Yathābhūta: Seeing Things As They Actually Are

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 54:14

Here at CIMC, I feel I owe a debt of gratitude because I usually teach in California, at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City. I heard about the sandwich retreat from CIMC and begged my teacher at the time to offer it, but he didn't want to commit to that kind of retreat—the daily life practice retreat every evening and the weekends around it. So when I became a teacher, I decided I would offer one. I've been offering my own version of a sandwich retreat at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City now for about the past five or six years, and there's a whole community of practitioners that have really appreciated it. Your community has offered this form that has now migrated out into the world. Thank you for that. I really appreciate CIMC.

In the Buddha's teachings, there's a phrase that is actually used quite a lot, but it can just disappear into the text. The phrase is *yathābhūta*, and it's translated as something like "as it actually is." This phrase is used all over the place in the suttas. You'll see the Buddha talking about how one understands suffering as it actually is, one understands the cause of suffering as it actually is, or he talks about understanding the eye and sight as it actually is. I actually looked on Access to Insight tonight to see how many places it was used, and I found 187 places where that phrase appears.

This notion of "as it actually is"—in my understanding, this *yathābhūta*, "things as they are," "things as they have come to be," "as it actually is"—these are various translations of the term. I understand it to be a kind of meditation instruction from the Buddha: that we should explore our experience as it actually is, free from views, opinions, ideas, and reactions. And that is not the easiest thing to do.

What I'd like to do tonight is explore with you this facet of *yathābhūta*, this aspect of looking at our experience as it actually is. Why it's so difficult is that we tend to add a lot to our experience. Our mind adds things to our experience. I'd like to look at some of the things that we add and explore how bringing mindfulness and wisdom to those additions can support us to begin to see things as they actually are.

In many places where the Buddha uses this term *yathābhūta*, he expresses that when one doesn't see things as they actually are, one suffers. So the exploration of seeing things as they actually are is that of letting go of suffering, letting go of the things that we add.

In this exploration of the things we add, I'd like to start with some of the more obvious ones and then work inward to the more subtle ways we add to our experience—things that catch us, that create struggle, that create this dukkha, this suffering.

In one of the Buddha's texts, he almost explicitly talks about the ways we add to our experience. It's a rather famous sutta, so you may have heard this story. The Buddha asks his followers: whether somebody has trained in the practice or not, whether one is an ordinary person or a trained disciple of the Buddha, one experiences pleasant experience, one experiences unpleasant experience, and one experiences neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience. Given that—given that whether we're trained or not, we experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience—what's the difference between someone who is an ordinary person, a run-of-the-mill person, and someone who has training?

He goes on to answer his own question, and I'll read a bit of this text to you:

"When the uninstructed worldling is contacted by a painful feeling, one sorrows, grieves, and laments. One weeps, beating one's breast, and becomes distraught. One feels two feelings, a bodily one and a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart and then were to strike him immediately afterwards with a second dart, so that man would feel a feeling caused by two darts."

What he's saying here is that when we experience something unpleasant, we don't leave it simply as an unpleasant experience. As he says, we grieve, sorrow, weep, lament, beat our breast, become distraught. Basically: Why me? Why is this happening to me? This shouldn't be happening to me. So when we have an unpleasant experience, there's the unpleasant experience, and then there is the reactivity to that unpleasant experience.

And what the Buddha says is that these are two unpleasant experiences combined together. In my own experience, they don't simply add—they multiply. The mental reactivity layered on top of a painful physical feeling greatly compounds the suffering. We add reactivity to our experience.

He goes on to describe the instructed noble disciple. When the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling, that one does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not weep beating one's breast and become distraught. One feels one feeling—a bodily one, not a mental one.

