Nurturing the Process

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 35:23

So this series that we're just really embarking on is about having goals in meditation practice or in life, I suppose. And I love this topic because we all have some relationship to the idea of goals in addition to the goals themselves, of course. Some people absolutely love having goals, and some people feel completely oppressed by goals. Some people think that goals are necessary, and they actually may end up limiting themselves by always working within set ideas. And other people may think that goals are totally pointless, but would probably do better if they were to stay on track and commit to an outcome. You can place yourself on this matrix somewhere.

Fortunately the Buddhist teachings are flexible enough to accommodate many different approaches, and I hope this series demonstrates that. You'll hear talks from many different perspectives and have a chance to reflect for yourself from that range how you relate to goals. I think that would be a good outcome.

So tonight I'm going to pull out a thread from the teachings that can be applied to this question of goals in practice. A goal is about the future. It's something that will be attained after some time and probably some effort. But practice asks us to focus on the present moment—what's happening now. So there is the future-oriented goal of aiming for awakening, and there's also the present moment intention to stay with experience without clinging, which is the instruction. Following this immediate intention can allow the path to unfold in ways that we couldn't even imagine. And it does rely on quite a bit of faith.

So let's talk through some of that. I want to start with a very simple case. There's a simile that's used several times in the suttas about a hen nurturing her eggs. It's pointed out that her future-oriented wishes for the chicks are not very important compared to whether or not she properly incubates the eggs.

Here's how it goes: Suppose a hen has eight, ten, or twelve eggs. If she doesn't cover them rightly, warm them rightly, or incubate them rightly, then even though this wish may occur to her—"Oh, that my chicks might break through the eggshells with their spiked claws or beaks and hatch out safely"—still it is not possible that the chicks will break through the eggshells and hatch out safely. Why is that? Because the hen has not covered them rightly, warmed them rightly, or incubated them rightly.

And then you get the positive side later in the sutta: Suppose a hen has eight, ten, or twelve eggs that she does cover rightly, warms rightly, and incubates rightly. Even though this wish may not occur to her—"Oh, that my chicks might break through the eggshells and hatch out safely"—still, it is possible that the chicks will do that. Why is that? Because the hen has covered them, warmed them, and incubated them rightly.

So what can we learn from this very simple idea? It's not really about what we want, but about what we

do. Does this sound familiar in practice? Rather than having a future goal, we can nurture the process of the path. And by linking it to the life process of chickens and eggs, we get the sense that this is a natural process, actually. We will return to this later.

A little more about these suttas that talk about the hen. As often happens in suttas, after the image or simile is given, then the Buddha gives an application to how this would work in practice. So he has the thing about the hen not incubating her eggs properly, and then one of the suttas goes on this way: Even though this wish may occur to a practitioner who dwells without devoting themselves to development—"Oh, that my mind might be freed through non-clinging"—still, her mind is not released through non-clinging. Why is that? From lack of developing.

And then you get the positive side: Even though this wish may occur to a person who dwells devoting themselves to development—"Oh that my mind might be freed through non-clinging"—still her mind is freed from the effluents through lack of clinging. Why is that? From developing.

So in one case the person isn't doing any development but they wish that they will be awakened.

And it doesn't happen. In the other case, they are doing the development but they don't ever bother to have the wish to awaken, and still they awaken anyway. So this is something to consider.

The sutta says "from developing"—the dwelling with or without development, and then they get awakened from developing. So we could rightfully ask: developing what?

Different suttas give different answers. There are a few suttas that use this same analogy, but they all reiterate known lists of practices and mental qualities that relate basically to the Eightfold Path. So they're pretty clear. We're being told that the point is just to do the practices and not to spend a lot of time wishing for results.

I like this, actually. It's very simple.

But then there's also this word "rightly"—about the hen. She was warming them rightly, incubating them rightly. So there is also a little bit of nuance there: not everything will work. Only certain things will work if we do it rightly. The Buddha did give us very good instructions, and we do have to follow them.

