NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney

Rigorous and direct teachings on early Buddhist thought and vipassana practice

Patrick Kearney

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CHAPTER 1

Introducing Mindfulness

Patrick Kearney · 31 min

> *Patrick Kearney begins this month-long retreat by clarifying the essential Buddhist concept of sati (mindfulness), distinguishing it from the popular secular understanding. Through a practical hands-on exercise, he demonstrates that mindfulness is not mere awareness, but rather "remembering awareness" - the active practice of continuously returning attention to present experience.*
>
> *Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna practice, Kearney explains that sati literally means memory, but specifically remembering the present rather than the past. He contrasts this with our modern relationship to time, showing how the Buddha's understanding of the present differs from our moment-based conception. The talk explores both directed attention (noting practice with meditation objects) and receptive awareness (noticing what arises in daily activities).*
>
> *Kearney addresses the distinction between sammāsati (right mindfulness) and micchāsati (wrong mindfulness) on the Noble Eightfold Path, emphasizing how direction and intention determine whether mindfulness leads toward awakening. He offers practical guidance for retreat participants on establishing general mindfulness through body awareness, graceful movement, and observing mental states without getting caught in thought content, explaining how continuous mindfulness naturally leads to samādhi.*

Tonight we're going to talk about mindfulness, sati in Pali. The practice that we're doing is satipatthana, the establishing of mindfulness or cultivation of mindfulness or application of mindfulness. The core concept is mindfulness, so we need to get clear about it.

Mindfulness, of course, has become incredibly fashionable and now has spread like a cancer across the planet in the secular mindfulness worlds of psychology and psychotherapy and even management and business. There's a great deal of confusion in this secular mindfulness world. What I want to do first is to introduce and clarify what is meant by mindfulness.

I want to start by having a little mindfulness experiment. What I want you to do is hold your hands together like this. My question to you is: can you feel your hands? It's not a trick question, by the way.

You can feel your hands. Good. Are you making any particular effort? No? It's pretty straightforward?

If you put your hands together and you ask yourself the question, "Can I feel my hands?" and the answer is yes, that's awareness. Remember we were talking about awareness this morning. Awareness is the presence of what is present. I am aware of the touch of my hands. You notice there's no effort involved. It's just bleeding obvious.

Now I'd like to do a very similar exercise where we're going to do the same thing but we're going to do it for two minutes. What I want you to do is this: if at any time during those two minutes you suddenly realize that you have lost awareness of your hands, that your attention has gone somewhere else and therefore you've lost the hands, then raise your hand. Is that clear?

Let's not make it complicated. If your attention leaves your hands so that you've lost that feeling, raise your hand.

How many hands did we have up? It's a goodly number. I knew you were an experienced bunch. How many people maintained it for two minutes? How did you manage it? How did you do it?

One person said, "I'm not quite sure, but I was moving the hands a little bit to remind myself. I noticed that the attention varied in its intensity. So there would be a thought, but I never quite lost it."

Another mentioned, "I used my hands as a primary grounding object before. The field of awareness started at the whole hands and then gradually narrowed down to a point, just a little point, and then I moved the point around."

"I was deliberately renewing my attention," said someone else. "I just reminded myself."

Of course, the reason why we do this is simple: put your hands together, feel your hands—dead easy, no effort. But do it continuously for just two minutes and it's a much bigger job.

Someone raised the question, "Well, do you mean if attention slips away just for a moment?" The answer to that is: you've lost it. It's gone for a moment—it's gone.

It seems like you can hold other things like sounds at the same time and still feel you're in touch with the hands. So you haven't lost it then?

"Well, it feels like you can hold more than one thing at the same time if you have a broad sort of awareness."

Yeah, that's possible. Did you do that?

"With sound, it still felt like I had some contact with the hands."

So that's how you managed to keep it. You would accept other things coming in.

"Until there was a louder sound and then the elastic band snapped."

The difference between these two exercises is the difference between awareness and mindfulness. Some people confuse mindfulness with awareness. They think it's another way of saying the same thing. It isn't. It's different.

Mindfulness is the translation of the Pali word *sati,* which means literally memory. Mindfulness is not awareness. It's remembering awareness.

So those of you who were successful in maintaining it for two minutes did so by literally reminding yourself: I'm supposed to be aware of the hands. And there are different ways you can do it. One way is, in fact, by movement. If you keep things moving, that can help. Another way that some people use—some people managed to really squeeze their hands together tightly, other people stare at them fixedly. There are different techniques that people have developed.

But you see that even if you succeed, it's a much bigger job. To maintain a felt continuity of awareness over time is not easy. And this is mindfulness. It's remembering awareness. Remembering I am already aware. Remembering to be aware of this, my meditation object. These are the two flavors. And what we were practicing was the second one: Remember the hands. Don't forget the hands. The hands are something I'm supposed to remember.

Usually when I lose it—well, the most obvious place when I lose it when I'm doing this exercise—is at some point I look up to check how people are going and how many hands are up. Damn it! Inevitably, that's when I completely forget the hands.

This time I looked really slowly. I'm not going to do it this time. And I managed to check the hall and come back to the hands, and I was still with them. And then I congratulated myself. And they were gone.

Now when I congratulated you—when I said okay, I can see you're experienced meditators because so many hands went up—I'm not being ironic or sarcastic. I mean it.

In the world of secular mindfulness, one of the big problems they have is how to measure mindfulness. Because if you're doing a scientific study, you've got to measure your results. So there's all this debate in the social sciences about how do you measure mindfulness?

One of the standard ways, which is really dubious, is self-reports. People have created these questionnaires, and if you answer the questions appropriately, it shows you've attained a certain level of mindfulness. Some of the questions are really weird, but anyway, we won't go into that.

But it's the standard thing in mindfulness interventions. A standard pattern of behavior is you get a group of people—these are people who have never meditated. Then you give them the questionnaire to rate their mindfulness. And normally they'd score themselves up here. In other words: Yeah, yeah, I'm pretty mindful.

Then they start the mindfulness training and at some point down the line they do the same test and they rate themselves down here. The mindfulness level collapses dramatically.

Now the reason is because they're becoming more mindful and they're noticing that the mind slips away, whereas before they hadn't noticed. And that's one of the tricky things about doing this exercise. The more deeply you go into meditation practice, there's a sense in which the harder it is to do this—because you can see how the mind can flash away and come back.

and come back in less than a finger snap. It is so fast. So is that continuous or is that not continuous?

Usually when I do this exercise, I will ask people, especially if there's a large number of people who have not raised their hands, "Okay, how many of you are absolutely certain that not for a moment did the mind slip away?" And then it turns out that a lot of people who never raised their hands are now raising their hands and saying, "Well, well, you know, it could have been, but it was really quick."

So it's an interesting exercise because it shows you how the mind works and illustrates the nature of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is memory. You know those signs you see at the train stations? "Mind the Gap." The way they use the verb "to mind" is exactly what the Buddha is talking about when he's talking about sati. If you say "mind the gap," what are they asking you to do? They're asking you to remember that there's a gap between the train and the platform.

Now, when do they expect you to remember this? Are they asking you that when you go home, having a quiet drink at night, you can reflect, "Yes, yes, there was a gap between the train and the platform"? No. They're asking you to remember it in the very act of stepping in and out of the train. In other words, they are asking you to remember the present, not the past.

And that is exactly the function and the meaning of mindfulness. It's all about memory, but it's about remembering the present, not the past. And the work of mindfulness is reminding ourselves. A couple of people have said it: "How did you manage it?" "Well, I kept reminding myself." That's exactly what we're doing in this retreat.

Our job for the next month is to remind ourselves of our awareness. As we said, we don't have to do anything to be aware. We are already aware, but we easily forget our awareness. We forget that we are aware, or we forget what we are aware of. Our job is to keep reminding ourselves of our awareness, reminding ourselves what we are aware of.

This morning we talked about the meditation method. You can direct, in terms of noting, directed attention. We direct ourselves to something. So we have a meditation object, and for the next thirty minutes, sixty minutes, whatever, I'm going to keep my awareness on this object. The job is to remind ourselves to be aware of this, my meditation object. So the mindfulness is directed along with the awareness.

Then we talked about noticing, which is receptive, where the things come to us. And this is in particular in daily activities. There, I'm reminding myself: I am already aware, I am already seeing, I am already hearing, I am already walking, I am already cold, I am already warm, I am already tired, I am already awake. Whatever the condition is. But it's reminding myself, this is what's happening.

So the work of mindfulness—and you notice that it does involve effort. Not a lot of effort, but it does mean we've got to be switched on. We've got to keep switching on again and again and again. And it's not a big deal when we do it, but we do have to do it. And we have to do it now.

So this is the job of mindfulness training: to remind myself of my awareness, to remind myself either this is what I'm aware of, or to remind myself I am already aware. Is that making any sense? Any questions? Comments?

One thing I'd like to point out or talk about is what we mean by the present. Because I think this can be, can lead to confusion. In our culture, when we—well, you notice that in Dharma talks and Dharma literature, people talk about the present a great deal.

And years ago I noticed that, as a Dharma teacher, I talk about the present a lot. And I noticed that every time I would use the word "present," I would add the word "moment."

I realized I did this because I was so habituated to it—because when I read Dharma books, this is what people do. If they talk about the present, they talk about the present moment. Sometimes people will even drop the word present and just say "the moment." So if you're in a Dharma talk and someone says, "You must be in the moment," does it occur to you to wonder—to put your hand up and say, "Which moment are you talking about? There are a lot of them." Because it's obvious, isn't it? It's the present moment.

What struck me was that the Buddha talks about the present, but I've never come across a reference where he adds the word moment. I wondered why. It's so obvious and natural to us—why doesn't he do it? It struck me that he must have had a very different relationship to time than we have.

Our relationship to time is basically conditioned by technology. It makes sense for someone to say, "I will meet you at 3:15." That's a coherent, meaningful statement. And if someone turns up at 3:18, it's coherent, although perhaps obsessive, to say "You're late." If you were on the receiving end of that, what you had just heard would be perfectly meaningful. It might be a bit weird, but it's perfectly meaningful.

But if you were talking like this in the Buddha's time, no one would know what you're talking about. "3:15? What? You're saying I was three minutes late? What the hell are you talking about?" They would literally not know what you were talking about because they didn't have these accurate measurements of time, so the whole relationship to time would have been very different.

When the Buddha talks about time, the time he is talking about is experienced time, not the measured time of the clock.

Here's a question: Do I experience the present as a moment? Well, sometimes I do—most commonly when I'm stressed, when I'm pushing to meet a deadline, or if I'm restless and agitated and just want to get to something else, or if the adrenaline is really flowing.

But when I come to meditate, what I find is the more I get into it, the more the present starts to expand. It gets bigger and bigger and bigger. In fact, one of the problems with a moment—using that concept—is a moment is a very short period of time which has two very clear borders. It begins and it ends.

What I would suggest to you as a meditation experiment is: see if you can find the border where the present becomes the future. Try doing it. I've tried. I've never found it. Or can you find the border where the past becomes the present? I've never managed that either. Whenever I look, all there is, is the present.

I find that when I get into the meditation, past and future actually drop away. They simply don't exist. And when I'm really intimate, the present also disappears. But the point here is that the present—the experienced present—is big.

This is one way in which it's possible to talk about remembering the present. Sometimes people resist this idea because they say, "Well, if I'm remembering, I'm just going back to the past. Aren't I supposed to be in the present?"

But the experienced present includes the past, or some aspects of the past. For example, it can be quite useful—let's say I'm meditating and I realize that I'm distracted—it can be very useful to, as it were, look back and ask: What happened just then? How did I lose it? How did the mind slip away from the meditation object?

That's definitely remembering. But if you find it, if it's available, you're doing it in the present. There's a sense in which you are remembering the present. Of course, if you don't get it, well fine—you just drop it. You don't go chasing, you don't think about it.

But as we deepen into the practice, we begin to recognize that the present is actually quite expansive—it's a field within which we can dance. This is the present that we are remembering. Does that make sense?

Any questions or comments about that?

We're at the beginning of the retreat, and generally at the beginning we're more concerned with a general mindfulness—remembering I am already aware. So I am already seeing, I am already hearing, I am already thinking, I am already sitting. Just being present to whatever is happening.

Often it's best to start with seeing and hearing. Don't avoid seeing and hearing. You don't have to go around with your eyes glued to the ground, trying not to hear anything. You can be mindful with the senses wide open. When I see, I'm aware that I'm seeing. When I hear, I'm aware that I'm hearing. That's what's important.

Grounding yourself in the body is extremely useful. Stay with movement and touch—the movement of the body and the contact with the floor, and also particularly with the hands, whenever the body touches something.

When you move, move gracefully and quietly. Notice any clumsiness. Any time you're clumsy, when you fumble something, check the mind. Is the mind here, embodied in this particular time and place, or is it lost in some faraway fantasy? Often we notice that when we're distracted, that's when physical clumsiness occurs.

For example, when I'm opening and closing doors, I open the door and realize—bang!—I've just made an incredibly loud noise. I've opened this door really noisily. If I stop and check, where was the mind? Usually I discover, oh, I was thinking about something. I wasn't actually here. I wasn't actually present for opening the door. I didn't remember I was opening the door. And that's when I made the noise.

With the mind, don't fight thinking. Just be aware of it. The job is not to stop thinking. The job is to be aware of what the mind is doing, including thinking. What is the experience of thinking? How do I know that I'm thinking? What does thinking feel like? What's the energy of it? In other words, how fast is it? How slow is it?

This is becoming interested in what the mind does. And again, people were talking about the importance of being interested in the exercise of holding the hands. Be interested in what the mind is doing. It's not getting caught up with what I'm thinking about—the content of thought—but just the activity of thinking itself. When I'm thinking, I'm aware that I'm thinking. And I'm aware of what it's like.

And deeper down, what's the condition of the heart? What we would call the emotions. Is the heart disturbed? Does it shake or tremble? Is it restless? Is it resisting the experience? Is it grabbing onto something? Is it grasping after something? Is the heart at ease? Is it enjoying being here? Or not?

In the early stages of the retreat, it's a settling into present experience. Don't force it. Don't push it. Just let it settle. And what will allow it to settle is this practice of mindfulness, of reminding myself: this is what's happening. Oh, that's right, this is happening.

This is happening. There was something I was supposed to remember. Oh, that's right, this is happening. What was it I wrote? Ah, this is happening. That's the work of the practice, this reminding myself.

And the Buddha teaches that if mindfulness is continuous, concentration, samadhi, will naturally follow. It will just start to happen. But the crucial point is the mindfulness.

A student asked about the definition of meditation in the Buddhist context as a training of awareness and attention, noting that this could describe almost any skill, wondering what makes Buddhist meditation distinctive.

The Buddha distinguishes between the Eightfold Path and the Noble Eightfold Path, the Arya Eightfold Path. He distinguishes, for example, between mindfulness and right mindfulness. In the terms of the path, it would distinguish between right mindfulness, samma sati, and wrong mindfulness, miccha sati. This is all about direction.

So am I practicing mindfulness to send myself in the direction of enlightenment or awakening? Or am I cultivating mindfulness to send myself in another direction?

On the odd occasion that I see obsessive politicians on the media, these people must be quite mindful in terms of what they're doing because they work relentlessly hard. It's like the mindfulness of a sniper. It's mindfulness, but it's not what the Buddha would call right mindfulness because it's taking the citta in the wrong direction.

When asked whether one could have wrong mindfulness or wrong concentration about a wholesome object, I responded that you could. When you meditate, what you find is that a lot of the time you notice yourself losing the balance. You're pulling back into it. Then you lose it, you come back. You lose it, you come back.

Your understanding of right and wrong concentration, right and wrong mindfulness, becomes more refined. And so you can see yourself how it slides off into a wrong concentration or a wrong mindfulness very subtly. Then you correct it, it comes back to the right one. This is an ongoing process, cultivating a sensitivity to the balance.

CHAPTER 2

On Meditation Method

Patrick Kearney · 1h05

> *In this foundational dharma talk, Patrick Kearney offers a comprehensive exploration of meditation method from the perspective of the Mahāsi Sayādaw tradition. He begins by defining meditation as the systematic training of attention, distinguishing between awareness (the presence of what is present) and attention (the deliberate placing of awareness on an object). Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explains how this practice differs from object-focused methods by being defined not by a specific meditation object but by the quality of awareness itself.*
>
> *Kearney introduces the three fundamental activities in Mahāsi practice: noting (deliberately placing awareness on an object), naming (labeling objects to develop precision), and noticing (receptive awareness that allows objects to come to consciousness). He addresses common misconceptions about distraction, explaining that the movement of mind is not a barrier to meditation but rather its very content - the gateway to insight into the nature of mental processes.*
>
> *The talk covers the crucial distinction between grounding objects (where awareness rests and stabilizes) and secondary objects (everything else we become aware of), emphasizing that practitioners must find what works for their individual constitution rather than following a 'one true technique.' Kearney concludes with guidance on daily life practice and right effort (sammāvāyāma), stressing the importance of sustainable practice that can be maintained throughout the day without strain.*

This morning I want to talk about meditation method. I'd like to start from the beginning, exploring what we mean by meditation in the Buddhist sense.

Let me begin with some basic definitions. First of all, meditation is the systematic training of attention. Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object, and awareness is the presence of the object. These are the basic concepts we're working with.

We start with awareness. When we do a meditation practice, this is essentially what we're working with all the time. For our purposes, awareness and consciousness are the same. Awareness is the presence of that which is present.

Think of it like light that illuminates a dark room. You step into a completely dark room at night and switch on the light. How do we know that there is light? Because we can see things. Suddenly the room and everything in it is present to us. Before we turned on the light, they weren't there. We switch the light on, and suddenly everything is there. The light makes the room and everything in the room present. Awareness is like the light—it's the presence of that which is present.

Awareness is not a thing. Right now, you are present to me. I can see you. But you are not awareness. Awareness is the quality of your presence to me. Awareness is tricky to grasp because it's not a something—it's a quality, the quality of presence.

When we work with awareness, we realize that we're always working with a basic dyad: awareness and what we are aware of. What is present and the presence of it. We're always experiencing and working with this basic dyad. A simpler way to say this is: when I am aware, I am aware of something. That something we call the object of awareness.

If I'm seeing, I'm seeing something. If I'm hearing, I'm hearing something. If I'm thinking, I'm thinking something. So that something we call the object of awareness.

Now, what I am seeing—let's say I'm looking at you—you are the object of my vision. You are not the seeing itself. The seeing itself is not you. But there cannot be that seeing of you without you. So they always go together, but they're not the same.

We're always working with this dyad: awareness and the object of awareness. That object doesn't have to be an object in the conventional sense—it could be a state of mind.

Here, that state of mind, we're calling it the object of awareness. So it's the object of awareness, but it isn't an object. It's not necessarily a thing. It might be a thing—we might say, "I'm aware of this, I can feel it"—but it might be something quite different. For instance, I'm aware of a subtle feeling of pleasantness because it's a really nice morning, mingled with anxiety because I'm teaching, plus the caffeine buzz from two cups of coffee, creating a certain itchiness to my feeling. So that's the object of my awareness, but it's not a something.

We're always working with this dyad: there's the awareness and the object of awareness. Or we could say there's the process of aware-ing and the object of awareness. There are always those two.

Now when you look at the way that we meditate—and you're all experienced meditators—if you examine different kinds of meditation practice, some methods emphasize the object and some methods emphasize the aware-ing. Generally with Mahasi, they emphasize the object. "Note the object. What is the object? Whatever object arises, you must note." If you've been to Burma, these are the standard instructions. Notice that the language is all about the object.

But you can't have an object of awareness without the awareness. So there's always the awareness. Other methods may say, "Look, I don't care what the object is. There is no object. Forget about object. Object is dualistic. We're not dualistic here. We are non-dual. We're much better than these dualistic people." That is a touch dualistic, but apparently we have transcended that. So there you often get an emphasis on the aware-ing itself rather than the object of awareness. It doesn't matter what I'm aware of. What matters is the aware-ing itself.

You find some meditation methods will emphasize the aware-ing, some will emphasize the object. But always there's both. You can't have one without the other. In practice, as one's practice develops, you go through periods where the object is what you're really focused on, but at other times it's really the aware-ing itself that you're focused on. You can move between one and the other, sometimes without even necessarily noticing that you're doing it, because the shift is quite subtle.

Can you be aware of the aware-ing?

Yes, that's another aspect of it.

So is that the object then?

Yeah, the awareness becomes the object. If you're speaking about this in Mahasi language, you'd be told, "Note the awareness." If you're labelling it, you might label it "knowing, knowing," or "aware-ing, aware-ing."

So this dyad is a structure more than a something. Any other questions? Are we making sense so far?

I'm not sure if what you just said is like a third thing, because you can be so lost in concentration that you're not aware that you're aware. It's only in hindsight that you're aware that you were aware. At the time it was like—I think that's a question of balance. It's like you've lost your balance.

This relates to the recursive nature of awareness itself, which we're going to be talking about, particularly when we discuss using mind as a meditation object. I think I've got this in here. I've rewritten this talk, so I'm not entirely sure what I've got in it. Let's raise these issues later on—they'll all come out and we can talk about them.

Often you do see a progression within one's practice. Usually when people begin, their interest is on the object of awareness. As the practice develops, people will find that the process of aware-ing itself becomes more interesting. That's often a pattern, though it's not necessarily the case.

One of the things that characterizes awareness is that it's completely natural. Whenever I look for it, it's already here. There's a book called "Ten Zen Questions" by Susan Blackmore. I don't know if you've ever come across it.

And every time she asked herself that question—having taken this inquiry quite seriously as a contemplative practice—the answer was invariably yes. If you try this for yourself, you'll likely discover the same response.

So awareness is completely natural and already present. We don't need to do anything at all to be aware. We are already aware.

However, there are degrees of awareness. We could say that awareness has depth. While I am already aware, I can be very faintly aware or very clearly aware, or anywhere in between. So though I am already aware, I'm not necessarily clearly aware.

This touches on something quite interesting. I can be in a meditative state in which I actually don't know what's happening. Sometimes as a teacher, you might observe someone sitting completely still in the meditation hall for two or three hours. When you ask them afterward what their experience was like, they simply don't know. They actually can't describe what occurred, which is fascinating.

If awareness has depth, this suggests it can be developed. I can move from being very faintly aware to being very clearly aware. But if I'm going to develop awareness, how would I do that? What's the mechanism?

The answer is attention.

This brings us to the whole question of attention. Awareness is the simple presence of knowing. Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on an object. In other words, attention is the act of being deliberately aware.

It's rather like the difference between seeing and looking. I am already seeing—I don't have to do anything for this to happen. In fact, it takes considerable effort not to see. But looking is something entirely different. Let's say I'm expecting someone to arrive at this retreat and I'm not sure if they've come. So I begin to examine everyone in the hall to see if I can spot them.

When I'm simply seeing, I'm making no effort at all. But when I'm looking, I'm making an effort—I'm actively doing something, adding something to awareness.

The moment we bring in attention, we also bring in method. If I'm going to look, how will I look? If I'm searching for someone in this room, will I scan from front row to back row? From left to right? Right to left? Back to front? Or will I simply take in the whole room at once?

That immediately gives me five different methods.

I've already got five possibilities in how I could go about doing something as simple as that.

So when we talk about method, we're talking about the systematic training of attention—in other words, what we call meditation. All forms of Buddhist meditation are forms of attention training. I want to heighten, develop awareness. To do that, I will pay attention. And if I'm going to pay attention, I have to have some method by which I will do that. And there are multiple methods available. We quickly worked out five just for looking to see who's in the room.

These are the various meditation techniques that we're familiar with in the spiritual supermarkets. And I think it's really important to understand that there is no such thing as the one true technique, any more than there is any such thing as the one true washing powder. It just doesn't exist. But the marketeers will quite try to persuade you that it does. They will try to explain that all laundry powders wash white, but only one washes whiter than white. And that's the one you should be buying.

You get exactly the same phenomenon in the spiritual world. "Ah yes, meditation is very good for you, but only this one will get you enlightened. Those other ones won't." This kind of rhetoric is extremely common. And I think as meditators it's really important to understand that all of this is complete bullshit, total, from the beginning to the end. It's just marketing. That's all it is.

The job of the practitioner is not to discover the one true technique. The job is to discover and cultivate the method which is most suitable for that person—for me. That's your job. You have to discover and cultivate what method works for you. And it's not

necessarily the method that works best for the teacher. What the teacher is teaching is usually what worked for him or her. But that's not necessarily what works for you. So it's your job to find out what that is.

The particular approach that we're working in is that developed by and taken up by Mahāsī Sayādaw. When I was in Mahāsī Centre practicing with Sayādaw U Paṇḍita, where he gave his dhamma talks was in his drawing room at his house. And he had that image of Mahāsī Sayādaw up on the wall. One time we were sitting there waiting for U Paṇḍita to turn up to a talk, and a friend of mine who was sitting next to me breaks the silence and leans across and says, "Do you know that that photograph was taken just two days before Mahāsī Sayādaw died?" And I replied, "To me it always looks like it was taken two days after he died."

This centre teaches a method based upon Mahāsī Sayādaw. It's developed over the decades and changed, but it has its origins there. And that's important because basically what Mahāsī was doing—Mahāsī and other members of the insight meditation movement in modern Burma—they were part of a revival of meditation practice to make it widespread for lay people.

This is really important. From a traditional Buddhist perspective, the fact that there's a group of lay people sitting here devoting a month to intensive meditation practice is really, really weird. It's not normal in traditional Buddhism, any school of traditional Buddhism. Meditation was taken to be only for a monastic elite. Not even the majority of monks and nuns would practice meditation, much less lay people.

In the Buddha's time there was, we know, a flourishing lay meditation culture, but it died out. In nineteenth-century Burma they seriously started to revive it, and they were wildly successful. That's where we inherit our meditation tradition from, so it's quite significant. It began in the nineteenth century but flourished particularly in the twentieth, and especially after independence in 1948.

Let's look at the nature of attention. Attention has a certain structure. Awareness presents an illuminated field, like a room when the light is switched on. Imagine you step into a dark room, hit the light switch—bang. At that point, what do you see? Do you see the entire room? Light illuminates everything without distinction, and awareness is like this. Awareness illuminates the entire field.

What attention does is within that field, it chooses one specific thing or one specific direction as being of interest and concern, and directs its interest there.

That's what it looks like. And that specific something now becomes the centre of the field of awareness.

So I step into a dark room, switch on the light. For a moment the entire room is illuminated, but in that room is my favourite armchair, where I like to relax, read a book, drink a little something. Because I'm in Buddha's company, I won't say what it is that I drink. And have a good time.

So it doesn't take very long, maybe only milliseconds, before my eyes go to that chair. And I focus on it, and that chair becomes the centre of my field. And what's around it on the periphery actually disappears. Because I'm not interested in it. What I'm interested in is this. So much of the field drops away and all I've got is this. Does that make sense? That's how we normally operate within this field and this is what attention does.

So the chair is now at the center of my field and everything else is on the periphery. Or we could say the chair is now in the foreground and everything else is in the background. And attention has that structure. We foreground something, what we're interested in, and everything else fades into the background or maybe even completely disappears. So when we work with attention, that's the structure that we work with.

In the Mahasi lineage we speak of three basic activities and this provides the language that we're using in this retreat. The three basic activities are noting, naming and noticing.

First of all, noting. To note something is to deliberately place awareness on it, or to be deliberately aware, or simply to attend. I forget what the Burmese word is that was translated into the English "to note," but that Burmese verb simply means to attend to, to be deliberately aware of something. When they were translating into English, you could use "to attend," but there really is no English equivalent. So they picked up the verb "to note" to explain this. So to note something is to be deliberately aware of it. In other words, to foreground it. To put this at the foreground.

Then you have naming. This is putting a name or a label on this object. And the reason why this is done is to develop aim, precision, accuracy in attention. And accuracy is really important if you're practicing for the purpose of developing insight. If we're practicing just to develop serenity or concentration it's not particularly important at all. And if you look at methods of meditation that are primarily about developing serenity they do not use naming and often their advocates will dismiss meditation methods that use naming. "That's ridiculous. Why are you making all these words up? They just get in the way. They're at best useless. The best you can say about it is it's completely useless."

Now, from their perspective, they're right. The problem is it's completely useless if you're just practicing for serenity. Because you don't need to be all that accurate. What you need is to be peaceful. But if you're practicing for insight, you need to be accurate. You need to be precise. So the naming can be useful.

And the naming can take different forms. It can be very brief. Let's say thinking comes up and you want to name it. You could name it simply "thinking." Or you could give it a longer name which tells you something about its nature.

You could say to yourself, "A thought is just a thought." That too is naming—simply doing it in a different way.

The name could even be a question: "What is this?" Or a more dynamic question would be, "What feeds this?" We'll be talking about this one later in the retreat—it's a very useful question. If you use a question, the question is always much more important than any answer you come up with. The answer is not particularly relevant; the question is important. A good question sends the awareness directly to the center of what's going on. In other words, a good question stimulates aim.

So this is the whole area of conceptualizing the experience in order to more effectively aim your awareness at it. You have noting, naming, and finally noticing.

Now, noting is to be deliberately aware of something. You go out to the object. Naming assists the noting, and you may or may not name. Some people use naming a lot, some people never use it, some people use it a little bit. You find different patterns. But noting has this quality of being active and directed.

Noticing is the exact opposite. Noticing is receptive and undirected. When I note, I send my awareness to the object. When I notice, the object comes to me. All I do is receive it. I'm not doing anything at all. It's coming to me.

This is, in a very mundane sense—if you go to a meditation retreat, you invariably get the cautions about how you should behave: move slowly and mindfully, don't make any noise when you come in and out of the hall, and so forth. The forms of behavior in a meditation retreat are quite explicit. You've got to behave very carefully. When people come to do their first meditation retreat, often this strikes them as being a bit weird. They think, "What sort of weird place am I in?"

But after a few days, you begin to realize why this is important. One example is the meditation hall clock phenomenon. You come into the hall and notice there's a nice big clock on the wall. You think, "Oh, this is good, because now I can tell the time, so I know when I can get out of here." And mercifully, the clock is silent. So everybody starts to meditate.

After a couple of days, you realize it's not actually silent. It does make a little bit of noise. And a couple of days after that, it's driving you crazy because it's so noisy. Have you ever had that kind of experience?

What's happening is the noticing is getting stronger and stronger and stronger. Noticing is all about sensitivity. The mind becomes increasingly sensitive and notices more and more. It's not that you're looking for the clock—the clock's finding you. This is noticing. It's the receptivity associated with sensitivity and the power of the mind as it develops, as meditation develops. But it is essentially receptive. It doesn't do anything.

Again, some styles of meditation work with noticing much more than noting.

So, for example, here's a very interesting meditation exercise: come into the hall, sit down, and for the next hour do nothing. Don't do anything at all. It's a really interesting exercise because you discover how difficult it is to not do. But that would be an exercise in noticing rather than noting.

In another exercise you might come in and say, "OK, for the next hour I'm going to track my breathing, I'm going to follow the breathing." That's noting. That's active. You're going out to it. Does that make sense? And sometimes you will find yourself quite spontaneously moving from one to the other.

So that's about the nature of attention. Then we can talk about the objects of attention. If there's attention, there's something we're being attentive to. This is the object. And we talked about this as when we are aware, we are aware of something.

Most meditation methods are defined by their object. So, let's say anapanasati, mindfulness of in and out breath. If you're doing breathing meditation and you do it, let's say, for one hour, and at the end of the hour you reflect, "Well, how much of that hour did I actually spend paying attention to breathing?" And you might think, "Well, maybe twenty minutes if I was lucky." Then were you doing breathing meditation for the other forty minutes? No. Because by its very nature, it's about the object. So if you're not focused on the breathing, you're not doing breathing meditation. Simple.

So you get forms of meditation which are defined by their object: breathing meditation, mantra, sound, visualization, visual object—real or imagined, and so on.

The style of practice that we're doing is satipatthana. You could translate that as the applications of mindfulness. And what characterizes satipatthana is that it is not defined by its object. The basic text which we'll be looking at for satipatthana is the Satipatthana Sutta, and that gives a whole range of objects—basically anything in the body and anything in the mind. In other words, anything. This style of practice is not defined by its object, and this creates a whole different dynamic to it.

However, you do find, when we talk about the object, what Mahasi talks about is two categories of object: the grounding object and the secondary object. Usually this first one, the grounding object, is translated as primary object. The original Pali is mula aramana. Aramana is object and mula literally means root, so it's literally the root object—but root in the sense of where we stand, where we're connected, so the ground where we find our ground. So I prefer to translate it as the grounding object. In other words, if we're doing a meditation practice and we're going to cultivate awareness through practicing attention, we need to ground our awareness somewhere. We have to allow it to rest in one place and let it become still. Let the mind become still.

Now anybody who starts a meditation practice quickly discovers that the normal state of the mind is to restlessly chase after one thing after another. So one thought or sensation after another thought or sensation. And the mind restlessly moves around looking for a satisfaction that it never quite achieves, so it keeps moving.

And this quality of restlessness is immediately evident to the meditator, and it manifests in what we call, in the context of meditation, distraction. Has anybody ever experienced distraction? Just once. I'm sure it was a long time ago, before you overcame it.

And when we call it distraction, we pile all these concepts on top of this experience. And often we see it as what prevents our meditation practice. Have you ever had the feeling that if only this would stop, then I could start meditating? Well, this is distraction.

But if we're going to practice any kind of meditation, we need to stabilize the mind. Which means we need to be able to keep our awareness in one place over a period of time. And this is the function of the grounding object.

This is what it's for. The grounding object provides a place for our awareness to rest and to remain still over a period of time. In a sense we could say that the grounding object is where our awareness feels at home—where our awareness will remain unless it has a specific reason for going somewhere else. This is the grounding object. And you notice that it's basically a function, not a thing.

So what do we use as our grounding object? Now if you take up a particular meditation technique—we could call these "off-the-shelf" techniques—you unwrap the packaging and you're presented with your grounding object. In the case of Mahasi Sayadaw, he presented what he calls the rising and falling of the abdomen. This is breathing sensed in the abdomen. This is actually very controversial in Burma, but we won't go into the reasons why.

The reason why he presented this was because he thought that for most people, most of the time, breathing here is clear and obvious—therefore it's suitable as a grounding object. Because if you want to rest your awareness somewhere and to keep it there, the basic qualification required is that this something, whatever it is, is clear and obvious to you. If you've got to go searching around for it, it's not going to work, because you're already restless just looking for it, not to mention restless trying to hold on to it if it's not suitable for you.

When Mahasi chose rising and falling of the abdomen, he did not choose it for esoteric, mystical, and yogic reasons. When I started doing Mahasi practice, I was quite used to this because that's what we did in Zen. I practiced Zen for a number of years before coming to this tradition, and that's where I was trained—tracking the breathing there. And there they have all sorts of reasons why you do this. In Japan it's called the hara. In Chinese it's the dantian. This is a major center of energy, important in martial arts, connected with the chakras—a major chakra area, and so on and so forth.

Now, as far as I'm aware, Mahasi Sayadaw either knew nothing about all this, or if he knew anything about it, he didn't care. He chose this for purely pragmatic reasons. For most people, most of the time, it's clear and it's obvious, so just do it.

But for some people it's not clear and it's not obvious. Some people find it very difficult to find this movement, much less to maintain it. Some people find breathing a difficult meditation object. And breathing itself is not, for a certain proportion of the meditating population, a suitable grounding object. It's always been difficult for me. I've had lifelong asthma, bronchitis, etc. Breathing's always been problematic for me, and I've always struggled with it as a meditation object.

So we want to ground our awareness, and the easiest way to do this is through some aspect of body or mind that we can easily find and which is clear and obvious to us. It also helps if this object is either still, or if it moves, then it moves rhythmically—which is another reason why people like breathing as a meditation object.

It's up to you to decide what your grounding object should be. Most of you already have yours. You're experienced meditators. You've probably pretty much settled on what your grounding object is. But notice that it's about function. And the grounding object itself can change over a period of time. What you were used to in the early stages of your meditation career—"OK, I can settle on this, and it works"—it may be that later on it's no longer suitable and you focus on something else. Don't fight it. Just ask yourself what's clearest and most obvious. Go there. Because that's what you want for a grounding object. Where can I most readily rest my awareness so that the mind will remain relatively still over time? This is my grounding object. This is what my awareness will call home.

So that's grounding object, and then we have secondary object. The mind moves and

When we do this practice, we are not trying to prevent the mind from moving. The mind moves. That's what it does. What we're trying to do is to understand that the mind moves and how it moves. It's the understanding that's important, not the movement. And this understanding of the movement of the mind is the gateway into insight, for reasons that we will talk about later on.

This brings us to this tricky question of distraction. The mind moves and we feel that we can't meditate because the mind is moving. If only this would stop, then I could meditate. If only I was not distracted, then I could meditate. Have you ever thought like that? No, not these meditators. Other meditators have thought like this.