So this training the Buddha offers helps us let go of the reactivity we add to experience. This is perhaps the most obvious way we don't meet things as they actually are. When something pleasant arises, we don't simply meet it as pleasant. We like it, we want it, we want more of it. Yes, more of that, please. When something unpleasant arises, we don't like it, we want to get rid of it. Again, additional movement of mind accompanies the pleasant and unpleasant. With neutral experience, the additional movement tends to be something like non-connecting—we simply don't recognize much of our neutral experience at all.

This movement of reactivity—wanting what's pleasant, pushing away what's unpleasant—is an addition to our experience. We're not simply meeting experience as it is. As we explore more deeply, we begin to understand that the pleasant or unpleasant experience is one thing, and our reaction to it is something else entirely.

With unpleasant experience, as the Buddha described in this sutta, we see how reactivity compounds

suffering. We often think we don't have much choice in this matter. It feels like, "This is just the way I am. When that happens to me, I react. That's who I am." We don't always recognize that there is some choice here, that reactivity is actually a process happening in our minds around which there can be just a little space.

When an unpleasant experience arises, if we're mindful, if we're aware with mindfulness of that experience, there can be just a bit of space, and we can choose not to act out of reactivity. This is challenging—not something that happens after looking at it once or twice. It's an ongoing exploration. We can begin by simply recognizing that reactivity is happening, allowing it without acting on it.

How does this work? When I first heard this kind of instruction, I was very new to meditation practice. I received it through reading a book: don't act on your difficult emotions. Anger was the emotion I was working with at the time. Don't act on your anger—just experience it, feel it. My thinking was, "What good is that going to do? If I just pay attention to my anger, won't I get more angry?" I didn't quite understand how it worked. However, I trusted enough to try it.

What I began to understand through exploration is that there's a difference between bringing attention to the experience of anger—turning toward that experience—and being caught in what we're reacting to. Normally when we react, there's something in the world we're reacting to, and then there's the reaction itself. The outer thing and the inner reaction. This exploration of the inner reaction takes our attention away from the thing we're reacting to.

In my situation, I was angry at a particular person. Exploring the feeling of anger took my attention away from thoughts about that person and brought it to the feeling itself. This is what it feels like to be a human being experiencing anger. I still didn't quite understand how it worked, but over several months I saw for myself how valuable it was, how effective it was to take my attention out of the thing in the world—where reactivity was fueling the anger—and turn it toward the feeling of anger itself. I found much more space around the anger, much more ability to navigate my world without acting from that reactive place.

This exploration, this turning toward our reactivity—this is the first step.

to beginning to have some space around that reactivity. And as we get some space around it, slowly over time—and it is a slow process—our mind begins to understand how that reactivity is formed. Slowly it begins to re-educate itself. It begins to understand how a choice is made around that reactivity.

I still remember very clearly one situation, after having observed this anger for many months. I found myself in a situation where I saw a thought arise in my mind about the person I was angry with. I saw the inclination to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry at that person. And in seeing that, essentially in that moment, my mind saw the choice that was possible.

The choice that the mind made—actually, I didn't even feel like I made the choice. It wasn't a feeling of consciously deciding, "Oh, don't think those thoughts, don't jump on that train." What happened is that the

mind recognized: that way lies suffering. That way lies anger that burns inside, because I had been feeling that burning by turning towards the feeling of anger. So the mind got an education. The mind got an education that anger is suffering. And when the mind saw itself headed towards that suffering, it just said, "Not going there."

This observing of our reactivity, this willingness to turn towards our difficult emotions, the ways that we react—that willingness is the beginning of our minds starting to let go and loosen around that reactivity.

Sometimes when we reflect on the suffering around the way we react to things, we notice different kinds of suffering. There's suffering that might come when we react to somebody cutting us off on a freeway. There's suffering that might happen if we lose our jobs. Or there's the suffering that might happen if we have a dear friend we learn is dying of cancer.

