Working with Difficulty

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 46:47

This morning I thought of reflecting a little bit about working with difficulty—those skillful means for when it's challenging to simply settle back and meet what is arising.

As we've said repeatedly, a big piece of the learning that develops and grows is recognizing when we can be with something, when the mind is balanced to meet just this is what's happening, and when we can't, when that's a challenge, when that's a struggle.

And yet there are some pieces to recognize, some ideas, some beliefs that can be in the back of the mind that make us think we can't be with something when actually it's possible. Some of the tools I'm going to explore are ways that might potentially support the mind in having more capacity to recognize that it can meet what's here.

I think the first piece is the distinction between not liking something and not being able to be with it. Things can be unpleasant, we can not like them, and we can simply recognize they're unpleasant and we don't like them. But if we're not noticing the not liking—the aversion—we may think that this object is a problem, that the object is in the way of being mindful.

So the key, as we've said several times, is: can we actually be aware with it? We may know the aversion, we may know the experience, and if the aversion isn't getting stronger, if what we're responding to isn't kind of taking over, then there's still learning happening. We have to begin to recognize how much the aversion or reactivity is pulling us out of mindfulness. Can we be aware of the experience and the reactivity? Are we getting lost in the experience? Are we getting lost in the reactivity? If we're finding ourselves repeatedly lost, repeatedly pulled out of mindfulness, not able to be mindful, that's probably a time to start bringing in some tools.

We do need to honor the strength of our reactivity. It's not helpful to try to push through, to just bear down and say, "I'm going to sit through this." That may be cultivating aversion—probably is cultivating aversion. And we can use our familiar tools to stabilize our mind, whatever those are, whether it's metta or stabilizing with a primary object. Whatever tools you use are fine.

And as Carol pointed out that first day, it's really important to bring right view into the mind as you shift to a tool, to recognize that the point of using a tool, of shifting the attention away from what is actually happening, is to help stabilize the mind—not to get rid of, not to avoid. That's a piece to also explore.

So we can use our familiar tools to stabilize our mind, and yet we can often have a belief that some experiences are problematic, that it's not possible to be mindful of them, or that the difficulty is somehow

in the way of mindfulness.

A classic example of that is the experience of spaciness—the idea that if I'm spacey, it means I'm not mindful, or that I can't be mindful with spaciness. But spaciness is just another mind state. It is possible to be aware with it. It's possible to recognize, "Oh, this is what it's like to have a spacey mind." But if we have a belief in the back of the mind that spaciness is somehow inherently non-mindful, we won't even try.

I think that's what we often think with some of these states of mind that we consider problematic. We think they're inherently non-mindful, that certain mind states are inherently non-mindful. But every mind state is just a mind state, and we can bring mindfulness to it, we can know it with mindfulness. We may not actually be able to bring mindfulness to it through effort—I've seen that with certain mind states, it's more that when the momentum of mindfulness is there, the mindfulness and awareness can meet those states of mind. It's not that I'm actually doing the mindfulness there.

Sometimes if we have an idea that certain states of mind are inherently non-mindful, we might jump more quickly to our habitual tools, our skillful means. We might jump quickly to, "Okay, I need to settle the mind here, I need to calm the mind, I need to bring in some metta." If we have the belief that we can't be present with certain mind states, we won't even explore that possibility.

One of the tools we can explore there is simply recognizing that the conscious picking up of a tool—the recognition of "Oh, I need to do this," or thinking "I should shift the attention to the breath" or "I should bring in some metta"—that very arising, that conscious arising of that thought, means you've already recognized whatever it is you think you can't be mindful of. You already have seen it.

This happened to me. I think I mentioned this briefly the other day. I was walking to my room, which is where I mostly did my meditation at the monastery at Chuyumen, and I noticed that I was trying to put my mind into what I would call a meditative mind state. In retrospect, that meant a subtle repression of thought. That was what a meditative mind state meant to me. And then I recognized: wait a minute, I'm already aware. I saw my mind starting to make that shift, to pick up that perspective of "this is what meditation is."

And seeing that kind of shift, there was the recognition: wait a minute, I'm already aware of this. Why not just know this? What's wrong with knowing this mind state?

There are so many ideas and agendas and beliefs about meditation that have us holding the perspective that we can be aware of certain things and not others. One tool that I use, one thing I recognize in my own mind, is that if the mind is saying something like "I can't be mindful with this," I recognize that I already am mindful of this. What does that mean? It's already happening. So open into that and check the attitude, because there's that belief, that idea in the back of the mind.