Now I'll put a few caveats on this. First of all, one issue that Westerners have with their perfectionist mindsets is that everybody's worried about whether they're doing things right. I don't know how many questions I've had where people raise their hand and say, "Is it okay for me to do such and such?" This is a fine question because there are instructions. But for the most part, we can wrap ourselves up quite a lot in whether we're doing it right. So I don't want to be making that point exactly. Let me say that this realm of "rightly" has a little bit of width to it. It's not like a really narrow line. But nonetheless, there are things that will work better than others.

The texts are pretty clear. The instructions are right there. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta says you should sit

ardent, mindful, and alert, putting aside greed and distress for the world. That's a clear instruction. But do we follow it? When we sit and practice mindfulness, do we sit ardent and alert and put aside greed and distress for the world? Or do we spend a lot of time thinking about all of our greed and distress about the world—which would not be mindfulness practice? So it's clear. But we have to do it.

The other issue I want to raise about this sense of rightly practicing is that it's both a blessing and a little bit of a disadvantage, depending how you look at it, that we have a huge amount of spiritual practice available to us in this area. For the most part this is wonderful—it's great. People come; look at all the people here tonight. It's wonderful. There are places where that just wouldn't happen. And of course there are centers that do Tibetan Buddhism and Zen, and we're sitting in a church, and there are many other spiritual paths available.

The challenge, though, is that for some people this richness somehow helps them find their way through. But for others it becomes an exercise in choosing what they want out of spirituality. "I like the Sufi dancing—that's really great, I go and do the dancing. But the part where I have to work with a stern teacher who's going to challenge my assumptions? I don't do that part." Or, "I come to the insight meditation, but I'm definitely not going on a retreat where I have to share a room with somebody else because I have my space issues." It becomes this exercise of choosing based mostly on what feels comfortable and pleasant to us.

I'm not saying that we should deliberately go for the stuff that's difficult. But any spiritual practice worth its salt had better bring some difficulty to our lives at some point. So I'll just insert that also—part of "rightly" does include reworking the way our mind works, which can be a little uncomfortable sometimes.

So that's kind of the simple warm-up image: this chicken, and the wishing versus the doing. Now I want to explore several dimensions that could be unpacked from this simple chicken lesson. It can actually get kind of subtle and deep.

First of all, wishes. This idea of wishes. Wishes themselves can be limiting because we can only wish within the realm that we can imagine. We may not know what to wish for, actually. People often want to work on particular problems that they have, problems they know are causing suffering. This is a fine approach, fair enough in some sense. But sometimes we don't want to take such a direct approach with our particular forms of suffering. It might be better just to follow the meditation instructions sometimes.

This is from Ram Dass, who is not a conventional teacher. But this is what he says: "Instead of trying so hard to get out of the shadow, the dark—which I think actually reinforces the shadow and its reality—just do your practices. If somebody says to me, 'I'm having these terrible thoughts and I don't know why, will you help me understand why?' I tell them that I'd rather sit with them and help them follow their breath. The breath has no content to it at all. It's just breath. It's better to strengthen the centering, the quieting, the presence, than to keep strengthening the problem, which gets reinforced when you work on it directly."

So of course this is one quote given in one context. I'm not saying at all that we never work directly on difficulties or we never work directly on, say, particular urgent life issues that have come up. That can be very important. But the attitude of approaching them with the sense of "I am working on this in order that it will go away or be replaced by something that I prefer" can be a little controlling in some cases.

Just to give a personal example, I came to practice because of chronic pain and health problems that I had. And I found that I didn't have the capacity to work with those. I hadn't developed myself well enough to be able to meet that particular kind of dukkha. And so certainly one of my initial goals was "I want to be able to deal with this." And that was absolutely a compassionate approach and a fine intention to have.

But I can say in retrospect that it was fortunate for me that somehow I didn't get caught up in relating absolutely everything through the filter of my health. In fact, I did just listen to the instructions, and it was actually relieving to me not to think about that so much and just do the "ardent, alert, and putting aside greed and distress for the world." I think that really, frankly, sped up the process and also avoided reinforcing the aversion that can happen when we come in and say, "I want to deal with my anger. I want to deal with this because I don't like it."