But this idea is a complete delusion. The delusion, the mistake is twofold. First of all, it mistakes the nature of the mind. The mistake is thinking that the uncontrolled movement of the mind is a barrier to meditation, rather than realizing it's the content of our meditation. It's the moving mind that we are studying. And if it didn't move, we couldn't study it.

The power of the meditation practice comes from the insight it gives us into the nature of the mind. And the nature of the mind is revealed through the way it moves. If the mind did not move, we would be in deep trouble.

Imagine the horror. If you walked into this hall after breakfast, let's say after the practice workshop, you check your watch and think, "Okay, lunch is at 12:15. Let me arise from my samādhi at 12:15," and you then entered into a deep absorption state in which the mind was completely still and completely peaceful and blissed out. And at exactly 12:15 you emerged from that and ambled up and had lunch. Imagine how terrible that would be. Because in the course of those several hours, what would you have learned about the nature of mind? Nothing, basically.

The movement of the mind is the gateway into insight. So if you're meditating for serenity, of course, that's what you want. You want to be blissed out. But if you're meditating for insight, you want to study the movements of the mind. So distraction is your ally.

The second aspect of delusion is about the nature of distraction itself. We don't even know what it really is. Distraction is not found in the movement of awareness from one object to another. Distraction is the unnoticed movement of the mind from one object to another. The fact that the mind moves is completely natural and is not a problem. Distraction occurs only when we don't notice the movements. When we are aware of the mind moving, we are not distracted.

We'll talk more about the nature of distraction when we talk about mindfulness. Just for now, notice that as soon as we know that we are distracted, the mind has already landed and we are already meditating. If I think I'm distracted, that means I'm already meditating. Because I'm aware of where the awareness has landed. And so I'm not distracted. I'm simply noting my secondary object.

This is what we call the secondary object. The secondary object is everything that we are attentive to which is not the grounding object. So as soon as I know that I'm distracted, I am no longer distracted—I am noting the secondary object. The relationship to the secondary object is really important because, at the most broad brushstroke level, grounding object gives us serenity. Secondary object gives us insight. So it's very important.

Do not fight distraction. Study it. That's the crucial bit.

In terms of the basic method, I like to sum it up as: firstly, settle awareness in the body and then see what happens. So the body is the grounding object. It's the first satipaṭṭhāna. And for a variety of reasons, which we'll get into, the body is really suitable as a grounding object. Now, it may be the whole body—for example, the whole posture, as you sit or stand or whatever. Or it may be some specific aspect of the body, such as the details of the breathing.

Or it may be the sensations you feel at the base of the body, or the sensations combined with the breathing—whatever works for you. There are different approaches you can use, but essentially you ground awareness in the body and do this consistently. Then see what happens.

And what will happen—I'll let you in on the secret—is that the mind will move. And wherever it moves to, that becomes your secondary object, regardless of what it is.

So we have formal meditation practice periods in the four postures: moving, standing, sitting, and lying down. We'll explore this more as we progress through the retreat. Then we have all the rest of the day when we're not doing formal meditation practice, and this is what we call daily activities.

Now, the daily activities practice is actually the most important practice. One way of looking at this retreat is that we're going to fill up the empty hours—we're going to give ourselves something to do. So we'll engage in these formal meditation practices, but we're doing that primarily to prepare ourselves for the real practice, which is the ordinary daily activities when there is no formal meditation practice. This is the central one.

And it's central because when we leave here and go home, that's the practice we'll be doing. This retreat is our chance to actually get to know it.

In the daily activity practice, this is by and large a general awareness that does not focus on specific details most of the time, but simply lets things flow. It's interested in what is happening in all six senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding. It allows things to happen—it doesn't suppress anything, but nor does it get entangled with anything. It's like keeping a balance in the mind.

When we notice ourselves falling into something, getting entangled in something—either physical or mental—then we relax and simply notice what's happening. Not a big deal. We are not trying to make something happen in this daily activity practice.

Let's say I'm sitting and I'm following the breathing—I'll use breathing as the generic meditation object. In formal practice, I'm trying to make something happen. I'm trying to stay on the breathing for as long as I can. In the daily activity practice, I'm not trying to make anything happen. I simply want to know what is happening. That's all.

You notice the distinction? The second approach—I just want to know what is happening—is less focused and involves less effort and no strain. And from this, sampajañña, clear understanding, naturally arises.

Any questions or comments? Has any of this made sense?

[Noticing a thumbs up gesture] I've got the thumbs up of approval.

[Participant responds about strain and work stress]

That's quite interesting because from the last retreat to this, I was actually trying to do that at my work. It's very stressful and moves very fast. I was trying to be aware of what's happening without trying to make things happen, and it's had a really good effect on me. I'm less stressed at work. It's just keeping it there. The tendency I find is to

grab onto it and actually push it, for me at least. I tried to stay out, and it was really beneficial because I realized that things were happening anyway, and they were actually happening in a good way. I didn't need to do quite as much as I usually do.

So that's more the noticing rather than the noting, in terms of what we were talking about earlier. This brings in the question of right effort—what the Buddha calls sammāvāyāma, right effort.

If you're doing a project where you meditate for thirty minutes or one hour, then you can put in a lot of focus and effort because you know that at the end of thirty or sixty minutes, you can stop and take a break. But as we'll discuss throughout this retreat, this practice is satipaṭṭhāna. And the Buddha says you do this from the moment you wake up in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night.

Now, if you're attempting that with a lot of effort, there's no way you can do it because you cannot sustain it. So what you're looking for in this style of practice is something you can sustain—a relationship to effort that you can maintain throughout the entire day.

Since effort is like finding the right string tension for music, it requires careful attention to the mind's quality and flavor. Notice if there's grasping—that subtle demand for the breath to deliver concentration, which turns meditation into a form of bullying. Wrong effort manifests as strain followed by collapse, a familiar cycle that signals imbalance.

This dynamic extends beyond formal practice into daily life. One practitioner shared how concentration without awareness led to complete absorption while reading, resulting in physical injury—classic signs of wrong samadhi, concentration out of balance. The pain served as a wake-up call, stimulating mindfulness that had been absent during the intense focus.

Physical posture becomes a valuable teacher here. The body reveals the mind's state with remarkable accuracy. Developing sensitivity to posture cultivates awareness of mental conditions, creating a feedback loop that supports balanced effort throughout the day.

This is why mindful attention to how we sit, stand, and move matters deeply. The body's wisdom guides us toward the harmonious effort that sustains practice from morning until night, helping us recognize when we're pushing too hard or sliding into dullness, when we need to engage more fully or relax more completely.

And then intention. This is likely to be interesting when you're sitting in a chair, so watch it.

A participant asked about the translation of *sampajañña*. Clear understanding, yes.

Another question arose about method and meditation objects: "I think it's interesting that for people who have been going through different traditions and have different objects... I sort of knew there was no right or wrong thing, but sometimes it just happens that there is no object. What I tend to do is focus more on the events themselves. So if your object is awareness itself, do you just let whatever comes up roll along and then forget it?"

Usually people find that relatively difficult to maintain unless they've already built up some momentum. Every approach has its shadow, and the shadow of that approach is that the mind can easily get lost and start to drift without even noticing that it's drifting.

If you notice that happening, come back and ground yourself somewhere more solid. Usually the body is the best place to go—it could be simply the posture, physical sensation, or breathing. Ground yourself in the body and then go back to just opening up.

It's like you're holding your meditation object and then you relax your grip a bit. This has a quality of effort involved. If you just relax your grip and let things move in and out, and you start to get lost, hold again. You find yourself moving from one to the other.

Another question came about the second object—noticing the movement of the mind: "Are you talking about where the mind is going, the object it's seeking, or the quality of attention, the quality of relationship to that object, or both?"

All are possible. In my experience, noticing the object is easier, so that's where I would start. But as I develop momentum, I might become much more interested in and aware of the quality of the awareness itself and what's behind that movement. Where is it coming from? What's feeding it? You could also ask what it's feeding.

Both of these questions are designed to expose the workings of dependent arising. This is always process, and we're tracking the process. Work with what's clearest and most obvious.

The practice at the beginning of a retreat will be different from how it becomes in the middle and how it will be at the end. Always work with what's clearest and most obvious. Other things that are more subtle will come to you—you'll start to notice them. You don't need to chase after them; they'll come to you.

It's important that you don't have a very blinkered approach to concentration, where you're so focused on one thing that you blinker out everything else and miss a lot. You want to be able to be grounded on something but have a sense of awareness of what's around it, so that when something happens, ah, there it is.

Good luck.

But it's important that you don't have a blinkered approach to concentration. Some people become so focused on a single object that they actually block out everything else and miss a lot. Instead, you want to be grounded on something while maintaining awareness of what's around it. This way, when something arises in your experience, you can recognize it clearly: "Ah, there it is."

This balanced approach to concentration allows you to remain stable and focused while staying open and receptive to the full range of your experience. It's this quality of mindful awareness that transforms meditation from mere concentration into wisdom practice.

Good luck with your practice.

CHAPTER 3

The One-Way Street & Nibbāna - Introducing Satipaṭṭhāna

Patrick Kearney · 1h04

> *In this opening talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney introduces the foundational practice of satipaṭṭhāna by examining the opening passage of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). He explores how the Buddha describes the four applications of mindfulness as "ekāyana magga" - a one-way street leading inevitably to nibbāna for those who persist in the practice.*
>
> *Kearney offers a nuanced understanding of nibbāna, distinguishing it from mere extinction and explaining it through two dimensions: cognitively as reality no longer defined by concepts, and affectively as the natural extinguishing of the fires of clinging (upādāna). Using vivid analogies - from fairy tale endings to the relationship between menus and meals - he illustrates how our conceptual frameworks shape experience and what it means to live beyond their limitations.*
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> *The talk addresses common misconceptions about Buddhist practice, contrasting the Buddha's ultimate aim of liberation with more conventional goals of happiness and comfort. Through practical examples of body awareness and the nature of physical tension, Kearney demonstrates how deeply our concepts penetrate even our most basic experiences, and how satipaṭṭhāna practice cultivates a clean, direct relationship to present moment experience.*

Tonight I'd like to introduce the practice that we engage with in Satipaṭṭhāna, the way I normally approach it, which is to begin by examining the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

Any kind of Buddhist meditative tradition is based on the teachings of the Buddha, and these teachings are found in the suttas. There are different discourses that address meditation, but there are two major meditation discourses: the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the Ānāpānasati Sutta. Ānāpānasati is mindfulness of in-and-out breathing. This tradition we practice is based on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—it's the root text. All of the modern Satipaṭṭhāna meditation methods go back to this discourse and its associated teachings.

Satipaṭṭhāna is variously translated. Older translations rendered it as "the foundations of mindfulness." Now you see translations like "the establishing of mindfulness" or "applications of mindfulness." Perhaps later we'll discuss why there are different translations, but for our purposes tonight, the main thing is that at the center of it is sati, which we explored last night.

Sati literally means memory, from the verb sarati, "to remember." It was translated as "mindfulness" by T.W. Rhys Davids, who first used this term in 1881. Different translators experimented with various terms, but by 1911 or thereabouts, "mindfulness" had become the accepted translation. We discussed how it fits quite well—when we talk about "minding" something, we mean to watch the store, look after it, don't wander away from it, keep your eyes on it, make sure you know what's going on. Essentially, it carries the same meaning. We explored last night the phrase "mind the gap," the sign in railway stations—remember that there's a gap when you step in and out of the train. So the translation definitely works.

When this discourse opens, the Buddha declares: "This way, the four applications of mindfulness"—here I'm translating Satipaṭṭhāna as applications of mindfulness—"is a one-way street for purifying beings, transcending sorrow and distress, vanishing pain and grief, attaining the right path, and realizing Nibbāna. What are the four?

"Here a bhikkhu, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body, ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful. Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, he lives tracking feeling as feeling, ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful. Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, he lives tracking heart-mind as heart-mind, ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful. Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, he lives tracking phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful."

This is the uddesa, the introduction to the discourse, and it essentially summarizes the entire teaching.

First, it begins with evaṃ me sutaṃ, translated here as "this is how I heard it," though usually rendered as "thus have I heard." All suttas begin this way, reminding us that this is an oral tradition. Oral traditions work differently than literary traditions. We are accustomed to being shaped by literary tradition, and we're moving into yet another kind of tradition with the internet—more of a screen-based tradition whose implications we don't yet fully understand.

In an oral tradition, everything is based on memory. Information comes through the ear and ultimately flows from the mouth. Everything is spoken, recited, sung—and particularly sung. These suttas, when we approach them as texts and read them (or at least don't read them because they can seem extremely tedious), are actually songs, meant to be performed in chorus. We miss much when we simply read them.

There's a certain rhythm in the discourses, particularly found in the patterns of repetition. Here we have one sentence repeated four times about the bhikkhu. Bhikkhu here means a committed practitioner. The legal definition of bhikkhu is "fully ordained male," or monk. But the essential meaning of bhikkhu is any committed practitioner—ordained or not ordained, male or female. I like to emphasize this point, and I want to stress that this is not a New Age reinterpretation. This is the ancient tradition. In fact, there's even a reference for this—Dhammapada, verse 142. Look it up.

So this discourse is addressed to all committed practitioners. It's addressed to us.

So here a practitioner surrendering longing and sorrow for the world lives tracking body as body, feeling as feeling, heart-mind as heart-mind, phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful.

This passage is repeated four times throughout the discourse, and the thing about repetition is that repetition shows us what's important. For a start, if you're chanting this, what you repeat the most goes deepest into the memory banks and simply becomes part of you. And secondly, if it's repeated extensively, you know this is important—this is what you must pay attention to. So we're going to examine this particular sentence closely.

The discourse was given when the Buddha was living among the Kurus, near the market town of Kamasadhamma. We have absolutely no idea where the market town of Kamasadhamma is, but we do know where the Kurus lived. The Kuru country is roughly the area south of modern Delhi. So the Buddha lived and worked in the Ganges plain, in an area extending from the southeast—roughly on the border of West Bengal—up the valley to the area south of Delhi, the Kuru country. And it was in the northwest that he gave this and several other important teachings.

The Buddha describes this way of practice—the four applications of mindfulness—as a one-way street: *ekāyana magga*. He then outlines a series of progressive attainments: purifying beings, transcending sorrow and distress, vanishing pain and grief, attaining the right path, and realizing Nibbāna. This is a one-way street to Nibbāna, and this is how the Buddha introduces it. It's quite a powerful teaching.

Mindfulness is, as we've discussed, very popular these days through the secular mindfulness movement. The purpose of mindfulness practice in the secular context is basically to reduce suffering. You could say it's designed to take people from clinical levels of sorrow, distress, and depression, and bring them into normal levels of sorrow and distress. But the Buddha doesn't say this. He says this practice is actually for Nibbāna.

I like to talk about Nibbāna, though I was told long ago—and have been told a few times since—that this is not a good idea. Initially, I agreed it wasn't a good idea because it's such an impossible subject to grasp and therefore impossible to talk about. But the reason why it's not a good idea, I was told, is because no one's interested. People just want to be a bit happier. That's why they come to meditation centers and do meditation courses. No one out there is interested in Nibbāna; best not to mention it.

I wouldn't argue with that observation. However, I would argue with the idea that this is something new. Throughout Buddhist history, most people have not been interested in Nibbāna. Most traditional Buddhists in traditional Buddhist societies had no interest in Nibbāna. It's there, kind of floating around somewhere, but that's not really what they're interested in. What they're interested in is having a good life this time around, and then getting a good rebirth—a nice rebirth in heaven, or if you're a woman, getting reborn as a man, which is obviously much easier.

This is, you could say, secular mindfulness. It's basically the functional equivalent of practicing mindfulness because at the moment—and for some time—you've been feeling pretty miserable, but you want to feel much better. When you feel much better, you can get a nice job, make some money, drive a nice car, build a reasonable superannuation account, and have a comfortable life.

If you have that kind of motivation, then basically what you're saying is: I have an idea from current experience of what happiness looks like, I want that, so I'm projecting my view of what would make my life nice now into the future, and that's what I want. That's essentially what the ambition is. In a traditional Buddhist society, if you say you want a nice rebirth, it's essentially the same move. It's projecting what you think happiness is now into the future—it's just that their sense of time is a bit different. But it's basically the same move.

If you look at advertisements for superannuation, it's basically heaven for old age. You see these ads where people are old but incredibly happy. There was one favorite I used to see at a railway station: an old couple on a tropical beach, both with fixed grins

on their faces, one holding up a cocktail. Clearly this is meant to convey paradise—a kind of heaven realm which you can be reborn into if only you accumulate enough superannuation.

Most people have always been interested in this kind of heavenly rebirth. If they undertake some kind of practice, for most people that's what they're in it for. Only a few people are seriously in it for Nibbāna.

And it's a really weird ambition to have because for a start we've got absolutely no idea what it could be. Like none. If we have an idea of what it is, we're wrong. Because all we're doing is taking some attachment that we have and projecting it into the future. So it actually is very good advice not to talk about Nibbāna.

But the border is quite clear. This is what it's for. So we'll talk about this.

But first of all, the relationship between the practice and Nibbāna—he says this is a one-way street that leads to Nibbāna. Now this is a very strong statement. If I'm heading down a one-way street, and at the end of that street there's a destination X, then if I keep going, I will get there. There's no room for doubt. I will get there. I might dawdle, I might take my time, I might be distracted by the pub just down on the left, or the department store further along, but if I keep going, I will get there.

And this is the relationship that the Buddha says that Nibbāna has to this practice. If we do this practice, we will, like it or not, want it or not, eventually get to Nibbāna if we keep doing it. So this is the relationship that I'm interested in looking at tonight.

So first of all, what is Nibbāna? The word itself comes from nirvāti, to blow out, to extinguish. We'll get to that. Nibbāna represents the ultimate goal of the practice, the goal beyond which there is nothing more to be gained and also nothing more to be said. It's like one academic of Buddhism compares it to the full stop at the end of a story.

He points out that if you read European fairy stories, you have this incredible drama with the prince and the princess and the wicked witch and the evil stepmother, and they're all getting entangled and all these things are happening. Kitties are being baked in ovens and wolves are attacking ladies dressed in red and so on. But eventually the story comes to an end where hero and heroine get together and the final sentence is "and they lived happily ever after." And at the end of that sentence there's a full stop.

Nibbāna is the full stop. In other words, it's the end. That's it. The story is over. And it's complete. And now at that point, the full stop itself has no meaning. But that point of stopping is what gives meaning to everything that comes before it. Now we can look back and say, oh, that's what it was all about. It was all heading to this. And it's meaningless to talk about anything that happens next.

So let's say if you're reading a fairy story and you go through all the dramas and the prince and the princess finally get together and they lived happily ever after. Full stop. And you feel very satisfied. But you notice there's another page. So you turn the page. And then there's another chapter, and it's called "Ten Years After."

And it turns out that the prince is now the king, and he's incredibly bored with his wife. And she's got half a dozen children, and she's being driven crazy by them, especially since some of them are complete spoiled brats—I mean, they are princes and princesses after all. The king has been chasing other women. Plus he's been getting into the liquor and he's turned into something of a tyrant, and his aristocracy are muttering among themselves and they're sharpening the knives. And the queen is just not only completely fed up with him but really worried about what's going to happen if they really do assassinate the old bastard. And whenever they do meet on state occasions, which is rarely because the king tries to avoid it as much as possible, they invariably have embarrassing fights in front of everybody. And the whole thing is a complete mess.

And you're reading this and you cannot help but feel a certain degree of disappointment. It's like it should have ended back then. Well, try to work out, okay, Nibbāna, so then what? It's making the same kind of move—it just doesn't work.

When Europeans started to study Buddhism, they thought Nibbāna meant extinction. In other words, death. And they thought of it this way. They thought, look, Indians, including Buddhists, especially Buddhists, believe in life after life after life after life.

When you have Nibbana, you don't have any more lives. What does that mean? Well, it means you actually die. So life is suffering and the only way out is death. And that view was propagated by a lot of early scholars and there's still ripples of that early view that you come across.

But Nibbāna is not extinction. It's the going out of a flame. It has two levels of meaning. One is cognitive and the other is affective. So you could say head and heart.

In terms of cognitive, Nibbana is not extinction. It's reality no longer defined by concept or narrative. Life lived beyond the limits of concepts. Now we touched upon this already. So we talked about the relationship to the body. And we talked about how

our relationship to the body is governed by our concepts about the body. So we don't actually experience the body. What we experience is our concept of the body. This is my body, and it has certain characteristics. This is what it can do. This is what it can't do.

And in bodywork, it's really interesting to see how deep these conceptual layers go. So, for example, if someone who has trouble sitting cross-legged, and in fact doesn't sit cross-legged because it's too painful, was asked, why don't you just sit cross-legged on the floor? And they might say, well I can't, meaning my body cannot. And they're saying a simple physical fact. My body does not have the flexibility required to sit cross-legged on the floor. Physical fact, that's it.

Apparently, it doesn't matter how tight a body is, if someone's laid out on the operating theatre, and let's say they're so tight that they can't even lay on the theatre, they have to be supported when they first lay down, if they're given the anaesthetic, the muscles relax and they're completely flat on the table. Not only that, but doctors or nurses could move any limb to its full degree. They could put an old person who's completely stiff into a full lotus position without any trouble whatsoever. The body has no problem doing that at all. Zero.

When the person comes out of the anaesthetic, all the old patterns of tightness return as they come back into consciousness. The reason why I cannot sit comfortably on the floor in full lotus isn't because of this. It's because of this. It's the mind, not the body. And this is weird. This is seriously weird.

But when you notice the way that we're doing the body work, basically what we're doing is we're persuading the mind that it's okay, you can do this. We're basically talking ourselves into it. Move into the stretch. Find the point of resistance. Stop. Breathe. Relax. Why relax? It's the mind which is tensing up. Because the body hasn't been put into this position for a long time, and so the mind has decided it can't. So what our job is to persuade it that actually you're wrong. We can. But it takes time to persuade. But it's basically just persuading the mind. Get yourself a new concept. That's all.

Another way of looking at this is you could ask what's the physiological difference between a muscle which is really tight and the same muscle which is completely flexible and loose. The physiological difference is precisely zero. There's none, whatsoever.

The difference is entirely in the mind. This is a fascinating illustration of how deeply concept permeates human existence. Our very physical world is a product of concept. The body we inhabit is a product of concept.

Then of course we have other manifestations: our relationship to thinking, who we think we are, what we think this situation is. Why is thinking so addictive? Why can't we simply drop it? Why do we persist in generating stories even when they're incredibly painful? Even when we know exactly how they're going to end because we've told ourselves this story twenty thousand times before. Why? Why is it so difficult?

The relationship to thought is very interesting, and we're going to explore this more deeply during the retreat. It's really intriguing because again it illustrates how profound the clinging to concept goes—the absolute determination to believe that this is who I am, this is who you are, and this is what the situation is. Absolute determination. And under no circumstances will we allow this to be challenged.

So what would it be like to live in a reality which is not defined by our concepts? Or to look at it another way, what would it be like to live in a world where we don't cling to our concepts of things? What would that be like when we don't mistake our concept of reality for reality, when we recognize that reality is actually something different?

This is quite interesting. When we live in a world of concept, notice that concepts tend to be permanent, or at least long-lasting. I have a concept about something or someone and it remains stable. Concepts tend to be fixed and they also have very clear borders. For example, I know what's good and I know what's bad. That's it.

When we practice, when we experience through concepts, the experience itself tends to be quite hard and quite rigid and quite clear-cut and usually very familiar. When we drop the concept, we find that experience is a lot more fluid and in a sense mysterious—mysterious not in the sense that I don't know what it is, or rather not in the sense that it's not clear. It's quite clear, but in fact I don't know what it is. That is, I can't pin it down conceptually because it's already moving, it's already becoming something else. And as soon as I reach out and try to pin it down, it slips away.

We talked about this in relation to the experience of pain in meditation practice. Some people really like to use pain as a meditation object because when we do it correctly, pain itself disappears. And what we have is this flowing stream of physical sensation and a closely associated flowing stream of mental responses. But we don't have pain anymore.

It's interesting if you go through an experience like that where the pain dissolves, where you cannot—there's something, it's there, something is there—but I can't actually identify it as being pain. And certainly not my pain. And yet before, it obviously was my pain. And when it was my pain, the world was quite clear-cut to me. I knew what I

could do and what I couldn't do. But now, I don't know, because there's just this cascading flow of experience and I quite literally don't know what's going to happen next. So I'm not in a position to put a judgment on it.

When we have these kinds of experiences, we're getting a sense of what the Buddha is talking about when he speaks of nibbāna—because he's talking about a life lived which is not dominated by our concepts of things. The concepts no longer get in the way. The relationship to what's going on is not interfered with by the concepts, and we get a taste of that when we practice.

The Buddha also talks about nibbāna in the affective sense, the heart sense. In fact, mostly when he's talking about nibbāna, he'll speak of it in this affective sense. Some of the technical terms that the Buddha uses are essentially cognitive. For example, he talks about delusion. Delusion is a problem, and the counterpart or the opposite of delusion is wisdom. So we should develop wisdom and get away from our delusion or our ignorance. Both of these are cognitive—they're up here.

Whereas the Buddha will also talk about the problem in terms of what he calls taṇhā—literally thirst, or usually translated as craving. This is in the heart. It's not cognitive; it's something in the heart. Nibbāna is a term that belongs to the heart, normally.

It's an affective term. And this is where you get the image of the going out of a fire. The Buddha uses the image of fire, and of course this is the ancient Indian context where he lives in a country which in summer is extremely hot. Fire conveys an image of heat at uncomfortable levels, and restlessness. Fires are always moving. So pain and restlessness—these are the images presented by fire. But also fascination. You know how pleasant it is to look at a fire because it's constantly moving and dancing. So it's fascinating, but it's painful and it's restless.

Now, if we ask: What defines a fire? How do we identify a fire? Because fire is fire is fire is fire—it's always the same. But we can identify different kinds of fire, and we identify them on the basis of their fuel, what feeds them. So we say this is a bushfire, that's a gas fire, that's a house fire, and so on. What limits a fire? Well, it's fuel. It can't go beyond its fuel. If a fire can't move to the next bit of fuel, then that's it. It's all over. What does a fire cling to? Its fuel. What feeds it.

So this is the image that the Buddha uses, and the terminology—because he's speaking in Pali, people listening to him get a pun that we miss. The word for fuel in Pali is upādāna, and the word for clinging or attachment is upādāna. It's the same word.

Now, in English, if you study Buddha Dharma, you know that clinging and attachment are very bad things indeed. And you should stop doing it, otherwise you'll go blind. Or worse. And this teaching can cause a certain amount of confusion. Because if you think about it, what is a human life without attachment? Psychopathology. I mean, someone who's not attached has got serious problems, let's face it. So it seems a bit weird that the Buddha doesn't like attachment. But of course the Buddha's not talking about what we mean normally when we talk about attachment. He's talking about something else. He's talking about what fuels, what feeds something.

If you think about the match—I strike a match and hold it up. What's feeding the fire? It's the match. It's the matchstick. Looked at from the other perspective, what is the fire clinging to? It's the matchstick. And the matchstick is what defines the nature of the fire.

Upādāna is a form of holding which defines the nature of the person. In other words, upādāna—let's say clinging—is not simple wanting. Upādāna is a form of wanting which is so strong that it actually defines who we are.

Now, wanting always contains its shadow, which is not wanting. So if there's something that I want, there's something that I don't want. If I want the sunny side of the street, I don't want the shady side. If I want the shady side, I don't want the sunny side. So desire and aversion—each is the shadow of the other, and upādāna, clinging, includes both.

But the thing about it is, it's a form of holding on or repelling away from which is bound up with my sense of who I am, my sense of identity. Who I am, who you are, what this world is. It's not simple wanting. It's a relationship to something which is necessary for our sense of who we are. If I don't have this, I die. Not necessarily physically, but I die in the sense of I don't know who I am anymore.

If you're caught up in some kind of addiction, one of the characteristics of it is that the person caught in it genuinely cannot imagine what it would be like to live without whatever it is. Because it's just so intrinsic to the identity that it's actually inconceivable what it would be like to not have it. It would be a different person.

We can see it on a broad scale. I think it's part of the problem behind the whole business about why we cannot, as a culture, as a society, adapt to climate change.

Someone is faced with certain scientific evidence that says disaster is coming. We've got to do something about it. And so the first response is, "Oh, okay, we'll do something about it. What should we do about it?" And then we get the list. And we look at the list and we realize what you're saying is we cannot live the way we've always lived—that business as usual is no longer an option.

Wait a minute. Who would we be? Who would I be? What would this society be like? I can't conceive it. Certainly I would not be here because surely I am the way that I live. My identity is caught up in all of this stuff. Take all of this stuff away—who am I? Who are we? It's just inconceivable. It's impossible to even imagine, and it's certainly horrific to even go in that direction. So let's just not go there and pretend something else is happening.

And the argument might come back: "But if we don't do this, we or our children or our grandchildren are going to die." And the problem is that if we do do this, I'm certainly going to die, because I cannot be the person I am. I have to be someone else, and I don't know who that is. So no, sorry, I can't do that. There's a pulling back.

And we can see it much more intimately in our relationship to our thinking. Why can't I drop this story about myself? Because if I did, I would drop myself. I would cease to exist.

I remember one time when I was practicing in Burma and I was having a horrific time wrestling with out-of-control thinking. Basically I would attack it with a sledgehammer—beat it, bash it with heroic effort and relentless noting until the thinking mind was reeling in dizziness and semi-consciousness. I would beat it down to the point where it got really quiet and looked as if it might possibly disappear. And as soon as the mind registered that it might possibly stop, there was a moment of panic and it was back again.

I was just astonished at my own perversity. But looking back I realized I was faced with the threat of death, because I was so caught up in my thinking that if it stopped, what would happen to me? Well, I'd be dead—because it was the thinking that was creating me.

So that relationship to thinking is upadana. It's feeding me. If I take this away, I'm taking away me. And that's horrifying.

Does any of this make sense? So this is the fire. This whole process is the fire. Nibbāna is the going out of the fire. This whole process just fades away.

We could say it's the extinguishing of the fire, but if we say "to extinguish a fire," it can convey something much too forceful. It's like the house is on fire. How do I extinguish it? Call the fire department. They have these massive hoses and they blast it with water and the fire's out. If we've got a kind of macho approach to the practice, then we can be having that approach—and this is certainly what I did when I was a foolish young man. Now that I'm old and wise, I don't bother. I just warm my hands by the glow of the fire.

But the image is the natural going out of the fire. If there's a fire burning, and as the Buddha points out, it all depends on its upadana, its fuel. So I'm faced with a fire, and if I look at what I'm doing—which we do in this meditation practice—I recognize that what I'm doing is hurling log after log after log after log onto this fire.

After a time I think, "I'm holding this log and I'm thinking, what should I do? What if I just drop it and don't throw this particular log on the fire?" That seems a good idea. Now the fire is still burning, but if I stop throwing logs on it, it starts to go out. And it's just a natural process. I don't need any divine intervention. It just naturally happens.

So the secret is: stop throwing logs on the fire. That's all. It's really quite simple. Very difficult, but fundamentally very simple. If we do that, the fire will go out in its own way, in its own time. But it's just a natural process.

Now there's a direct relationship between this going out of the fire and the practice of satipaṭṭhāna.

And basically it's all about our relationship to experience, how we relate to experience. When we start to practice, the way that we relate to experience becomes evident to us. One way of looking at it is that we discover that our normal relationship to experience is infected by a sense of something to gain or something to lose from the particular event.

So, right now, there is something I can gain or something that I can lose from this now. I'm sitting up here on the throne, giving a Dharma talk. I have something to gain. If I give a good talk, they'll think I'm a good teacher. They'll give me lots of dana. That'll be really great. And I have something to lose. If I give a poor talk, my reputation is dented. People will get fed up with it. They'll notice that I keep repeating the same talks all the time anyway, and they won't bother to come to retreats. I won't get any dana, and I'll be in trouble at home because our expenses are going up. So right now, in this situation, I have something to gain and therefore I have something to lose. My whole relationship to this is affected, infected by this relationship.

You have something to gain or something to lose. Why do people like Dharma talks in meditation retreats? Now I find this a totally perverse form of enjoyment. I really don't like attending Dharma talks in meditation retreats. I find them usually quite tedious. But I notice that a lot of people actually enjoy them. It seems to be the substitute for TV.

So you come in here, and what is it you want when you come in here? Do you want a nice, entertaining, interesting and stimulating Dharma talk? Is that what you want? Do you have something to gain? Do you have something to lose? "Oh my God, this is tedious." And if there's something to gain or something to lose, isn't it true that you're constantly judging the experience? "Can I give this one the thumbs up, or do I have to cross it out?"

And of course, when we're practicing, I'm following my meditation object. The same infection. I've got something to gain or something to lose from this meditation period. Am I getting my nice concentration? Or not? And it comes down—let's assume we're using breathing as meditation object, and I'm just using breathing as the example of the generic meditation object—this in-breath, is it fulfilling what I want it to fulfill? Is it doing what I want it to do? Is it behaving the way I want it to behave? Or not? This outbreath. What's that doing? I have something to gain or something to lose.

And this thought, this feeling, this movement, this desire, this aversion—the more I look at my relationship to experience, the more I see how this relationship is infected by this sense of gain and loss. In other words, grasping and rejection, clinging at a deep level. Upadana. Because all at the bottom of all this is who I think I am and who I want to be in the future. I don't want to be in the future who I am now. I mean it's okay now, but I really want to be someone better. I want an improvement.

So as we do the practice, we can see how deep this relationship goes. And if we look at our relationship to distraction, what is it that distracts me? Or rather, what's fueling the distraction? What's underneath it? It's this fuel. It's the upadana. It's the clinging. And it's there all the time.

So what we're doing in this practice is coming face to face with the experience. We're tracking the experience over time—we'll talk more about this tomorrow night. And in each moment, what we're doing is trying to be as clear as possible: this is the experience. And that includes this is my relationship to it.

Remember we talked about the basic dyad. There's the process of awareing and there's the object of awareness. There's always that dyad—there's the knowing and that which is known. So my relationship to this which I know, this which I'm aware of, is dominated by this clinging. But I can even see it in the process of awareing: the very way in which I know this experience is infected.

So I get interested in the whole process, and what I'm trying to do is simply be as clear and as intimate as possible with this whole process. The experience is just the experience. The awareing of it is just the awareing of it. That's all. Not adding anything extra.

So every time I note a meditation object, what I'm doing is creating a clean, clear relationship as much as possible to this experience right now. When the practice develops to some degree, we get a sense of what this means.

Sometimes people will report that after a few days of a meditation retreat, they go outside and suddenly realize, "Wow, the trees are green and the birds are doing what they're doing, and the bees are buzzing and the breeze is cool." Sometimes people will just stop and just look at nature or just listen to what's going on, and everything seems completely fresh, new. Have you ever had that kind of experience?

This indicates that mindfulness is getting stronger. That's one of the tell-tale signs. But notice that if you look at the nature of that experience, the nature of that relationship, it's much more clean than normal.

The classic one is: I've heard that the sunset is very beautiful from this particular view. So I go there to watch the sunset. And all the time, the mind's buzzing: "Oh, this is nice. This is quite nice. This isn't as nice as people say it is. It's not quite as nice as people say it is, but it's rather nice. And I must tell somebody about it." Or the 20th and 21st century equivalent: "How can I get a good photograph of it?"

That versus just, "Oh, that's what it is."

That second one has an intimacy to it. There's a directness and an intimacy and a dropping of the agenda, the habitual agendas.

When that starts to happen—well, first of all, the training is from the very beginning to cultivate that kind of relationship. So this is what it means to note something: "Okay, it's just this. That's all it is. It's just this."

And when this gets momentum, we get a sense of what it actually means when we have these kinds of experiences where things are much more simple, clean, clear. That gives us a sense of what the Buddha is talking about when he's talking about nibbāna. It's like the fire is going down a bit, and we get a hint of what it will be like when the fire drops away completely and that becomes the new normal.

So what we're doing is moving towards that. This is the one-way street. We're heading in that direction all the time. And it's all about our relationship to experience. What is this now?

So you can see there's a radical simplicity to it. This practice is radically simple. It can appear complicated—lots of different instructions about different aspects of the practice—but what it boils down to is a radical simplicity.

Mahāsī Sayādaw wrote these little books about how to do this practice. He's got primary objects and secondary objects and this kind of object and that other kind of object and this kind of meditation exercise and that kind of meditation exercise. But when he actually describes what is satipaṭṭhāna meditation, he says it's the practice of noting whatever arises in any of the six sense doors as it arises.

The doubt I had went away."

"Oh, good."