Over time, I think one of the key tools in my toolkit in terms of working with difficulty is knowing that it's possible—and this developed over a long stretch of time—knowing that it's possible for mindfulness to

meet any experience. There's nothing that mindfulness can't meet. And it is also true that it is not always possible in this moment. The strength of reactivity may be stronger than the strength of the mindfulness in this moment, and there are times to bring in some supports.

This morning I want to reflect on a few supports that are outside of different practices. They're more supports that I've stumbled into and that Sayadaw has pointed to in terms of being able to connect with what's actually happening—supports that help us to meet what is actually happening.

The first thing, and Carol mentioned this the other day, is right view. The recognition that the aim of exploring experience, even a difficulty, the aim of being with the experience of a difficulty isn't to get rid of it. It's to understand it. Through that understanding, over time we begin to see the impermanent, the unreliable, the conditioned nature of experience—that the experience is not me, not mine, not who I am. And those understandings support letting go. The mind, when it sees something as impermanent, unreliable, not-self, realizes it doesn't make any sense to cling to it.

But this is the development. This isn't where we start. We can remember at the beginning that this is our direction, this is our perspective, this is our aim: to understand experience so that wisdom will support the release of suffering and clinging.

To me, this brings in a real sense of curiosity about what's going on. Curiosity is such a support—curiosity about "what is this?" Not curiosity about how I can get rid of this, but what is this experience? What's happening here?

So that's the first piece: just reminding yourself that this is happening, it's something to understand. Every single experience has Dharma nature. No matter what it is—whether it's aversion or greed or a belief in the mind, or the arising of compassion and joy—every single experience has Dharma nature. Every single arising will pass away. Every experience is impermanent. It's unreliable as a place that we can land on for lasting happiness. So it doesn't matter what is happening. Every experience can show this Dharma nature. That's what we're exploring. That's what we're trying to see and understand: the Dharma nature. So bring curiosity to whatever is happening. There's no special experience that has to happen in order for us to find Dharma nature. Everything has Dharma nature.

Another useful support—and this is in line with wise view, supports for helping the mind have that perspective—is to consciously drop in wisdom reflections. Reminding yourself of wisdom, either wisdom that you've heard from teachers or read from dharma books, or things that you know you've understood in the past. Maybe not in this moment, but you know you understand it.

This is the level of wisdom that is the hearing, that we've learned. And then the level of wisdom that is reflective, the use of thought. Bringing in wisdom reflections is a use of this second level of wisdom essentially, the *cintāmayā paññā*, the wisdom of reflection. We can drop in reminders to ourselves of wisdom that we've understood. "This is impermanent." "This is dukkha." That one actually has been

surprisingly helpful for me when I recognize, oh yeah, that's right.

It's all dukkha. This is what the Buddha said we should understand. When I saw that clearly, it was so interesting—just reminding myself, *this is dukkha.*

Another reflection that Sayadaw has suggested is "This is nature." That one has been deeply resonant for me. What this means, to me, is that it points to the conditioned nature of experience. Whatever is happening right now—this difficulty, this challenge—has been conditioned. It arose based on conditions. It will continue as long as conditions are in place. It will end when conditions fall apart.

Dropping that in is a kind of pointer to this aspect of Dharma nature, the conditioned nature of experience. *This is nature.* To me, this creates such ease in the mind when something challenging is present—just to remind myself of this. It also brings in that recognition that everything has Dharma nature, that there's nothing outside of what can be understood, what can be learned with.

So this is the use of wisdom reflections. But something important to notice: when you drop in a wisdom reflection, it's not meant to bring in a lot of thinking. It's not about elaborating with many thoughts. It's just a recognition that what's here is a condition. Thoughts are powerful conditioners, and dropping in a thought like this can have a shaping effect on your experience.

So notice what happens when you drop in a wisdom reflection. That's the practice. Drop it in, kind of like dropping a pebble into a still pond, and then notice the ripples that follow. We're dropping a pebble of wisdom into our experience—and then what are the ripples? What happens when you drop in that wisdom reflection?

As I said, for me, when I drop in the reflection "this is nature," I feel space. I feel more balance. I feel a subtleness, a capacity, and more curiosity arising. So notice the effect that wisdom reflections have on your experience. Again, it's a pointing toward being more fully with what is here. It's not trying to shift attention away from what's here. It's an exploration, a tool that may support you to open more fully to what's here.