We have to be so careful. Maybe you'll learn about this in the mindful self-compassion and self-esteem course, I'm not sure. But there's an art to being able to work with issues. And these practices, far from being cold and detached because they tell us not to get sucked into the content, are actually really compassionate because they help us to have a relationship to our experience that is healthy and that can allow our heart to grow and expand in a way that it just doesn't when we focus so hard on that one thing.

I also had no idea where meditation would take me, and that was good. It happens to have completely rearranged my life in ways that are wonderful, but I couldn't have anticipated that. So I certainly couldn't have had as a goal to do the various things I've done, like sit two years of retreat. If you'd told me that before I started practicing, I would have said, "Yeah, right, I have too much energy for that." But other things have just happened. I changed my career. I changed my lifestyle. Now I teach the Dharma. That wasn't my goal when I was twenty.

It unfolds differently for everyone, of course. This is not any kind of a thing to imitate. But it all just happened step by step. It wasn't a plan. It just unfolded step by step. So there's a process. We have to stay open to what can happen.

And at risk of offering a very hackneyed image, the caterpillar doesn't know what a butterfly is. It just doesn't have any concept of that. And then there's also maybe what Misha Merrill said in a little bit more down-to-earth way. She said, because her own life had a couple turns like this—she actually thought she was going to be an artist, and then it didn't happen, and she was devastated, but then something even better happened—so you never know. What she said is, "You may think you're going to be a chocolate cake, but then you discover yourself becoming a steak." This can be disturbing if you're vegetarian.

So we can't actually imagine in our unawakened mind what we're looking for. We don't know what we're looking for. We might think it's just a sort of better version of what we have. But I think the teachings ask us to be a little bit more creative and open than that, to go a little bit farther than that. Or maybe another example: if you're looking for the source of a river, you might discover that the source of the river is ice from a glacier, or it might be the sky that produces the rain. It might not look anything like a river.

So we can trace this idea a little bit farther in that the conceptual mind itself is actually a limitation. Another problem with a goal is that it's inevitably a concept of some kind. And the very structure of our ordinary mind is that it creates ideas and concepts and abstractions. We couldn't live if we didn't do that, of course. All the time we're doing that. But the teachings tell us that this can actually hinder the path in subtle ways. Even when we're not creating full-blown goals and aims, our very concepts along the path can be a hindrance. So we have to continually watch that. And I'll unpack this a little bit. The mind looks for known patterns.

It loves to have a template. "Oh, this is the meeting template that we're about to go into." And then you play out the meeting template, and afterwards you say, "Well, that was another unsatisfying meeting." Why? Because everybody played out the meeting template. It's just how it goes.

But this ability of our mind, when applied to spiritual practice, means that we will inevitably project some kind of idea about how the path is going to unfold. We've heard dharma talks, we've read dharma books, and then—subtly or even unsubtly sometimes, but especially subtly—we will try to recreate that. We'll try to replicate what we read in the book or what we heard in the talk, and this can actually hinder the process.

So what to do, though? Because we have to hear teachings. I don't think anybody—well, the Buddha was the one who could advance on the path without hearing teachings. But the rest of us, we need to hear teachings. So that means I am going to continue with this talk, even though I've now warned you that you shouldn't be listening to dharma talks because then you're going to try to apply and replicate everything I'm saying. So it's too late. The ideas are already coming. Let's just go with it.

Having an idea of the path in the background of our mind—what does that actually look like? It means that we will see certain things and not see other things. We will remember experiences that conform to what we had in mind, and we'll forget the ones that don't. As we're going along, we have this idea that we're following this path, and so we downplay or forget things that don't seem to match.

Now, when the mind gets concentrated—Shaila is a wonderful concentration teacher—the purpose of getting the mind settled and still is so that we can watch how it works. Then we see very clearly that there's a lot of manipulation in the mind. We are not just seeing experience as it is; we're actually putting our template on it all the time. It's really fascinating. Sometimes it's disturbing, but it's really fascinating to watch this happening in the mind. You don't have to say, "Oh, this is terrible, I need to throw out all my concepts." You can't, actually, and you couldn't live without them. It's enough to see them, and this helps to

detach from them. But we really get a glimpse of how constructed our everyday world is and what a deep habit this is.