"You see, if we completely stopped thinking and knowing who we are, it's not so much that we'd be dead, but having had a father with dementia, I would hate not to know who I am and not to think."

"Did I say we completely stopped thinking? No. Let me answer my own question. No, it was more that nibbana would be like this."

"No, nibbana is where we do not believe our thinking. We do not take our thinking about what's happening to be what's happening. That's a big difference.

The example I like to give is that the Buddha has this concept of nimitta, which literally means, or one translation is, sign. And nimitta is something which indicates something else, something which points to something else.

So outside this center there's a sign that says Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center. Now let's say you're coming to the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center and you see the sign and you stand there. And you wait. And you look around and you

think, where is everyone? What's wrong with these people? I'm supposed to be meditating at the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center and it says Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center and there's no one here.

And if someone explained to you, 'Look, it's a sign. Right? It's not the center. The center's just over here.'

But we are like the people who stand underneath the sign wondering where everybody is. That's taking the thought about X to be X. But it isn't. The one thing that the sign is not is what it points to. Because otherwise it couldn't point to it. It couldn't do its job of indicating where it is.

So there's a gap between the concept and the actuality. And the thing about that gap is you cannot fill it in with a concept. And that's what we want to do, especially when we're academically trained. But we don't actually need to fill in that gap. It's a very comfortable place to live.

And it's not that we don't think, and it's not that things don't have meaning. It's just that we know that fundamentally the meaning is false."

And that gives us a great deal of freedom.

"Is that like the difference between the menu and the meal?"

Yes, very much so. I don't really need to know the menu if I'm hungry enough right now. But if I know the menu and I think I know what the meal ought to be, and I'm served something else, maybe I'll be unhappy about it. Well, the menu has served its purpose once you're chopping away, but it was useful because it helped you choose. So it's not that concepts are not useful—of course they're useful, they're necessary—but they're not what they are about.

What we tend to do is we stop at the concept. And when we do that, we miss what they are about.

"Don't you sometimes go along and you may let go of one concept but then put another one there?"

Yes, that's what we do. So the concepts arise, but it's the relationship to the concept which is crucial. You're more flexible. For example, with thinking—I could try to stop thinking. Let's say I'm meditating and my thinking is really bugging me, so I try to suppress thought. Some people can actually do it, that's one thing, but at best it's a temporary solution.

The other solution is I could allow the mind to think, but when a thought arises, I just recognize it as: this is just a thought. That's all it is. And when that happens, the mind naturally calms down. I don't have to do anything. It just calms down. I find that I think less, but the thoughts that I do think are much better quality, and I have a whole different relationship to my thoughts. I'm not so eager to believe them.

So let's say I'm anticipating something in the future, and I think I know what it's going to be, and therefore I've decided how I'm going to respond. But then when I get there, I discover it's actually not what I thought it would be. In my case, it's never what I thought it would be. But I can find myself reacting according to the script that I've already written for myself because I'm so locked into my concepts.

But what if even when I had the concept of what it's going to be, I didn't actually believe it? I knew: no, this is just a concept arising now. It's got nothing to do with what will happen later on. Then that concept would not have any power over me. It would be just the mind playing, doing what it does. And I wouldn't take it seriously. And I'd have a whole different relationship to it.

Thank you very much for listening.

CHAPTER 4

Tracking Elements

Patrick Kearney · 56 min

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney examines the practice of tracking the four mahādhātu (great elements) - earth, air, fire, and water - as part of kāyānupassanā (mindfulness of body). Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he distinguishes between body in the broad sense (all five physical senses) and narrow sense (touch sensitivity), focusing on the latter through elemental awareness.*
>
> *Kearney addresses how modern culture's obsession with body image creates barriers to authentic body awareness, contrasting our concept-driven approach with the Buddha's emphasis on direct sensational experience. He guides practitioners to work from the inside out rather than conforming to external mental images, whether in posture, walking meditation, or general body awareness.*
>
> *The talk includes a detailed guided meditation exploring each element: earth (resistance from soft to hard), air (movement, pressure, vibration), fire (temperature), and water (liquidity and cohesion). Kearney emphasizes precision in awareness as crucial for developing insight, noting how the four elements always appear together though one may predominate at any moment. This foundational practice prepares practitioners for deeper investigation of experience beneath conceptual frameworks.*

This morning we're going to look at tracking elements as part of mindfulness of body.

When the Buddha talks about body, he includes two meanings or two aspects. In a broad sense, body refers to all the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Anything that comes via the physical senses is body, in a broad sense. The first satipaṭṭhāna is tracking the body, and this includes all physical experience.

Then you get body in the narrow sense, which is the fifth of the five senses—essentially sensitivity to touch, which can be either internal or external. External touch would be things like the contact of the body against the chair, the cushion, the bench, and so on. Internal touch would be any sensation within the body that you might feel—for example, the movements of the breathing or physical pain. These are obvious ones.

Today we're going to focus on body in this narrow sense of sensitivity to touch, and we're going to look at it in terms of the four mahabhuta, the four great elements.

Before we get into this, at a more general level, the relationship to body is extremely important in meditation practice, particularly the way the Buddha talks about it. We tend to think of meditation as a spiritual activity. People in Western Buddhism sometimes talk about their spiritual practice, and this is a concept which I think the Buddha himself would not recognize because he has no concept of the spiritual. There's body and there's mind, and there's what completely transcends body and mind, which is the unconditioned, which is nibbana or liberation. But the realm of the practice is the realm of the body-mind. In other words, it's physical. Meditation practice is a physical activity.

Anyone whose body hurts when they meditate knows this. But we tend to bury this. We tend to push this aside. We tend to imagine that the body hurting is somehow extraneous—some accidental intrusion in our spiritual activities. But it's not. It's actually central. It's fundamental to it. So the relationship of body to the practice is absolutely central.

Where does the practice take place? It happens here. And body—one of the things that characterizes body is location. The body is here. The here-ness of experience is inherent with its physicality.

Think about being distracted by thinking in a state of total distraction. Have you ever had the experience of being in a meditation hall in a rather unpleasant situation where you're stuck in this hall and it hurts and it's getting pretty tedious by this stage and you really want to be anywhere but here, and then ten minutes later you wake up out of a fantasy in which you were, in fact, a long way away?

The mind has this capacity to be not here. In fact, it would be anywhere but here. We discover this as children and we've been using it ever since.

The body is relentlessly here. Has anybody ever had a physical experience which has not been here? I can be far, far away in my mind, but then I trip over, for example, and as soon as the awareness comes back to body, it's here. And it's now. It's not past, it's not future, it's not somewhere else.

When we talk about this as a physical practice, it's obvious, but it's more than obvious. The here-ness and the now-ness that the body provides is absolutely central to our whole relationship to this practice. So the relationship to body is absolutely central.

Now this relationship tends to be sabotaged by the mind, particularly in this culture, much more so than in the Buddha's time. When we're practicing according to the Buddha's instructions, one of the problems that we have is cultural translation. We live in a completely different culture, in completely different circumstances. We live in cir-

cumstances that the Buddha himself would never have even imagined. And we have difficulties grappling with this practice that I think people in the time of the Buddha did not have. One of the crucial ones is this whole relationship to body.

Our culture is utterly obsessed by body image. And it comes out in ways like various disorders.

our obsession with supermodels and the particularly strange body type required to be a supermodel. It emerges in our obsession with mirrors. How many of us would go twenty-four hours without looking into a mirror? One? Two? You're part of a cultural minority. Most of us look into a mirror practically every day.

In the Buddha's time, mirrors were very rare, very expensive, and by our standards, quite poor quality. Most people's sense of their appearance would come from occasionally seeing their reflection in water. That would probably be it. What would it be like to go through life without a completely ingrained sense of what we look like?

How many people have seen photographs of themselves? We have a really clear sense of what we look like, and through the advertising industry, what we're supposed to look like. We're constantly measuring the difference. Sometimes when I'm in a doctor's waiting room, I pick up a magazine—I don't know if the title is ironic or not—called *Men's Health*. It's all about what you're supposed to look like if you're a man.

What you're supposed to look like falls into a very narrow category. For a start, you're supposed to be young—you're really not supposed to be old. You're supposed to have no excess fat whatsoever, which I imagine would make you particularly cold in winter. Certain muscle groups that are especially visible are supposed to be highly developed, particularly in the chest and shoulder area where you're supposed to be enormous.

According to these images, if you don't look like this, you're apparently not really healthy. You start to get worried. I feel reasonably healthy—I only go to the doctor once a year for a checkup—but obviously I'm not, because I don't look anything like this.

All of this obsession is very much part of our culture, which was missing in the Buddha's time. The result is we have a mind that can create a world which is not here, which is not now. And then we view the body through this mind. Most of the time we do not have a direct relationship to the body. What we relate to is our concept of the body—what we think the body is or should be. We approach the body from outside the body, and we do this habitually.

When we're doing the stretches in the morning, I keep saying: don't push too far, don't try to reproduce what you think the posture is supposed to look like. You know how you look at yoga books and see some model demonstrating the perfect asana? The message you're receiving is that you're supposed to look like that.

I came across this in my early meditation years when I got into Zen. I was preoccupied—because I had so much pain when I sat—with developing good posture. I saw photographs of Zen monks in perfect postures, and they looked really good: always young men, nicely shaped, beautiful uniforms, sitting perfectly. This was presented as correct meditation posture. So naturally I thought I was supposed to look like that.

I struggled to get my body into that shape so it would look like that. I struggled for years. Of course, this is going about it completely the wrong way, because it's working from the outside to the inside—starting with a mental image, then wrestling with the body to make it conform to the image. This is completely opposite to the right approach.

The way to work with the body is to start from the inside and move out. If the awareness of sensation is right, the body will arrange itself the way it's supposed to arrange itself. The image is entirely up here—it has nothing to do with the body. The body knows what to do. Its understanding is being buried by our conceptualization, but it knows what to do.

To get there, we start from the inside. What does it feel like? What is the sensation? At what point is the body showing signs of distress? When does it panic?

And we can see the distress particularly in the breathing and any sense of panic or disturbance in the mind. We can also see the limits when we reach a point where we cannot move any further. I can move this limb this far, but then there's a wall and I can't move it any further.

But these are signals that come from inside. They don't come from out here. They don't come from mental image. They come from inside, and in order to read them I have to be inside. If I'm doing something as basic as a stretch, and I'm coming at it from the outside—this is what it's supposed to look like—that's when I will injure myself. But if I drop that, and I'm simply with it from the inside—this is what it feels like now—I will not injure myself. It just won't happen.

When we work with posture in the meditation practice, we have to learn to come to it from the inside. In other words, we need to learn to relate to the body through sensation and awareness rather than concept. When the Buddha talks about this, he talks about it in terms of the elements, the elemental qualities of physical experience. This is what we're interested in—not what we think the body is.

Any of this making sense?

So we're re-educating our whole relationship to the body where we are not concerned with what it looks like or what we think it looks like or what we think it should look like, but we are concerned only with what it feels like.

This social aspect, the social image of the body, comes up in retreats as well. You think it wouldn't, but it does, particularly when people do walking meditation. If you go to a place where you have people who are very experienced with walking meditation and you see them doing it, it's like they're creeping along really, really slowly.

One of my friends and teachers, John Hale, who some of you knew—when I first saw him do walking meditation in Burma, I had to stand and look at him for a while to figure out if he was in fact moving. He was so slow.

But we think, how do I do walking meditation? Ah, we look at someone who is doing walking meditation. I'm supposed to do it like that. What is this person doing? They're creeping along at zero kilometers per hour. Therefore, my job is to creep along at zero kilometers per hour. So I start to do it, and it feels terrible. The conclusion—the completely distorted conclusion that I draw from this—is, I don't like walking meditation. I think I'll just forget about it and focus on the sitting, rather than concluding, maybe I'm doing it wrong.

It's about what it feels like. What does it feel like to move? Does the body and the mind feel at ease? Can I get—am I feeling maximum sensation as I move? Am I getting the sensation that normally I miss because I'm so busy trying to get somewhere? And you notice that when I'm trying to get somewhere, what's that somewhere? It's an image in the mind. It's got nothing to do with the body as it moves.

Is it possible to move from one end of that veranda to the other end with absolutely no understanding that I'm moving from one end of the veranda to the other end? I'm simply moving. That's all. What does it feel like to simply move? Actually, it feels magical when you do it. It's just magic.

So forget about what it looks like and focus only on what it feels like. That's the essence of it.

Now when the Buddha conceptualizes this—and of course in order to speak about it we have to conceptualize, so we have to have some kind of language, we have to have some kind of framework—the framework that the Buddha uses when he's talking about

the experience of body in this narrow sense, which is sensitivity to touch, he conceptualizes in terms of the four mahādhātu, the four great appearances, as the four elements, the dhātu of earth, air, fire and water.

This is what we're going to play around with today. These are elemental qualities of experience.

Earth element is the experience of resistance from soft to hard. For example, if I move my hand down, I have the experience of movement as the hand keeps coming down until it reaches a point that I would normally conceptualize as "my hand just hit my leg," where there's a sense of resistance. At first this is soft, but if I keep trying to move, it gets harder and harder until the resistance becomes absolute—it can't go any further. This quality of resistance is earth element, and it ranges from soft to hard.

Air element is movement—the experience of movement in all of its forms: pressure, vibration, expansion, contraction, and so forth.

Fire element is the experience of temperature from cold to hot. One thing about this retreat so far is that fire element has been pretty strong. When you step into a heated room or step outside, fire element seems to be particularly obvious here.

Finally, water element is the experience of liquidity and cohesion. Liquidity is wetness and dryness, and cohesion is stickiness and slipperiness.

So what we're going to do is take a brief tour of these elements. Again, it's very artificial because we're using concepts, but we're using a conceptual framework that hopefully, if it works—if it does what it's designed to do—will point us toward aspects of our experience that are beneath our normal conceptual framework.

When we do this practice, we are always interested in the elemental quality of the experience—that which is beneath the concept. The concepts keep floating along at the top, but we're always interested in what's underneath the concept, even when we work with thinking itself as a meditation object, which we'll be doing later on in the retreat.

Now when we do these little meditation exercises and experiments, as we did last night, rule number one: do not take them seriously. They are games. Be playful with them. Don't ever take them seriously. The more playful we are, the more we can learn from the experience.

As a more general rule, never take the Dharma seriously. The Dharma is far too important to be taken seriously. The sense of play and experimentation is really important.

Whatever happens when you do these exercises is exactly what is supposed to happen. That also is a very important principle. There is no such thing as a wrong result. What there is, is what happens. And what we're interested in in this practice is what happens.

Remember we talked about the basic principle: settle awareness in the body and then see what happens. Whatever happens is what's supposed to happen.

Any questions or comments before we get started?

"Patrick, one question. You said water was wet and dry and cohesion."

"That's the cohesion—stickiness and slipperiness. Wetness and dryness is liquidity. It's the most difficult to directly sense. Apparently the first three are more obvious, according to the books, although you get different responses when people actually do it. So rather than me trying to lay down whether it is or isn't, let's find out when we do the experiment."

So settle into your meditation posture. Establish the posture and begin by opening your awareness up to the whole body, experiencing the whole body.

Now turn your attention to those parts of the body where you feel hardness. Where can you find hardness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: "Hard. Hard."

Now focus on those parts of the body where you feel softness. Where can you find softness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: "Soft. Soft."

Now open your awareness up again to the whole body, experiencing the whole body. From there, turn your attention to those parts of the body where you feel heat or warmth. Where can you find heat or warmth?

Look for it and when you find it, focus on it and name it.

Hot.

Warm.

Now focus on those parts of the body where you find cold or coolness. Where can you find cold? Coolness. Look for it and when you find it, focus on it and name it.

Cold.

Cool.

Thank you.

Now open your awareness again to the whole body experiencing the whole body. And from there turn your attention to those parts of the body where you feel wetness. Where can you find wetness? Look for it, and if you can find it, focus on it and name it.

Wet.

Wet.

And now focus on those parts of the body where you feel dryness. Where can you find dryness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it.

Dry.

Dry.

Thank you.

Now open your awareness again to the whole body experiencing the whole body. And from there turn your attention to those parts of the body where you feel movement. Where can you find movement? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it.

Movement.

Now open your awareness again to the whole body experiencing the whole body and from there open up to all the elements. Be aware of the whole field of the body and accept the full flow of all the elements as they move through.

Don't try to hold onto any one particular sensation. Just allow whatever is happening to happen. Let everything flow throughout the whole body.

Okay.

With the four elements, which one did you find easiest to find, and then having found it, easiest to stay with?

Movement.

Movement. Where did you find it?

In the lungs, and the heart, and some in the gut.

Mm-hmm. Anyone else? What was...

Earth.

Earth. Hardness or softness?

Hardness.

Hardness. What about... Did you find softness?

Not as much.

So hardness is more obvious. Where did you find it?

In my base.

Sitting on it. So the foundation of the body.

Foundation. Yeah.

Yeah. Everywhere.

Everywhere. Whole body?

Yeah.

Beyond the body?

Yes.

The tradition points out that these four Mahābhūta always appear together. If you have one, you have all four. But at any given moment, one of them may be predominant—one of them stands out from the crowd. But if there's one there, they're all there. They always come as a package. Sometimes that could be quite clear in terms of the experience, and sometimes it's not clear.

One student wondered about the role of suggestion: "Whilst I was concentrating on all of that, I was wondering if some of the aspects were there because I knew it was there. Like, for example, I know my eyes are wet, so it was easy for me to feel the wetness. So there's some element of suggestion."

There's always an element of suggestion—always. That's always part of the package, I think. But for our purposes, it doesn't matter. You might wonder whether it counts because there's some element of suggestion, as if you're saying there's a valid experience of wetness and an invalid experience of wetness. But actually there's just the experience of wetness. The "valid" and "invalid" is just the mind conceptualizing about it. So don't worry about it.

This is an interesting exercise, especially when you have localized sensations. If you're interested, let's say you've got an itch. We tend to take something like an itch for granted. If you went up to someone on the street and said, "Do you know what an itch is?" they'd probably look at you very strangely and say, "Of course I know what an itch is."

But then when you look at something that you think you know, you realize, actually, I don't know. When I start to examine it, I actually don't know. And that curiosity powers the meditation. So it would be a very interesting project to try to pin it down. The closer you get to it, the more you can't find it. If you really drop beneath the conceptual level, can the itch survive?

Well, sensations rise and they fade. But what is it that's arising and fading? I just recommend we keep investigating. It can be quite interesting.

A student asked whether all experiences could be categorized in terms of the four elements. It is just a conceptual framework—it's not the actual experience. But yes, the Buddha would say that anything in the realm of touch can be mapped in terms of the four Mahābhūta.

That's the same with respect to pain. You could spend days, weeks, months looking at pain. When you can break it up into its elemental qualities, one might ask: where's the pain? What happened? It was a concept.

This is an exercise in precision—aiming directly at what's actually there.

Precision in awareness is very important if you are practicing for the purpose of insight. As the retreat goes on, the more precise you can become with your awareness, the better.

Now, precision also requires a fair amount of energy. This is a high energy practice, exercise. I notice some people nodding off. Still early days in the retreat, but sometimes you go through periods of time, and sometimes it's a question of biorhythm.

For me, I wake up really slowly. When I'm doing a retreat, generally my best meditation time is about mid-afternoon through to early to mid-evening. That's when I'm at my most awake. So if I'm going to do really precise work, that's when I'm most likely to do it. Often the first sitting of the day, my meditation practice is to stay more or less conscious, more or less upright. That's my meditation practice. It's the best I can manage most of the time.

So depending on levels of energy, the nature of the practice changes. But where you can be precise, be precise. That precision stimulates mindfulness, concentration, energy, and it also stimulates the perception of impermanence. And the perception of impermanence is the gateway through which insight comes. So precision is very useful.

You notice how we're using the naming with this exercise? And it fits quite neatly. When you're being precise, it helps to name, to specify exactly what it is. So with Katie's example, oh there's an itch. So what is that? Here, using the elements. So which elements? So you're dropping the general concept, itch, and you're using a more precise concept—movement, hardness, whatever—to try to pinpoint, well what exactly is it? So you've got a higher degree of aim and accuracy allied with the name.

So the naming can be very useful for cultivating aim. That's essentially what it's for. And what name you use influences where you're sending the awareness. So be creative with the names. Name it as you feel it. And sometimes the name can be a question. Like, what is it? That also directs awareness to where you want to go. So the naming can be useful.

You notice that some things are obvious and some things are not obvious. As a general rule, you stick to the obvious. So if some aspect of experience is more clear to you than other aspects and you can hold it more readily in your awareness, that's what you work on. Because that helps stimulate the mindfulness and it gives you a sense of momentum.

So if there's some aspect of experience that you're simply not connecting with, forget it. Even if it's a hallowed, canonized and sanctified aspect of experience, like for example, breathing. If you can't find it or if it's difficult to hold on to, just drop it. And go to something obvious like the hardness of the base of the body, for example.

So you look for what's obvious, what's clear, what you can find and hold easily, and you work on that, and then the mind will get stronger, calmer, clearer, and things will start to develop from there. So don't go after something more difficult.

And again and again, dropping beneath the concept to what is it actually. In other words, becoming more and more intimate with the experience. And this is really crucial. The further we go in this retreat, the more intimate we become with the experience. And that's always underneath our thoughts about it, our concepts of it, what's happening underneath there.

Finally, one last thing. Those of you who found movement clear... Is there a difference between movement and breathing? Or are they the same?

Different.

I had a pulse in my finger that had nothing to do with breathing." "And you stayed with that pulse?" "No, it was there. It didn't run away."

"Anyone else?"

"Breathing is definitely part of my movement—part of the movement. I had different sorts of rhythms going on, so it was one kind of rhythm."

So movement is a broader category, and breathing is a more specialized aspect of it. There's also different movement within breathing. I'm sure no one's missed that I'm a bit chesty at the moment. So within the breath there was the movement of the bubbles in the lungs. They're caused by the breath, but they're not the same thing. So you've got movement as a broader category, and inside that the breathing, and then within the breathing there's also movement, which is not the breathing.

"I can just feel—I can hear my heart and my chest, I can feel my heart and my chest pulsing."

So you get a sense of pulsation as well.

Tomorrow we're going to be working on breathing as a meditation object. But I just want to draw your attention to the question: what is the difference between breathing and air element? We'll pick that one up tomorrow morning when we work on breathing.

You notice that the most common elements used in meditation practices usually are air element and earth element—in other words, movement and touch. Let's say you're doing walking meditation. What have you got? You've got movement and you've got contact on the ground. Movement, touch. Sitting meditation: movement, breathing, touch, contact with the ground, the feel of the body. These two elements are the basic standbys for meditators.

Get to know the elements. Get to know the elemental qualities of the experience.

Any questions or comments before we close? Thank you.

CHAPTER 5

Mindfulness of Breathing - Ānāpānasati

Patrick Kearney · 1h13

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney provides an in-depth exploration of the Buddha's classical instructions on ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing) as found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). He examines the traditional pericope - the standardized passage on breathing meditation that appears throughout the early texts - offering his own interpretation while acknowledging orthodox Theravāda perspectives.*
>
> *Kearney emphasizes that mindfulness of breathing is fundamentally about the mindfulness, not the breathing itself. He guides listeners through the progressive stages: from simple mindful breathing, to understanding the breath's varying characteristics, to training with the whole body (sabba kāya), and finally to calming the bodily formations (kāyasaṅkhāra). Drawing on his understanding of Pali terminology and meditation experience, he explores how the practice deepens from cognitive awareness to intimate sensing (paṭisaṃvedeti), ultimately leading to the dissolution of subject-object duality.*
>
> *The talk addresses practical challenges Western practitioners face with posture and technique, while maintaining grounding in early Buddhist teachings. Kearney's approach demonstrates how ancient instructions can be interpreted through contemporary meditation experience, always with respect for traditional sources while acknowledging the need for skillful adaptation across cultures and centuries.*

Tonight we're going to look at mindfulness of breathing. This morning we were doing some exercises, experiments in using breathing as meditation object. And tonight we're going to have a look at a standard paragraph of the Buddha's instructions on breathing meditation. It appears in the Satipatthana Sutta but it appears in other discourses as well. So we're going to go through this and unpack it.

When you write it out as a paragraph, of course this was not written, it was chanted, but it's what's technically called a pericope. It's a kind of unit or a bundle of text that's memorized and then is put into different discourses where it's appropriate. So if you're an early Buddhist reciter and the topic of breathing meditation comes up, you can recite this bit. This is the standard bit on breathing meditation and then you've covered breathing meditation. So it's like a module that fits into different discourses depending on its purpose.

It's a Greek term, P-E-R-I-C-O-P-E. It's a term used by scholars of historical criticism when they're taking ancient texts apart. It was first used with the Bible, but the methods of reading that were developed for the Bible were then transferred to early Buddhist texts. And this is generally called historical criticism. So the terminology that people use when they study the Buddhist teaching is actually borrowed from biblical study. And the methods are borrowed as well, and a lot of the attitudes and assumptions are borrowed from biblical studies, including the idea that we have to get back to the original Buddha and the closer we get to the original Buddha the more authentic it is. This is borrowed straight out of New Testament studies - we've got to get back to the original Jesus and the closer we get to the original Jesus the more authentic it is. That's where the very idea came from. There's a lot of Christian assumptions underneath the way that we read these texts.

But anyway, the point is that this is a kind of standard way in which the early tradition talks about breathing meditation. When you write it out, it's only a paragraph. And we're going to go through the paragraph. And I'm going to give an interpretation of this. But I do emphasize this is my interpretation. So don't take it seriously. It's one way of reading this. And these - it's not gospel truth. No, it's not Buddha's truth. Definitely not gospel.

The text provides a kind of idealized template of how breathing meditation works. And I think the way these function, these templates, is that they're meant to be interpreted and to be played with. I think it's a mistake when reading the Buddha and he lays out all these little schemas, it's a mistake to take them too literally. They're structures which are literally memorized. And then once you've got them in your memory banks, you can play with them, you can riff, as it were. And this is the way an oral tradition works. You have a kind of memorized template, you know that, you've got a certain structure, and so long as you stay within that structure you can then play with it in different ways, and different groups and different individuals would play with it in different ways. But when they would recite, they do cite the same text, because all these different ways would fit into this one template. So this is my particular spin on it.

So, let's begin. The first sentence: "Here a practitioner goes into a forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty place, sits down, crosses her legs, straightens her back and establishes her mindfulness directly."

This is the beginning. Wherever you see this sentence, from this point on, the Buddha will start talking about a formal meditation practice. Now in this case he's going to talk about breathing meditation, but in other contexts he'll talk about another

form of meditation, but it's always this sentence that indicates the beginning. "Practitioner" of course is a translation of bhikkhu, because that's what, as we discussed last night, that's what bhikkhu in the sutta context means.

And you notice that the Buddha begins with location. Where should one do one's meditation? And I find it interesting that way back then this was an important issue. So you need the right place to do this. And of course today we find the same thing.

We need the right place to do this. Some places are better than others—some work well and some don't work so well.

For the Buddha, the first place he mentions is a forest. I find this interesting because he assumes if you're going to be doing any serious practice, you would naturally head there. Like, what are you doing here? There are trees out there—lots of trees down that direction. What are you doing here? It's an odd place to meditate. So presumably he would have just assumed everybody would be heading out to the bush, which is what they did in those days and what he himself did.

So there's a forest, or the root of a tree. Maybe there aren't too many trees around at this point, but still, it's underneath a tree. Trees are good for meditation. Or an empty place. According to the tradition, this would be the third option—an empty place. So a meditation center is an empty place. In other words, it's empty of usual, normal humdrum activity, and therefore available for meditation practice.

So the meditator sits down, crosses her legs, and straightens her back. This is all the advice the Buddha ever gives about posture. But you notice that he begins with posture. He doesn't leave it out. He doesn't say, "Okay, you're going to start meditation, so here's the first jhāna, the first absorption, and second, third, fourth." No, he says first find the right place, and then set yourself up with good posture. So posture is important.

Now he doesn't give much instruction about it, I think for two reasons. One is that, again, what's chanted and remembered is a kind of template, and it's necessarily dense and brief because this is being memorized. So there would have been a lot of understanding about posture—āsana—within the community. But they wouldn't have memorized that. That would be more commentary when you're unpacking this sentence. Okay, so how do I set up good posture? Well, this is how you do it. So this kind of practical, everyday practice information would not have been in the sutta, but it would be part of commentary once you start to expand the sutta.

And also, of course, in those days people would not have had much problem with posture. They were raised without furniture. Houses didn't have furniture. So people were raised sitting on the floor. The necessity to give detailed instruction on how to sit

would have been roughly equivalent to, in our culture, having to write down and transmit detailed instructions on how to sit in an armchair. If you buy an armchair, do you get detailed written instructions on how to use it? No. Why? Because it's bleeding obvious. Everybody knows how to use it because we've been using them all our lives.

I think it's the same here. There's not much said about posture—about setting up a posture—not because it's not important, but because for them it was so much easier than for us. So we have to struggle to get a posture. We have to go to yoga classes and do stretches and so on and so forth. And we have to do it because otherwise we're fighting the body.

A lot of meditators do fight their bodies, especially when—I mean, my generation, when we started, we had absolutely not the foggiest idea of what we were doing. And then we trot off to Asia, and of course the teachers have absolutely not the foggiest idea of who these weird people are, and no comprehension of where they're coming from—geographically, culturally, psychologically. They're in a society in which people just routinely sit on the floor, so they just say, "Well, sit there and meditate. And then, please report your experience."

"Well, it was incredibly painful."

"What's the matter with you? You only sat there for fifteen minutes."

So what is being established? This firmness, this groundedness of awareness is being established "directly" - and this is another word that conveys this quality of firmness and directness. The term is *parimukham*. Usually it's translated as "in front" - are you familiar with that? "Establishing mindfulness in front of you?" The Pali is *parimukha*. *Mukha* - who knows what *mukha* means? Yes, mouth. And sometimes it can be face, or opening, entrance. And *pari* means "around" or "all around."

Now, this bit is really 100% me. All the authorities disagree with me. I'm warning you.

So the usual interpretation is that you establish mindfulness in front of you, which gives you this sense of mindfulness being somewhere out there in front of your face. But to me, that doesn't make sense at all. If *mukha* is mouth, and *pari* is all around, then *parimukham* means all around the mouth. And if you think about it, when you're really present, when you're really here, where is your awareness? It's right here, right around the mouth area, around the face. It's intimate, it's close, it's direct.

This isn't some abstract positioning of mindfulness somewhere out there. It's immediate. It's *right here*. When you're fully present, the awareness is gathered right here, intimately connected with the breath, which comes in and out through the nose and mouth. There's nothing theoretical about it.

So the practitioner establishes this mindfulness *parimukham* - directly, intimately, right here around the face, around the breathing. Not projected out somewhere, but gathered, concentrated, immediate. This is what I think the text is pointing to - this quality of intimate, direct presence that's grounded right here in the body, right here with the breath.

Of course, you can take it or leave it. All the commentaries will tell you something different. But to me, this interpretation makes much more sense of what we're actually trying to do in practice. We're not trying to put our mindfulness somewhere out there in front of us. We're trying to gather it right here, intimately, directly, where we actually are.

means around—it can mean around as in circling, or it can mean around as in complete. The prefixes have bundles of meanings.

So one of the interpretations that was picked up early in the Theravada orthodoxy was that mukha means opening, as in the opening at the face—the nostrils. Pari means around, so around the nostrils. So if you do breathing meditation, you follow the breathing here, at the nostrils.

This interpretation is first written down in the Patisambhidamagga, the Path of Discrimination, which is a Theravada text. It's not found in any other school. It's very early—so it's classified as Sutta, but it's an Abhidhamma text and it's in the Khuddaka Nikaya, the collection of miscellaneous discourses. So it's kind of an add-on towards the end. Modern scholars think it's definitely after the Buddha, but it's very early.

And this interpretation that you establish your mindfulness here is very, very early, but it's peculiar to the Theravada. It's just one interpretation of this. But that's why if you go to an orthodox Theravada teacher and you say, "I want to do anapanasati, mindfulness of in and out breathing," you'll be told, "Sit down and focus here, at the entrance. And this is parimukha, because Buddha says so. He says so right here."

I think here that parimukha, first of all, is an adverb, not a noun, and it's an idiom. And this is one of the problems with translation.

Imagine you are an archaeologist living 2,000 years in the future, and you're digging under the ground in this particular obscure part of the planet, where once upon a time there was a city called Sydney. And as you're digging up all these artifacts, you come across a fragment of text. And it's like, "Hallelujah, this is fantastic. We're getting an actual text from these people." And you're puzzling over it. It's very brief, and it's something about catching a cab.

And you realize that other people have discovered other documents, other fragmentary documents, which also refer to the catching of cabs or taxis. So you get together—what would all this be about? Well, you find these fragments, particularly in urban areas. So the taxi or the cab must have been some kind of creature which was found, especially in urban areas, and which was a problem because they had to be caught. So there was probably organized hunts that people had. And so you could write learned articles and publish them in archaeological journals.

And of course, they've missed the point because catching a cab is an idiom. It's not meant to be taken literally.

And I think this is an idiom. I think parimukha is rather like the English idiom if you say something is "in your face." Boom. Or "get out of my face." What are we conveying? We're conveying a directness and a closeness.

And I think this is what's being conveyed here. Establishing mindfulness, bang, like this, in your face. You know when you do intensive meditation practice, the experience can be like that. It's like, vroom. Sometimes you want to take a break because everything is too close. You just, "Okay, I've just got to get out of here. Give me some space, man," because meditation has that character, and I think this is what it refers to: to establish mindfulness bang, directly, face to face.

When we talk about noting, it's a face-to-face encounter with the experience. We talk about the secondary object—I am distracted. So often the relationship to the distraction would naturally be, "Oh, there's something buzzing around here and I'll just kind of vaguely swat it away while I'm struggling with my meditation object." But Mahasi Sayadaw says, "No, note the secondary object." In other words, turn to it, bang—a face-to-face encounter with it, a direct encounter.

So I think this is actually what the Buddha is talking about: to establish mindfulness directly. And again it conveys this direct, solid, grounded face-to-face encounter with the experience which is characteristic of mindfulness meditation.

Does that make sense? You're not going to burn me for heresy?

Anyway, that's my interpretation. So here you could sum it up: be firmly grounded and established in the physicality of the experience. You notice everything so far is physical.

Be grounded in the location, the place, the body that's there. Bang. Direct. And so far no mention of any specific meditation object. It's just the body so far.

Then the Buddha says, "mindfully she breathes in, mindfully she breathes out." And this is describing the practitioner. So, then, find the movements that indicate the breathing and breathe mindfully. That's it. Very simple. Just breathing as per normal, but doing it with mindfulness established directly. In other words, remembering the breathing.

Breathing in. Breathing out. Breathing in. What was that? Out. Breathing out. Breathing in. Breathing out. Now there was something I was supposed to remember. Breathing in. Got it. Then what comes after it? Breathing out. Breathing in. Breathing out. Keep remembering. This is mindfulness. Remembering the breathing.

We are already breathing, but do we know we are breathing? Are we aware of the breathing? Can we remember that we are breathing? And is there a continuity of that? Can we notice our tendency to forget our breathing? Because part of mindfulness is remembering, but of course part of remembering is noticing when we forget. Becoming aware of that.

You notice that the key here is mindfulness. "Mindfully she breathes in, mindfully she breathes out." It's not about breathing. It's about mindfulness. This is the crucial point here. It's not about the breathing. It's about our relationship to breathing.

For example, if I'm doing breathing meditation, sometimes I find that my awareness can be sucked into the breathing itself. And when this happens, the breathing becomes increasingly distorted. We were talking this morning about whether you find yourself interfering with the breath as you're tracking it, as you're being aware of it. If we forget the mindfulness and just obsess with the breathing, this is what can happen. The breathing becomes incredibly important. It's got to be just right. And we get tangled up in it. Often there's a sense of claustrophobia or tightness associated with this. But certainly a sense of strain and often a sense of an exaggerated breath in some form or another.

I find myself breathing deliberately, but the point is I don't have to breathe deliberately. What I have to do is attend deliberately. What's happened is I've forgotten, in terms of mindfulness of breathing, I've forgotten the mindfulness and I've got sucked into the breathing, into the physicality of it.

But mindfulness of breathing is fundamentally about the mindfulness, not the breathing. It's about the relationship to the breathing. And the relationship is one of remembering and becoming sensitive to the forgetting. All of this is what's going on in the mind, not in the breathing.

Similarly, with thinking, if we're practicing mindfulness of thinking—which we will be doing, playing with it in a couple of days—our tendency is to forget the mindfulness of and get sucked into the thinking. So we get caught up in the content of our thoughts. But mindfulness of thinking is about mindfulness. It's remembering the fact of thinking, the flow of it, the process of it.

