Checking the Attitude (Online Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 39:01

Good morning, everyone.

I just want to start by saying a couple of words about our collective situation in our lives right now. We've had this interesting juxtaposition, this combination of events—the coronavirus and the shelter in place, everyone secluding themselves and turning inwards, a little more time away from our usual experiences and work and how we engage in the world. And then there are the protests that have come in the last few weeks, which really speak to a deep, very deep oppression of Black and brown people in our country. That external movement, the movement to engage, the movement to speak and act towards justice, towards change of conditions.

I think it's not an accident that these two things happened in a way together. The movement inwards, the seclusion, in some ways created the conditions for this connection outwards. The fact that people were in such a different place allowed them to be more available, to have the conditions—the videos, the situation of George Floyd's murder, Ahmaud Arbery's murder, the video with Amy Cooper—have those hit so deeply because we weren't engaged with all of our other things. I think that's a condition for the engagement, for the heart opening.

To me, this really speaks to the interplay, the dance between inward and outward, internal and external. The interplay between looking inward to what's happening inside and engagement outwards. I wanted to speak to this because we're taking this time this week, these days, to engage with an inward exploration, but it's not separate from looking outwards. Looking at the conditions in our own mind has an effect on how we engage outwardly. It's not separate. The conditions of the world are, I suppose we could say, a kind of combination of all of our internal mind states. The systemic oppression of Black and brown people originates in the views, the attitudes, the unseen delusions of people. Seeing those, taking the time to step back and see those, will support and move us all in the direction of more healthy relationships.

It has been resonating in my mind, this inner and outer—exploration inward at our own conditioning and also looking outward at the conditions in the world and seeing how they connect. I do think that this time on this retreat will be a valuable support for that in your own life and in the way in which our practice inevitably connects to how we engage in the world.

So just a few key points before the meditation, a few key points to follow on from Carol's instructions yesterday, Carol's guidance on the practice, the overview of this style of teaching. The instructions

themselves are pretty simple. We relax the body and mind because that supports a very natural awareness. We don't try to make awareness happen. The relaxation of body and mind allows those processes, those natural human capacities, to do their job. So we relax the body and mind and then begin to recognize, notice the awareness itself. Am I aware? What is that experience of awareness? And then noticing what awareness is aware of. What is obvious? What's here in this moment? And the light touch of persistence—just enough effort in a moment to be with this moment, and then doing it again and again and again. Each moment: Are you aware? What's obvious? What's here?

From time to time also checking in: How am I in relationship to experience? Sayadaw calls this checking the attitude.

This checking the attitude is one of the pieces I want to explore a little bit more this morning. Checking the attitude is important because how we are paying attention, how we are noticing experience, may be embedded with or imbued with habitual tendencies—attitudes of greed, of aversion, of confusion. Our work is to begin to move in the direction of having an attitude where everything that arises is okay, and yet we don't try to deny when there's a not-okay perspective in the mind.

Often these perspectives, these attitudes, are kind of hidden from us because they're so habitual, because they're so embedded or ingrained in the way that we engage. We don't see them. And so the checking the attitude is a kind of noticing what's here. We notice what's here—oh, there's this happening right now: this experience, this thought, this mood, this body sensation, this sight, this sound. And how am I in relationship to that? Do I like it? Do I not like it? Do I want it to go away? Is there confusion about it? A belief, an identity in relationship to it? A sense of me and other, self and other?

These relationships often are not seen, but sometimes we can simply check in: How am I in relationship to this?

And then some of those hidden attitudes can come into the forefront, be revealed, be seen. And that helps the mind to begin to notice what's actually happening in the moment. When we do see an attitude, we see what's happening.

I also want to mention a fourth kind of attitude. I've just mentioned different attitudes connected to greed, aversion, and delusion. Wanting something to happen—that's a greedy attitude, a mind of greed. Wanting something to stop happening, not liking something, being irritated by something—those are attitudes of aversion. Confusion, spacing out, disconnection, beliefs or views, identification—these are connected with delusion.

And then there is another form of attitude that Sayadaw would call wise attitude, or right attitude. That's the attitude that is okay with what's arising in the moment. There's ease with whatever is happening. No problem.

So in this exploration of checking the attitude, being curious about how am I in relationship to what's

happening, you might discover a relationship of greed, aversion, or delusion. You might see that in the mind. But you also might see this okayness, the mind that is not disturbed by what's happening.

That experience of okayness can take many different flavors. It might have the flavor of interest and curiosity. It might have the flavor of simply okay, it's not a problem. It might have the flavor of compassion or love. These flavors begin to point us to some of the wholesome qualities in the mind that develop as we practice.

Opening to the attitude is not just about opening to kilesa, to reactive states of mind, to defilement, but also beginning to open to the wholesome states when the mind is okay with what's here. There's this thing happening, and yes, this is okay. What is it like for the mind to be okay with that? What's it like for the mind to have that sense of no problem? It's a pretty subtle experience.

Seeing the attitude, seeing it as part of what's happening—we don't have to do too much with that as we notice it, as we check in and see, oh, there is a relationship happening here. Simply allow that to be part of the field of what we are aware of. We have become aware that there's this experience of maybe some physical discomfort, and then there's the not liking, the resistance, the aversion to it. Those are happening simultaneously—the body and mind in relationship. That can be known. This is what it's like for a human being to be experiencing pain and not liking it. Can there be okayness with that?