Awakening is the one thing that cannot be constructed.

So the Buddha was aware of these issues of construction, and he understood very well how the human mind works, including the ways that it tries to engineer its own awakening. And so he devised a template that's different than other templates. He devised a template called the Eightfold Path. The great thing about it is that it includes refining our conduct—there's an ethical section—developing our mind—there's a meditation section—and cultivating wisdom—there's a wisdom section of the path.

What you may not know about this brilliant Eightfold Path is that it is actually designed to undermine the mind's tendency to identify, including with the path itself. The Eightfold Path is a construction that will undo itself, unlike our usual constructions, which bind further. That's what makes it different.

This is not something you have to believe. This is something that, once again, we have to do. Remember the part about doing and not just sitting and wishing to be awakened.

The idea that we can somehow control our awakening is actually based in conceit. It's based in the same drivenness and striving that spiritual practice is designed to relieve us of. And what a relief it is when we realize that we're not in control of our awakening. Phew! I have no idea how to do that. Great. I'm just going to do the practices and let that take care of itself.

None of this is to say—to put a caveat in again—that we shouldn't reflect on our path, or that we shouldn't deliberately address particular issues when they come up in certain cases, or when we know that we have certain kinds of letting go to do. That is useful. It also doesn't say that we should blindly do practices and never think about whether they're actually helping us, or that we should blindly follow a teacher, or that we should blindly follow what a community is doing. There is still a need for discernment, of course. But there's this distinction: we don't think that we're in control as we're doing it.

So then an interesting question arises: Is anything in control? Why do we have these senses that we want to undertake a certain practice at a certain time? Why did you come to this meditation group at a certain time? Sure, you've got the story, you've got the thing that you put on, but there's something else, right, in you that's working.

And when we look back over our life, sometimes we realize, "Oh, I thought I was doing such and such, but actually there was some other force going on there."

So there isn't somebody in control, but wisdom and compassion will prompt us to do things that help further our path. That's actually their job. If we let our ordinary mind—that is to say, the one that sets goals—get involved in controlling our spiritual practice, it actually ends up obscuring the path. But if we open and let these wiser parts of ourselves, namely our heart, our wisdom and compassion, have the reins

so to speak, they will follow the path in a way that's efficient for us and will help awaken us and help us let go.

We can take long detours if we follow what we think we logically ought to, or if we get emotionally caught up in what a teacher or community is doing to the point where we're not looking out for our own well-being. So a lot of the path then is about learning to hear this inner voice that's being offered by wisdom and compassion, the voice in the heart. And the good news is you can hear it long before awakening, actually, if you are willing to open to it and trust it.

This is the part where we have to think a little bit about faith. There is this inner voice. There is this sense in our heart that something would be nourishing for us or something would be good for us. And this is something that we can place our confidence in.

I want to tell a story about faith and about letting the path unfold without so many goals. It's a story from the Tibetan Shangpa tradition—the story of a woman named Sukhasiddhi.

She was a poor woman who lived with a husband and three sons. Things were not going well in their world—their business, their life. They were running out of money, basically, and they were down to their last portion of rice. The husband and sons said, "Well, we're going to go out and get work today, get some resources for our family." Of course, Sukhasiddhi stayed at home while they did this. The husband and the three sons went off in the four cardinal directions, saying, "We're going to do work and come back with some money. You stay here."

And so she did. During the day, a wandering spiritual seeker—the equivalent of the Buddha, somebody who's given their life over to meditation and just being a beggar—came by and knocked on the door and begged for food as a practitioner. She said, "Well, they're out getting money." And she cooked up the last portion of rice and gave it to him. Off he went.

At the end of the day, the husband and sons came home discouraged and said, "Well, we didn't get any work today, so how about the rice?" She said, "Oh, I gave it to a wandering mendicant who was a spiritual seeker." They were enraged that she had given away the last of the food, and they threw her out.