We talked about how in meditation practice we're always dealing with a dyad of mind and its object. So we could call it awareness of X. We're always dealing with that, and it's got two parts. Awareness of X has two aspects. There's X, what we are aware of, and the awareness of. We're always working with that dyad.

Normally, my interest and my concern is with X. That's what's interesting. I see something—I'm interested in the something that I'm seeing. I think something—I'm interested in what I'm thinking about. I'm eating something—I'm interested in the food. I'm reading something—I'm interested in the book. It's obvious, isn't it? That's our normal relationship, our normal habitual relationship.

But when I am mindful of X, aware of X, I am keeping X in mind. And that means that my interest is not simply in X but in my continuing awareness of X. So there's a shift in the interest. It's not the object which is of prime concern. It's the awareness of the object. You see the difference? It's this subtle but important shift.

So it's not the breathing that's important. It's my awareness of the breathing. It's not the thinking that's important. It's my awareness of the thinking which is important. There's a turn in the point of interest and attention, which is not our habitual habit. It's not what we normally do. We're not used to this. And this is why it's so weird when we start to do it and why we have to keep pulling ourselves up. We keep getting lost in the object of awareness. And again and again we have to pull ourselves back. No, it's not that. It's the awareness of that that I'm interested in.

So it's the relationship to that we're interested in. What is that relationship? Let's say, when you're talking about breathing as a meditation object, what's my relationship to the breathing? Am I fighting the breathing, for example? Am I forcing the breathing? Do I like the breathing? Am I satisfied with the breathing? Do I dislike the breathing? Is it easy to find? Or is it hard to find? Is the mind that is aware of the breathing distracted?

Or is the mind that's aware of the breathing unified?

So these are the issues that are of interest. It's not the breathing itself. It's the relationship. Does that make sense?

Breathing in a long breath, she understands she's breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, she understands she's breathing out a long breath. Breathing in a short breath, she understands she's breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, she understands she's breathing out a short breath.

Now you notice that the project has changed. In the previous sentence, the verb was to breathe. She breathes in, she breathes out. Added to the breathing was the mindfulness. So you're breathing in and out, or you're already breathing in and out, but do it mindfully.

Here, it's not about the breathing—it's about understanding. And the verb here is pajanati, from which we get the noun panya, wisdom. So, understanding. And what's being understood are the varied characteristics of the breathing. Now here, in particular, is it long or is it short? Which is one of the exercises we did this morning, wasn't it? Which one is longest? Which one is shortest?

But again, this is a template. This is an idealized template. And I think this is shorthand for the kind of exercise that we were doing this morning. What are the different characteristics of the breathing? How does it appear? What are the different things that it does? What are its various characteristics over time? So we don't take breathing for granted, but we start to explore it, as we were doing this morning.

Now this implies anupasana. This is a term that we haven't talked about yet. We'll be talking about it more later on. But anupasana is the basic activity of satipatthana, of mindfulness meditation. And I translate it as tracking. It's basically following an experience over a period of time. This is about cultivating a continuity of awareness of the object, whatever it is—in this case breathing. So I'm studying it over a period of time.

And as I do that, I can see it's changing all the time. So I can get a sense of how it behaves over time. Sometimes it's like this, then it does that, then it does this other thing, and then it swings back and it's doing what it was doing before, and then it does something completely different. So it's changing all the time. And this sentence is all about understanding these changes as they take place over time. Understanding the varying characteristics, the behavior of the breathing over a period of time. Getting to know it.

And as we do that, understanding or wisdom develops. And it's basic ground level understanding. This is what the breath does under certain circumstances. And this is what it can do. If I do this, that happens. If I do that, this other thing happens. When I'm tired, it's like this. When I'm alert, it's like that. So we're studying something over a period of time and getting to know it, which means getting to know how it behaves.

Does that make sense? And this is the beginnings of wisdom.

The next sentence: "She trains herself to breathe in, sensing the whole body. She trains herself to breathe out, sensing the whole body."

So here it gets really complicated. We've got three activities: training, breathing, and sensing. There's a pattern emerging through these instructions—basically, an increasing sophistication and deliberation in the relationship to the meditation object. Again, it comes back again and again to the relationship to the experience. That's what we're working on, and this relationship is developing.

It starts with breathing, then breathing mindfully, then from breathing mindfully to understanding the breathing, and then from understanding breathing to training the breathing. The verb here is *sikati*, to train.

Now, the breathing itself is natural. It just happens by itself. It's just part of nature. But when we practice mindfulness of breathing, our relationship to the breathing becomes part of the picture. It's not just breathing anymore—my relationship to it is part of the picture.

Over time, an understanding develops—an understanding of the breathing and of the mind that's following the breathing. This relationship becomes more sophisticated. We start to see the patterns of breathing, the patterns of the body influenced by the breathing, the patterns of the mind as we breathe, the interrelationship between breathing, body and mind. All of this starts to become apparent.

And then from there we move on to training. This implies that our understanding becomes more deliberate. Training implies deliberation. I'm making decisions in maintaining this relationship of mindfulness. I'm doing something. I develop a strategy: How will I practice this? I'm making choices all the way, and I can see some choices work, some don't. I try this—no, it doesn't work. I try that—ah, this seems to work. I'll keep exploring this one. No, it's stopped working now; I've got to try something else. Ah, this seems to work.

And so we recognize what we are doing and we start to do it more deliberately. There's a sense of direction in what we're doing. There's a craft beginning to emerge. There's a skill that's beginning to develop. We're not simply aware of whatever is happening. We are deliberately taking the practice in a chosen direction.

For example, as we were exploring this morning, sometimes I will focus in on the precise detail of the breathing. Sometimes I'll step back and have the whole pattern revealed with no attempt at getting detail. That's one obvious fundamental choice that we make. We discover through understanding that sometimes it's best to focus in, sometimes it's best to pull out. We get to understand ourselves: I'm much more at ease when I focus in and I have something specific to hold on to. Then I can keep the mindfulness going, I can keep the mind clear, I can hold the meditation object over a period of time.

Or alternatively, I discover that when I do that, I just get really tight and tangled up. For me it's best to step back as much as possible, open up the field, and let the whole thing flow.

Or the same person might find that in the first few years of practice, focusing on detail was essential because they needed something to hold on to. So they would follow the breathing in the abdomen because they could find that, could hold on to it, or at the nose tip, or whatever. But later on they discover they actually don't need to stay in any one particular location. Wherever the breathing appears, they can just go there.

So you see these alternatives. I get to know the patterns of the breath. I get to know me, the way my mind works. And at some point, it's like I deliberately steer the ship in a certain direction. I'm going to go in this way with my meditation practice. And this is training—*sikkhā*. It implies a deliberation and a sophistication in the relationship to the breathing which wasn't there before, but now it's beginning to develop.

She trains herself to breathe in and breathe out, sensing the whole body.

Now this verb, "sensing," is *paṭisaṃvedayati*. In the P.T.S. dictionary, this means to sense, to experience, to feel. The root is *vid*, from which we get "verity," from which we get *vedanā*, feeling. So sometimes you see this translated as... what do you say? Does it feel? Sometimes translated as that. So *vedayati* can be translated as feeling. And then you get *paṭisaṃ*, which I think it's impossible to translate literally, but basically it adds an intensification to it.

What this verb suggests—when you see this verb appearing and look at the context—is a greater intimacy. It's like it's getting closer and closer and closer and closer. More intimate, less cognitive.

Let's say when I start meditation and I'm told what you must do is sit down and follow your breathing and then you get enlightened. It's pretty much what I was told. So, okay, breathing. Okay, this could be a bit delicate. I haven't done much of this before, but I'll try. So I set up the posture and I'm feeling very self-conscious. Now I feel like a meditator. I've got a good cushion. Now I've got to get a bit of breathing going. So, go for it. It's got to be clear. I've got to hang on to it. And it's all very cognitive.

I often realized at one point in my meditation career I was following the breathing—I did five years of Zen and they do the breathing down here—and I realized it was like I was aware of breathing down here from up here. Basically, I think I will follow the breathing, and this is the decision made up here. Where do I find it? I find it down there. So I'm up here and the breathing is down there.

Have you ever had that kind of experience? Is it just me?

But this *paṭisaṃvedayati* is suggesting, no, you're getting over that. The awareness is down here. The breathing is down here, and the awareness is down here. There's an intimacy in the mind, which we'll talk more about tomorrow.

So the relationship—again, it's the relationship to the breathing which the Buddha is talking about. And this relationship is changing. It's becoming closer, more intimate, less heady, less cognitive, more feeling-based.

And as he says: *She trains herself to breathe in, breathe out, sensing the whole body—sabbakāya.*

Now this is weird, because apparently the breathing just disappeared. I mean, this is supposed to be about breathing meditation? Where's the breathing? Absolutely no mention of it. It's the whole body, the *sabbakāya*.

The geography of the breathing is changing. We've been emphasizing the relationship to it—remember, we're always dealing with that dyad. You've got the mindfulness of, the awareness of X. So the mind and its object. These are in an interdependent relationship. If you change one, you change the other. If you change the relationship, you will find that the object itself changes. And this is, I think, what the Buddha was talking about.

The very geography of the breathing changes. Remember we talked about concepts. When I started doing breathing meditation, I had a certain concept about the breathing. For example, if you had asked me back in the day, "Where do you breathe?" I would

have said, without too much thinking about it, the lungs. And if you then said, "So, where are they?" I wouldn't have had a great deal of difficulty in saying, "Well, they're here."

Therefore, if someone says, "What I want you to do is to be aware of breathing," then where would I put my awareness? Obviously, here. But that's not the instruction. The instruction is, put it down here. Steady on—that's my bowels, mate. I don't breathe with my bowels. It's all wrong. What's the matter with you people? Haven't you studied science?

So there's a certain conceptual framework that we have with the whole thing, and that includes our sense of where the breathing is, but also even what it is. Well, it's in and it's out. I inhale, I exhale, that's it. Cool air comes in, warm air goes out. I read that in my high school science textbook. It's quite straightforward. But when you actually practice breathing meditation, it's not that straightforward. It's much more diverse than that.

Once we're no longer tethered to our concept of breathing, what we find is what the Buddha calls air element, or what in other traditions is called prana. We discover that this is actually throughout the entire body and beyond the body. The whole body—things are opening up now. The object of my mindfulness is not restricted to what I think breathing is, or where I think it should be, or how I think it should behave. It's completely different now.

We've dropped beneath concept. We're in the elemental realm of experience, and along with that, the rule book just got thrown out the window and suddenly everything is bigger than it was. So this is the whole body. Everything is opening out like it hadn't before.

And the body is the body of felt elements. It's not the solid two legs, two arms, torso, head that I used to think it was. I still think it is—but it's not necessarily the way that I directly experience it. Does that make sense? I'm glad to see that some things I'm saying are making sense. It's very encouraging.

"She trains herself to breathe in, calming the body construction. She trains herself to breathe out, calming the body construction."

So here again, we have breathing in, breathing out, but the focus of interest has actually passed beyond the breathing. The focus here is no longer the breathing. Here it's about calming, and calming the body construction, the kāya-saṅkhāra.

We've moved to the whole body, and from there we've moved to the body construction. Now the question is, of course, what the hell is the Buddha talking about? There are different interpretations you get for this. First of all, we have the term construction—this is saṅkhāra.

This is a key technical term that the Buddha uses again and again. It has different meanings in different contexts, which makes it more confusing. But in every context, what it refers to is the fact that whatever we experience is constructed, made up of parts, and in turn constructs and makes something up.

So, for example, this body is constructed. It's made up of different parts. This building is constructed. It's made up of different parts. All the bodies in it are constructed, made up of parts. But all of these things in turn construct and create something else. In this case, a dharma talk in a meditation retreat.

So there's this particular building made up of these particular parts with these particular group of people sitting in a particular way, looking in a certain direction, a fellow waving his pieces of paper around and talking about Buddha. And what you have constructed is a dharma talk in a meditation retreat. So this situation is a construction—it's made up of parts, and it in turn is constructed by different things, and each of those different things is in turn constructed by something else. You're starting to get the pattern? Everything's this complex network of systems and subsystems all relating together. This is saṅkhāra, this is construction.

So she trains herself to breathe in, calming the body construction. She trains herself to breathe out, calming the body construction.

Now usually the body construction is taken to mean simply the breathing, and it can be taken as that. Breathing is a construction, and in fact there's a reference in the suttas, in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta, that explicitly says exhalation and inhalation are the body construction. So you can read this quite legitimately as she trains herself to breathe in and out, calming the breathing. But I think there's something more to it than that.

Breathing constructs the body. Now especially—well, first of all, when the Buddha talks about the body, he's talking about the sentient body, the alive body. Sometimes he uses the term sa-viññāṇa-kāya. Kāya is body, viññāṇa is awareness or consciousness. And sa means with—a body with awareness, a conscious body, a sentient body. So this is a body, but it's a sentient body. It's a body that knows, that awares.

And this body is constructed—this being, and the world within which this being exists. So this sentient body sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches, minds. In doing so, it creates a universe, a physical and mental universe in which it occupies the center. I don't

know if you've noticed, but all of you are just bit players in my drama. Have you noticed that? You probably think that I'm a bit player in your drama. This is the nature of the sentient body. Each body is the center of its own particular universe, which is constructed.

So we construct ourselves as body, but this body is necessarily connected to a world. This body sees—there's a visible world out there. This body hears—there's an aural world out there. This body smells, and so on. So this sentient body by its nature occupies the center of an experienced universe. And this is a universe, a world that belongs to me. Because what's constructed out of this is me. Here I am in my world. And this is the construction.

Calming the body construction. The body calms because everything is connected. Everything bounces off everything else. When the body calms, the mind calms. When the mind calms down, the body calms down.

Have you ever, when you've meditated, gotten caught up in some emotional storm which is associated with a lot of thinking in which you create this vividly real world in which someone did something or will do something or is doing something? Ever done that? And have you noticed that there's one characteristic that this whole construction does not have, and that's calmness. There's a lot of energy to it.

When everything calms down, what happens to that world? It drops away. It ceases.

This, I think, is calming the body construction. It's like all of that drops away. And when it drops away, what we're left with is pure intimacy.

So when we go through this little paragraph, just a few sentences, and again it's an idealized template, what we see is a journey into the nature of experience using breathing as the vehicle, as our pathway.

If we were doing a meditation practice, what are we trying to do? We're trying to gain access into the sentient body, into the body-mind process. And we're trying to go as deep as possible into it. We need a vehicle. We need some way of getting in there. And that's our meditation object or objects as the case may be.

Now here the Buddha is talking about using breathing as the vehicle. And the journey is one of ever deeper and more refined awareness. So we bring awareness to what we normally don't even notice: breathing, which we take for granted. And then we cultivate mindfulness. We train ourselves to remember our awareness. So the continuity,

the felt continuity of awareness. Then we develop understanding. We get to know the details of what is happening, in this case with the breathing. We learn the patterns over time, how it behaves over a period of time.

So our relationship to the meditation object, here it's the breathing, changes, becomes more sophisticated. And therefore the meditation object itself changes. The breathing changes along with the relationship, because everything is connected. If we change how we experience, we change what we experience. So breathing itself ceases to be what we think it is, and it becomes something quite different. When we get beneath our concept of breathing, that takes us into the realm of what the Buddha calls vayodhatu, air element. And this spreads throughout and beyond the body.

And this relationship is one of increasing intimacy, from just breathing, to being mindful of breathing, to understanding breathing, to sensing breathing. And the sensing conveys getting really closer and closer and closer and closer to it.

And this intimacy takes us to other aspects of experience. When we're completely intimate, well, when we start this process, there's someone here, there's a self, there's a meditator or someone who wants to be a meditator or someone who wants to be a good meditator or a successful meditator or an enlightened meditator. So there's a self that stands apart from this process. I'm the one who's going to manage all this and at the end of it I'm the one who's going to be enlightened. So here is the process and here is me who's doing it and who's going to get the benefit at the end. And this self is constructed by the process.

How is it that I think I'm a meditator? Because there's this process going on and it's happening to me. So I'm a meditator. But as we become increasingly intimate and as everything spreads out, we realize there's nothing separate from this process. There is no one here who's doing this. It's just the process. And the self constructed by this whole process falls away, disappears. There's only the process.

So I think that's enough. I think we've come to the destination.

Any questions or comments?

"So when the self falls away, we don't have the dyad anymore?"

That's right. It depends. The dyad is just part of nature, like awareness and what we're aware of, what is present and the presence to it. What we don't have is the subject-object structure imposed on it. So me, my experience. We don't have that.

That's completely unnecessary. The dyad is still there, but it's no longer of any significance. I mean, the dyad is just a concept, and like every other concept, it gets tossed out with the garbage. So in that sense, we don't have it anymore.

But in particular, what we have is the dyad, but the way that we normally experience it is: there's me here and there's the object of awareness there. This is the subject-object duality. We impose that on top of the dyad. But actually, it's not necessarily part of it. It's something that we do—it's a construction. We add that to it.

And that's becoming intimate. When we become intimate, all of that starts to crumble. It just falls away. It can't be sustained. It cannot be sustained without a sense of separation, without a sense of distance—here's me and this is the show. Once that falls away, then that whole structure necessarily falls away.

And you get this cluster of terms that the Buddha uses, built on the root vid—sometimes vedati, sometimes vedayati—and they all convey this sense of intimacy, of getting closer and closer. But we'll explore this a bit more tomorrow night.

This also opens up the whole realm of affect, of the heart. It's like when I start, it's all up here. I've read the right books and I've got the right technique and I've got the idea of what I'm supposed to do, and it's all up here. But when I get into it, all that eventually drops away and it's here. This is the journey into intimacy.

"So do you see there's a persistent state where this subject-object duality is broken down? Or do you, like the Buddha said—there's nirvana with remainders and nirvana without?"

There are experiences where it just completely drops away. But of course, you can't live like that. It's difficult to have lunch like that or drive a car like that. So you come back into the normal structures of experience, but you experience them quite differently. You know that they're fundamentally arbitrary and contingent, so you don't believe them. You use them, but you don't believe them.

If you look at the stories about the Buddha, the Buddha had a clear sense of identity. He knew exactly who he was, and he knew how people were supposed to behave towards him and how they weren't supposed to behave. So when he was dealing with recalcitrant students, he knew when a student was behaving badly and he would respond appropriately, often just by walking away.

So he had a self-structure and he had a social world within which he played a particular role, but he didn't believe it in a fundamental sense. He knew this is just a game. But it's a game I play because if I play it this way, I can reduce suffering, and therefore

I'm going to play it this way. Because he could have played it some other way—by just staying in the forest and not teaching and just enjoying himself. That would have been another game. But he chose a particular game to play because he wanted to reduce suffering. Out of compassion, he played this particular game. But it was just a game, as opposed to thinking "this is me."

"The instructions that one normally hears—I always heard 'the full body of the breath' means the full body of the breath, like it's up here, and you'll get the whole process of the breath, the full body of the breath, rather than being in the body as you were discussing it, as you were explaining it. I've never heard it like that."

In the Theravada orthodoxy, they ask the question: what is the sabbakaya? The whole body. And the commentator says, "Well, it's the whole body of the breath." It's like they're wrestling to keep the breath in there. And because the commentary says it, then any respectable orthodox Theravadin will say that, and therefore the meditation instructions coming out of the orthodoxy will repeat that, even if—let's say the person giving the instruction is an accomplished meditator and knows perfectly well that actually the experience is quite different. Their job is to hand over the orthodoxy.

I think one of the problems that you find in, certainly in Theravada, but I suspect in other traditions as well, is that you get the great commentators, the famous names who have written the books. These people are academics. Maybe they've done meditation. Maybe some of them are even good meditators. But really, these are academic presentations.

"You're talking about the Abhidhammas and the Abhidhangas and all that sort of stuff?"

Yeah, and Buddhaghosa in the Theravada and so on. So philosophically, I think when you're working with Buddhist philosophy, you've got to take it with a grain of salt when you're coming from a practice angle.

What works philosophically doesn't necessarily work practically. So what we do, at least what I do, is study the text, study your own experience, and bring them together.

What you want is to be faithful to the tradition. That is to say, for me, I ground myself in the Buddha. But how do I know what the Buddha taught? Well, I've got these texts and I've got a living tradition. And I read that against my own experience and I bounce back and forth between the two. I check both and I ask myself, does this reading of the text work? Does it make sense of my practice? And does it give me somewhere to go? And when I go in that direction, is that helpful? Okay, then I'll use this reading.

Now, historically, I don't know if that's what the Buddha meant. Nobody knows. That's two and a half thousand years ago. Who knows what the Buddha meant? What we've got is these teachings and my experience. And we bring them together. And when we do it openly...

Then you get the chance, like in this practice community. So I'm telling you, I'm giving you this riff, and I'm telling you straight out, this is my interpretation. And when I deviate from the orthodoxy, I will tell you that I'm deviating from the orthodoxy. Then you can make up your mind. You can decide, look, this guy is off on his own trip. It's very entertaining, but I'll stick to Buddhaghosa, thank you very much. Or you might say, oh, that's interesting. Maybe there's something else happening and maybe I should take a look and find out.

So when you have that—you have a dialogue in a practice community informed by the tradition—then you get something worthwhile happening and you have a practice community which is learning as a group, not simply obeying orders. And especially in a group like this where people have experience. You're not in kindergarten.

Just in terms of Mal's point, and to support your interpretation, the idea of the sabbakāya being the whole body of the breath, if that was what it meant, it's really just repeating the previous instruction. Breathing in the long breath, I know that I'm breathing in the long breath, not the short breath. If I'm doing that, I'm already following the whole body of the breath. So it makes sense that the next one has a broader meaning.

One reason I just avoided this passage for decades was that it just never made any sense to me. So I just didn't talk about it. And when I decided I was going to talk about it, I really had to kind of jump right into it. But the traditional interpretation doesn't make much sense to me.

I found it interesting in the two different translations, the Bodhi translations of the Majjhima Nikāya. In the 1995 version he says, "body of breath." And in the 2005 version he says, "the whole body." When you look at Bhikkhu Bodhi, you can see him evolving. And you can see, go back to his teacher, Nyanaponika. I used to read Nyanaponika's translations in little pamphlet thingies. And I'd be reading—this was the first time very early, back in the 70s—I'm reading the Buddha's words. And every now and again, this is a really obscure passage. And mercifully, there's a footnote. And I go down to the bottom, and Nyanaponika writes, "Commentary says, blah, blah, blah, blah." And it's all explained.

And after a while, I thought, wow, this guy "Comy," he seems to know everything. Every time Nyanaponika Thera's got a problem, he goes to "Comy." And "Comy" tells him what the answer is. And it took a long time before I realized that "Comy" was short for commentary.

So for Nyanaponika, operating in the 40s and the 50s and into the 60s and so on, what the commentary says it means is what it means. When you look at Bhikkhu Bodhi's early work, and some of it is with Nyanaponika, he's doing exactly the same thing. If you look at his later work, he'll tell you, this is what the commentary says. Personally, I think it means this. And he'll give you his own interpretation, but he'll always tell you what the tradition says it is. So he always treats the tradition with respect.

I'll give you what the tradition says. But if I think it's wrong, I'll tell you I think it's wrong and I'll tell you why I think it's wrong. So he's stepping out of the orthodoxy but still with this attitude of respect for the tradition.

I think that's really important. I think when people lose that respect and they just head off on their own tangents, you just get the fashionable stuff that floats around and you can attract a few students but...

Well, many years ago, Sayadaw Upandita had a room full of foreign meditators, and he knew that a lot of them were going to end up being teachers. And he said to us, "I can tell you how you can be enormously successful as Dharma teachers. You can have a huge number of students and make buckets of money. And the way you do it is very simple. What you do is you teach our Dharma. A-dharma. A is the negative prefix. You teach not-dharma. You teach anti-dharma. And you will have many students, be enormously popular, and make lots of money. On the other hand, if you teach dharma, you will have few students, not be popular, and not make much money."

And I think he's right.

Thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 6

Tracking Breathing

Patrick Kearney · 57 min

> *Patrick Kearney leads a series of playful meditation experiments focusing on breathing as a meditation object, encouraging practitioners to investigate the actual movements and sensations rather than conceptual ideas about breath. The session explores where breathing movements are most clear in the body, their direction and qualities, and the relationship between awareness and the physical process.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes working with the air element (vāyo-dhātu) rather than the concept of 'breathing,' drawing from early Buddhist understanding of the four elements. Kearney discusses the challenges of interference with natural breathing patterns, the power of conceptual overlay in meditation, and how different approaches suit different practitioners—from detailed investigation to whole-body awareness.*
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> *The discussion addresses practical concerns about controlling versus observing breath, the relationship between mindfulness (sati) and natural breathing, and how precision in awareness can develop both concentration (samādhi) and insight into impermanence (anicca) and non-self (anattā). This experimental approach offers valuable insights for both beginning and experienced practitioners working with ānāpānasati meditation.*

This morning we're going to play with using breathing as meditation object. We'll start with a number of experiments and then we'll have a discussion afterwards.

Treat these exercises as games. Don't take them seriously. I think the more playful you are in your attitude, the more likely it is that you'll get some benefit from them. Whatever happens is what is supposed to happen.

If you get into your meditation posture and begin by being aware of the whole body, opening your awareness up to the whole body. Now look for the movements within the body that are associated with inhalation and exhalation. Where are these movements clearest and most obvious to you? In the belly? In the midriff? In the chest? In the throat, shoulders, head? Start to focus on wherever these movements are clearest and most obvious to you.

If there are movements, they must be going in some direction. In what direction do these movements travel? Are they vertical? Are they horizontal? Are they curved? Do they expand and contract? Focus on direction. In what direction do these movements travel?

Let's assume we have two movements, one associated with inhalation and one associated with exhalation. Is the movement associated with inhalation longer or shorter than the movement associated with exhalation? Is the movement associated with exhalation longer or shorter than the movement associated with inhalation? Or are they both equally long or equally short? Focus on length. Which one is longer? Which one is shorter? Or are they the same?

Is the movement associated with inhalation clearer or less clear than the movement associated with exhalation? Is the movement associated with exhalation clearer or less clear than the movement associated with inhalation? Or are they both equally clear, or both equally obscure? Focus on clarity. Which one is clearest? Which one is least clear?

If there are two movements, then each movement must have a beginning and an end. Can you see the beginning and the end of the movement associated with inhalation? Can you see the beginning and the end of the movement associated with exhalation? Or are you missing parts? And if so, which parts are you missing? Focus on beginnings and ends.

These exercises require precision and detail in your awareness. As you attempt them, do you feel any sense of strain in the mind? Do you feel any tension in the body? Do you find yourself interfering in any way with these movements? If any of this is happening, step back from the details of the breathing and relax. Watch the movements. Don't do the movements.

Or if you realize you can't help but do them, then watch the mind that is doing. Make your relationship to the movements your meditation object.

And again, open your awareness to the whole body. Take your awareness back away from the detail of the movements and rest in the whole field of the body. Just feel any sensation or any movement that's occurring throughout the body and be aware of the general field of the body. No need to focus on any particular thing. Just on the experience of sitting here now.

So, where did you find the movements? Where were they clearest and most obvious?

"Nostrils."

All the time? Consistent?

"Sometimes the whole process. So sometimes just the nostrils, sometimes the whole process."

Anybody else?

"Ribcage. Consistent throughout—in breath, the ribcage, out breath."

"Wherever I focus, that's where I feel it. So if I focus on my stomach, that's where I feel the breathing. Focus on my ribcage, that's where it will be. If it's on my neck, I'll feel it there."

So did you play around with different places? Did you settle on any one thing eventually?

"No, I sort of held it there. It's up to me what I want to do."

And anywhere works? It doesn't matter where it is?

"It does. It actually came to the nostrils, came to the back of the throat, all the way down, out. It's fine everywhere. It can actually be anywhere. It depends on my focus."

"When you said, 'where do you find the movement,' I found it everywhere. I was looking at it, it was like a chain. The movement of chains. But then when you said, 'where do you find it strongest,' the whole thing changed. Of course, I found it strongest in most of my abdomen, and my nose, this area—this whole area."

So the movements themselves are everywhere, but there's a clear, distinct area where they're clearest and strongest.

You notice in these exercises—they're exercises on breathing meditation—and I try to avoid the word "breathing," and I minimize any use of the words "inhalation" and "exhalation." That is for a reason, but we can talk about that.

Where do the movements go? In what direction?

"Up, down."

Vertical? Straight up, straight down?

"Not straight—bendy up and bendy down."

"Mine was up in breath. Up and then out. Out from down there. So up and then out from down here."

"And the back was down. The shoulders were down."

"I just had like a slow-motion flower image."

Expansion, contraction or opening and closing? So going in all directions?

"Opening in all directions and closing in."

"So I didn't feel breath."

This is precisely the richness I hoped to explore through this investigation. When you asked about direction, I found I could focus on various places. I had the concept of 'in and out,' but this felt somewhat forced, because when I actually experienced the sensations, nothing was going anywhere—it was simply vibrating. It was like a gentle pulsation, just this rising and falling sensation, rather than any movement in or out.

We tend to conceptualize it as 'in and out' because we're thinking about the breath as an idea. Did you find direction significant for you?

Well, there was an up and down quality, a vibration. Direction wasn't particularly meaningful for me. When I focused on the abdomen and torso, there was definitely expansion and contraction. But when I attended to the tip of my nose, there wasn't any particular direction—just vibration and sensation.

Now, which is longer—the inhalation or the exhalation? And which is shorter?

The exhalation feels longer than the inhalation. How many would agree that the outbreath is longer than the in-breath? How many would say the in-breath is longer? How many would say they're equal? And how many would say 'all of the above'?

It's fascinating when we have these discussions—the variety of experiences people report, including how any one person can have completely different experiences over time.

In my instructions, I deliberately say, "Let's assume there are two movements, one associated with inhalation and one associated with exhalation." I phrase it this way because I used to simply state, "There are two movements." Then one day, someone at exactly this point in our exploration said, "That's incorrect. There aren't two movements. There is only one movement."

How many would agree with that observation? That there aren't really two movements, but actually just one continuous movement?

I notice that when we began discussing beginnings and endings, some resistance arose. I didn't want to go there immediately—we haven't reached that investigation yet.

But it's on the same lines of what you're asking. So, a single movement. Yes. You have this sense of the unity of just one movement. Anybody else know just one movement?

"It's like a loop."

A loop. So it's not one-two, it's just one single loop.

"Once I started to concentrate on the beginning and end, that was really aggravating. The loop was more comfortable."

So let's move on to beginnings then. Peter, you just totally objected to the beginnings.

"When you said I didn't want to go to beginnings and ends, I made myself do it, but really I was quite happy with not having a beginning."

When you made yourself do it, what happened?

"I got it. It felt a little bit uncomfortable."

Did it feel artificial?

"Yes."

This is an example of the power of suggestion in meditation practices. If you're told, "Look, there's X, so go and find it," you look for it, and you might not find it. But you convince yourself it's there, and then the mind can conjure it up. This is quite an interesting aspect of meditation practice—the power of suggestion. To what extent is my experience real, or to what extent am I just inventing it? Or does it make no difference? Even if I'm inventing it, if I'm experiencing it, then it's real. It's quite an interesting area. It's a question of how you conceptualize it.

The idea of beginning and ending—these are concepts. It's a way of organizing reality, thought, experience along various dimensions which may or may not have validity. So we've been talking about the power of concept. It's like there's something going on.

The Buddha's basic stance is this: he says, "Look, there is something out there. There is something going on. It's just that it's not what we think it is." Because we operate in this world of concepts. And the more you actually look at this, the more you see how deeply entangled the concepts are with the experience. And this kind of exercise demonstrates that.

The whole question becomes: is this a concept of something, or is it really something? In the Buddha's language, have I actually hit the elemental level? When we're talking about breathing, that's a concept. What's underneath it is air element. We played with the elements yesterday, and there we were looking for movement, which we called air element.

But really, when we're doing breathing meditation, the object of the meditation is not breathing. Breathing is a concept. The object of meditation is the air element and the way that the air element moves around.

So, Mao's description—"Movement. Well, it's everywhere"—he conceptualized it as qi, as prana. But when you ask, "Where is it clearest and most obvious?" it resolves down here, somewhere in an area which we would recognize as breathing. But these are just concepts.

When we do the meditation practice, we use the concepts. But it's really important not to get trapped in them and to actually get at what is actually happening—not my concept of it, but what's actually going on.

We could have philosophical debates about whether or not it's possible to have a non-conceptual experience. People do have philosophical debates about this. But for our purposes, sending awareness in the direction of "Let me get beneath the concept to the elemental quality underneath"—that sends awareness in the correct direction, in the direction that we want to go as meditators. Whatever is there, we're getting closer and closer and closer to it. And we're getting further away from the way we habitually conceive it. That's the key.

What we actually come up with doesn't really matter. Whether it's clearer or not clear, longer or not long, or what direction it is and so on. All this is trivia, actually. What's important is that sending the awareness deeper and deeper, becoming more intimate with the more elemental quality, becoming more and more intimate with the experience.

Kim raised a fascinating point about touch points. "Many years ago I was given instructions to watch touch points, and I always found it fascinating that regardless of whether there was a sensation at those points, the mind was still able to go there. It was sort of like the awareness of a place in the body as opposed to a sensation. But it worked really well."

"So that was conceptual, very much so, for a lot of the time that I was doing it. And I always found that fascinating."

"Why was it conceptual? What made it conceptual?" I asked.

"Well, the mind was imagining a spot. Because the eyes were closed, so to say, it was the kneecap. Quite often there'd be no sensation whatsoever."

"But you had a sense of the awareness in space and you knew that that was the kneecap?"

"Yes. So the mind was doing three points. The sitting and the whole body. Sitting, left kneecap, right kneecap."

So you could put your awareness in a space. Conceptually you knew this is the left kneecap, that's the right kneecap, even though there was no sensation. You could say you were using the concept to aim your awareness. But I would say you did have a genuine, non-conceptual experience—basically a space element.

The Buddha talks about awareness lands. There's a sense in which awareness has location, which is quite interesting. So this is bound up with body. I am aware of you, but my awareness of you has location. It's here. I'm not aware of you from over there. I'm aware of you from here, which is bound up with body—the fact that awareness and mind and body come together as a package. But there's also a sense of the object of awareness. My sense of you is over there, so space.

There is this quality of space. I think strictly speaking, space is listed as one of the elements. The Buddha lists space as one of the elements. If you use sound as a meditation object, you get a sense of space. You can have a sense that this sound is close but that sound is further away. So you have a sense of extending out the space element. I think what you're talking about is working largely with space rather than with sensation.

"I've been instructed, the breath had disappeared at the time that the teacher said to do this."

That makes sense.

Another student mentioned something about the directional aspect of breathing: "Even though we're not interfering with the breathing, I'm always aware in varying degrees of a point at the top and bottom of intention."

"Intention?"

"Yeah, I think it's because if you have hiccups, you hold your breath. So even if you're not trying to control it, there's a whiff of an awareness that I'm changing now."

Ah, I see. You mean the actual move into... People who talk about this say that intention is most clear on the inhalation. One person said that when he was doing these exercises, he grew quite alarmed because he would exhale and then he's just following the movements, and then there's nothing happening at all.

And then suddenly there's a moment of panic because the mind knows, if I don't breathe, I'll die. There's a moment of panic and the inhalation begins. And he didn't find an intention for the exhalation, but he found it very clearly for the inhalation.

So that's another aspect you can play with in terms of breathing—where's the intentionality of it? What role does that play? Is there a decision to end a movement? And again, it doesn't matter what answer you come up with. As a matter of fact, that you're asking the question, that you're interested in the question, means that your awareness is being directed towards a subtle object. And the mere doing of that is making your mind clearer, sharper, more subtle, more refined. So it's helping the meditation process.

Interest and curiosity are really important. In the factors of awakening, of course, the second one after mindfulness is investigation of phenomena. Now this often, for all intents and purposes, means curiosity. So if you have that curious interest, then you're stimulating that awakening factor.

When you think about the point of non-interfering, because in contemporary psychology, as you know, they talk about controlling your breath. In fact, if you want to increase your heart rate variability, you do a longer out-breath than in-breath, and you time it. And I know in yoga too they also talk about controlling the breath. And there's been a few debates that I've had on the internet with other psychologists about how it's no control. Mindfulness of breath is that relinquishing control completely.

And so I find that when I'm doing mindfulness of breath I'm very conscious of letting go. And then noticing how short the inhalation is compared to the exhalation. Because I've been studying that controlled breathing and all that sort of thing. So my thoughts are that when we relinquish control, it helps us understand ananda. And when you control that, it creates that illusion that you actually have control.

Before we get onto that, let's raise a question about interference. Did anybody feel that they were interfering with the breathing?