And so we get to wise attitude. Sayadaw often says this: we find our way to wise attitude by getting to know unwise attitude really well. Not by resisting it, not by trying to fight it, but by opening to it in a different way.

When those unwise attitudes—when the attitudes connected with greed, aversion, and delusion—are embedded or hidden in our mind, when we're not consciously aware of them, they are reinforcing themselves. They're kind of driving the show. We are acting out of them. But when we can become aware of them and hold them with this kind of curiosity—oh, what's it like to be a human being experiencing aversion to something unpleasant? That's what's happening—that's a whole different relationship to that experience. And that's where transformation can happen.

Seeing these relationships, seeing these unwise attitudes, is not a problem. It's actually how the practice deepens, how we begin to gain the wisdom that frees the mind.

Just a couple more pieces about attitude. These attitudes might be in relationship to some particular experience—the sight, the sound, the smell, whatever's happening in our experience. That's one big category of relationship that we might have. But another big category is attitudes that we have about the meditation itself—about what's supposed to be happening, about how we think we're doing. We could look at these as agendas for the meditation.

So this is another kind of relationship to be curious about: not only attitudes about what's happening in the experience, but also what's happening in relationship to what I'm doing here, which is meditation. Do

I have any beliefs or ideas or views about what is supposed to be happening?

Through this exploration around attitude, we become aware of a filter or view through which we're paying attention, or perhaps we become aware of that okayness, that wise attitude.

So let's sit together, and I'll offer some reflections, a guided meditation. And again, remembering to keep it simple.

Starting with some relaxation. Relaxing the body. Consciously relaxing the body, perhaps checking in where there may be tension and allowing there to be a relaxation. Remembering how relaxation supports this natural capacity for awareness. Relaxing the body is a condition that supports a relaxed mind. And when the mind is relaxed, when it's not pulled into thoughts, worries, concerns about the past, the future, the present, it's very naturally aware of what's happening.

So relax the body. Allow the body to relax. Allow the mind to relax.

As the body and mind relax, notice: is there awareness? Are you aware? Taste, touch that quality of being aware—as Carol spoke about yesterday, that sense of just knowing. Aware. It may not be quite clear how you know that you're aware, but that's okay. After figuring it out, just: yes, I'm aware that that is happening.

And what does awareness receive? What is awareness aware of? What is obvious in this moment? Receiving experience rather than choosing or directing the attention. Maybe having a sense of what is coming to you.

Relax. What is obvious? Maybe something really simple, like this body sitting here. Or a breath. Or a sound—the sound of my voice perhaps, the silence between words. Moods, emotions.

A light touch of effort. Each moment, just enough effort to be with this, whatever this is. And then perhaps the attention shifts, picks up on something else. We're sitting here aware of a breath and then there's a sound that happens and we become aware of that. We don't have to fight that shift—just being aware. Oh, attention on this now. What's that like, to be receiving that? Just enough effort to be with this.

In one sutta, a teaching, a being came to the Buddha and asked, "How did you cross the flood?" The flood referring to the stream of greed, aversion, and delusion that arises in our minds. And the Buddha responded, "By neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood."

That image—neither tarrying nor hurrying—has been very supportive for me in this light touch of effort. Each moment, what's arising in this moment? Not tarrying with it, not holding on to it, not sticking to it, just being with it for this moment. Also not rushing past it, not hurrying, not reaching for something else. Each moment, neither tarrying nor hurrying. Just this.

Remembering relaxation. Are you aware? What is obvious? This gentle persistence supports a stabilizing

of mindfulness.

From time to time, check in: what is the connection, the relationship to what's happening? Do you want something to happen, to keep happening? Do you want something to stop happening? Is there confusion? A belief about what should be happening? Maybe it's okay. No problem.

If there is some relationship that is revealed, just allow that to be included in the field of awareness. What's now?

What's happening now? Being aware of this. Are you aware? What is obvious? Just this, this moment, this experience. Neither tarrying nor hurrying.

The mind will wander. This is a natural part of the conditions in our minds. But an equally natural part of the conditions is that mindfulness will return at some point. In that moment when mindfulness returns—that's actually a great moment. Mindfulness returned of its own nature, and you didn't have to do it. An effortless moment of mindfulness arose.

Can you take in that awareness is here in this moment? Aware again. It's a great moment to begin to really get that flavor of what it's like to be aware when awareness returns.

In that moment too, the mind will have been shaped by what had been happening when it was wandering. And so that's worth becoming aware of. How is the mind now, in this moment, having been wandering? What has been the effect of the wandering? How is that being experienced right now?

Sometimes after the mind wanders, it has wandered into habits and patterns familiar—arguing, wanting. And so maybe there's a flavor of that, of greed or tension or tightness. Maybe that's what's there. That's okay. Can that be known?

And sometimes, more than you might think, when the mind wanders it can wander into calm, into ease. That too might be the consequence of the mind wandering. Sometimes when we come back from wandering, we might notice there's actually more ease, more relaxation. If we're judging ourselves for the wandering, we will miss that this has happened.

Noticing the effect of what the wandering has created. And also noticing the possibility of the effortless quality in that moment of mindfulness's return.

Relax. Recognize awareness. Are you aware? What is obvious? Receiving experience.

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