If we start to look at this, we see that most of us would be pretty happy to let go of some kinds of reactivity—let go of the reactivity around somebody cutting us off on the freeway. But the reactivity around a friend dying from cancer, the anger, the sense of "it shouldn't be like that"—that kind of reactivity, we feel like it proves that we care. There can be a way that we cling to some of our reactivity because of our relationship to our views, our beliefs around that reactivity. We believe that certain kinds of reactivity make us human.

What I'd like to explore is the possibility—and I've seen this in my own practice—that, certainly not all the time, but I've seen times where I find I can meet a really challenging situation. A situation like, "This shouldn't be happening"—such as a friend dying from cancer—where rather than reacting to that and being angry about it, there can be the heart that doesn't contract. The heart that feels the suffering of that, resonates with the pain of that, but doesn't contract.

This is the possibility, and this is actually meeting things as they are. Rather than resisting the truth of impermanence, the heart can open and respond with kindness, with love, with compassion.

This exploration around reactivity, the letting go of that reactivity—it doesn't take us to a place where we're flat and non-responsive. That's a misunderstanding. It can open us to a place where the heart feels like it's vibrating with the world, out of love. This offers the possibility of being responsive to the world rather than reactive to the world.

I think of this as coming into alignment with truth. Rather than reacting to the challenges of unreliability, of impermanence, of suffering, rather than railing against it—"It shouldn't be like this"—well, it is like this. Coming into alignment with that truth, meeting it without resistance, we can respond skillfully. We can meet the pain.

I remember one friend who told me of a very deep pain that he had experienced. He was reliving it in the moment through reflection. I was able, through just trying to be there—I didn't want to close down or contract—I just tried to be there with him, with his pain. I didn't try to fix it. I didn't try to talk him out of

it. Just sitting with him. A feeling on my part of that open-heartedness, that willingness to meet the pain.

A couple of days later, he asked me, "Were you doing mettā? Were you doing loving-kindness?" Because it felt to him like there was love there. What I was doing was just trying to keep my heart open to the pain. That openness, that willingness to just meet reality, coming into alignment with things as they are—it can be felt as love. It can have that quality.

So that's one way that we add to our experience, and the exploration of reactivity can help us come into alignment with things as they are, meet things as they are.

Another way that we add to our experience is through views, opinions, beliefs. There are so many different kinds of beliefs that operate in our minds. It's like we're swimming in these beliefs.

We don't necessarily recognize that we're believing things or that we have this orientation. It's like views are a filter on our minds. If I had a pair of blue glasses that I put on and wore around all the time, at some point it would stop being apparent to me that I was looking through blue glasses. The mind would adjust to that and it would just be, "That's the way it is, things look that way." Similarly with our views—we're just seeing through that perspective and we don't actually recognize that we're seeing with a view in mind.

There are views that we have about our person, kind of personal views. Views of who we are, what we do, what we're capable of doing. Views of what our partners should be. Views of what our children should be. These personal views are individual—ones that we each have because of our conditioning.

One simple example from my life: I was both very short when I was a child, and I had really bad eyes. Those two things together meant the teacher always put me in the front row in the classroom. That created this view in my mind, which years later I finally recognized—well, this is why I always sit in the front row, wherever I am. It's a silly little thing in a way, but it created a kind of belief in myself: I like to sit in the front row. There was even a story around it—it shows that I'm really interested to sit in the front row. So it became part of my identity, this sitting in the front row. We have many of these that we may not be so aware of.

Then there are views that are developed based on our life in a particular culture, in our society. Societal views that relate to me personally. For instance, I have this job, so I deserve this job. Ways that we believe we have a right to what we have, essentially—whereas it's really conditions coming together to create the situation that we have these things.

And then there are broader societal views that we pick up. Views about—well, here's a good one: America is a land of opportunity. Anyone who works hard enough can fulfill their dream. This is a view that pervades the dominant culture in this society. Believing that view, swimming in that view, not seeing that view, leads to a kind of denial of the privilege of white people in this culture. Because for a certain class of people in society, perhaps if you work hard enough, you can get what you want—but it is not uniformly

the case. So many views that we carry around, that we swim in, that we're unaware of living with.