"When you suggested finding the beginning and end, I found that that suggestion actually created that sort of movement or intention to find it. At the time the breath was very subtle and I just noticed this very subtle shift to then, oh, yeah, I've got to find it, just that mind movement."

"Yeah, moving closer in and then trying to... it wasn't actually there, there wasn't actually an ending for the exhalation, but then I noticed myself becoming more forced, the breathing."

"Did you create an end in the end?"

"I did, in the end, yeah. And I noticed that then it became... the breath became less subtle again, and more gross, and yeah, I realized I was straining a bit."

So did everybody hear what Robin was saying? That the breathing was very refined. Then when I said find beginnings and ends, then the sense of strain came in, leading to actually creating an end to be found. This is a classic description of how we can easily interfere with the breathing. And breathing is very easy to interfere with.

Sometimes I ask this question: do you notice that you're interfering with the breath or not? Some people say yes. "When I'm trying to be detailed with it and I notice that I interfere with it, it gets disturbed." Some people say no. One person objected, saying, "Look, since the only possible awareness I have of the breath is when I'm being aware of it, how would I know what it's like when I'm not being aware of it? So it's impossible to say if I'm interfering with it." I thought, well that's an interesting response.

But sometimes you do get this sense of interference. I get the sense that the breath becomes disturbed. If I focus on it, it becomes disturbed. So I know that the awareness is interfering with it. But breathing is particularly sensitive to the state of the mind. This is well known among people who talk about breathing meditation. So if I get agitated, my breathing will become agitated. If I calm down, my breathing will calm down. If I want to calm down, one way to do it is to calm my breathing, and I will calm down. So there's this well-known link.

So this raises questions about whether we can deliberately interfere with the breath to improve the breathing meditation experience. For a certain proportion of people, they simply cannot do breathing meditation unless they interfere with their breathing.

Some practitioners, year after year, fall asleep every time they attempt breathing meditation. They struggle and strive, but it makes no difference. They can be completely awake, walk into a meditation hall, follow the instructions, focus on the breathing, and five minutes later they're unconscious. There's nothing they can do about it, and it's incredibly frustrating.

My hypothesis is that these are shallow breathers. When you begin to meditate on breathing, the breath naturally becomes more subtle and refined. They quickly reach a point where they're not getting enough oxygen, and the brain simply turns off. The only way they can practice breathing meditation is by deliberately interfering with the breath. The simplest method is to extend the exhalation—that's one of the standard approaches.

From a meditation perspective, deliberately breathing in some particular way is neither necessarily good nor necessarily bad. In certain circumstances it's useful, and some people find it extremely beneficial. Some of my students use it to develop concen-

tration. They count their breaths and can tell you precisely: "In one hour I will breathe X number of times." When it drops beneath a certain number, they know they've achieved good concentration. People can be very precise with this approach.

For others, attempting such techniques creates hopeless confusion. For me, it doesn't work. I have a very problematic relationship with breathing—lifelong asthma, bronchitis, and so forth. I don't like breathing as a meditation object. I've never liked it, and I can't do that kind of precise manipulation. At least I haven't been able to up to now.

As for whether this relates to mindfulness—I don't think it has anything to do with mindfulness itself. Mindfulness is remembering the breathing. Whether the breathing is completely natural and uninterfered with, or whether it's artificial, neither of these is the mindfulness. The mindfulness is remembering whatever it is—staying with it over time, whatever form it takes.

In developing your own meditation practice, it's up to you to discover what works best. Does it serve you to have a relationship where you don't interfere with the breathing?

There's another consideration Mel mentioned: if I don't interfere with the breathing and simply allow it to be what it is, that encourages the perception of anatta. If I deliberately breathe and develop good concentration as a foundation, that's not cultivating the sense of anatta. It may create a sense of someone back there who's doing it, subtly reinforcing that perception. These are side effects to consider.

But in terms of your individual practice, what relationship to breathing works best for you as a meditator? This will be different for different people.

I find it does change over time. If you can make the choice—"I'm not going to do anything with it, I'm just going to be aware of it"—I think it's a valuable exercise. It's particularly interesting and challenging for me.

What this means is I can't be too detailed with the breath. If I engage in very precise exercises, the tendency to interfere, to shake it up a bit, becomes overwhelmingly strong. I have to step back and create a sense of distance.

Personally, what I do is make the whole body the object, and within that there's the movement of breath. But I'm not making the breath movements the primary focus.

I make the whole body the focus, and that works for me.

Student: So the purpose of the detail is?

Teacher: Again, you notice that we're practicing precision.

Student: So it's for concentration?

Teacher: It's for developing insight. Precision gives you details that you don't otherwise get, and the details change. Precision gives you the perception of impermanence. But equally, the effort that you make could create a sense of self. So it's always a balance between the different aspects.

Student: If you were observing the desire to interfere with the breathing, or the recognition that "this is when I could interfere with the breathing," then that is intention, and that's creation that leads into the whole creation of what you're doing—you're creating things, creating karma. But why is it more "creating something" than doing anything else?

Teacher: Because you're aware of it. Normally, during the day, I don't have intentions to breathe or to hold my breath. I don't notice intention. It must be there, but when I'm doing breath meditation, I notice the intention to breathe or the intention not to stop. And then there's an intention—oh, yeah, I get it.

Basically there you're watching mind rather than breathing. So it's the mind-body thing. If you're just watching movements, you're on body. But if you're watching your relationship to the breathing, it's actually mind—it's your meditation object.

Student: It's going to sneak back there, isn't it? It's sort of more interesting.

Teacher: For some. That's a very smart answer. Watch this—it's not quite as boring as I thought it was. And so if that's your natural inclination, why not? Then the breathing operates as a support for your investigation of the mind.

Student: But we can breathe without any tension, and I normally do. This is when I'm meditating, suddenly... What I find is that in certain circumstances I have this longstanding habit where I forget to breathe. This is in normal everyday life. I'll be doing something that involves some degree of tension, either physical or mental, and what I would notice is that I'm doing something and getting more and more agitated and frustrated about it, even though the objective situation is such that—why am I getting agitated and frustrated about it? And I suddenly realize that in the focus on this, I've forgotten to breathe. The longer I do that, the more agitated I become. So I've trained myself to notice when I forget to breathe.

Now I don't know if this is because of my background with asthma or whether it's a more universal thing, but I frequently forget to breathe.

Teacher: But you do remember eventually.

Student: Yeah, eventually.

Teacher: You survive thus far.

Student: Yeah, but only just. But if you didn't remember, your body would just breathe anyway because it's not actually you breathing.

Teacher: No, it doesn't breathe. It stops breathing. And you fall down.

Student: If I was determined enough, eventually I do start again. But there's a period of time when I'm not breathing which has no reason why I shouldn't be breathing except that I've forgotten to do it.

Teacher: No, I think everybody actually does that because it's a stress reaction. A lot of people do that.

They clamp up and stop breathing. That's why I tell people who are really stressed to just stop, calm down, and take a deep breath—then hopefully they can find some relief.

This is actually why, in our stretches, when we reach that point—the edge where you're encountering the barrier—I always say breathe and relax. Because that's precisely when people stop breathing, when there's tension.

As a matter of interest, when I did sessions with Holi-san, he would work with breathing exercises that I could never manage. It was like working with the *mu* koan—he would have us breathe in for a short period, maybe thirty seconds or so, then breathe out for an extended time. This practice has much to do with calming and focusing attention, being substantive rather than scattered. Apparently it's a very effective samatha technique, though I had great difficulty with it.

When you opened up to the whole body, how did that experience unfold for you?

"For me, after the forcing of the breath, it was like a relief—I could go back to just breathing naturally again."

And is that more your natural style, this opening up and relaxing approach?

"Less effort. It requires much less effort."

So you found it less effortful?

"Maybe I interpret it as finally being able to rest. Opening up to the whole body feels like having a rest."

Could you maintain clarity of mind? Were you able to stay with the meditation object, or did you begin to drift?

"Yes, that's exactly what happened."

This points to one of the fundamental dynamics in practice. There's this ongoing choice between needing something specific to hold onto versus the tendency to drift. Some practitioners don't need a particular anchor—they can work with a general field as their meditation object quite successfully. By "working," I mean the mind remains clear, mindfulness stays continuous, and concentration develops naturally.

But for other meditators, when they open up, while it feels very pleasant, they become lost. And even for the same person, at certain stages of practice, opening up leads to wandering, while at other stages, opening up works perfectly well. Sometimes the mind simply refuses to hold onto a single object and insists on expanding awareness—and that's completely appropriate.

This depends entirely on where you are in any given moment. But it does illuminate these two fundamental approaches available to us: we can either focus inward on a specific object, or we can step back and open awareness outward. Broadly speaking, these are our two primary choices.

Which approach to take depends on circumstances. Sometimes it's most skillful to focus narrowly and precisely. Sometimes it's most beneficial to step back and expand upward and outward. Part of developing as a meditator involves learning when to apply which approach.

There's more than one way to approach this practice skillfully.

Any questions or comments before we conclude?

Thank you all very much for your attention and participation today.

CHAPTER 7

On Vedanā

Patrick Kearney · 1h08

In this comprehensive dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney provides an in-depth exploration of vedanā, the second foundation of mindfulness. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta (MN 44), he examines how vedanā functions as the affective dimension of experience that underlies all our responses to the world. Kearney distinguishes between the cognitive and affective aspects of Buddhist psychology, showing how vedanā is intimately connected with contact (phassa) in the six sense fields and precedes both perception (saññā) and intention (cetanā). He explains the three types of vedanā—pleasant (sukha), painful (dukkha), and neither-painful-nor-pleasant (adukkha-masukkha)—and how they condition the fundamental movements of attachment, aversion, and delusion. The talk includes practical guidance on vedanā-anupassanā (contemplation of feeling), emphasizing how this practice requires cultivating intimacy with our subjective responses rather than conceptual understanding. Through examples from meditation practice and daily life, Kearney demonstrates how vedanā creates the world that has the power to move us, serving as the foundation for all our perceptions and decisions.

This morning we had a brief experiment on vedanānupassanā, the tracking of vedanā, of feeling, and then we had a long complicated talk about it. Tonight we're going to have another long complicated talk about vedanā, just to go over what we've done but also take it a bit further.

In the Satipāṭṭhāna Sutta the Buddha says, "How does a practitioner live tracking feeling as feeling? Here a practitioner sensing a pleasant feeling understands she is sensing a pleasant feeling. Sensing a painful feeling she understands she is sensing a painful feeling. Sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling she understands she is sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling." This is the opening section of the sutta, and it introduces feeling, vedanā, and the notion that there are three basic ones: pleasant, painful, neither.

When the Buddha talks about the human being and the human condition, if you look at the language that he uses and at the structure of his teaching, he distinguishes and talks about two aspects of the person: the cognitive and the affective. The cognitive is what we would call the realm of the head—all about concept, thinking, cognition, and so on. The affective is the realm of what we would call the heart: mood, emotion, and so forth.

You can see it in the way some of his key technical terms pair off. I've done a little table with a cognitive term on one side and its affective counterpart on the other. For example, the fundamental problem—why it is that we have to practice—is because of avijjā, ignorance, delusion, or moha, which is another word for delusion. But then sometimes he talks about the basic problem as taṇhā, thirst, craving. This is the heart, the drivenness of the heart. So delusion, ignorance—that's cognitive, up here. But craving, drivenness, is down here in the heart.

Similarly, we have the two sides of the solution: cognitive paññā, wisdom, understanding—again, cognitive. Or also saddhā, which is inadequately translated as faith. Saddhā—dhā is to put or to place, and saddhā comes from an old Vedic word for heart. So it's where we place the heart, and again, affective. In one discourse, which we might look at later in the retreat, the maturity of wisdom and the maturity of faith become interchangeable. They're like two sides of the same coin—distinct, but interconnected.

The Buddha will talk about vijñāna, awareness, knowing something, awareing something. And he'll talk about vedanā, feeling, feeling something, which we played with this morning. He'll talk about the asaṅkhata, the unconstructed—sometimes you see it translated as unconditioned. To recognize the unconstructed is an aspect of wisdom, definitely, and the flavor of it is cognitive: "Ah, it's unconstructed." And then you have the term nibbāna, which we've spoken about, and that is an affective term. This is the cooling of the heart.

So the Buddha has this view of what it means to be a human being, which encompasses both head and heart. Some terms come together like citta, which is a key technical term, usually translated as mind, but that includes what we would call the heart as well. When we talk about mind, we tend to think up here, but citta is just as much here, in the heart. Sometimes you see it translated as heart-mind.

We have the realm of cognition—knowing, understanding, or not knowing, not understanding. And then you have the realm of affect, and this is that which moves us. When we spoke about vedanā this morning, we compared it to the flavor of the experience, like the flavor of food. So when we eat food, we experience the physical sensations: smoothness, crunchiness, hardness, softness, hot, cold, and so on. And we also experience the flavor. The flavor is not the sensation but it's intimately entwined with the sensation. We could say that flavor is what moves us—when I get up to take seconds, I am moved by the flavor.

So vedanā is that aspect of experience that moves us, that provokes some kind of response. There are three basic flavors, according to the Buddha: pleasant, painful, neither painful nor pleasant—sukha, dukkha, and adukkha-masukkha. These three basic flavors are closely linked to the three basic movements of the citta.

Attachment, the movement toward an experience to hold on to it. Aversion, the movement away to get rid of it, to avoid it, to reject it. And then delusion.

Delusion is more complex. The first two are a simple binary: toward, grab; away, reject. And of course these go very deep, as we know. We talked about the evolutionary impulse—even an amoeba can do this, moves towards something to hold on, recoils from something that it doesn't want. Every living creature does this, every animal does this. It's absolutely built into the circuits. So these first two are both quite obvious, and part of their obviousness is you can see how deeply they must be embedded within us.

The third one is more complex. The third one can be ignorance, simple not knowing. So we could say not noticing. What do I notice? I notice what gives me pleasure or what gives me pain. These are important.

So if you're wondering what would be worth reporting when I have my meditation interview, and if you've just come off several hours of intense bliss, would that be a possible candidate? Yeah, that would be interesting. Or alternatively, if you just came out of several hours of misery and anguish, would that be a candidate? Yeah.

So pleasure and pain grab our attention, they grab our interest. If something isn't apparently pleasurable or painful, we simply ignore it. We just don't notice it. It's like effectively not there. So we are ignorant, simply not knowing. Or if we do notice it, we don't know what to do about it. Should I grab this or should I reject it? Maybe I should grab it, or maybe I should reject it. So we are moved to dullness and doubt and confusion.

But whatever flavour it is, what they all have in common is that we are moved in some way.

We mentioned this morning that vedana, like the English word feeling, functions as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, feeling can indicate what we experience: "I am in touch with my feelings." So it's something that I can find and experience. Or we might use feeling as a verb: "I think that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel that it would be a complete disaster." So there it's not a something, it's a way of experiencing which runs parallel to ordinary knowing. It's not the same, but it's not a something that we experience—it's a way of experiencing. And some people are more familiar with it than others.

So there's an ambiguity, even indeterminacy, in this concept of vedana. And it goes right back to the root of the Pali word. Vedana is derived from the root *vid*, to know, via the verb *vedati*, which means, according to the dictionary, to feel, to experience, to sense. So you can see there are different translations possible, and each one of them has a different connotation. They're not exactly the same.

So one of the problems is that it does create multiple possibilities of translation, which makes it hard for us, because we're operating in English. For example, that very simple passage I just read out from the Satipatthana Sutta, which I've translated here as "a practitioner sensing a pleasant feeling, sensing a painful feeling, sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling." You could translate as "feeling a pleasant feeling, feeling a painful feeling, feeling a neither painful nor pleasant feeling." That's a perfectly valid translation.

You could say "experiencing a pleasant experience, experiencing a painful experience, experiencing a neither painful nor pleasant experience." That would be a valid translation. Or you could say "sensing a pleasant sensation, sensing a painful sensation, sensing a neither painful nor pleasant sensation." And that would be a valid translation.

But they're not quite the same, are they? Even the most basic statement has this quality of being difficult to actually pin down. The other thing which I found about these is they're pretty redundant: experiencing an experience? What else did you do to an experience anyway? You could ignore it...

Often that's the best.

Let's look at how the Buddha speaks of the location of vedana, and we might get a better sense of where he's coming from. Vedana is intimately interwoven with the immediacy of experience.

The Buddha says the six sense fields condition contact; contact conditions feeling. So the six sense fields—this is one of the two major ways in which the Buddha analyzes the human being. Sometimes he'll talk about the human being as five bundles or aggregates, khandhas, and sometimes as six sense fields. He'll do this in different circumstances for different purposes. Later in the retreat we'll have a look at this.

But basically, if you look at the sense fields, what I am, what we are, is a kind of locus of sensitivity. There's this area here which is sensitive to data which strikes it. And there are six ways in which data strikes this sensitivity, or this bundle of sensitivities, which is me. There's a sensitivity to form—visual sensitivity—or the sensitivities of see-

ing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, the five physical sensitivities, and minding, the one non-physical sensitivity. Each sensitivity is a receptivity to its corresponding sense data.

So, for example, the eye—as in E-Y-E. When the Buddha talks about the eye, he's not talking about this eyeball, which, you know, if a doctor's talking about the eye, this is what he's talking about. But when the Buddha talks about the eye, he's talking about a felt sensitivity. There's this body, which is here, inescapably with me. And this body is sensitive. There are two little parts of this body that are sensitive to light. I've experimented with this and I can say with absolute certainty that my feet are not sensitive to light. They have no idea whether the lights are on or off. But there are two parts of the body just here which are sensitive to light.

So light strikes the body—most of it, nothing happens. But these two bits, it hits something which receives it. There's a sensitivity there, a receptivity there. Bang! And something happens.

Similarly, there are two little parts of the body that are sensitive to sound waves. And there's a part of the body which is sensitive to taste. There's a part of the body which is sensitive to smells. All of the body is sensitive to touch. And then there's the other non-physical sensitivity, the mind, which has its own range of sensitivity.

So we have these six sensitivities. Each of them picks up its own unique kind of data. For example, my ears do not pick up my thoughts—they are totally insensitive to them. My mind is sensitive to my thoughts. So you have like six channels. Each channel sends in its particular data. The mind receives its own unique data, but unlike all of the others, it also picks up the other ones as well. And it's the mind, mano, mind as a sense sensitivity, which brings all this data together and creates a coherent, meaningful world.

So there you are in the meditation hall. Something is created. And the way each one of these senses work—the Buddha says, depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. This is what he says about the immediacy of the experience.

So you have the particular sensitivity, you have this particular corresponding kind of data, and you have the corresponding awareness. When these three meet, like in an arena, in one location, bang, something happens and you have an experience.

Does that make sense so far? With me?

Now you notice—this is the immediacy of experience. This is the first time something happens. You cannot get anything simpler than this. You cannot get anything more elemental than this. And you notice it's already a complex event. Three things need to come together.

If one of them is missing, nothing happens. When all three come together, something happens. Awareness is necessary for something to happen.

For example, let's say I'm reading something quite interesting in a café. My friend enters and sees me, calls out my name, but I don't hear it. He calls again—still nothing. He calls a third time, and I go, "Oh, what? Oh, there you are!"

Now, at what point did the touch begin? This word which gets translated as contact—*pasa*—could also be translated literally as touch, which I find quite interesting. We are touched by the sense data. At what point in that example does the touch on the ear sensitivity begin? It began sometime before I heard my name. The ear sensitivity was picking up data, but I didn't hear anything.

What changed such that I began to hear? Suddenly my attention, which was directing awareness, left the page—bang!—and went to the ear. "Oh, there you are." You need this convergence of three factors for an experience to take place. Experience at the most elemental level is already complex and requires the coming together of three different factors.

The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling—*vedanā*. This sentence almost invariably follows the previous one. *Vedanā* is intimately and invariably associated with contact or touch.

This conditional relationship we explained this morning is immediate—there's no gap. It's not that there's contact and then the clock is ticking and somewhere down the track, ah, feeling arises. If there's contact, there is already feeling. There's no gap. And if there's contact, there has to be feeling. There's no exception to this, according to the Buddha.

If contact is the arena of experience, *vedanā* is found within the stimulus itself. Data strikes a sensitivity—there's some kind of bang, stimulus. Contact is like the arena within which this happens. *Vedanā* is like the stimulus itself.

Take the exercises we do in the morning. We're doing a stretch, for example. We come to a point where we get the message through the body and mind: "I can't go any further. This is it." The body feels it cannot move anymore—it's come to its limit. We experience a sense of hardness and pressure, perhaps, in both body and mind. We might also experience a touch of panic in the mind.

Then we stabilize ourselves, breathe and relax—this is the standard instruction. The body sensation changes and the mind changes. The mind softens, the body softens.

The meeting of sensation, sensitivity and awareness is contact. The different physical sensations are the elements. The responses indicate *vedanā*. The initial response of "that's it"—that's where we find the *vedanā*. The later response of settling into it—that's where we find the *vedanā*. It's in the response that we find the *vedanā*.

The relationship between sensation and *vedanā* is really intimate. You can't even say that we sense something and this sensation is accompanied by *vedanā*. If I say that, it implies that *vedanā* is separate from the sensation—here's the *vedanā*, there's the sensation.

And therefore it would be coherent to suggest that you could have a sensation without vedana. But from the Buddha's perspective, such a thing is completely incoherent. We sense, and vedana is already found in the response to the sensing. So they can be distinguished, but they can't be separated. Contact and feeling are as close as stimulus and response. Where there is a stimulus, there is already a response. And where there is a response, there is already a stimulus. They always come together as a package. They're different sides of the same coin. They're as intimate and inseparable as a sunflower turning toward the sun, or as a sleeper reaching for a pillow in the night.

We can get a sense of the depth of vedana when we look at the necessity of living beings to respond to what is necessary for their survival and what is necessary to avoid for their survival. Seeking the desired, avoiding the feared—these are fundamental to all living beings. And right in the middle of that is vedana.

So let's return to the way the Buddha and his students talk about vedana. We'll have a look at the Cula Vedalla Sutta, the lesser dialectic. This is a discussion between the arahant bhikkhuni Dhammadinna and her ex-husband Visakha. And this is what she says about vedana:

"Friend Visakha, whatever is sensed, bodily or mentally, as pleasant and soothing is pleasant feeling. Whatever is sensed, bodily or mentally, as painful and hurting is painful feeling. Whatever is sensed, bodily or mentally, as neither soothing nor hurting is neither painful nor pleasant feeling."

So that's Dhammadinna's presentation. And again, the verb that she uses is vedayati, from vedana. So it could be to feel, to experience, to sense something. So you could translate it as "whatever is felt is feeling," "whatever is experienced is experience," or "whatever is sensed is sensation."

When you get it down to that basic sentence that she's saying, these don't tell us very much. "Whatever is sensed is sensation" doesn't say very much. But what she says is "whatever is felt as pleasant and soothing is pleasant feeling. Whatever is felt as painful and hurting is painful feeling." In other words, vedana is a particular kind of experiencing characterized by the capacity to soothe or to hurt. That's what distinguishes it—the capacity to affect.

Perhaps she's not saying "whatever is felt is feeling," but "whatever is felt as pleasant, whatever is felt as painful is feeling." So it's feeling as, experiencing as, sensing as something. And that something is what distinguishes vedana.

So vedana represents some form of knowing. I sense this as something. I feel it as something. You can see there's some kind of understanding involved. But it's much more intimate than our normal sense of knowing something or understanding something. For example, I might say, "I know that"—I often do say that, actually, when I'm driving and the family's going somewhere. I turn to the right and my wife says, "It's to the left, again."

When we say "I know that," what we're suggesting is a distance between the one who knows and what is known. "I know that." So there's this separation, this subject-object distinction which is always implied in the notion of knowing something. Vedana implies a knowing that's much more intimate, less nameable, less amenable to being pinned down as a something that's known by someone. It's much more intimate than that.

But it's found in a response that goes in a particular direction. The response is in one direction, to hold on to. Or it's in another direction, to reject. Or it's in another direction, to ignore or to be in confusion about. So it's quite definite. Some kind of assessment is going on. "This is pleasant." Some kind of understanding, some kind of judgment has been made.

In that response, there's some kind of judgment that's been made, and it's quite definite. It takes the citta in a very specific direction. But if it's an assessment, it's a foundational, non-cognitive assessment that's built into the fabric of experience itself—before there is anyone who experiences.

I know that. There's someone here who knows that. But the knowing that's part of vedanā is so foundational and so much part of the fabric of experience that it happens—the judgment is made before there's anybody to make the judgment. The response is done before there's anyone to respond.

Does this make sense? No? We'll keep going.

"Would that suggest that every single person would have the same response to all stimuli regardless of their conditioning?"

No. There are bundles of infinite networks of conditioning. But there's no sense of identity in it. I mean, we bring into the world some tendencies. A baby will respond—different babies will respond to the same stimulus differently before they've created an identity. But the response is still there. The patterns are still there.

"Is there any sense of subconsciousness?"

Well, if you were going to talk about whether the Buddha had a concept of the unconscious mind, then I suspect this would be down there.

"When Dhammadinnā is describing this to her ex-husband, what does she say for neither?"

She just says it's neither soothing nor hurting.

"So she hasn't got confusion?"

No, but she's going to talk more about it in the next paragraph.

The comment about the idea that it's non-judgmental—like we have judgments, judgments are built in—makes one question the contemporary definition of living non-judgmentally. When those kinds of judgments are being made, we've already actually made a decision, and then we make a judgment. Which is what we're getting to next.

"Patrick, from what you're saying, vedanā is almost like another sense. It has pleasure, pain, success—rather like that. Like a seventh?"

Yeah, almost like a seventh sensitivity, except that it's attached to each of the sensitivities.

"Well, that's like the mind, in a sense, isn't it? It has access to all the data and has this sort of coordinating or integrating function. It's there in that also, isn't it?"

Yes, certainly it shares in that. It's certainly very close to that. Because the pleasure-pain comes from the whole integrated visual contact with that tree. And perhaps even before that, it might be rearranged and reshuffled within the mind.

But like one person might find one thing pleasant and another person might find it totally unpleasant. It's just our differences, our conditioning, whatever. And they might be conditioned to, over time, have a different judgment.

"They can change. I might not like ice cream today, but tomorrow I think ice cream's great."

This is part of dependent arising. It's always shifting.

But here what we're talking about is a kind of basic structure of the patterns, which remains true throughout. The structure does.

So vedana is a kind of assessment, a kind of response that is pre-intention. This brings us to *chaitanya*.

Chaitanya is a key technical term normally translated as intention. I like to translate it as choice or decision—the decision to act that arises from the perceived significance of an event. In other words, what will I do about it?

Chaitanya is extremely important in the Buddha's teaching because for him it's the central factor in how we construct our lives. He says very famously, "*Chaitanya* is karma." Everyone's heard about karma. Karma is absolutely central. And for the Buddha, *chaitanya* is karma. We could translate it as "choice is action." After choosing, one performs actions of body, speech, or mind. Or "decision is action." After decision, one performs action of body, speech, or mind. This is the whole realm of karma, which is the whole realm of ethics—totally centrally important to the Buddha.

Vedana represents the world as given to us before *chaitanya*, before a decision is made. It's in a sense the given background of the decisions that we make. Or you could say vedana presents the world that requires a decision. I've got to do something about this. Why do I have to do something about it? Because this world already has vedana built in, so it demands a decision. There's already a response, so I have to make a decision about it.

The fundamental decision that we have to make right now—literally right now—is how the experienced event is positioned in terms of me and my interests. Is it pleasant? Should I head towards it? Is it painful? Should I repel away from it? Is it neither, such that I won't bother to notice it at all? This is the whole world of vedana.

And it's very difficult to pin down in concept. It's like we start to talk about vedana and we hit the limits of language. This makes sense because if I am to speak of something, that something has to be an object out there, separate from the speaker. So, "I feel this to be..." To make such a statement, there has to be an "I" distant from the "this," which I feel to be whatever it is.

But when we're talking about the relationship between contact—the immediacy of experience—and vedana, the response to that immediacy, there's no distance from which any kind of description can be attempted. If there's no distance, if there's total intimacy, there's nothing you can say. Because to say anything requires separation.

So there's a response, but there's no rationalization of the response. This comes later. We're going to look at this discourse later on. In the *Madhupindika Sutta,* Mahakaccana says, "What we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we proliferate or we complicate." First he lays out contact, and then contact conditions feeling, and then he says, "What we feel, we perceive."

Perception is recognition. I recognize this place. This place is Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre. I recognize you lot. You're the latest group of meditators. Now this perception is fundamental. I don't have to think about it. I don't have to think, "Where is this?"

I know I've seen this place before. Ah! I remember. It's just obvious. It's just presented to me.

But perception is built upon feeling. I perceive what I've already felt. First comes the feeling. Then comes the perception. First comes the feeling... Then comes the world that I recognize, including me. But all of it rests upon feeling.

And then comes the thinking. Then I start to think about it and say, "Oh, this is good, this is bad. I like this, I don't like that. That's valuable, that's not valuable." But all of that is like up here—this complicated structure that's built. Down here at the base is vedanā, is feeling.

A student asks: "Say a black bird initially, and you didn't recognize what it was. Wouldn't it be maybe until after you decided it was a bird that you liked, or a crow that you don't like, that you would have a response after the perception?"

You might have an initial response, then there's perception, and that would feed back into the feeling, and the feeling might change.

"So you've got the category 'bird' anyway to start with?"

So you have the initial visual stimulus, and the Buddha is saying with that there's already a response. Then later on there's the perception: "Oh, that's a bird," and "Oh, that's this kind of bird."

So you just have initial response to the form of that, which probably would be nothing much. Because do we ever see it? Do we ever actually get down that far? But all along the way there's some kind of sense stimulus, and along with that is the feeling.

So the whole process is dynamic. It's changing every nanosecond. But the basic structure of it remains the same.

"Until you knew what sort of bird it was, couldn't it be both? Because it could be a bad bird, it could be a crow, so there's negative and positive."

Could be.

"Wouldn't vagueness stimulate the exploration of what kind of bird it is?"

That's another aspect. You see all the things you can start working with. I think it's so tied into the conditions. What past we bring with us is one thing.

So I think initially you would see—and I think it's you—you would see a black object, and there could be initial perception of blackness or darkness or something. But then perception would arise, and then in response to that perception there's another vedanā. And then in response to that there's thinking. In response to the thinking there's more vedanā. So it goes all along the line.

"Does this example show us that in fact, if it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we want it to be one or the other?"

If it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we probably wouldn't even notice it consciously. It probably wouldn't even rise up into consciousness. Or if it did rise up into consciousness, it would be, "What's that?" So we would be trying to check it out.

I think, as you suggest: Is this pleasant or painful? I think that's the crucial question for us. We do have a very... We want things to be pleasant or unpleasant. "Now, is this important to me or not? Should I run or not?"

The movement brings the contact because you may not have been paying attention before that. So contact happens, and at that point you have the interest to know whether this is going to be dangerous or pleasant.

And interest itself, depending on the person—some people find interest unpleasant. And some people find interest just in and of itself pleasant. Some people find just the fact of being able to see pleasant and will look at things just for the pleasure of looking, whether or not it doesn't matter what it is. Like in a retreat where you read the notice board again and again and again.

So vedanā creates the world that has the power to move us. It's found in the response to a stimulus. The Buddha points out there are three fundamental responses: If the vedanā of a sensation is pleasant, we are moved to grasp. If the vedanā of a sensation is painful, we are moved to reject or resist. And if the vedanā of a sensation is neither painful nor pleasant, we are moved to ignore it as beneath notice, or if we do notice it, we are moved to confusion and doubt about how to respond.

Damodaro goes on to say, "Pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes. Painful feeling is painful when it persists and pleasant when it changes. Neither painful nor pleasant feeling is pleasant when understood and painful when not understood."

That's interesting. So vedanā changes its nature. Like everything else, it's impermanent and shifting all the time. It changes its nature depending on how it moves and whether or not we understand it. I find that very interesting. And how can an object of experience be so protean that it shifts around like that? Well, maybe because it's not an object of experience. It's a relationship. And the relationship involves time and understanding.

So at first, vedanā appears solid. It appears to be something which is either pleasant or painful. But its solidity dissolves over time, because that which is pleasant is so only as long as it persists, and it becomes painful when it changes. So when its solidity is perceived to be illusory, then suddenly it shifts into being painful. And the converse is true of that which is painful—it's painful only as long as it appears to be solid. But once that solidity is seen to be illusory, it ceases to be painful. So it depends upon time. Again, it's more a felt relationship than a thing. And it's a relationship which is continually flowing.

In terms of the third one, that which is neither painful nor pleasant, that changes into either pleasant or painful, depending on shifts in understanding. So our capacity to discern vedanā changes vedanā.

Now the word translated here as understanding is ñāṇa, which is the same word you find in vipassanā ñāṇa, insight knowledge. But here it's got a more general meaning. Here the fluidity of vedanā is not a function of time, but of a relationship involving

awareness and understanding. So what this suggests is that something is here, but not known. And then later, it's known. It's understood. So what is presently experienced changes as it moves in and out of awareness.

When outside awareness, it's painful. And this is really odd, isn't it? How can you have painful without awareness? How can something be felt as painful when it's beyond the boundaries of awareness?

Perhaps what Dhammadinna is getting at is sometimes there's a felt sense of obscurity and its accompanying confusion. For example, in disturbed sleep. Have you ever had disturbed sleep? Is it pleasant or painful? Unpleasant. And yet it's characterized by not knowing. But there is something—there's an obscurity to it. And I think what Dhammadinna is suggesting is that very obscurity is painful. Or restless distraction. So something is felt as being here but only obscurely. And it's felt as painful. But when it emerges and we confront it directly, then it's not so bad. It could even be pleasant. I think this is what she's getting at, this kind of relationship.

So given all of the above, how do we practice vedanā, the vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna? The practice is vedanānupassanā. Anupassanā is contemplating or tracking, tracking vedanā. How do we do that?

This practice, first of all, takes us directly into the realm of affect. What does this feel like? It's perhaps a key question. What does it mean to like something?

To dislike something? What does that mean? What is that experience? What's the nature of it? What is pleasure? What is pain? What's confusion? What is it exactly?

In this practice, what we're doing is training ourselves to investigate our experience. This is the basic move. And of course this quality of investigation has a strong cognitive element to it, and generally it appeals to people who are a bit on the cognitive side.

Vedana points us towards our own subjectivity. Can we investigate our own subjectivity? Or another way of looking at it is: can I objectify my own subjectivity? And again, it's tricky to talk about because as soon as we start to speak about it, we're drawn into the realm of cognition and away from feeling, away from affect. But let's try to say what we can.

Firstly, working with vedana entails cultivating intimacy. The direction is always in. More and more in. More and more intimate with the experience.

Secondly, if we're working with vedana, normally what we would work with are the first two aspects: pleasant and painful, attraction and aversion, because these are the most obvious. The third one is harder to work with because it's so much more obscure.

One way of working with it is with what we call emotion. They're obviously either pleasant or painful, but let's avoid the obvious. Let's say we might work with what we normally call mood. There's always some kind of underlying mood. This experience now is flavoured in some way, and I'm already moved by this flavour. I already find this situation as in some way satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

What's the quality of this pleasure or pain? What is that? How do I feel that? What does it feel like?

Let's take pain. Pain may be so subtle that I can overlook it. I gave the example this morning—being very aversive, I tend to work with pain. Let's take, for example: has anybody had the experience of having a good sit? Now, forget about the bad ones. I'm just talking about the good ones. You're in a situation where you've got the meditation periods and someone rings the bell at the end, and you're having a good sit—which means pleasant—and the bell goes, and you notice that very subtle response immediately arises: "Phew!" Does that ever happen? Is it just me?

Now where does this "phew" come from? There's something about that experience which has to be painful, because otherwise I wouldn't have responded that way. What is that? I didn't notice it at first. If someone had interrupted me to conduct research, I would have said, "Oh, very pleasant." But apparently not. The pain might be so subtle that it can be easily overlooked.

The other thing that must not be overlooked is pleasure. This is, I think, very important for meditators. As the mind settles, we find a pleasure in mindfulness and awareness—a pleasure which is completely different from our normal pleasure of getting what I want or receiving some kind of interesting stimulus. We've talked about the freshness of things that we can experience, the directness of the felt encounter with the world that arises when we're doing this practice. And there is a pleasure in that.

Can I drop into the citta and feel that pleasure?

And finally, vedana always concerns a response, so we can find it in our responses. The example I gave just then, "phew"—that's a response. And that's where we find vedana. So I am moved to hold or to reject or to ignore. Can I see this movement? Can I discern this movement in real time? Can I feel it? Can I discover what's feeding it? What's behind it? That's interesting.

