, what it's familiar with looking at. To kind of step back is almost like, "Oh, maybe something else. What else is here? What else is happening right now?"

There are some particularly useful times to check the attitude that I've found in my own practice. In general, as I've said, not to do this a lot—not to check the attitude every time we check our experience,

"What's obvious? What's the attitude? And what's the attitude to that? And what's the attitude to that?" That gets really exhausting. So just from time to time.

And yet there are some good times to check the attitude. If it feels like there's any struggle in the meditation, check the attitude. If it feels like there's any kind of sense of a problem, or something's wrong, or this isn't right—that itself is revealing an attitude. So check the attitude there. And as I mentioned yesterday, when mindfulness returns after having been lost—mindfulness has disappeared and reappears—that can also be a good time to check the attitude, because an attitude could have shifted while we were lost.

And then, if it feels like it's going really well, check the attitude. That may reveal, when it's going really well, subtle beliefs of "This is right. This is the way it's supposed to be. I'm doing well. I want more of this." So it might reveal a subtle greed or some delusion around "supposed to be like this." But it also can help us to check in and see wise attitude when it's going well—help us to recognize what balanced mind is like, what that loving attention is like.

This aspect of exploring the attitude is how this practice leads to freedom. Because so much of the undercurrents of our mind are motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion. And unless we are curious about what's the motivation, what's underlying this, it may never be seen. We're so habitually oriented in ways that we don't tend to see what's habitual. And also, these relationships can be very subtle and very deep, very deeply conditioned.

And so this is very direct. We are opening to what's the relationship, curious about: Is greed, aversion, delusion here? Is there balance of mind here? The curiosity, the willingness to understand and explore what's here around the greed, aversion, delusion—this curiosity and willingness to understand the greed, aversion, delusion creates the conditions for its release.

When we see and recognize loving attention, balanced attention, that creates the conditions for those wholesome states to arise more frequently.

And so this exploration is particularly connected, very directly, to the Buddha's description of freedom. What is Nibbana? he said. The absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. This indeed is Nibbana.

And the freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion happens as we explore and are curious about greed, aversion, and delusion.

Freedom. That's the possibility of this practice.

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