Some of these views don't necessarily cause us problems. Like the sitting in the front row for me—that didn't particularly cause me problems. But what is the issue? What's the problem with views? Some of the views we carry around do cause suffering, and this is an important place to explore our views. But in any case, views of who we are and views of who other people are, these are limiting. It's like we've put ourselves in a box. This is who I am. This is the kind of thing I do. This is what I'm capable of. This is what that person is capable of. This is who that person is.

When other people do this to us, we don't like it. We chafe at it when somebody else says, "Well, that's just the way you are." We're like, "No, that's not just the way I am. You don't know me." But we do that to ourselves. We put these boxes around ourselves. We live in these views ourselves, often without even recognizing it.

So these views are not necessarily all leading to suffering, but we need to at least be aware that we are carrying these views around. There's a saying in one of my favorite suttas, in the Sutta Nipata in the chapter of the eights: "Those attached to views roam the world offending people." This attachment to views—the Buddha actually points to this as being a source of conflict in our culture.

So anytime we are suffering, there is some kind of view operating. This is an important thing to recognize.

A common view that leads to suffering is something like, "It's not supposed to be like this." And underlying that is often a belief or a meaning. There's the view—"it's not supposed to be like this"—and underlying that is some kind of meaning. Perhaps something along the lines of: "If it's like this, it means I'm a failure. If it's like this, it means I'm not lovable. If it's like this, it means I didn't try hard enough. If it's like this, it means I'm not as good as someone else." A variety of meanings can be attached to that.

So it can be very interesting to start exploring: what do I believe when I'm suffering? There's some kind of suffering happening—what's the belief that's operating? The meaning that's associated with the belief is often a place where we identify, something we're holding on to. We even hold on to things like "I'm a failure." We identify with that. We have habits of identifying with even these negative views, these negative meanings.

As you explore this and start to recognize the belief, you might also notice how much belief is happening around a particular thought. For example, an example from my own exploration: I had a pretty strong pattern of self-hatred, and there was a lot of meaning attached to that—"I'm a failure, I'm no good, I'm not lovable," some of those things I just mentioned. The way it often popped into my mind was simply the words: "You're no good."

As I began to explore this, I saw that there was a process of belief that began to solidify that thought into place. There's the thought—"you're no good"—and then there's a process of believing that thought. They're actually separate things, as I discovered.

I had a recognition at one point, a clear recognition, that these thoughts around self-hatred were just thoughts. There was nothing more to them. They were just phenomena created in the mind. And somehow that insight deeply undercut the belief pattern in those thoughts. At this point, I still will from time to time see these thoughts arise—"You're no good. You're a failure"—but there is not belief in those thoughts.

You can explore this kind of view for yourself. There's a thought that comes up, and there's the belief in that thought. You can ask: how much do I believe this? How much do I actually believe this? At times, if you catch a thought arising early enough, the belief process may not have taken hold so tightly, and you may recognize, "Oh, this is just a thought. I actually don't believe this so much right now."

So there's the common view of "it's not supposed to be like this" that can lead to suffering. And equally, a view that leads to suffering—at least in my exploration—is "it is supposed to be like this." This is right. This is the way it's supposed to be. When I first started exploring my suffering around views...

Along these lines, I found the suffering really congealed—I mean, the experience of suffering really congealed—around the "it's not supposed to be like this." I'm a failure. I'm no good at this. I'm bad. I can't succeed. I really felt the suffering in that side of it, so it was clear that there was suffering there.

The view around that is that it's not supposed to be like this, and because it is like this, I'm a failure. That's the belief underneath it. So there was suffering there. I could see this pattern of belief, and I began looking at that pattern of suffering and beliefs and meaning associated with it.