So this is an exposition on vedana. It's very complicated when you try to talk about it, but in terms of experience it's incredibly simple. It's complicated to talk about because it resists any kind of conceptualization. The concept takes us away from vedana. Vedana is still there. Vedana is always here. There is not a nanosecond of our lives in which we are not being moved by vedana. We're always moved by vedana. But it's harder to pick up when we're lost in the cognitive, when we're lost in concept. So the more we conceptualize it, the more difficult it is to get hold of it.

And we talked about it being difficult to get hold of it because it's already got hold of us. Again, the intimacy of it makes it tricky. But it's radically simple, and it's basically a matter of dropping into it. And it's important to drop into it because it's the source of every decision that we make and every perception that we have about ourselves and our world. So opening up to this realm is an important aspect of the meditation practice. And it's not something that can be pinned down by a technique, but it is something to have the radar open to, to be sensitive toward, to be ready to pick it up when it comes knocking.

Okay, that's enough for tonight. Any questions or comments?

"The simultaneous—" Yes, that's one possibility. And it's a possibility that the pleasant is immediately replaced by the painful so that it was pleasant up until you heard the bell. That's a possibility. There's infinite possibilities. Can we start to become sensitive to it, to that whole realm?

"When you said one of the things you can do is work with the attraction or the aversion—what do you mean by that? Just really experience the attraction or the aversion?"

You can experience it as, for example, attraction literally as a movement. It's like I feel myself—I can, like in the mind, the attraction of thought, distracting thought, I can feel the awareness go into it. It's an interesting feeling. Or with something that I recoil against, I can feel that the mind goes—there's a raw energy to it. So it's really building up a sensibility towards that. It's all about sensitivity. It's cultivating a particular sensitivity. It's like, I know there's something of this nature here. Can I learn to tune into it? Can I become sensitive to it?

"You just gave examples that sometimes with thoughts you can feel yourself being attracted to them or repulsed by them, but earlier—and I completely understand that—the thing that I don't understand is earlier you were saying that the cognitive area gets you away from... I don't know, but there's so much vedana in ideas, like people who go 'Oh, I get it!' or 'Aha!' or recognition, or like this morning when your clock—when you

finished the talk, you said, 'Oh, just in time, the battery was about to run out.' And there was sort of like vedana in that. That was just recognition of a coincidence. So I just don't quite get that vedana is absent in the cognition—sorry, removes us away from it."

When we—the more we think about it, the more we tend to miss it. So if we think too much, we can tend to miss the feeling aspect. But the feeling aspect is always there. And as you point out, in the realm of cognition, there's also affect. And some people are particularly sensitive to that. Some people find a great deal of feeling in thoughts. For example, I would say academics and people generally who are attached to view, like me, find a great deal of affect in concepts. In scientists and inventors.

Because it's a sense base. And every sense base has its vedana with it. So the cognitive realm—the thoughts are the object. So you've got the sensitivity, the object, and consciousness is contact and vedana in all of life. So if the mind is the sensitivity and the thought is the object, when you're aware of the thought, it's vedana in all of life.

So when a pleasant thought arises you get a pleasant feeling. When an unpleasant thought arises you get an unpleasant feeling.

It's no different in that way to any other sense sphere. But what I was getting at is that we can get too caught up bringing the head in. This practice is about opening up the heart in a broad sense. It's about the heart rather than the head when we first approach it.

Can understanding or insight be grasped conceptually? Certainly it cannot be understood in that way. It defies intellectual understanding because it's too elemental.

Take me as an example of a dried up old stick—because my background, my habit, is always to approach head first rather than heart first. I've had to recondition myself to work more in what we would call the heart area, because I was so caught up in the realm of cognition that I was cutting myself off from much of the realm of feeling. Of course, that cognitive realm is a pleasant realm, and I can get lost there. I can have a great time there.

But recognizing this background mood, this bias that you have—the karmic bias, whatever you want to call it—and then moving in another direction through cetana... hence cetana is so important because that's what we can work on. That's the steering wheel. Until you understand that background bias, you're really just being a puppet on a string.

You could say cetana is like the court of appeal—you can now review and maybe go in a different direction. By the time we're thinking about something, we've already made a decision. But that decision is always subject to review. There's a power of veto. So we have free will, not free won't.

Part of this whole process of insight meditation is to expose what was previously unconscious and bring it up into consciousness. And then something can happen, something can change. When people work with emotions in this practice, it's exactly this process. Normally I react when someone does X, but if I can actually see in real time the arising of that pattern, then it gives me the opportunity to say, "Uh-uh, no, I think I'll try something else."

All along the way, the background and the ocean within which we're swimming is an ocean of vedana. It's like being an amoeba—we're all Buddha's little amoebas. Amoebas don't have so much cetana, and they don't have so much dukkha. But they definitely have vedana in them—the movement toward and away from.

The cetana is the choice—the choice either to lead into more suffering or to lead out of it. The volitional choice, made on top of the deeper layer of non-volitional choices that have already been made.

CHAPTER 8

Tracking Vedanā

Patrick Kearney · 1h05

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney guides practitioners through an experiential exploration of vedanā, the second of the four satipaṭṭhānas. Beginning with a meditation experiment comparing 'watching' versus 'feeling' the breath, he demonstrates how different modes of awareness reveal the intimate nature of vedanā as the 'flavor' of experience that drives all our responses.*
>
> *Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Kearney explains the Buddha's classification of vedanā into three categories: pleasant, painful, and neither painful nor pleasant (not 'neutral' as commonly mistranslated). He emphasizes that vedanā operates in the realm of affect rather than cognition - the heart rather than the head - and is what moves us to respond to every moment of experience. The talk includes personal anecdotes about discovering vedanā through practice, its relationship to contact and craving in dependent origination, and practical guidance for working with this fundamental aspect of experience.*
>
> *This teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners insights into one of Buddhism's most subtle yet pervasive teachings, emphasizing experiential understanding over conceptual analysis and encouraging a playful, experimental approach to meditation practice.*

Over the past few days in our practice we've been emphasizing the role of the body. The body is the first of the four satipaṭṭhānas, so we've been working on that first. Today we're going to play around with the second satipaṭṭhāna, vedanā, usually translated as feeling. We're going to start with a meditation experiment and then we'll talk about it afterwards.

Again, with these little experiments don't take them seriously. Treat them as games and play and see what happens.

So if you establish your posture, set up your meditation posture, and open your awareness up to the whole body, experiencing the whole body. Now focus on the movements within the body that indicate breathing. Watch your breathing. Look at your breathing. Witness your breathing.

And now, feel your breathing. Don't watch it. Don't look at it. Don't witness it. Feel it. Feel your breathing.

Is there a difference between watching the breathing and feeling the breathing? And if so, what is it?

Yes, there is a difference. What's the difference?

"When you're feeling it, you're a lot closer. When you're watching it's more like a top-down kind of approach to it."

Disembodied and top-down. Where do you watch it from?

"Some kind of conceptualisation in the brain, I guess."

Don't theorise, just tell me where you watch it from.

"Yeah, it's looking down."

Anybody else? Anybody else find it different?

"I think I changed senses when I was witnessing, watching it. There was a bit of touch in it, but it was mostly kind of internal seeing. While when I felt it, I moved back more to touch, internal touch, the nose and the air passage and the lifting of the lungs and how it felt at the top of the lungs. It was much more touch-based than watching."

"I actually seemed to be feeling it when I was meant to be watching it and feeling it when I was feeling it. It wasn't that much difference to me. There wasn't any difference because you feel it anyway. I mean somebody might say watch the breath but basically that goes and you just feel the breath."

"A little bit like the other two speakers. When I was mentally observing I did feel apart from it and I could sort of just feel a part of it so that felt really good. And then with feelings, I mean the words, it just felt timeless, which is not a feeling-type word but for me that was how it felt. It sort of felt timeless."

Timeless?

"Yeah, that was the word that came through. Felt with feeling, both closer as the other person said, but also more identified with the breath in some way. Whereas the watching, there's further away, more of a subject-object. More detachment perhaps?"

"Yes, though I must say I thought the main difference in the instructions was in the attunement. When you said watch the breath, look at the breath, it was kind of an admonition. And then you said, feel the breath. You were conveying a feeling."

"I remember a locus of observation tends to be in the middle of the body but at the back, as if my eyes are kind of here in the felt sense. And when you said watch the breath, I still had the experience of touch, but when I moved from watching the breath, the touch of the breath, to feel the breath, I was kind of more actively noticing which bits were painful and unpleasant and which bits were neutral, and what part of the breath, what parts of the body were actually not hurting. Because it's kind of painful at the moment, but it's not all painful. So I was really teasing out the pleasant-unpleasant quality rather than just the felt touch. So it brought out the whole pleasant-unpleasant-ness, the kind of mosaic of pleasant-unpleasant and where they are."

Thank you.

"When you said, watch your breath, I was sort of feeling that I wasn't really aware of the feeling tones. I was struggling a little bit, a little bit of strain. When you said feel it, definitely I came more into my body. And definitely I became more aware of that quality of it."

The painful, pleasant, painful quality of it, yeah.

Kim?

"Watching the breath, I was aware of the movement, but feeling it, I was aware of texture."

So texture when you're feeling, you found texture; when you're watching, you found movement. I like this experiment. Part of it is the power of suggestion, the power of language.

When I started doing meditation, all the language around it was about watching—watching and witnessing. So my initial instructions, as far back as I can remember, were all about watching the meditation object, which is what I did. Eventually I noticed that I would be aware of my—let's say, rising and falling of the abdomen—from up here.

Anybody ever get eye strain when they meditate? It can happen. Because there's this association of watching: where do I watch from? Well, I watch here. So I'm looking down at the breathing.

But years ago, my last trip to Burma, I attended an Abhidharma course in—where was it? Across the river from Mandalay. I forget the name of it.

"Sagaing."

And we had Abhidharma in the morning and meditation at other times. It was a combination of Abhidharma course and retreat. One day the teacher was talking about vedana. And do you know how if someone's explaining something to you that you already know, you tend to go half asleep? You just keep the radar open enough to kind of have a sense of where they are, but you're not really paying attention because you already know.

I was doing this, and at one point I suddenly realized that he just said something about vedana and I didn't understand what he just said. And this frisson of alarm went through me, and I realized: if I don't understand that, that means I actually don't understand vedana. And I thought I did.

So then I started to pay attention. And I got quite intrigued by this. I went back, deciding, "OK, I don't know what vedana is. So I have to find out." And so what I did was, when I started the meditation part of the day, I decided: from now on, I'm not going to watch anything at all. I'm going to feel the meditation object. And then I'll find out.

I noticed the experience was different. So I got very intrigued by all this. I started doing this experiment, and I've been doing this for years with people. If you've done retreats with me before, you've done this.

Some typical responses that people give: for some people, watching indicates distance, feeling indicates closer perspective. A number of people have commented about this. For some people, watching is detailed and specific, whereas feeling is much more general—although we've had a couple of people for whom it's the opposite. The feeling is actually more specific. You heard about the specificity of pleasant, painful, while the watching is more general.

For some people, when they watch the breathing, they naturally go here at the nostril. And when they feel the breathing, it's down here, somewhere within the body. See, you do get a whole range of responses.

One response that people come up with is, "What the hell are you talking about?" Just completely bamboozled. Some people will say there is no difference because "I always feel the meditation object. Why would I watch it? Are you crazy?" So there's no difference.

You do get this wide variety of responses, but it's interesting that what it brings out is that there are different ways to be aware. There are different ways to relate to an object of awareness.

Now, you notice that we've made no attempt to define vedana or feeling. In fact, I've just assumed you know what it is. But there's no reason why we should make this assumption. Let's go back to the Buddha and what he...

...what he's talking about. When he talks about what he calls vedana, he discusses it in terms of the qualities of pleasant, painful and neither.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, he says, "How does a practitioner live tracking feeling as feeling? Here, a practitioner sensing a pleasant feeling understands he's sensing a pleasant feeling. Sensing a painful feeling, he understands he is sensing a painful feeling. Sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling, he understands he is sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling."

So feeling gets divided up into three categories: pleasant, painful, neither.

One of my favorite hobby horses is to get up and shake my fist and denounce those who claim that the third feeling is neutral. Buddha does not say neutral. If he wanted to say neutral, he would have said neutral. He does not say neutral. He says, "neither painful nor pleasant." Understand?

You get the three feelings—pleasant, painful, neither—based on which you get three elemental responses. If there's pleasant feeling, there's grasping, attachment. If there's painful feeling, there's aversion, rejection. If there's neither painful nor pleasant, there's delusion and ignorance.

In other words, neither painful nor pleasant means "don't know." It's the feeling of the teenage boy. "How was your day?" "Dunno." "Would you like this?" "Dunno." This is what the Buddha's getting at. It's the not knowing. And so it's associated with delusion and ignorance. It's not neutrality. Neutrality is something else.

"So you don't feel neutrality?" You do, but neutrality is... These three categories are the kind of ground level, universal. Neutrality is a subtler feeling, but when it's developed in the practice, it becomes equanimity. And the response is equanimity. The response to genuine neutral feeling is equanimity.

The first time I became aware of this was—I've often told this story, it's a bit embarrassing—I was doing a retreat with John Hale. After about ten days or so, I hit a wall. I just couldn't do this anymore, completely stuck. This was down at Udumbara, at what is now the nunnery.

I went to John and said, "I'm stuck, I've hit the wall, what can I do?" He looked at me rather fiercely and said, "Come with me." We left the main building and walked off to the hut that I was staying in. Now this was quite remarkable because at the time John was dying and movement was difficult for him. So to take me on a walk, to give me a talk, I knew something was going on.

We went off to this little private area and sat down. He considered the situation and said, "Patrick, you are a dried up old stick." Oh my God. "You are a dried up old stick. You are completely cut off from your feelings. You've got no idea what you're feeling, do you? You are totally oblivious to what you are feeling." And he put the boot in and I was, "Oh, yes, okay."

I said, "Well, what can I do about it?" He thought about this and said, "It's probably too late now." So I knew he was serious.

So then he put me onto vedana as a meditation object. I started to play with vedana, and it was a complete revelation. It was like, "Wha!" I discovered that I was living in this waterfall of vedana. It was everywhere—cascading through seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. It was everywhere.

I was certainly no longer stuck. The wall had vanished, and I was playing around. But after about two or three days, again I got stuck. This time it was quite weird because I just couldn't find it—I could not find the vedana. It was really strange because I checked everything. The mind was really clear and sharp, the concentration was good, everything was going smoothly, but I could not find the vedana.

So I went to John and reported this, and he said, "Neutral feeling is the hardest to discern." I realized that's what it was—neutrality. It is so subtle that it's actually difficult to even recognize. It's not pleasant, but it's more pleasant than pleasant pleasure. It's better than pleasant feeling. But he meant neutrality—the actual neutrality that's associated with equanimity. He wasn't talking about ground-level feeling. He was talking about a feeling which is accessible once you develop a certain degree of mindfulness and concentration. Then that "neither painful nor pleasant" feeling has morphed into neutral feeling.

Does that lead to equanimity? Yes, the natural response to that is equanimity. In this case, for example, I was feeling frustrated because I couldn't find it. Therefore, conceptually, the whole project had failed, yet I was feeling very good. I wasn't upset by it. It was just, "Oh yes, I can't find it. Yes, there's a problem." But actually the equanimity was just there all the time.

The response to pleasantness is some degree of grasping, except when it matures and then the response is saddha, faith. The response to aversion is rejection, except when it matures and then the response is wisdom. And equanimity when it matures.

So when the Buddha's talking about these three basic categories of feeling—and they are categories of feeling, a system of classification—then at the ground level we have pleasant, painful, neither. In other words, essentially pleasant or painful. Either I like this or I don't like it. And in either case, I'll pay attention to it. It's important. "I like this. Ooh, pay attention. Ooh, I really dislike this. Okay, pay attention."

If it's neither, I just don't notice it. Why would I bother? So I don't pay any attention to it, so I don't even see it. So I'm ignorant. That is, literally, it just doesn't register. Or if it does register, I don't know what I should do about it. Should I grab it? Should I reject it?

Should I grab it? Should I reject it? I don't know. So there's doubt and confusion.

The first two vedanās are really quite clear and obvious—it's a simple binary of like and don't like, grab and reject. The third one is more complex. It can manifest in two forms. One is that I simply remain oblivious to it. Or if I do notice it, I'm doubtful and confused about what to do about it. Should I grab? Should I reject? Grab, reject, grab, reject. Ever had any kind of restless sleep? It's like that. You don't quite know what's going on, but there's a kind of agitation about it. It's murky. If you speak to people with a lot of delusion, they often say it's like that—a kind of murkiness and restlessness, dullness.

So these are the three categories of vedanā.

Now vedanā is all about the realm of affect. It's the feeling, the affective world, as distinct from the cognitive world. It's what we would call heart rather than head. The Buddha talks about wisdom—that's head. He talks about the opposite of wisdom as ignorance—again, head. But the Buddha will also talk about, for example, saddhā, inadequately translated as faith. That's heart. And he will talk about the problem as taṇhā, craving, drivenness. Again, that's heart. Vedanā represents this whole area of heart, of affect.

Let me look at these terms more closely. Saddhā and taṇhā are both terms that refer to the world of affect. In saddhā, the *dhā* is the root meaning "to put" or "to place." *Śrad* in Sanskrit is an old word for heart. So saddhā is to place the heart or to place in the heart. In English we have the expression "I put my heart into it"—that's an emotional connection. So saddhā is the heart connection to what's going on.

What about taṇhā? It's not *dhā*, it's *ṇhā*—not D-H-A, but T-A-N-H-A, *tṛṣṇā* in Sanskrit. That's literally thirst. If you think about thirst: I might think that I'm thirsty—well, that means I'm not really thirsty. If I'm really thirsty, I'm just thirsty. It's feeling, it's the heart area. And there's a drivenness, a desperation about it. I've got to do something about it. I don't think that I have to do something about it—I have to do something about it.

So this is the area of affect. When you look at the Buddha's language, some of the terms he uses refer to this world of affect, of feeling, of what we would call emotion. And some of his terms refer to the world of cognition. They're both parts of the human being. We're part cognition and part feeling.

And Vedana is over here. Vedana refers to this whole area. We're going to talk more about it tonight. Vedana is, I found, one of the most difficult subjects to actually get across. It seems to be quite simple and obvious, but when you start to actually talk about it, it's quite difficult.

Vedana is rather like the flavor of the experience. Every experience comes to us flavored in some way. It's like the flavor of food. When I eat, there's a whole variety of physical sensations—hard, soft, smooth, crunchy, hot, cold, and so forth. These are physical sensations. Food also has flavors. The flavor is not the sensation, the physical sensation, but it's intimately tied up with the sensation. You can't have the flavor without the sensation. When I'm moved to respond, to get up and take seconds or to push the plate away and not have it at all, what moves me, what creates that response, is the flavor.

Vedana is the flavor of the experience, whether the experience be physical or non-physical. So Vedana is what moves us. It's what provokes a response. Something happens, I respond. Vedana is what provokes that response. It's the felt sense of experience—the feltness of the sense. There's the data of the physical body, like hot, cold, hard, soft, and then the mind's response to that data. The Vedana is in the response. You could even say the Vedana is the response.

Is it the mind or the heart? The mind's response or the heart's response? It's the citta's response, which covers both, but here the context would be heart, because it's the feeling area. So probably it would be better to say heart's response. We have the expression "a heartfelt response," conveying the same sort of thing but at a very strong level. But it's automatic.

This is an interesting debate. Sometimes people do translate it as sensation. But the problem with that is if we translate it as sensation, we have no word for the actual data as distinct from the response to the data. But often you do see Vedana translated as sen-

sation because Vedana and sensation are so intimately intertwined that for practical purposes you can't separate them, because they're so close. We're going to talk about this tonight. It gets really tricky to talk about. This is why it's so hard to actually grasp it.

In English, feeling means both sensation and emotion. The word is ambiguous in both Pali and in English. For example, in English and in Pali, a feeling can be a thing—"you hurt my feelings," so feelings are a something. I can experience my feelings; you are cut off from your feelings. So there are your feelings, and your job is to experience them—they are the object of your experience. But you can also say, "Yes, I understand that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel it's not right."

There you're not talking about a something that you experience but a way of experiencing. If you want to do this, you've just got to feel your way into it. What are you conveying there? You're saying there's a particular way you need to experience this, and maybe it's not the way that you're used to. In Pali, as in English, Vedana can refer both to what one experiences—so you can make Vedana the object of your awareness—

But it also refers to a way of experiencing. So you can feel the meditation object, or you can watch the meditation object. And that, of course, was what we were doing for this little exercise.

"I find it really hard to separate a feeling from watching it. Because the feeling is there, and then in order to actually have the feeling, there must be something that's watching it. There must be awareness of it. If there was nothing there watching it, the feeling would be..."

"So there's the feeling and the awareness of the feeling. That's the watcher, isn't it?"

"Yeah, you could say watching. But certainly awareness. And the thing about—well, we'll talk more about this tonight—the Buddha says contact conditions feeling. Contact is the immediacy of experience. Where there is contact, there is feeling."

Now this relationship, this causal conditional relationship, is extremely tight. The Buddha is not suggesting that first you have an experience and then later on feeling joins the party. He says if you're experiencing now, you are feeling now. And also this relationship is compulsory. It is impossible to have an experience without feeling.

He then says feeling conditions craving. Now that relationship is not compulsory. You can have feeling without craving. But you cannot have experience without feeling. So it's bound up really tightly. And one of the implications of this is it's very difficult to actually tease them apart. So it's not actually worth worrying about for practical purposes. It comes together, doesn't it?

Different people are sensitive to different aspects of experience. Some people naturally are attuned to the feeling aspect. Some people naturally are attuned to the awareness aspect and not the feeling aspect. And some people are naturally attuned to both.

Such a person is likely to say, "What the hell are you talking about?" Precisely because they've already got it. It's like you're trying to explain something new to me and the more you explain it the more confused I get because I already know it. So sometimes that's the response that you get when you talk about this. It's difficult to talk about because it's so intimate.

Last night we were talking about the Buddha's use of the verb *patisamvediti*, which I translated as sensing. But you could translate it as feeling. Now I translated it as sensing because I was looking for an English word that conveys intimacy. What's the closest, most intimate form of experience that you can talk about using the English language? What's the verb you would use? If you wanted to express an experience which was completely close, completely intimate, what verb would you use?

"Engage." "Experiencing." "Engaging." "Feeling." "Sensation." "Sensing." "Moving." "I was moved. I moved."

But here it's like, let's say with the breath...

The breath moving. That doesn't quite work. Inhabiting the breath? But you notice how we're groping for the right expression? There's no obvious candidate that stands out. So I chose "sensing." But these verbs like *paṭisaṃvedeti* and similar terms—this is what I think the Buddha is expressing in Pali. He's pointing to a form of experiencing that is really, really intimate. And this is the realm of vedanā.

This understanding is important for practical purposes because it's all about response. I respond to the world. But why do I respond in that particular way? You can see gross levels of response: "Jesus, I hate that. I just get so pissed off when people do this or that." And the flip side: "I just love that. I've got to have it. I just can't let that go. If I don't get this, I'm going to kill myself."

All the way down to the subtlest levels—you can be sitting in meditation with just this vague sense of disquiet. It's so subtle you don't even notice it until the bell rings to indicate the end of the sitting, and there's this instant response: "Phew." That's the first hint you get that actually, over the past half hour, there's been this sense of disquiet. It's so subtle. All of this is vedanā.

So to get to know vedanā is to get to know our responses. Why is it that awareness, that the mind, moves toward this? Why does it do that? Vedanā—it's moved to go there. That movement is vedanā. To get to know vedanā, to become familiar with it, opens up this whole realm of how the citta, the heart-mind, responds to everything. How it is responding now. Right now there is vedanā. Right now I am already responding.

As a meditator, I've got to be interested in this. But the strange thing about it is there's no technique for it. It's too intimate. You either feel it or you don't feel it. It's so fast.

It's both very fast and inescapable, because it's happening now. And there's never a moment in my life when it's not happening now.

"Isn't vedanā also simultaneous with the consciousness of it? So it's the contact, the feeling, and consciousness all happening..."

All in one package. Boom. Exactly.

And because of its complexity, different minds have different sensitivities. The same mind has different sensitivities over time, so that at one point I may be more attuned to the awareness aspect. At another time I may be more attuned to the feeling aspect. At another time I may be more attuned to the impact of the contact.

"It's like love."

Mmm-hmm.

"It defies analysis. It defies conceptualization."

And it drives conceptualization. Why am I trying to make sense of it?

I am moved in that direction. It's the vedanā which is pushing me to try to make sense of it.

I was very struck by the idea that every single cell in our body, or a one-celled animal, an amoeba, the one thing it can do without a brain is approach or avoid. So if that's true of every cell in our body, it's more fundamental than breathing.

Yes, it is. The Buddha would agree with that. It is more fundamental than breathing. Feeling is more fundamental than breathing.

In our culture we exalt reason and rationality. All of that rests on the foundation of vedanā and is an expression of vedanā. Even plants can do it. Amoebas do it. Plants do it.

In terms of the meditation practice, working with vedanā is basically impossible to pin down as a technique, but it's all about intimacy and it's all about the relationship to the present, because it is happening. It's not that it's going to happen later. It is happening. It's immediately available. It's always immediately available. And it's what's driving everything.

So the more I uncover it, the more I can see: What is it that I do? What are the responses? How am I responding to this situation? And what's driving that response? All of this is revealed through vedanā.

But we'll talk more about it tonight. We're going to have a dharma talk on vedanā.

If it's not useful, forget about it. Anything that I say that is not useful, just don't even bother arguing with it—just let it go. But feel your way through the day, and if you do that, be really genuinely experimental. There's nothing that is supposed to happen. Just play with it and see what does happen. The important thing is to learn from the experience.

And you learn by playing. It's the basic principle that if you've got some complicated piece of electronics in the household and you don't know how to use it, who do you call upon? The youngest member of the household. Now, why is this? Is this because that said youngest member was born with a PhD in electronics, which they inherited from a previous life? No. It's because when you get your complicated piece of electronics, the child looks at it and thinks he's looking at a toy. And so he plays with it. And because he plays with it, he learns it.

Meditation is a toy. Please play.

When I was last in Burma, one of the things that I did was go to bookshops and collect books written in English about Buddhism, because I was interested in what do Burmese people read about Buddhism. I can't read Burmese, so I was looking at English books.

In Burma there's dozens of different meditation methods, particularly insight meditation methods. Only two of them have been exported, but there's heaps of them in Burma. And there's one insight meditation technique which is very popular in the Mandalay area. Mandalay and Sagina are intellectual centres for Burmese Buddhism. There's a hell of a lot of study that goes on there, and particularly Abhidhamma.

There's a particular form of insight meditation which is popular in that part of the country, which is very Abhidhamma-based. Like many of the methods, its grounding object is kāyika vedanā—vedanā felt in the body. Think Goenka method. Vedanā in the body, because it's obvious.

I found a beginner's instruction manual for doing this, and the author had various warnings for the beginning meditator. One of the warnings was: if you're going to practice using vedanā, in particular bodily vedanā, as your meditation object, do not make the very common mistake of looking for it.

Because if you look for vedanā, it's rather like looking for your glasses. Now I know that I can distinctly remember putting my glasses on when I was in my room and coming down here, and I could actually see at a distance. So I know I had them on. I came in here...

Obviously I took them off at some point and they're gone. And I've looked everywhere. The only rational conclusion is one of you bastards took them. So I'm just telling you, none of you are getting out of here until I get my glasses back. Is that clear?

It's like that. For a start, if I'm looking for something, it assumes it's somehow hidden. You cannot hide Vedana. It's bleeding obvious. If you look for it, you're thinking, ah, it's something special. And if I'm just clever enough, I'll stumble upon it. The very desire to stumble upon it is an expression of Vedana. It's too obvious, isn't it?

It's hidden in plain sight. Yes, it's hidden in plain sight. It's so obvious that it's difficult to recognize.

Patrick asked about the practice of noticing pleasant, unpleasant. Yeah, that's where it's most obvious. They're the two which are clear. If you go into work with Vedana, they're the two that you would actually go for. So you notice any recognition of the pleasant or any recognition of the painful.

For example, in the visual field, the eyes are constantly scanning the visual scene. I noticed with my eyes, when I sit here and they're kind of scanning, that there were certain parts of the room—dark corners—that the eyes would just skip over a bit faster. When the eyes kind of go outside to the view, they'll just linger there, just for a moment. Painful, pleasant.

You can see this with all the senses. Where do the senses go? How long do they linger? You can start to say, oh, pleasant, painful, pleasant, pleasant, painful, pleasant, pleasant, pain, pain, pleasant, pain, good, bad, good, bad. It comes with the territory.

Also, one warning I should address. You notice the contradiction that what we're talking about this morning is feeling, and yet it's being incredibly intellectual. There's concept and there's experience. When you're working with the meditation tradition, you're always dealing with concept and experience.

I think, first of all, the technical terms that the Buddha uses are very precise, but they're not scientific terms. They're more like poetry. So if you read poetry—good poetry—you can get a very precise meaning that's coming out of those words. And yet, if somebody else is reading the poem and they have a very different meaning, you wouldn't be inclined to have the same kind of argument with them if you were both reading a science textbook and coming up with different meanings. Because you know that poetry has an element of subjectivity, and you can quite legitimately read the same poem in different ways.

For me, the Buddha's teaching is a form of poetry. It's the poetry of human experience. Yes, it's incredibly precise, but it's fundamentally poetry. Sometimes when you pin down a meaning you've got a meaning that works for you, but it's not necessarily—you know—absolutely this is what the Buddha means and anybody who disagrees is wrong.

So don't get caught up in concepts. It's not that there's an objectively correct meaning for terms like Vedana and therefore an objectively correct experience that we're supposed to find, or an objectively correct method of practice. It's more like these concepts can guide us in cultivating a particular form of sensitivity to what is already happening.

If you're trying to track Vedana, start with the experience and then interpret it. Don't start with the interpretation and from there look for the corresponding experience. You start with the experience. I'm already feeling this. And from there I get the concept, the interpretation.

Is this what they mean by Vedana? Don't start with the concept—"Where is Vedana?"—and then from there look for the experience. "Could this be it? Is this it? Maybe this is it." Favor the experience over the concept. Clarify the experience. Basically, become intimate. And then you might question, "Is this what they mean by Vedana?" And if it fits, it fits—for you. And if it doesn't fit, it doesn't fit.

Questioning whether something is pleasant or unpleasant—is that what you mean? I think that's quite useful. We're going to talk about what exactly that means tonight when we look at Dhammadina's explanation of it.

For example, you can also look at attachment and aversion, because attachment and aversion are responses to pleasant and painful. One way that I've worked with it—I have heaps of aversion. I'm very strongly aversive. I'd like to sum it up by saying that for me, approximately 95% of my experience, I'd much rather it was something else.

"You'd much rather it was something else? 95%?" At a conservative estimate.

"I don't remember that in the interview today."

This is the nature of aversion.

"Yes, but do you like being averse?"

I'd much rather it was something else.

One time I got very interested in this because it struck me that, of course, if there's aversion, aversion is a response to pain. So if I'm averse most of the time, I'm feeling pain most of the time. There's a painful quality to it. So I started to get interested in this.

The way that I worked with it was I'd just be doing my normal meditation, but when I felt that I was quite settled, I'd drop in the question. Basically, I'd look for any manifestation of aversion, particularly the subtle ones.

For example, I was doing walking meditation along a veranda. Everything was going really smoothly. It was a good day. It was a good walking period. And I see the end of the veranda, and this half-formed pre-verbal thought popped up in the mind: "It would be good to get to the end."

And I thought, "Wait a minute, why? If it's good to get to the end, that means it's correspondingly bad to be here—which means this must be unsatisfactory in some way, although I haven't noticed it. So what is it? What is the pain here?"

I would send the awareness: "Okay, what's the pain?" And I would ask the question, "What is dukkha?" So I would drop down and try to find what's the painful quality of this. It has to be there because there's just a twinge of aversion.

I started to explore it in that way, and it got really interesting. What I found most interesting is that when I went down to look for the pain, the closer I got to it, the more it disappeared.

I remembered a teaching I got from Sayadaw Utejaniya on the first retreat I did with him. When I was reporting experience—which is quite common for me—I was often reporting painful experience. Lots of dukkha.

On the last day of the retreat, when the retreat was over, I came across Tejaniya in the corridor. He wasn't speaking much English at the time; everything was through an interpreter. But he sees me, and he comes bowling up to me. He looks me in the eyes and says, "No dukkha," and marches off.

Investigating vedana—this feeling tone that underlies all experience—reveals profound insights about the nature of dukkha itself. When I truly investigated this during that retreat, it became bleeding obvious what Sayadaw Utejaniya was pointing toward. Fundamentally, there is no dukkha.

This investigation of vedana involves cultivating an interest in the feeling tone, the feeling quality of experience, however it presents itself to you. It's not a standardized package that fits everyone, but rather a process of becoming sensitive to the feeling aspect of being here in this place at this time, and then sending awareness to it. What is this clarifying? How does this work? The key is getting genuinely interested in it.

When deep concentration arises, something remarkable can happen. Pain might transform into elements—pure heat, movement, sensation without the overlay of suffering. But what does this mean for our understanding of vedana? If it's no longer actually painful, is it pleasant? The conventional categories suggest we can only have pleasant or painful.

I think it can transcend those three categories altogether—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. There might be delight in the pain becoming manageable, transformed into heat and movement. There's pleasure in the relief that comes when suffering ends. But beyond this, there's the recognition that pain itself is just another concept.

Sometimes what emerges is genuine neutrality—not exactly delighting in the experience, but not suffering either. You might find neutrality in the very disappearance of painful sensations. This is seeing into the nature of pain itself. What exactly is pain?

Pain is actually a package deal. You get sensation, but you also get aversion. These elements mutually support each other—if you don't have aversion, you cannot have pain. When you tease that package apart through clear seeing, there's no pain. The sensation might be exactly the same or completely different, but there's no pain. What remains is pure sensation without thought, without commentary.

In that experience, you might feel genuine neutrality—a sense that everything is simply okay. It's not wonderful and it's not terrible; it's just totally okay. This can be quite fascinating, though some meditators actually grow bored with such subtlety after a while. There's nothing you can grab onto as being anything in particular, and the very spaciousness of it can feel uninteresting to minds accustomed to drama.

What Sayadaw Utejaniya was suggesting is that vedana itself involves judgment. What happens when you simply don't make that judgment? This is essentially the heart of the Vipassana technique—sensing every sensation without judging it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

This investigation opens fascinating paradoxes. Many of us discover we can actually enjoy pain to some degree because it provides such a clear, concentrated experience to rest awareness upon. Even more intriguingly, we might enjoy emotional pain because it feeds our sense of self. You can observe this clearly in meditation when painful emotions begin to dissolve. An alarm arises: "Oh my God, if I don't think about this anymore, what will happen? I'll disappear!" And so the mind regenerates the pain.

There's a strange reassurance in pain, and that reassurance carries its own pleasure—the pleasure of knowing "I am a person who suffers from this." The very identification with our pain becomes part of how we know ourselves to exist.

This is the profound territory that opens when we begin to investigate vedana—not just noting pleasant and unpleasant, but seeing through the very mechanism by which experience gets categorized and how those categories create the sense of a someone who is experiencing them.

Yes, and there's a pleasure in that. There's a pleasure in, there's a satisfaction in being quite clear about that and finding a ground with that. So that would then be not neither pleasant nor painful. That would be a mix of definitely pleasant and definitely painful.

Again, these are categories. So they're concepts. A concept has a fixed border. Like, if it's pleasant, it's not painful. Obviously. That would be a contradiction and philosophers would be hammering at you. But in terms of experience... Experience doesn't have the border. Experience is not tidy. And so something can be simultaneously pleasant and painful. In fact, people experience it that way.

So again, that's the danger of concept. If you bring too conceptual a framework to the practice, then you start to mess up the experience to try to make it fit the concept. And this is the problem of the fundamentalist in every approach. So the concepts are useful, but don't let them take over.

CHAPTER 9

Tracking Experience

Patrick Kearney · 1h11

> *Patrick Kearney explores the heart of satipaṭṭhāna practice - what he calls "tracking experience" rather than mere contemplation. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he examines the Buddha's instruction that practitioners live "tracking body as body, feeling as feeling, heart-mind as heart-mind, phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful."*
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> *Kearney translates the Pali term "anupassanā" as "tracking" - following experience over time rather than thinking about it. Using the memorable "follow that car" analogy, he illustrates how meditation requires following wherever experience leads, not controlling its direction. He explores the three essential qualities: ardency (ātapa) as balanced effort like tuning a musical instrument; mindfulness (sati) as remembering awareness; and clear understanding (sampajañña) as the practical wisdom needed to develop meditation as a craft.*
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> *The talk addresses common meditation challenges like distraction and self-judgment, emphasizing that recognizing distraction is itself mindfulness. Kearney discusses how satipaṭṭhāna is meant to be our normal dwelling place (gocara), requiring flexibility and sustainability rather than rigid technique. He concludes by examining the instruction to surrender "longing and sorrow for the world" (abhijjhā-domanassa) as an ongoing process of letting go of emotional imbalance.*

Tonight I want to explore the central practice of satipaṭṭhāna, that of tracking experience. On a previous night we looked at the udesa, the introduction to the discourse, and we got as far as the one-way street and Nibbāna. Today we'll move on and examine how the Buddha summarizes the basic practice.