The next tool or support I'll offer is again one that Sayadaw points to: the use of questions to support investigation of what's happening. And again, with questions, you're not trying to figure out the answer. It's very similar to dropping in wisdom reflections. You drop in a question and then just see what happens. I use the analogy of pressing a doorbell. What happens? Who answers the door?

You drop in a question, and the initial questions can be simple: What is obvious? What's the attitude? These basic questions of the practice can support meeting a challenge, a difficulty. Especially "What's the attitude?" Sometimes that's all we need—to recognize that when there is struggle, there's some attitude that isn't being seen. If we drop in that question, sometimes the attitude can become obvious, can become clear. But we don't have to dig for it.

We don't have to look for it. As Sayadaw says, these questions are tools that support the strengthening of curiosity in our minds. But we don't have to look for an answer. We simply drop in these questions and then see what's obvious, what's here.

In terms of working with difficulty, certain questions may be particularly supportive. The first ones are fundamental: What's obvious? What's the attitude? What's the relationship to it? How does it make the body feel? And again, the intention isn't to direct the attention to the body, but dropping in that question can support a very natural opening to what is happening with the body.

One really useful question when difficulty is present is: What purpose is it serving? Again, we're not trying to figure it out, but sometimes that question can land in a way that allows us to see something more that's already happening right now—something where the nib of the reactivity is connecting to something that might be a little bit buried under the surface. What purpose is this serving?

Another question I find useful is: What is being believed? It has a similar flavor to asking what purpose this is serving. What's being believed?

So these are some supports using questions. And again, they are all supports to help the mind open more fully to what's here. It's not a digging. It's not trying to see anything in particular. It's an invitation. You can think of questions as an invitation. I sometimes think of them as asking, "Body and mind, are you willing to show me what's being believed right now?"—as opposed to "I need to see that." It's an invitation, an inviting of curiosity. Perhaps this is something that might be useful.

There are times when what's happening and the reactivity to it are fairly strong, pulling the attention while the reactivity amps up. In those situations, I've found that not aiming directly at the object can be helpful. One tool I've found really useful is letting the attention get more broad. I call this the "and" practice.

There's something going on. There's the reactivity. There's the attitude to that reactivity. And there's seeing happening. And there's hearing happening. And there's other body sensations. Oh, and there's that thing. And there's seeing. It's just reminding yourself, stepping back to a broadening of attention.

Sometimes with a reactive experience, awareness collapses down to just that thing, and it feels like there's nothing other than that. But there are thousands of things happening in the present moment. So we step back and consciously remind ourselves: there are other things happening right now. We're not trying to avoid noticing that thing—it's not completely stepping away. It's not that much of a stepping away. It's more like opening more fully to the recognition that a lot of things are happening. That thing is happening. And there's seeing. And there's a breath. And there's a body sensation. And there's a sound. And there's that thing. It's that quality of "and"—just keep going.

And... And... And...

That's a little bit more of directing in a way. It's directing the attention kind of away from that challenging thing. And sometimes that is useful.

Another thing I found really useful, especially when there's something—a kind of reactivity that happens a lot—and some of you mentioned this kind of pattern, a pattern that's very familiar, something that's coming up a lot, that seems kind of persistent. When there's a persistent pattern, when it comes up a lot, when it seems more stable in a way, when it feels like it's always there or there a lot—something I find really useful is to notice when it's not there. Notice its absence.

It's not always there. And sometimes we don't consciously recognize that so much. So notice its absence. Notice when it's present. Notice when it's absent. Just noticing that distinction. What's it like when it's absent? What's the experience when it's not there?

The Buddha actually points to this in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta around hindrances: notice when they're present, notice when they're absent.

And then, when it is present, I found it useful to recognize the difference—that there are times when it's present and it's just like, yeah, it's there, it's not a problem. There's that thing, whatever—pain in the body, impatience—and it's not a problem. And then it shifts to being a problem. We get caught. This is an attitude arising. This is a kind of reactivity to the thing.

So noticing the difference. Caught, not caught. Caught, not caught. And I found it useful to keep that simple, not to even necessarily try to understand what's the flavor of caught. Is it greed? Is it aversion? Is it confusion? Is it beliefs? Is it ideas? But just knowing that I'm caught, noticing the difference between caught and not caught.

You'll start to see—that's essentially the place where we can start to see when we're caught. We can actually also know that we're caught. And when we're not caught, we feel the flavor of the mind that's not caught. We notice that difference. And we can also see that we can know being caught without being caught.

So that's enough, I think, around that. Let's sit together.

Just letting the mind notice what's here. Are you aware? What is obvious? And remembering the support of relaxation—just this moment receiving experience.

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