At some point I began to see that there was another side to the story. That was the side when things were going well, and I told myself, "This is the way it's supposed to be. I can do this. I'm good at this. In fact, I may be better than anybody else at this." That created a kind of flip-side identity that I believed was the way it was supposed to be. So again, the belief was operating—the view that this is the way it's supposed to be.

That didn't particularly feel like suffering in the moment of it happening. It actually felt good. It's like, "Yeah, this feels good. This is the way it's supposed to be." But what I began to recognize is that feeling of "this is the way it's supposed to be" was a setup. It was setting myself to a standard that if I've attained this, I have to keep this. It has to always be like this. And when it can't always be like this—because things are impermanent, they change, things fall apart—then I crashed into the failure side of things.

Actually, in this exploration, I saw it was equally, if not more important, to recognize those times when I felt, "Oh, this is the way it's supposed to be. This is good. This is right." To recognize when I was praising myself, when I was feeling like this is it. To acknowledge that. To acknowledge that as a view, as a belief, not as reality, not as this is how it has to be. And when I began acknowledging that side of it, it really evened out the whole pattern.

We often can't just decide to stop believing something. We can't decide to stop reacting to things. We can't stop our views. We can't decide, "I'm not going to have this view anymore." But we can begin to become

conscious of our views. We can begin to recognize the beliefs that are operating.

Having a curiosity about what these views are—when we're suffering, beginning to explore: What do I think needs to happen? What do I think needs to stop happening? What beliefs are functioning here? Begin to become conscious of your views. That's the first step in maybe not letting go of views entirely, but at least recognizing when we have these filters on, recognizing when we are operating out of a perspective so that it's not blind acting out of a view, but consciously recognizing, "Oh, here's a view that's happening right now."

Certain views are skillful to act on in a moment. Other views we may begin to recognize—wow, this one is not so skillful. Maybe I shouldn't act on this one.

So that's another way that we add to our experience, this adding, seeing things through views. Again, when we're experiencing things through views, we're not seeing things as they are.

A subtler way of adding to our experience is the process of recognizing things, of perceiving things, of working with concepts. This is a very normal way that our mind works. I look out at this room and I see men and women and I see green zabutans and I see walls and I see lights. I see

But all of those things are concepts. It happens very quickly in our minds, these concepts, and we tend to relate to our experience through concept rather than through our direct meeting of experience.

A simple example of this: put your attention in your hand right now. Just feel the experience that is your hand right now. You might feel vibration, pulsing, tingling, heat or coolness, pressure. Just the feeling, just the experience there. And now look at your hand and think about it as a hand. When I do that, at least, there's a shift of the experience. I lose touch with some of that experience that I was just exploring with you.

Hand is a concept. The direct experience is not hand. The direct experience is vibration, pulsing, tingling, pressure, coolness, heat. But when we relate to it as a hand, there's a little bit of a distance that happens from the actual experience. This kind of thing happens to us a lot—we relate to our experience through a layer of concept.

Now, that's not necessarily a problem. It's actually a really good shortcut for us. If I had to walk in here and from form and color actually figure out every time I walked into a room, "Oh, those are people, and that's the floor, and that's the wall," it would take forever to navigate our world. So concepts are really useful. They're a really useful shortcut.

But the way we add around concepts is that we believe we are experiencing the real thing. We believe that when we are experiencing things through concept, we're experiencing reality. That is the way we're adding around concepts.

We can start to really see how this works, and the problems that it can introduce for us, when

perception—this process of creating concepts—makes a mistake. Because this process of perception is very prone to making mistakes. It does a pretty good job. It's a pretty good pattern-matching algorithm in there that figures out what is happening out there, based on my history. It's kind of like a memory lookup thing. I look out there, and I've seen walls before, so that becomes identified as a wall, and I relate to it as the concept of a wall. But perception can make mistakes.

An example of this: I was in Burma, practicing in a monastery that was close to a village right next door. My room was right next to the monastery wall. Sounds of the village came over the wall—the loudspeakers, the sounds of people doing their things. Every evening I was meditating in my room, and every evening at about dusk, I began hearing a squealing sound. To me, the mind heard that sound and identified it as pig. A squealing pig—this is what I identified.