He's talking about the practitioner surrendering longing and sorrow for the world. She lives tracking body as body, feeling as feeling, heart-mind as heart-mind, phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful. So there are four satipaṭṭhānas: body, feeling, heart-mind, and phenomena. The Buddha repeats the same sentence for each one, and as we mentioned, repetition indicates importance. This sentence is crucial.

What it's all about is what the Buddha calls anupassanā, usually translated as "contemplating." So contemplating body as body, mind as mind. But I prefer to translate it as "tracking." In Pali it's anupassanā. Passanā means seeing, and anu is a prefix denoting "along." When we see something, the relationship is direct and immediate—there it is. But "seeing along" implies following it over time, tracking it.

I don't like using the word "contemplating" because it could possibly imply thinking about something. This is not thinking about. Rather, it's following something, tracking something over a period of time.

There are two aspects to this practice. First, direct the mind towards an object of experience. Direct awareness and then ground it on this experience. Mindfulness has this very earthy, grounded quality to it. We ground awareness on something, creating a very direct encounter with the experience.

The object of awareness could be anything. For example, it could be a very specific object that we think is really important and that our guru says you must become intimate with in order to become enlightened—breathing, for instance. It's the generic meditation object. Or body sensation, or whatever. Alternatively, it might be grounded on the awareness itself, rather than the object of awareness. This is more like a space within which experience comes and goes, things arising and passing within a broader space.

But whatever it is—whether obvious like the body, extremely subtle like awareness itself, or anything in between—the first move is to directly ground awareness on something. This is central.

Then extend that encounter continuously over a period of time. This is the second aspect, the tracking aspect. If I'm going to track something, follow it, that implies time. The word mindfulness itself implies time. Mindfulness, remember, is a translation of the Pali word sati, which literally means memory. How can you have memory without time?

When we track something, we don't track it just for a moment. In one moment it doesn't go anywhere. Tracking something requires cultivating an ongoing relationship over a period of time. This is central to this practice.

When we track something, it's not up to us where it goes. Our job is to follow it. This again is a fundamental principle. This is what I like to call the "follow that car" principle. You know in the movies when someone leaps into a taxi cab and says "follow that car." The taxi cab driver is excited because he's been waiting for this for twenty years because he's seen all the movies. So off he goes. Imagine you're the person who's just leapt into the cab and you're sitting beside the driver, following that car.

You've got to follow that car. And fortunately the taxi cab driver seems very skilled, weaving in and out of traffic. So you're settling back and relaxing, no problem. And then at a certain corner, the car you're following turns right, and without hesitation, your taxi cab driver turns left.

Now, at this point, would you be a happy chappy? Would you be content? Would you be thinking of the large tip you're going to give this taxi cab driver? No, you might be, in fact, irritated. You might even remonstrate with the taxi cab driver.

But the taxi cab driver could explain he's got perfectly good reasons for turning left. The taxi cab driver might be a hippie and it just felt right to turn left. He just wanted to express himself. He just felt that his inner dolphin told him to. Or it could be that he was absolutely dead set certain that car was going to turn left. He was absolutely certain of it. It just took him completely by surprise when it turned right. Or he could say, "Look, the view this way is much more interesting. It's terrible that way. It's much better this way." He could have all sorts of reasons like this, but would you find them convincing? No. The instruction is simple: follow that car. That's it.

Satipatthana works in exactly the same way. When we're tracking experience, we don't care where the object goes or what happens to it. That's not our business. Our business is to follow it and to understand whatever happens to it. That's all.

And although we might criticize the taxi cab driver, in fact as meditators we behave like that taxi cab driver pretty much at almost every intersection.

So this practice has a degree of unpredictability built into it. It's simply part of its nature. If you've got just a single meditation object to follow, well that's hard enough and that's unpredictable enough. But when the basic principle is it doesn't matter what the object is—the object could be body, could be feeling, could be mind, could be phenomena, roughly speaking everything—the unpredictability becomes massive.

This unpredictability in turn requires a degree of flexibility in the meditator. You can't afford to be rigid in what you're doing. Maybe it might work in some other form of meditation practice, which is just do this one thing: here's your meditation object; every time the mind wanders away, just come back to it. You can afford to be rigid maybe, and it might even pay off to some extent. But with this practice, it just doesn't work. It's a complete schmozzle.

So the attitude of the practitioner: it does not matter what happens. And this is really important. It genuinely does not matter what happens. What matters is that we are aware of what happens. That's the key point.

Now the forms that this practice takes are multiple. Let's just take a single lineage, the Mahasi method.

So you start with Mahasi himself, then his students, then his students' students. Let's stay several generations down the line, but stick to his students and his students' students.

These days, on one side, you have Sayadaw Tejaniya. For Tejaniya, he really doesn't care what it is that you're mindful of. What he's interested in is the mind which is mindful. He's really interested in that.

With Tejaniya, if you were doing a retreat with him, and let's say you just got really fed up with sitting in the hall and meditating, and you decided, "I think I'll go to the pub." So you wandered off, went down to the pub, sank a few—or possibly more than a few—weaved your way back to the center, and then went into the interview and explained what you had just been doing, he wouldn't bat an eyelid. But what he would want to know was: What happened when you did that? What happened in your mind when you did that? What was the experience of getting really fed up? What was the experience of heading to the pub? Were you mindful of downing those beers? How did consciousness change? How did the body change? What happened when you came back? And he would be genuinely interested.

He's quite strong on the principle that it doesn't matter what the object is. It doesn't matter what the experience is. It doesn't matter if you're inside the meditation hall or outside the meditation hall. What he's interested in is the mind which is aware—what's happening in that mind.

On the other end of the spectrum, you have somebody like Sayadaw Upandita. When I was working with him back in the day, we had the standard instruction: primary object in the sitting, rising and falling of the abdomen; secondary object, whatever else happens. But in practice, you'd give essays on the rising and falling of the abdomen and brief mentions of the secondary object. He was very fixated on rising and falling of the abdomen. Great precision and detail. I used to write little essays on it. I couldn't do it now—well, I suppose if I tried, but I don't think I ought to try. It's pretty intense.

There's one of the classic Upandita stories about a meditator who went there and in the course of meditating had some profound spiritual awakening experience. He was overwhelmed by gratitude and joy to the old guru that under his beneficent guidance he had had this experience. At the next interview, he was explaining all this to Upandita

and expressing his gratitude and so on. Upandita heard him out, waited until he stopped talking, and then said, "This experience that you had—did it occur on the rising or the falling movement of the abdomen?"

The guy says, "I don't know."

And Upandita says, "Please, be more mindful," and throws him out.

Radically different approaches, even in the same lineage using the same method. There's tremendous flexibility built into this because satipatthana is so universal. You cannot pin it down.

This is bound up with the fact that, as the Buddha emphasizes, satipatthana is meant to be our normal dwelling place. He calls it the gochara. I like the word gochara. It's a technical term, and roughly translated it means cow paddock. Gochara—G-O-C-A-R-A. Go is cow and chara is where one wanders. So a cow paddock.

And satipatthana is our cow paddock. In other words, our territory, our own base. This is where we live.

Let's say I'm a dedicated practitioner, and let's say I'm a dedicated Mahasi-wala, and let's say I'm going to really crack this rising and falling of the abdomen, and let's say I throw myself into it with absolute dedication. The fact is, I am a visitor to that cushion and to the rising and falling of the abdomen. No matter how dedicated I am, I cannot live there. But satipatthana is meant to be someplace where we live. So it has to be more than a meditation technique. There's more to it than that.

Basically, satipatthana is about cultivating a particular relationship to experience—all experience, any experience—in which the nature of the experience itself does not really matter. What matters is the quality of our presence to the experience.

And this relationship requires that the practitioner develop three qualities: ardency, clear understanding, and mindfulness. "Here a practitioner, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body—ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful."

None of these words are accidental. These discourses are very tightly composed, and if the Buddha is using a specific word, he's using it for a purpose. So let's examine these three qualities: ardency, clear understanding, and mindfulness.

The first, ardency, is atapa in Pali, derived from the verb tapati, meaning "to burn." So atapa literally means heat, referring to the passion, commitment, determination, and effort required for this practice. This naturally brings us to the question of right effort, one of the factors in the Eightfold Path.

Now, again, satipatthana is something meant to be lived—something meant to become our normal, habitual dwelling place. If that's the case, then this passion, commitment, determination, and effort cannot mean strain. If we are pushing and straining, at some point we will collapse. We simply cannot maintain it. Then perhaps we pick ourselves up and push again, only to collapse once more. This creates an on-again, off-again relationship to the practice, which doesn't work.

Effort, or vayama, is the usual term—though I don't think there's any exact equivalent in English. Effort is reasonably close. Vayama represents the active or doing aspect of the practice: what one does, the project, the whole sense of something to work at.

In the Eightfold Path, when the Buddha talks about meditation practice, he mentions right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Concentration is not active—it's peaceful, still, calm, receptive. At the other end you have effort, which is the active part. Mindfulness sits in the middle as the balancing factor. So effort represents the active aspect of the practice.

Sometimes instead of vayama, the Buddha uses virya. Both come from the same root: vir. Words from this root indicate strength, commitment, determination, perseverance, and courage. In yoga, for example, you have virasana—vira asana—the posture sometimes translated as "the posture of the hero." A vira is a strong person, a hero. When Sayadaw U Pandita talks about effort, he calls it "heroic effort" because he's emphasizing that root.

If you examine these factors, you'll notice something important about mindfulness: we can have too little mindfulness, but we cannot have too much mindfulness—it's impossible. With effort, however, we can have too little effort or too much effort. So effort behaves quite differently from mindfulness.

When the Buddha talks about right effort, he compares it to music, creating a sense of harmony. The classic story is his encounter with Venerable Sona. Sona was an aristocratic young man who got religion, ordained, and became a bhikkhu. In his lay life, he was an accomplished musician who played the vina, a stringed instrument.

Sona was one of those eager young men who wanted to race to full enlightenment as quickly as possible, and he habitually made way too much effort in his practice. Apparently, the breaking point for his fellow bhikkhus came when they noticed blood on his walking track. They brought in the Buddha, who spoke to him.

When the Buddha approached him, Sona was actually getting disheartened and thinking of quitting. Despite putting in incredible effort, he wasn't making any real progress and was becoming very discouraged—it was all too hard.

So the Buddha spoke to him about his practice of music when he was a layman. The Buddha asked him, "When the strings of your vina were too tight, was it well-tuned and easy to play?"

Sona naturally replied, "No."

"When the strings were too loose, was your vina well-tuned and easy to play?"

"No."

"When its strings were neither too tight nor too loose, but adjusted to a balanced pitch, was your vina well-tuned and easy to play?"

Yes.

So effort is like tuning the strings of an instrument. And what you're looking for is a balanced pitch. The Buddha goes on to say, "So too, Sona, if effort is too forceful, this leads to agitation. And if effort is too weak, this leads to stagnancy. Therefore, Sona, resolve on a serenity of effort. Attain balance of the faculties there. Take up the meditation theme."

I love this expression, "serenity of effort." We wouldn't normally think of combining those two qualities. But the Buddha is saying that's precisely what we need, because we need the balanced pitch—the sound has got to be just right. Not too much of this, not too much of that. So establish a balanced attitude and then follow the theme of the music.

The theme, of course, varies depending on the conditions. The music that we're playing when we do the practice changes from day to day, hour to hour. But whatever tune is being played, effort or ardency represents the tuning of the instrument. If the tuning is just right, then the music can be played harmoniously and without strain.

So effort is crucial, and one way of learning to discern when we're making right effort is basically through sustainability. What can I sustain throughout a day? What relationship to experience can I sustain throughout an entire day?

On a few days we've been doing exercises in the morning where we're looking very closely at the elemental quality of the experience—sensation, breathing, and so on. Could I maintain that all day long? No. At least I couldn't. I could do it when the mind is really clear and sharp.

Now in my case, my biorhythms are such that I'm very slow to wake up in the morning and my energy peaks mid-afternoon going into early evening. This is why if I'm doing a stretch in the morning exercises and it's lasting a long time, just check and see if I am in fact awake. Because sometimes I just fall asleep during them.

So when I'm going to do the detail exercises, I'm much more likely to do it in the period mid-afternoon to mid-evening because I'm awake then. But in the morning basically my meditation consists of staying upright without falling asleep. I find this quite a challenge.

So it varies in any given day from hour to hour simply based on biorhythms. And then there's how long into the retreat it is. Well, the effort that I make at the beginning of the retreat is very different from the effort that I'm making towards the end. It changes. It becomes more refined. Overall, the mind becomes more refined, so the nature of the project necessarily changes.

And then there's the movement of the moods and emotions, and then there's whether or not the body is sore and how it's sore, and then there's all these other factors. So it keeps changing and the way that I relate to the practice has to keep adapting. It's not making the same amount of effort all the way through.

In fact, one of the reasons why "effort" is a poor translation is that viriya or vāyāma have both a subjective and an objective side to them. Objectively, it's energy. Now sometimes the mind has a lot of energy, and sometimes it does not. And that's just an objective fact.

If the mind has this much energy, and I'm practicing with this much effort, this is a serious problem. I'm just going to tie myself up in knots. On the other hand, if the mind's got this much energy and I'm practicing with this much effort, equally, I've got a problem. Stagnation.

So, finding the balance. And I'm not in control of the amount of energy. There are some things I can do to improve it, but in any given moment, it is what it is.

Subjectively, this factor of samma-vāyāma is what we call effort. Now that's subjective. Regardless of the conditions, what's my relationship to it? And for me, effort is essentially choice. It's a choice made now to be aware of this. And it's a simple binary.

I either make the choice now to be aware of this, or I don't. And it's very simple. But the problem with it is that I have to make the choice now. And then I have to make it now. And then I have to make it now. And then I have to make it now. This is where it becomes difficult. I can't make the choice at the beginning of the sitting and think that that will somehow sustain me throughout. It won't. So right effort is a very interesting one.

Now to ardency. There we have mindfulness. We're changing the Buddha's order a bit. He says ardency, clear understanding and mindfulness. But I'm looking at ardency, mindfulness and clear understanding.

Mindfulness—*sati*—is at the center of this practice. As we've already talked about, it's essentially remembering awareness. It has two flavors: remembering I am already aware, and remembering to be aware of this.

We can see these flavors in our relationship to distraction. Sometimes when we emerge from distraction, we come out of it with the realization: "Oh, I'm distracted. I'm thinking, for example." This is remembering I am already aware—in brackets, of this distraction. This flavor of mindfulness is particularly relevant in everyday activity. Mindfulness remembers: right now I'm seeing, right now I'm thinking, right now I'm hearing, I'm moving, I'm touching, I'm reaching, I'm happy, I'm sad, and so on. Something is happening right now, and this flavor of mindfulness is remembering, "Ah, this is happening." Of course it doesn't matter what's happening—it could be anything.

You notice that sometimes when we emerge from distraction, at the very moment we realize we're distracted, the distraction itself vanishes and awareness goes immediately and spontaneously—bang—back to the meditation object. Has that ever happened? This is that second flavor: remembering to be aware of this, my meditation object. This is the flavor we find particularly when we do formal meditation practice. We're training ourselves to remember this.

If I'm sitting and my meditation object is the whole body, or it might be the breathing, or body sensation—whatever—I'm training myself to remember this particular experience. These are the two flavors of mindfulness.

To return to that basic principle we've already discussed: fundamentally what's important is the tracking, the remembering—not what we remember. That's of secondary significance. The practice is reminding ourselves of our awareness, reminding ourselves I am already aware, reminding ourselves to be aware of this, not to forget this meditation object.

As practitioners, we face practical questions: What should I be mindful of? And how should I be mindful of it? These are craft decisions—the decisions we make as we learn a craft, and through these decisions we become better at the craft. It's like a carpenter reaching for the right tool to do this particular job.

In that action there are at least two aspects. First, the awareness of reaching for the tool, the touch of it, the awareness of using it. Here the quality of awareness itself is central, and mindfulness serves the purpose of clarifying and stabilizing the mind, making that awareness clear and continuous—the awareness of the activity itself, using the tool.

Then there's the choice of what tool to reach for in this particular set of circumstances. Which tool will fit this particular job, and how to use this particular tool? This is what should I be mindful of, and how should I be mindful in this particular set of circumstances.

There are different techniques we can use, and each morning we're experimenting with a different one. It's not that there's one right technique. It's not that we're going through a curriculum where once you tick all the boxes, that's it. We're simply playing around with different possibilities to get a sense of what's available. Because each of us, in the course of a lifetime, will face every conceivable experience being thrown at us.

So how do we work with it?

This brings us to clear understanding—*sampajañña*. This is all about the craft, about learning the craft and the wisdom that comes from the craft. The Pali term *sampajañña* is based on the root *ñā*, to understand or to know. Another root based on that same foundation is *paññā*, wisdom. *Sampajañña* is a kind of ground-level wisdom, a practical, ground-level wisdom. And it's associated with the recursiveness of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is more than simple awareness. It entails awareness of my awareness. It's not simply that I'm aware—I know that I'm aware. I know what I'm aware of. So mindfulness is found in that recursiveness. *Sampajañña*, clear understanding, monitors and watches over the flow of experience.

We've been talking about the craft of meditation. This always involves what the Buddha calls *yoniso manasikāra*, which can be translated as appropriate attention. Sometimes you see it translated as methodical attention, or wise reflection. There are two different aspects of *manasikāra*. One is conceptual, which involves reflection—the thinking about. For example, the kind of *yoniso manasikāra* that you would apply in a dharma talk. You're paying attention to the talk; it's conceptual. You're trying to understand it. And for the Buddha, this appropriate attention includes asking the right questions. It's an active engagement.

But then you have appropriate attention in a situation which is not conceptual, such as the meditation practice. This is all about the craft of meditation—how we construct our attention.

Sometimes it's appropriate to focus in very closely on a meditation object. Sometimes it's appropriate to step back from it. Sometimes it's appropriate to be very active, to go towards the experience, to engage it. Sometimes it's appropriate to step back and let the experience come to us. Sometimes it's appropriate to focus in on a very small object. Sometimes it's appropriate to open out and make the object very big, even bigger than the body. Sometimes it's appropriate to make more effort. Sometimes it's appropriate to make less effort. Sometimes it's appropriate to be still—standing, sitting, lying down. Sometimes it's appropriate to move. Sometimes it's appropriate to note pain and not try to avoid it. Sometimes it's appropriate to note something pleasant, to ease and soothe the *citta*.

There are all sorts of decisions that need to be made and all sorts of possibilities. This is all about learning a skill, and it's clear understanding that enables us to do this—this monitoring of the experience, what it does, how it behaves over time.

We're learning a craft, and it's a craft that is learned through trial and error. That's the only way to do it. In the beginning, what predominates is the error. This is completely normal. Mistakes and experiments play a really important role.

When we come to meditation practice, when we begin, what's our condition? Well, according to the Buddha, the fundamental condition of the human mind is one of delusion. And delusion has two aspects: ignorance—don't know—and a more positive state of misinformation.

I think I know, but I'm wrong.

So this is delusion, and this is the normal human condition—the package that we bring with us when we start a meditation practice. Looking back on my own experience, I see it very clearly, but as a teacher I really get to see it. It's astonishing how we come to a meditation practice with a whole number of assumptions about what it is and what's supposed to happen.

People turn up having never done a meditation retreat in their lives. They've either never meditated before or hardly ever meditated, and they walk into this retreat. Within one or two days they're really upset because what's supposed to happen isn't happening.

What? How on earth do you know what's supposed to happen?

"Well I do. I'm supposed to be calm and I'm not supposed to be thinking. My mind should be a blank."

What? It's astonishing—the absolute determination that even beginners have to cling ferociously to a fixed view and opinion of what their experience should be, when a moment's reflection reveals that the data upon which this judgment is based is non-existent, necessarily non-existent.

One time, a particular meditator was doing a retreat with John Hale, my old friend and teacher, and he was complaining to John in the interview: "I'm just not making any progress, I'm not making any progress."

John's response was to ask the question: "How would you know?"

And it was not a rhetorical question.

So when we start, we don't know what we're doing—quite literally—and therefore we make mistakes, obviously. And mistakes are really valuable. That's how we learn. If we didn't make them, we could not learn. We don't learn and then do things. We learn by doing things.

So we start doing it and fall over ourselves again and again and again, and we learn if we are paying attention to the whole process. And this is where the clear understanding comes in. I bump into a wall. Okay, that's not the right direction. I'll try another direction. I bump into something there. Okay, I've got to be more careful in the way that I steer.

Or I like to look at it as we're on the path—it's supposed to be the right path—and I'm proceeding along this path. On either side of this path there's a very steep ditch, and every now and again I find myself lying in the middle of it, staring up at the sky, or alternatively face down in the mud. At this point I know that I've left the path. And this is useful information. This is data which can be employed for useful purposes.

So this is the learning process. Nothing is ever wasted, and this is all part of clear understanding.

We monitor our own experience, both ourselves individually, but also in relationship to the tradition—what we read, the dharma talks, the discussions with teachers and with fellow meditators, especially more experienced meditators. We get a sense: this person might—well, this person definitely knows what they're doing.

So we apply our intelligence to the process. You could say that mindfulness, *sati*, is essentially presence. *Sampajanya* is intelligence. So this whole process, this whole practice, we could sum up as the practice of intelligent presence: to be present, but to do it intelligently.

So we don't simply blindly obey orders. We monitor what's going on, we check, we ask questions. We look for the patterns, and in this way we learn a craft.

So looking at our sentence that we're examining here: "A practitioner, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body, mind as mind—ardent, clearly understanding and mindful."

Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world. We'll just briefly go through the rest of this. First, this refers to the loss of emotional balance. The term translated as "longing" is *abidja*, which indicates a leaning out towards something. And the shadow of longing is sorrow. If you have one, you have the other. If we want, then we don't want.

If I want this, I don't want that. If I'm happy when this occurs, I'm sad when that occurs. So longing and sorrow naturally pair off. This pairing is essentially shorthand for all the emotional entanglements we become lost in.

The Pali word is *abhijjhā*—A-B-H-I-J-J-H-Ā. The word for sorrow is *domanassa*—D-O-M-A-N-A-S-S-A—which generally means any kind of non-physical pain. In normal contexts it has a broader meaning, but here it's specifically paired with *abhijjhā*. The prefix *abhi* is not a negation, but rather a heightening, as in *abhidhamma*.

Think about the work we do on posture. When the body and mind are perfectly balanced, we feel completely at ease. If the body is in right posture and the mind is in right posture, we simply feel completely present. Then something happens—something disturbs us and we lose that balance, and we lean out. It might be physical.

Have you noticed that sometimes when you're sitting and caught up in thinking, when you come out of it you notice that the body has moved? With me, I'll be sitting and fall into thought, and when I emerge, I find myself leaning forward like this. All the energy has gone up into the head. There's a loss of balance in the body itself, which reflects the loss of balance within the mind. The body leans out.

Or we lose balance in the mind. The mind is present, and then suddenly it slides out. Sometime later we wake up to find ourselves either in the past or the future. Again, it's this same loss of balance—a falling over.

This is longing and sorrow for the world. The practitioner is asked to surrender longing and sorrow for the world. This is an ongoing process. It's not that first we surrender longing and sorrow for the world and then we do the practice, although some early translations gave that impression because of the various possibilities of translating that particular construction.

In early translations you see it rendered as "having surrendered longing and sorrow for the world," which gives the impression that first you drop the longing and sorrow, and then you start the meditation practice. It's a phenomenally awful translation. It just makes you stop. When I read it, I think, "Oh, forget about it." I can't even start—the bar is set so impossibly high that no one could meet it. You have to do it before you start. It's just poison. But it's grammatically valid to translate it as "surrendering longing and sorrow for the world."

There's a similar instruction with some practices—an instruction to "put aside worries and concerns," putting aside those things, then establish your awareness on an object. It could well be the same construction. The instruction is practical, giving you directions for what to do when you sit down to practice meditation.

Putting aside is acceptable—it's when it says "having put aside" that creates problems. You have to successfully put it aside before you can start. But "putting aside" works because you do it over and over. It's part of the process.

Certainly what I'm emphasizing here is that the surrendering of longing and sorrow is part of the ongoing process itself.

The key point is that the surrendering of longing and sorrow is not a preliminary activity before we begin the real practice—it's part of the whole process. It's like what you were saying with that expression: it tells you what to do. What should I look for? Longing and sorrow for the world. And when I get caught up in it, what should I do? I should let go of it. Let go, let go, let go, let go, let go. That's sort of the ultimate result of the practice.

And you can also use this as a measure of progress: Am I making headway? Well, to what extent am I surrendering longing and sorrow for the world? Again, it's an ongoing process.

This text wasn't written exclusively for monks and nuns, but rather for the bhikkhu. Bhikkhu in the sutta context means any meditator, any committed practitioner. We know that in the Buddha's time there were lay practitioners of satipaṭṭhāna, including very accomplished ones, because they get mentioned by name. There was a flourishing lay meditation culture at that time. In one of those lists—there are lists of excellent practitioners, excellent male lay practitioners, excellent female lay practitioners—I've looked for my name but couldn't find it. Must be an inadequacy of the translation.

So, longing and sorrow for the world... the practitioner lives tracking body as body, mind as mind. Now this tracking body as body, mind as mind—again it's the relationship. It's the Buddha hammering this direct relationship: body is just body, this sensation is just this sensation, that's it. This thought is just a thought. That's it. This emotion is just the emotion. End of story.

So we're facing it directly, but recognizing it's just what it is, not adding anything extra. And when I do add something extra, because I have longing and sorrow for the world, then it comes back to: it's just longing, it's just sorrow. That's it. That's all it is. So again, it's hammering this direct relationship with the experience—a relationship which becomes one of complete simplicity. We'll talk about that later on.

In conclusion, it's all about mindfulness. Mindfulness is memory. The opposite of memory is forgetting. When we practice, we find that we forget again and again. We forget and we wake up in our stories, we wake up in longing and sorrow for the world. This happens again and again and again, and it's natural that this happens. It's our habit to forget. This is a habit we've been working on for decades, so we're going to forget many times. This does not matter. What matters is the remembering. That is what matters.

For example, as meditators we often have this attitude: I'm meditating away, I fall into some kind of distraction, and sometime later—could be a nanosecond, a second, a minute, an hour, a day, a week, a month, whatever—I suddenly remember, "Oh, I'm supposed to be meditating." And at that point, often what we will do is start to flog ourselves: "Oh, dammit, forgot again. This is ridiculous. I've been doing this for years. I still fall into the same bloody habit. Oh, this is hard. This is way too hard. I think I should take a break. I think I should give up the whole bloody thing. It's just hopeless." Five minutes later: "Well, I'd better get back to the meditation."

Now, let's say I've had this amount of time that I forgot. Then suddenly I remember, "Oh, I'm distracted." This period, I can't do anything about it. Then I remember, "Oh, I'm distracted." And then: blah, blah, blah, blame, blame, blame, complain, complain, complain. There's another gap here, and this one is all my own loving work. It's completely unnecessary.

When I wake up, when I know, "Oh, I'm distracted," that is mindfulness. Sometimes people talk about...

And Hogan's son instantly said, "But that's not Zen."

Now Zen people never do that. They never ask what happened next. Because in Zen, it's all about now, now, now, now. There is no next.

So it was interesting to me to see the difference in emphasis. In Soto Zen, there's this very strong emphasis on the immediacy of this moment. In Theravada practice, there's more emphasis on tracking the flow of experience over time. But I think both are necessary.

If you're only in the immediacy of this moment, you don't learn much about how your mind works. You don't start to see the patterns. You don't develop that wisdom that comes from understanding the mechanics of your own experience.

But if you're only tracking over time, then you miss the intimacy of direct experience. You become too much in your head, too analytical.

So we need both. We need the immediacy of mindfulness in this moment, and we need the broader understanding that comes from sampajanya, from monitoring how things unfold over time.

This is why when I'm distracted and I suddenly know I'm distracted, that's already mindfulness. I don't need to get back anywhere. But then I might also step back and ask: How did that happen? What led to that? What's the pattern here?

Both perspectives are valid. Both are part of the complete practice. The immediacy gives you the direct taste of awareness. The broader view gives you wisdom about how your mind operates.

And this is really important to understand, because otherwise we can get into this game of constantly trying to get back to something, as if mindfulness is somewhere else. But mindfulness is right here, in the knowing of whatever is happening now.

And at this point, Hogan could no longer control himself. He said, "No next. Just this!" It was like—biff! It would be interesting to watch a conversation between him and Upandita.

That response is very, very Zen. But Upandita's question is very, very Theravada. Theravada emphasizes development over time, how things unfold over time. In Zen, they don't give a damn about how things develop over time. They just want bang, right now. So it's like two sides of the coin.

And I think you need both. One of the weaknesses of Zen, for example—in Theravada, we really emphasize process over time, and we also really emphasize ethics. Because to see how ethics works involves process over time. I did this, and this is the result. It's not a good idea. In Zen it's all "just this, just this, just this," and they're notoriously weak on ethics. They got into a lot of trouble in America, and I think there's a connection between the two.

But for me, you do need both of these views. Sometimes what I'm saying belongs to this broader view of process over time, taking this wider perspective. And sometimes it's "just this, just this." This emerging out of distraction, I think, is a classic "just this" part of the practice—the opportunity to actually apply that, where it's very fruitful to apply that.

"Is that where we find our habits?" someone asked.

Well, that's where we discover what they are and what they do, what the effects are, how they shape our life. Then the immediacy is in the moment that the habitual tendency arises—bang, gotcha. Then I can do something about it. But that understanding will come within that broader context. Otherwise, I don't know the significance of it. I don't even know what to look for. I haven't trained myself to catch it because I don't know that it's significant. But because I've learned over time that it is significant, then I'm alert to it.

So that waking up moment, coming back—that's the moment that's really crucial because I'm coming back from something that maybe I habitually do. And that coming back is the arising of mindfulness. Now, mindfulness is unattached. It's not mine. It simply arises through causes and conditions. If I'm cultivating it, I'm cultivating the propensity for it to arise. So when it arises, this is a matter of celebration. To know that I'm distracted is a matter of celebration, because it means that my training in mindfulness is showing fruit.

"Is it possible that that beating up thing—oh bad me, bad me—that that's just yet another habit?"

Oh yeah, definitely. Some individuals are more inclined to it than others, and some cultures are more inclined to it than others.

"As a culture, do you think there is a general obstacle to practice because of our attitude to going somewhere—like the sense of achieving or just journeying through life?"

I think our culture is very goal-oriented, but that can manifest across many different aspects of society, for different individuals.

"Do you think, as a general cultural attitude, that's a difficult obstacle?"

I think preoccupation with goals is a problem. The Buddha emphasizes direction rather than goal. It's part of the whole idea about path. Is it going in the right direction or the wrong direction?

So for him, if I'm going in the right direction, I don't have to worry about the goal. The important thing is to set the direction.

But I don't know that our culture is any more goal-oriented than others. When I teach in Malaysia every year to Chinese people, they're pretty goal-oriented too. But they have a much easier time with meditation practice than we do.

Why? It's a very good question. I do have a hypothesis.

My hypothesis is that when the typical person in our culture looks inside themselves, they feel that at the very bottom of it all, I am fundamentally alone. And I think in Chinese culture in Malaysia, when they look inside themselves, they know fundamentally I am not alone. And I think that makes a huge difference.

They have a stronger sense of ancestorship and continuation. The whole family network and community network that hangs off that is so much stronger and more palpable.

The first time I realized this was when I was teaching a retreat with forty or fifty people, and at least a third of them were related to each other. They were actually related to each other, not just sharing the same last name. They come in family groups. There's this old woman sitting up the back with a middle-aged woman and a slightly younger woman beside her. Over there there's a husband and two daughters. In the meditation hall, this family networking is something you would never see in an Australian hall. You would never expect to see it, but there it's just routine.

How would that make meditation easier? The sense of not being alone eases the citta. Overall, they find concentration a lot easier than we do. They develop concentration much faster.

Anyway, we're speculating on psychology. We've wandered off the point, so maybe we should call it a night. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 10

Tracking the Thought-Stream

Patrick Kearney · 1h05

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney explores the third foundation of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) by investigating citta through direct observation of the thought-stream. Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he addresses the common meditation obstacle of excessive thinking by making thought itself the meditation object rather than trying to suppress it.*
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> *Kearney emphasizes that the problem is not thinking per se, but our addictive relationship to thought. He explains how we construct narratives with ourselves as the central character, creating identity through stories - a process intimately connected to the Buddha's teaching on self and not-self (atta/anatta). The practice involves learning to observe the process of thinking rather than getting caught in content, recognizing thought as another empty phenomenon arising and passing according to conditions.*
>
> *Through guided exercises, participants explore how thoughts appear (words, images, sensations), where thinking seems to occur in experience, and the relationship between awareness and its objects. Kearney draws on the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda) to show how understanding any aspect of mental process can lead to deeper insight into the constructed nature of experience and the possibility of stepping into the unconstructed.*

We've been looking at different aspects of the practice, starting with the body. Yesterday we moved on to vedana, feeling, experimenting with that. And today we'll start on the third satipatthana, citta, by looking in particular at the thought stream, making thought itself a meditation object. And we'll play around with this one.

Tracking the thought stream is for some people a very important part of the practice because it constitutes a major distraction for them. I know people in this room will find it difficult to comprehend, but there are meditators who feel, "If only I could stop thinking, then I could meditate. If only this thinking would even slow down, then I might meditate."

So the basic principle in this approach is: whatever comes up as a barrier, whatever is an obstacle, whatever is getting in the way, face it and make it the meditation object. This is implied in the Buddha's words, "establishing mindfulness directly"—establishing a direct face-to-face relationship with the experience.

Now in this case, the thought stream, the mind is constantly generating thought. It's like fire throwing up sparks. And this happens continually. And these sparks are like little elemental thought images, and the awareness will go, sweep in, grab one of them—any one of them—and then turn it into a movie. And then we get lost in it. And when that one runs out, the attention will grab another one, turn that one into a movie. When that one runs out of steam, there's another one there, and another, and another, and another. And so it goes.

The problem here is not the thinking. This is very important to understand. Apparently there's a new book out called "Thought is Not the Enemy." Of course it's also in most cases not an ally. What we do with thinking as a meditation object, as with any other meditation object, is basically what we're concerned with discovering or realizing: that it's just another empty phenomenon that comes and goes according to conditions. It's nothing special.

But what makes thinking difficult for the meditator is not the thinking itself, but our relationship to the thinking. And in most cases, that relationship is addictive. And it's the addiction which is the problem, not thinking. When we use thinking as a meditation object, really what we're interested in is the relationship to the thought, more than the thought, and certainly not the content of the thought.

Thinking is addictive because we create narratives, and you might notice that while we create this vast array of different stories, all of them have one thing in common, and that's the star of the show—and that's me. No, it's you. We use these stories to generate a sense of identity. Basically we're telling ourselves who we are, and we're doing this all of the time.

And so any kind of relationship to the thought stream brings us into the whole world of what the Buddha calls atta and anatta—self and not-self. We construct a self in part through our thinking.

The American philosopher Daniel Dennett points out that we do not think our thoughts—our thoughts think us. They create us. And he also points out that while we think about many different things, all of us have a few core narratives that are our favorites at any given time, because these are the ones that provide the most solid sense of identity. And Dennett goes so far as to say that the self is the center of narrative gravity. It's like where the narratives most likely end up—that is the self.

So when we take on the practice of making the thought stream itself the meditation object, this practice is closely related to anatta, the understanding of not-self, which is one thing that makes it particularly interesting. When we look at our relationship to

thought, what we're looking at is ourselves creating ourselves. When we let go of thinking, what we're letting go of is us and entering into a world in which we're not defined by our stories. And this is a whole different world. So this practice has potentially a great amount of power.

Let's backtrack a bit and talk about awareness, because in all meditation practices, but especially when we're making the mind itself the meditation object, then it's useful to remember this fundamental dyad that we've been talking about: awareness and its object. This is what we always work with—awareness itself and what we are aware of. There's always that basic dyad that structures everything.