So she went off into the world and found that she had more resources than she thought. She was clever enough to beg for a while, and then she got enough money from that to buy some barley and malt and decided to make beer. You may be aware that beer is a symbol of wisdom in the Tibetan tradition—shocking for Theravadans, I know, but this is important.

She discovered she was pretty good at making beer, actually. She took it to the marketplace and sold it and made even more money, because it was really good beer. She just kept doing that. She discovered she had this talent, and it became her livelihood.

One day a very well-dressed woman showed up and asked for beer—a little surprising, this very

well-dressed woman. Sukhasiddhi asked, "Is it for you?" The woman said, "No, actually it's for my teacher, who is an awakened spiritual teacher, but he likes really good beer, so I thought I'd get some for him." Sukhasiddhi said, "Well, in that case, why don't you just take it, since it's for your teacher." So she gave the beer freely.

Every day the well-dressed woman came back to get beer for her spiritual teacher, and Sukhasiddhi gave it on donation, just freely. After a while, the master said, "This is really good beer that you've been bringing me every day. Where do you get this?" She said, "Oh, there's this woman in the marketplace who makes it." He said, "Well, bring her here. I want to meet her."

So the well-dressed woman came and said to Sukhasiddhi, "My master would like to meet you. Why don't you come?" She went, and the master saw that she was very close to awakening. He gave her just a simple teaching, and she woke up and gained all the spiritual powers. Sukhasiddhi—that was not her original name; I don't know what her original name was—she was named Sukhasiddhi at that point and became a great teacher, one of the great female teachers of the Tibetan tradition.

There's a lot in this story, and we can't unpack quite all of it, but I would offer that what she was acting on was faith in the spiritual side of life.

What happens when your life falls apart is that the spirit comes knocking on the door—in the form of the beggar. And she didn't question it; she just fed it. The last of her rice, actually. It didn't produce an immediate positive effect. Maybe she got thrown out. But she didn't worry about that. She just went on, moment by moment.

And then there came another opportunity. Oh, this beer is for a spiritual master. She gave it away. She fed it. She didn't try to make money off of that. So when the opportunities presented themselves, she gave freely. And the result was that she ascended higher and higher spiritually and eventually was led to the place where the conditions were right for her to awaken.

Probably it wouldn't have happened if her husband and sons had made money that day. Probably not.

So she didn't have any idea that she was pursuing awakening. But she fed her faith along the way. She did what seemed right in each moment. And it had bigger effects than she could ever have imagined.

There's a picture outside the interview rooms at the Insight Meditation Society—I don't know if you've ever been there, in Barre, Massachusetts. It's one of the classic centers of our tradition. There's a picture that's one of those Japanese prints, very elongated, seeming to portray flower stalks and shoots. Maybe one of those ink ones where you blow on the ink; I'm not sure. But the caption says something like, "Try not to have any expectations." Most of the little ink trails or flower shoots are down near the bottom of the picture. And then there's one that goes all the way up, about six feet, to the top of the page. I think that's instructional for us.

So you remember the chicken image? We're back to the chicken. The hatching of chicks, sitting on the eggs, incubating them properly—it's a natural process. And so to what degree, we can ask ourselves, do we trust in our path as a natural unfolding process?

You can look at how long-time practitioners practice, people who've been at it thirty or forty years. For the most part, these people are very unpretentious. They pretty much go along with their life, and from time to time they undertake particular trainings or practices that seem moving to them—like they'll decide to go on a retreat with a particular teacher, or take a trip to Asia, or take three months off and write something. And then the rest of the time, it's going along with life. Going along with life.

Often, the result of these little things—"Oh, I'm going to do this retreat," or "Oh, I'm going to go to Asia"—often the result is surprising, even to thirty- or forty-year practitioners. They just have a feeling that some fruit is coming to ripen, and so they should go. What we see in this example is that truly we're not in control of this process. It's only a matter of how deeply we accept this.

So, relax. Relax. Just do the practices, and do them properly or rightly, and the path will unfold. Sometimes it will unfold easily and sometimes not so easily, but it will always be unfolding just as it can in a given moment.

That is my offering on the sense of goals in practice. Thank you for listening.

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