And then the mind went a little further than that, to create the idea that this sound of squealing had a distress to it. So my mind constructed this idea—and I knew this was a construction, I knew this part was a construction—that what I was hearing was a pig being butchered. That this was the regular every-evening butcher shop just across the wall there, and I was hearing that happen. So there was compassion that was born in my heart for this pig. It happened every night, and so I got to practice with this every evening.

And then one evening, instead of sitting in my room at that hour of the day, I decided to take a walk. I was doing walking meditation, walking up and down at the monastery, and there were bats flying. They fly kind of close, so it's a little startling. And the bats were squealing. I recognized in that moment that the squealing sound I had been hearing, that I had identified as pigs being murdered, were simply bats.

I mean, perception had clearly made a mistake here. It wasn't any kind of willful mistake—it was simply that I had never heard bats squealing before. The sound of squealing, in my experience, matched to pig. So perception made that mistake, and from that created this whole construct, this whole idea.

In that case, it became clear to me that my reaction of compassion—the whole thing just went poof. The compassion vanished because there was no need for compassion. What are we actually reacting to? Much of the time, what we are reacting to is a concept. It's not what's actually happening. That's something very interesting to explore.

And then the most insidious concept that we live with is the concept of self. Actually, all of the other ways that we add to our experience are born out of this very fundamental concept—a misperception, actually. I don't have time to explore all of that notion of self except to say that we can begin to understand how that concept of self is created by exploring all of these other ways that we add. If we explore our reactivity, we begin to understand something about a sense of self involved in that reactivity. We explore our views, our opinions, our beliefs—we begin to understand something about the sense of self that holds that view, that opinion, that belief. From time to time in this exploration, we may see a moment of views falling away. We may see a moment of a sense of self falling away. And then we get an understanding of how that is simply a concept. It's not something that's actually there. It's a very useful concept, actually, and it's not

necessarily a problem that we function with that concept. The problem is that we believe that concept to be reality.

I'd like to come back to the words of the Buddha here at the end of my talk. This text I'm going to read is another really famous one you've probably heard, and to me it really expresses this notion of coming to meet things as they are—just what's actually happening in the moment without the filter of views, opinions, beliefs, ideas. Again, we can't just go right there. The way to explore this is to see our reactivity, explore our reactivity, explore our views, our opinions, our beliefs. That helps us to begin to let go of them.

This text is from the Bāhiya Sutta. The Buddha was approached by this renunciate, Bāhiya, who came many, many miles to ask the Buddha for his teachings. He had been a renunciate for many years but just hadn't quite heard the teachings of the Buddha. He came to the Buddha and said, "Please give me your teachings in brief." He had to ask three times because the Buddha was getting ready to go on alms round, but after the third time, this is what the Buddha said:

"Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This is the end of suffering."

I love this exploration. He offers a training: in reference to the seen is only the seen. This is the training. We practice exploring what it means to see things. We notice our reactivity. We notice our views, our beliefs around seeing. We notice our views, opinions, beliefs around our thoughts. We notice our views, our opinions, our beliefs around what's heard, sensed, cognized. In the seen is only the seen.

We can't arrive there immediately. But that's the training. The Buddha calls it a training.

And what I appreciate about this sutta is that he then points out the benefits of this training. As we begin to meet experience in this way, as it actually is, we see clearly for ourselves: there is no "you" in terms of that. No you there.

This exploration of the falling away of identity view, that concept of self, comes quite naturally as we begin to simply meet things as they are. It's not something we have to force—"Oh, I have to get rid of myself. I have to figure out how to not feel this sense of self." The Buddha points to just seeing things as they actually are, and this begins to reveal the truth to us. And this is the end of stress, the end of suffering.

Thank you for your attention.

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