Awareness itself is the presence of what is present, so awareness is not a something, but the presence of something. It's a quality rather than a thing. We gave the example: imagine stepping into a dark room at night and then turning on the light switch. Before flicking on the switch we don't know what is present. As soon as we hit the switch the room is illuminated, and the point is, of course, the whole room is illuminated and everything is revealed at once. Bang! So the light illuminates everything. But what we do is we tend to focus only on a few things within the room that are of interest and concern to us. So the attention immediately selects just a few familiar aspects of the room. Bang, there it goes.

Have you ever cleaned houses and then discovered in odd places layers of dust, and you've got no idea how it got there? Yet it was there in plain sight. I liked Jane's comment about vedana hiding in plain sight. The light illuminates everything.

Everything is available, but we don't see most of it because of where we put our attention. Most of what's going on we simply don't notice—it's invisible. But that doesn't mean it's not illuminated. That's part of the choices we make. Why we focus here rather than there is driven, of course, by vedanā. And so again, getting to know vedanā, you get to see this whole process of selection: I'll send the awareness here, I won't send it there.

I remember one example. One time I was doing walking meditation during a retreat, and the mind was particularly restless and couldn't focus on the walking. Then it occurred to me to note, or to name: avoiding what? As soon as I did that, it was like the awareness went bang to some element of discomfort in the mind, in the heart. To avoid that, I was doing all this thinking. The mind was generating all these stories to keep me away from here. So I just kept doing that—avoiding what? And when the mind would get restless again: avoiding what? Ah. Very quickly, everything was quite settled and I was right there. It was quite interesting.

Again, it was there. What was happening was there, but I just didn't want to look in that direction. But it was available. It was illuminated. I just didn't want to go there because it was unpleasant. And therefore, because I wasn't going there, it was dominating the entire experience. This is quite common when we practice.

So awareness is like the light. It illuminates. It brings everything into presence. But we organize awareness. Awareness will land somewhere in a particular location and it will construct some sense of meaning and coherency around that location. It will organize the contents of the room, as it were, in some particular way that makes sense to us and gives us a sense of meaning and even purpose.

Here's a rough example. Notice how you come to a place like this—you come to this place, in fact. You're going to be meditating here for a month and you try to get to the hall early so you can pick your spot. Then you gather the furniture, settle in, and every time you turn up here you go to that spot. Have you ever had the situation in which you walk into the meditation hall and someone's in your spot? How absolutely outrageous that is! So you sit down, but there's a certain amount of edginess because you've actually never been in this hall before. You've got to get used to it all over again.

This is how we work. This is how awareness itself works. It settles, it lands. The Buddha uses this term, the landing of awareness. Then it organizes itself around that location and gets comfortable with it. That's where we construct our sense of identity and our world.

We experience—we're not simply aware of, we are aware from. There's a particular place from which we are aware. Again, it's habitual; we're used to that. With the thought stream, we are aware of it from a certain place and we are used to aiming our awareness to certain aspects of the thought stream, usually content. When thinking comes up, what am I interested in? I'm interested in what I'm thinking about. What is significant to me? The content of the story. So it's always content.

What we're doing in this practice is reorganizing the normal habitual structure of awareness by learning to attend to what we normally ignore—things that are there and available but we normally just put aside. We normally ignore them because we're interested in something else.

So the key here in this practice is learning to drop any concern with the content of our thinking. The content is basically irrelevant—it has nothing to do with anything. I like to work on the principle that every thought I think is a lie, including the thought that every thought I think is a lie. I find this a very useful working principle myself.

Some people argue with me. They say, "No, no, no, some thoughts are true." I don't try to persuade them otherwise—I simply find this a useful working principle.

What we're interested in is not what we are thinking about, but the process of thinking itself. Thinking is a process—it's constructed and conditioned by something, and it in turn constructs and conditions something. That's what we're interested in. In other words, what the Buddha calls dependent arising. This is actually what we're interested in regarding everything: process. Things arise and cease—how they arise and cease. That's what we're interested in.

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj compares this practice to a mother watching a child play with a favorite toy. The child is playing with the toy, and the child's focus is on the toy—that's what's important to the child. The mother is separate from this but really interested. She's not interested in the toy, however—she's interested in the child playing with the toy. You see the difference?

We are normally like the child, and our job is to become like the mother. It's not that we have to throw the toy away—the toy is not the problem. What we have to do is step back and watch the game. That's what's interesting, and that is what can teach us something.

We're going to do a few basic exercises in this. For each one, we will begin by settling awareness in the body, grounding ourselves there. From that foundation, at some point I'll ask you to direct your attention to the mind. We'll be looking at some aspect of the thought stream.

If you get lost—in other words, if you get lost in the content of the thinking—drop it, come back to the body, re-establish yourself, and then return to the mind. The body is always the background. In a sense, it's the body that thinks. Keeping a sense of this background is extremely helpful.

Any questions or comments before we get started?

If you would, settle into your meditation posture. From there, settle into your normal meditation object. And at this point, stop thinking. Just don't think. Stop thinking.

Any luck? Maybe no.

"A couple of times I asked myself, 'Am I thinking?'"

Were you thinking at the time?

"No. But I did think, 'Am I thinking?'"

But apart from that, you weren't?

"No. Images sometimes lead to thinking. So if I stop the images, I go back to the..."

So you had images, but you didn't turn them into stories. What category would images be in?

You notice how we have made no attempt to actually define thought? We've blathered on about stories, but that's for the next exercise.

Did anybody consider the exercise to have been a total failure?

They just kept thinking continuously?

I had images too, and I thought, well, there's only just thought, so...

So did you reflect on that? Did you think about that?

Yeah.

So you had images and then commentary on the images?

Yes.

What questions about images is this thinking? It's a very good question, of course. It's like, what is thinking?

Blake?

I have a few thoughts, but you told us not to think of the content. I was trying to think of other factors of thought, like the tenor or the sort of timbre of the thought, like a radio in another room. What sort of voice it had, that sort of feeling, what sort of qualities it had apart from the actual story of it.

Did you have a look at that?

Couldn't get there.

So all you got was the story?

The second one hooked me.

The reason why I do this first exercise, apart from entertainment value, is to illustrate the addictive quality of thought. A lot of people get really frustrated with this. It's a minute and a half, and I get the impression that some people spend a minute and a half

thinking, "What a stupid idea, what is he talking about?" But it illustrates the addictive quality. Basically, it's the classic story of the addict: "I can stop any time I want to. It's just that I don't want to."

This is the relationship that we're interested in. The thinking itself is mostly pretty pointless, but it's the relationship which is interesting. But as pointed out, we've so far made absolutely no attempt to even define what we're talking about. So this next exercise, we're going to look at what exactly do we mean by thought.

What we're going to look at is the question: how do I know that I'm thinking?

So if you get into your meditation posture, settle awareness in the body, and turn your attention to the mind. Are you thinking? If you are thinking and if you know you are thinking, then thoughts must be appearing to you in some way. How do thoughts appear? Do they appear as words? As visual images? As feelings? As combinations of these? As something else? Study the flow of these thoughts. Don't focus on their content, but on their appearance, how they present themselves to you.

How do thoughts appear? What are they?

How do they appear? Of course for the Buddha the question "what are they" and "how do they appear" is the same question. Because all there is is phenomena, appearances. They come and go.

I noticed that images appear and words appear, but with images it always seems that they just come out of nowhere. But with words sometimes they come out of nowhere. Sometimes I definitely get the feeling that I created it. So images just seem to pop up by themselves.

Yes, I don't feel they're created.

And some words pop up like that, but some words, there's a decision behind them. There's some kind of active agency.

So you've got images and words.

Yes.

And the words are sometimes written but usually they're spoken.

So sometimes visually they're written and sometimes just sounds.

There's a sense of body sensation and movement. So it could be words or not words. If they weren't words there was something which I would describe as body sensation.

So there's a physicality to the thought.

There's a fascinating range in how thought manifests itself. For some, it begins as pure body sensation—a movement, an energy that may or may not crystallize into words. The physicality comes first, then perhaps emerges into language, though it doesn't always make that transition. Sometimes thoughts simply surge around as body sensation, understood and known but never verbalized.

This embodied quality of thought feels distinctly different from fantasy or mental proliferation, which tends toward the disembodied. When thoughts remain at the level of physical sensation, there's both the bodily experience and the mental cognition—a knowing of the meaning without spelling it out explicitly.

The location of thoughts also varies significantly. Some practitioners notice words appearing in the head with heavy cognitive content, while others arise in the chest carrying emotional resonance. The affective quality seems to determine the physical location—different sources manifesting in different places throughout the body.

Visual imagery presents another dimension entirely. For many, planning or questioning naturally takes the form of internal pictures rather than words. Some practitioners even report experiencing internal sounds—not necessarily verbal but auditory nonetheless—a phenomenon that can feel quite novel when first noticed.

What's particularly intriguing is how these patterns shift over time with practice. One practitioner shared how their thinking had transformed through retreat experience. What once involved a complex combination of words, images, and internal commentary had gradually simplified. The verbal narrative had dropped away, leaving primarily visual imagery.

Even more subtle was the discovery of how quickly images can arise in response to sensory input. The sound of a bird call might instantly generate the faintest image of the bird in its tree—so subtle it almost went unnoticed. This reveals how imagery can operate below the threshold of obvious awareness, taken for granted while words and commentary feel more like an active narrative demanding attention.

This points to the layered nature of mental activity. Words operate at the surface, obvious and narrative-like, while underneath flows this stream of subtle imagery, working quietly in the background of consciousness. The practice of observing thinking reveals these usually invisible processes, showing us the true complexity and richness of our inner landscape.

At that particular time, it's a response to the feelings in my body—a response. Today I'm feeling particularly exhausted, and I keep coming back to this: arms of tiredness, "I don't want to do this anymore"—negativity, aversion, pushing away. It's a response to the body. So the condition of the body, the body's state, conditions the kind of thoughts that will arise.

"The sentence 'how do souls appear'—I felt like it could be used when I was doing it to make the souls like... not being there, to sort of go empty. Because when you think 'how do souls appear,' it's like concentration, and there's no thoughts."

"Like when you said before, 'stop the thinking,' I just felt like I was going to burst out laughing quite frankly. But 'how do souls appear' then? I find it like a trying goal. Where do they go? Where are they? You know, like... it's more like an emptiness than actually trying to stop it."

Trying to stop thinking is totally perverse—for most people. For some people, not. I tell this story. I've done these exercises for donkey's ears. Years ago, I was doing this introductory meditation once a week at the Buddhist library in Sydney. We did this exercise with these people who were coming once a week for introduction to meditation. And we did the first one: stop thinking. I said, "So, any luck?" And there was one young woman who said, "Yeah, it's like turning off a tap. You just turn it off."

Then we did subsequent exercises like this one, and the more we did, the more frustrated she felt. She was feeling like a complete failure at meditation because she couldn't do any of those exercises. Having turned the tap off, she couldn't figure out how to turn it on again. And I've often wondered what happened—how long did the tap stay off?

So there's this huge variety in the way that people respond. Some people can actually not think by making incredible effort to focus. But they say it's like there's this wall, and then the pressure on the other side of the wall builds. Then stuff starts to leak underneath. Then cracks appear. In other words, it doesn't work. It's not sustainable.

But in other ways, what you're pointing out is that if I actually focus on thinking, the more I put the spotlight on it, the more it disappears. But that also takes a lot of effort.

"I found it really strange, but I wanted to reach that point where the source comes from, and so it was all focus, kind of. So the thoughts have really more space because they're thoughtful."

That's very interesting when you do that. But of course, what we're looking for are strategies that we can employ over time. If a particular strategy requires a lot of effort, that's not sustainable. It's useful sometimes—you play with it and see what happens—but it's not sustainable. So we're looking for a relationship that is sustainable, a relationship to the thinking mind that we can sustain over a period of time.

"Is there a part in the suttas where I think the Buddha says the last resort for dealing with thoughts is to kind of crush them and squash them out of existence?"

Yeah, that's the last resort. And you wouldn't do it for long because you'd just get exhausted.

"I had this thought: what makes my thought different from sensations? And the other thing was the source of the thought, which was the mind."

So then I thought, they're like mind sensations. Like you've got a sore leg, the equivalent would be some sensation, not from the leg, but there'd be a thought that would be just the same irrelevancy as that physical sensation, but mental thought—just a coloring coming from the mind rather than from the body.

I like that expression—it's a mental sensation—because mind is a sensitivity and it's registering all the time. When we ask the question "what is thought?" one of the problems we have, again with language, is that our culture is impoverished when it comes to words that talk about mind.

You look at the Buddha—he has this rich vocabulary for different aspects of mind. And we just don't have these concepts. So we have "thought," and it just covers a huge amount of stuff. Whereas the Buddha has a whole number of different terms that look at different aspects of mental activity. And it helps because if you have a concept, it's like you have a direction with which to send your awareness. And it helps to become more sophisticated in your understanding of what's actually going on in the mind. The fact that the vocabulary exists indicates that it's being used by people who have this sophistication of understanding of what's going on in the mind. So it's something that we need to develop.

Shall we move on to the next exercise? Which has already been anticipated. This one is: where do we think? Where do you think?

So again, establish your posture and subtle awareness in the body. And from there, settle into your normal meditation object. Now turn your attention to the mind and in particular, turn your attention to the place where you think. Where do you think?

This is similar to locating the place where physical sensations arise. The difference is that physical sensations have physical location while the thought stream may not. People sometimes experience their thoughts in the general area of the head, and it may be useful to begin there. But don't take anything for granted. Where do you think? Is there a specific location? Is there more than one location? Does this location change? Or is there absolutely no location?

Where do you think?

Okay. Where is it? Where are the little buggers?

"I was finding a circle of the head and chest."

Oh, okay. No more specific than that?

"I could work out where they weren't, which was mainly the legs and arms. They definitely weren't there."

So the general area of head and chest, but you couldn't pinpoint it?

"No. But it was clear where they were not."

"So wherever your attention goes, that's where the thought is. Including outside the body?"

"I had a sense that I was perceiving them here, but I wasn't generating them there."

So that's in front of you?

"Yeah, in front of me was where I was perceiving them. But they weren't being generated there."

So they might have been projected from somewhere else?

"Yeah, but I couldn't find where they were. But you don't know where they're projected from. You've just got the finished product, and that's out here somewhere."

It's interesting. Two out of three is definitely outside the body.

"I had that same experience that Katie was talking about. However, when I realized that when I was generating, there wasn't a space that I was generating from. It was just in a different realm."

What do you mean?

Different realm. It wasn't like there was a tendency to place it somewhere in the body, but it's not a... We do that. We construct that. Yet where we construct it from is not in the body. It's not of the body. It's not in our realm.

So basically it doesn't have location.

No. Location in a physical sense. If location is described as physicality, then it doesn't have location. So it's not a case of not finding it. It's simply not there. There is no location.

"I thought you were generating my thoughts. They were coming from way behind you."

So there's a difference between where you experience them and where they're coming from.

"Is there? Something like that. Is there? Because I experience them anywhere. In me, out of me. I'm like... It's not the right word. I sense them anywhere. How they arrive there. Or where they arrive from."

Yeah, where they come from. That's a whole different issue. And you don't have any clues about that. You've just got them where they pop up.

"Yeah, where I experience them."

Where you experience them. But what's behind that or underneath that?

"I'll have to look into that."

Yeah, I think that's it. That is a very interesting question. And you notice how it's like something grabs you.

If you look at the way one's meditation practice develops over time, what direction it goes in. And people's practice goes in different directions. Many years ago I was talking to one meditator who said, "Let's say you have a meditation hall with twenty people inside it. Let's say that they've only meditated at the same place with the same teacher, following the same instructions, and none of them have had any experience of any other form of meditation or any other meditation teaching. If you went around and asked each one of them, 'What are you doing?' it would be twenty different answers."

So people, in meditation practice, head off. And this I've discovered as a teacher is definitely true. Because you get to hear other people's experience. It's amazing what people do. Your meditation practice over time heads off in a different area.

Now what determines the direction? To me there's basically two factors. One is: what are your obstacles? What's getting in the way? So you have to deal with that. If I've got a problem in my meditation practice, I've got to work with that. Because otherwise I just get completely bogged down.

And the other thing here is what I'm interested in. What is it easy to pay attention to? What I find interesting. And sometimes, of course, those two are actually the same thing. If you're interested in your obstacles—which is my case, I'm interested in distraction—

I find distraction fascinating. For me, the basic koan of my meditation life is, why is it that I can't keep my awareness on a meditation object for more than 2.5 nanoseconds at a time? Why? I'm really interested in distraction.

So if you find something interesting, go for it. Because it's easy to develop and maintain mindfulness on that if you're interested in it. And of course, if you're looking at an aspect of mind, this is fantastic, because seeing the nature of mind is very, very useful. And it doesn't matter from what point you enter.

This principle of dependent arising, this multidimensional network of conditionality—once you're in it, all the pathways will become available. The practical problem for most of us is how do we get in there? What's our entrance? So if you find something which grabs your interest and attention, go for it.

Again with this kind of exercise you get this huge variety of different responses that people get. People find their thinking in all sorts of weird places, inside the body, outside the body. Some people simply cannot find location—they just can't find it. And some people will declare with great confidence, it's not that I can't find it, it is that it does not apply. There is no location to thought.

I've had all of them. I've had times when I've been able to pinpoint the exact location of thought and I've had times where it just does not apply. Thought is both everywhere and nowhere simultaneously—it just doesn't apply. But the thing is with these exercises is there is no right answer, there's no correct answer. It's simply an exercise in directing attention into the mind and seeing what happens. Whatever happens is what happens. Every answer is the right answer.

The important thing is we're learning to look at the thought stream without getting caught up in the content. So the basic principle is find some aspect of the thought stream which is not the content and focus on it. And it doesn't matter what it is so long

as it holds your attention. And when you're not focused on the content you're not feeding the content and the whole thing collapses. And you're just watching the activity of the mind, which is extremely useful.

Sometimes you need to know enough about the content to know what hindrance is. Because if I completely ignore the content, how would I know if something was ill will or sense desire? What does ill will feel like in the body? It feels horrible. But that's how I know. There's always a step where I go, "That bastard... oh." But that's how I know.

In other words, basically there's one thing that the content of thought can tell you: the current state of your citta. We think that thinking tells us about what's happening in the world. We even think that it tells us what's going to happen in the world or what did happen in the world. But actually all it tells us is the current state of the citta. Which could also mean what hindrance?

So that is a useful piece of information that you can pick up. But it might be interesting for you as a meditation exercise to try to work out the hindrance without thought.

"Don't take the easy path of having someone tap you on the shoulder and tell you what it is. You should echo it in the body—it's definitely something in the body."

This brings up the issue of meaning. One of the basic functions of the mind is to give the experience meaning. So I can have something going on in the body which I'm very, very clear about. But what does it mean? Do I need some kind of story to tell me that? Or can I have meaning without the story, without the thought? Interesting question.

What can I experience without meaning? Can I experience without meaning? Or what do I, if I experience without meaning, what is it? I've worked with this—I got very interested in this a while ago—and sometimes there is experience without meaning. But the problem is that as soon as I notice it, it has meaning. As soon as I notice it, it has meaning. A function of awareness gives it meaning. Which is, "Oh, this is experience without meaning."

And I've already lost it. As soon as you notice it according to that dimension of meaning. But that meaning is a concept.

Yes, but it can be very subtle. Like in the example I gave—let's say I'm doing walking meditation and I look at the end of the track and think, "Oh, that would be good to get there." That indicates vedanā. But let's put it slightly differently: I look at the end of the track. How do I know that's the end of the track? That's meaning. Now I'm not thinking, but simply in the seeing there's a knowing that's the end of the track.

"Isn't it that to be aware you've got to have some sort of meaning? You can't be aware of things that don't have any meaning."

Is that true? I'll think about it this morning. Don't think about it. Try to find it. Don't waste time thinking about it.

"If it has no meaning at all, isn't it a bit like neither positive nor negative? Is it sort of irritatingly confusing?"

Is it? "Irritatingly confusing" is a meaning. It's the meaning that we put onto the experience.

When you look at dreams, when you start to do recollecting of dreams, you can give meaning to it if you want to. Meaning is what you ascribe to it. But watching the mind ascribe meaning is quite interesting, regardless of the question of whether you can not have meaning. Watching the creation of meaning and the investment that we have in it is really quite interesting. Again, this is an aspect of seeing ourselves create ourselves and our world. And in seeing this process, we are in that very action deconstructing. So we're approaching the unconstructed.

Peter?

"Words around that insight, which is great. And I'm really happy to have words to put around that. There's a good—I'm just thinking about it now—there's also a great felt sense as well. So it feels really good to get the insight that that's something I've been cooking on for a very long time. So I love having words that come to my brain around that time, in my thought process. They're very attractive."

Even for a normal human life, absolutely necessary. But it is interesting to see if you can get actually underneath that. And what is there, if there's anything?

Kim, did you want to say something?

"This is just to lean on something Katie said about hindrances. Last night I was feeling sleepiness, really gross sloth. Just go to bed. I hope this wasn't during the Dharma talk. It was. I thought, 'I'm just going to get out of here. I'm going to lie down.' But anyway, I thought, 'I can't leave. I've got to watch this.' And I went to the vedanā and I experienced there was a real heaviness in the body. So when the talk was over and you left, I did lying meditation but not for very long. And it went away immediately. It was like the mind had discovered the process out of it. Oh, it's just heaviness. It's not—"

You know, the mind stopped thinking, "Oh, I've got to go to bed. I'll try another posture—one closest to going to bed." And it worked. Once it became simply heaviness, it no longer was the hindrance.

That's precisely it. The hindrance was something you had carefully constructed out of raw materials such as heaviness, but also resistance and aversion. It's a fascinating example of the constructed nature of experience. We take for granted, "Oh yes, this is X," but when we start to examine it closely, we discover something quite different.

The examination included your decision to go into the lying posture—that was a wise decision. You could allow yourself to experience the heaviness directly, allow the body to feel it fully. It was a suitable posture for investigation. This is what I would call a craft decision: How do I work skillfully with this? One approach is to lie down and create space for exploration.

You set it up in such a way that you could go into the experience and tease it apart, finding its elemental qualities. You focused on the most obvious quality—the heaviness—and deconstructed the whole fabrication. This is essentially what we're doing in practice. What we take to be real is often just a construct. This becomes increasingly evident when working with the mind.

Since time is moving on, let me offer another exploration following from yesterday's discussion: What does thinking feel like? What does it actually feel like to think? I recommend playing with this question if you need something to investigate.

One final reflection on thinking: To me, thinking is essentially the cognitive aspect of the mind. We've discussed vedana, the feeling aspect, and thinking generally covers the cognitive dimension—the knowing aspect, how it works, what it constructs, and how it moves. Using the thought stream as a meditation object provides a gateway into understanding how the mind constructs meaning and how the process of knowing actually functions.

I think it was Jane who mentioned experiencing a knowing that may or may not be turned into words. I find this observation fascinating. I call this "the one more cup of coffee before I go" syndrome. As a dedicated coffee drinker, I notice that the thought "it's time for another cup of coffee" occasionally arises. But when I pay careful attention, I realize there's a moment of instant knowing that precedes any verbalization. The words cement the knowing, but they also cement the one who wants the coffee, embedding that person into the whole situation. Yet the knowing was already present.

When you use thinking as a meditation object, you discover something interesting: you'll think less, but the quality will improve. You begin to realize that, at a conservative estimate, ninety-nine percent of our thinking is a complete waste of time—everybody's time, and especially our own. The half-life of an unattended thought is perhaps twenty nanoseconds.

This reminds me of a recent study where researchers attempted to reproduce three hundred significant psychological studies, and in the vast majority of cases, they couldn't replicate the results. The findings were dubious at best. Perhaps much of our mental commentary deserves similar scrutiny.

Thank you very much for your attention and engagement in this exploration.

CHAPTER 11

Mindfulness, Memory & Wisdom

Patrick Kearney · 1h02

> *Drawing from the Mahāsīhanāda Sutta (MN 12), Patrick Kearney examines the Buddha's teaching on four interconnected mental qualities: mindfulness (sati), retentiveness (gati), memory (dhiti), and lucidity of wisdom (paññā-viyatiya). He explores how sati, rooted in memory (sarati), involves tracking experience over time within an expanded present that includes the depth of past conditioning. Through practical examples—from yoga instruction to his own teaching experiences in Burma—Kearney demonstrates how mindfulness develops through three movements: clearly registering present experience, holding it within context, and maintaining continuity of engagement over time. He emphasizes that true mindfulness practice requires both the noting aspect and dhammavicaya (investigation of phenomena), creating space for wisdom to emerge through recognizing patterns in experience. The talk addresses the balance between analytical understanding and saddhā (faith/confidence), showing how genuine insight practice requires both cognitive precision and heart-based trust, particularly when navigating the challenging aspects of meditation development.*

Tonight I want to speak about mindfulness, memory and wisdom. We're going to explore mindfulness by examining how the Buddha speaks about it, looking specifically at one section from the Mahāsīhanāda Sutta, the greater discourse on the lion's roar.

Let me set the context by reading the beginning of the sutta:

"This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living at Vesali in the grove outside the city to the west. Now at that time, Sunakkhatta, a son of the Licchavis, had recently left this teaching and training. He was speaking to the Vesali assembly: 'The Samana Gotama does not have any accomplishments transcending the human, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of cultivated ones. The Samana Gotama teaches a Dhamma hammered out by reason, following his own line of inquiry as it occurs to him.'"

The scene is Vesali, located on the north bank of the Ganga in what is now Bihar state or eastern Uttar Pradesh. Vesali was the capital of the Licchavi Republic, the largest of the old tribal republics that still existed during the Buddha's time. The political landscape then was divided between the new centralizing absolute monarchies and the old tribal republics. The Buddha himself came from one of these old republics, the Sakya Republic.

Sunakkhatta, being a son of the Licchavis, was an upper-class citizen of this republic and a member of the parisa, their parliament. They practiced a form of direct democracy, and he had the right to speak in the assembly. He had recently become disillusioned with the Buddha, decided the whole thing was worthless, and quit. Now, with the Buddha visiting, Sunakkhatta was busily slandering him in the assembly.

Notice how he calls him "the Samana Gotama"—using Gotama, the Buddha's family name, rather than "the Buddha" or "the Blessed One." Samana was the category of practitioners and philosophers that the Buddha belonged to. This form of address marks him as an outsider, rather like saying "Reverend Gotama." His criticism was that the Buddha "does not have any accomplishments transcending the human, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of cultivated ones"—in other words, he's not spiritually enlightened. He claims the Buddha "teaches a Dhamma hammered out by reason," suggesting he's merely thought up some theory and is spouting nonsense.

When Sariputta, going through the city, hears about this slander, he reports it to the Buddha. The Buddha then launches into this discourse—a lion's roar, a sīhanāda. A lion's roar is a statement of absolute certainty and conviction: this is the way it is. Here it concerns the Buddha's right to leadership, defending both his enlightenment and his authority as head of what had become a huge international organization—the Sangha and the Buddha Sāsana.

This discourse occurs when the Buddha is already an old man, about eighty years old. In fact, he will die within a year. Sariputta is also elderly and will die before the Buddha. In this conversation between two old men, as the world changes in ways they don't appreciate, the Buddha addresses the subject of mindfulness and its relationship to wisdom, particularly in the context of old age.

The Buddha tells Sariputta: "There are certain samanas and brahmanas"—the two categories of philosophers and practitioners that existed; brahmanas being the hereditary Vedic priesthood and samanas being everyone else—"whose doctrine and view is this: 'As long as this good man is still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth in the prime of life, so long is he perfect in his lucid wisdom. But when he is old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life and come to the last stage, being eighty, ninety or one hundred years old, then the lucidity of his wisdom is lost.' But it should not be regarded so.

"I am now old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life and come to the last stage. My years have turned eighty. Now suppose I had four students, each with a lifespan of a hundred years, perfect in mindfulness, retentiveness, memory and lucidity of wisdom. Suppose they continuously asked me about the four establishments of mindfulness and that I answered them when asked."

Suppose they remembered each answer of mine, never asked a secondary question and never paused except to eat, drink, urinate, defecate and rest. Still, the Tathagata's Dharma teachings, his detailed explanations of Dharma and his replies to questions would not end before those four students of mine would be dead at the end of their hundred years. Sariputta, even if you have to carry me about on a bed, still there will be no change in the lucidity of the Tathagata's wisdom.

The Buddha's not taking any nonsense from these ambitious young teachers who think wisdom diminishes with age. He's talking about mindfulness and wisdom, giving this vivid image of four perfect students, each endowed with mindfulness, retentiveness, memory and lucidity of wisdom. They're engaged in conversation about Satipatthana, the very practice we're doing here. The dialogue flows back and forth continuously. Because these are perfect students, the Buddha never has to explain anything twice. They don't need clarification—they understand every answer immediately. So they're moving rapidly through the entire teaching.

The Buddha could speak about this practice for a century and still have more to say. This gives you a sense of the vast depth within this practice of mindfulness.

Let's examine these qualities the Buddha mentions and how they interconnect. First is mindfulness itself—sati, derived from the verb sarati, meaning "to remember." Mindfulness is fundamentally about keeping the present in mind. But what do we mean by "present"? The Buddha isn't speaking of clock time but of experienced time—an expanded present that, in a profound sense, is the only thing there is.

If I look for the past, I cannot find it. I cannot experience the past directly. I cannot experience the future. All I have is this present moment. This is simply the nature of existence.

Yet this present has tremendous depth. It is profoundly shaped by what has preceded it. The present is what it is largely because the past was what it was. Right now we're here together in this present moment—this particular situation unfolding. But why does it exist at all? And why is it precisely as it is?

Each of us has made countless decisions and performed countless actions over many years that have culminated in all of us sitting here together now. This situation is the product of years of choices, decisions and actions by each of us, as well as by the entire network of people who conceived the vision of building a meditation center in the Blue Mountains, who actually built it, and who continue maintaining it to this day.

When you truly look at it, there's this vast network of human interactions converging to create this moment. This present is what it is now largely because of everything that happened in the past. So this present moment contains enormous depth reaching back through time.

The fact that the present is shaped by the past is precisely what makes learning possible. Learning requires time to develop. Each person in this room has cultivated their meditation practice to a certain level. When I experience my practice now, what I encounter is this present event. But this present experience is the fruit of decades of development. It simply could not occur without that foundation.

When we examine cultivating mindfulness, this involves three closely related movements.

The first movement is the most obvious. This present experience—what's happening right now—must be clearly registered. We have to be face-to-face with it, maintaining direct engagement with the present. Of course, the difficulty is that we tend to be seduced by past and future, or by somewhere else, some when else. We keep being drawn away from this immediate reality. So first, we must cultivate the ability to remain present.

Secondly, this present experience must be held within the context that surrounds it. When I'm aware of something, this something exists within a larger field. For example, when I follow my meditation object, this object is part of a wider field of sensation—it doesn't exist in isolation. The knowing of this meditation object is flavored by the mind that knows it, and this mind is in a certain condition which influences the whole experience. The mind knows it in a particular way, so there's both breadth and depth involved. This experience now, whatever it is, is dynamic. It has already transformed into this, having been something else, and is already turning into something else. Nothing stays still; everything is constantly moving. Nothing is finished yet.

Thirdly, recognizing that this present experience moves through time, we realize that to truly understand it, there must be a continuity of engagement. We have to stay with it over a period of time if we are to actually understand it. This is where we en-

counter tracking—anupasana—following experience over time while maintaining continuity of awareness and attention. This is how we develop the skill we've been discussing.

Let me offer an example. Imagine you arrive at your first meditation retreat, wanting to be incredibly spiritual, only to discover that sitting cross-legged and trying to remain upright is incredibly physically painful. You have no time to be spiritual because it hurts too much. This is not an uncommon realization when people begin meditation practice.

So you decide to do something about it and take up yoga. You research carefully and hear about a particular yoga teacher. She's been practicing yoga for thirty years, teaching for fifteen. She has an excellent reputation and runs wonderful classes. You sign up.

You arrive for your very first yoga class. They're doing basic postures. In the middle of class, the teacher says, "Everyone stop." She has a student demonstrate a posture and asks the class, "Take a look at this posture and tell me what you see."

Now imagine you're standing right next to the yoga teacher, with almost exactly the same view. You're both looking at the same person doing the same posture. Are you seeing the same thing? Absolutely not.

Even assuming your eyes function identically, you're not seeing the same thing. It's obvious. The yoga teacher is seeing a tremendous amount that you have absolutely no idea about. Yet you're both in the present, noting exactly the same object—except it's not the same object, or at least not the same experience.

The difference is that you bring twenty minutes of past to this experience, while the yoga teacher brings thirty years of past to this experience. And that makes all the difference.

This reveals an important aspect of mindfulness: mindfulness is memory. It's about our relationship to the past. Mindfulness involves both awareness and retentiveness—what in Pali is called dhāraṇā or gati. These translations come from Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Gati, G-A-T-I, translated as retentiveness, is the capacity to hold something in the mind—to be aware in such a way that a broader picture can emerge.

When we take up meditation practice, one of the things we discover is that much of meditation practice is quite mundane. We could even say tedious. And we tend to grow impatient with it. It's too ordinary.

All afternoon I've been sitting, walking, and it's like: breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, step, step, step, step, distraction, step, step, distraction, breathe in, breathe out, distraction, step, step, distraction, breathe in... God Almighty, what is this about?

What it is about—its meaning or any understanding that it contains—is something that emerges at its own pace over time. And so in practice, one of the characteristics that a meditator needs is the capacity to wait. To simply wait until something happens that completes the picture. Ah, this is what it's about. Ah, this is what's happening.

Retentiveness is the capacity to do this, to hold something in the mind until some kind of understanding can emerge. But again, time is central.

And then we have memory—*dhiti*. This is another word for memory. And this is the capacity to bring out from the deep places of the mind what has been previously stored there. Now, memory here implies a response to present experience that brings with it what has been held from the past. In other words, the capacity to apply one's experience to present circumstances.

The example that I like to give is about the first time that I taught in a meditation retreat. This was back in the 80s. I was a monk and not long out of Burma, and I was visiting Wat Suan Mok in southern Thailand. This is Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery, and they had set up this program where every month they would run a ten-day retreat for foreigners—basically spaced out tourists and hippies.

By this particular retreat, the whole program had developed to the point where they had actually built a meditation center on the other side of the highway from the main monastery. It's a huge thing. As far as I know, they still do it—a ten-day retreat every month is an enormous commitment. And of course the language of instruction was English.

So the monastery was always on the lookout for anyone who was: a) ordained, b) spoke English, and c) within the past decade had been within five kilometers of a meditation center. Because if you had these three qualifications, they grabbed you and they threw you into it and you were a meditation teacher.

So I was conscripted, much to my alarm. And I was given the job of interviewing the meditators. There were at least two of us who were doing this. I remember there were two of us in the same venue. This was the dining hall—this big kind of tropical place with a waist-high concrete wall and then pillars with a thatched roof so the breeze could come through. On the side of the wall there was a concrete ledge which you could

sit on. I was sitting on one side and this rather eccentric German monk was sitting on the other, and we were interviewing. I was very nervous because I'd never done this before.

I was not feeling very happy about it. Anyway, I was hoping no one would turn up, but someone did turn up to sit down. I tried to make friendly conversation, but they just wanted to talk about their meditation. And worse, this fellow wanted to talk about the problems that he'd got in meditation.

So he's telling me about this problem, and I'm sitting there wondering what to do. But it occurs to me: yeah, yeah, that happened to me. And so I say, "Well, yeah, that's familiar, that happened to me. Look, try doing this. It worked for me, it might work for you."

And the fellow looks happy and he goes off. And I think, "Phew, got through that one." But someone else comes. So it goes through the whole process again. I manage to say something because, you know, I'm in... basically, any hole that you can fall into, I've fallen into. So off they go.

And somehow I managed to survive that first round. And I was really relieved.

But the next day I'm back again. And who should turn up? The same person who turned up the day before. And he opens up by saying some of the most fearful and alarming words that any meditation teacher can hear: "I did what you told me." And of course I think, "Oh no, why did you do that?" So I say, "And what happened?" And he says, "It worked." Another relief.

So it goes on, and at some point during this process it occurred to me that I know about meditation. And it took me quite by surprise. Because you know, as a meditator, what do we do when we meditate? We're wrestling with some problem. Something isn't right. So we're kind of wrestling with it. And then we've got that more or less patched up. But by the time we finish congratulating ourselves, there's something else which isn't quite right. So we're kind of patching that one up. We've got to do something else and patch that one up. We've got to do something else and patch that one up. So all the time we feel like we're behind speed. So we're thinking, "Well, I'm not very good at this. If I'm making progress at all, it's incredibly slow."

And what we don't realize is that each time we go through this process, we're learning something. But we're so close to it that we don't recognize it. And it's only later on, when somebody says something like, "Yeah, I was meditating but this terrible thing

happened," that you realize, "Yeah, that happened to me. I was completely stuck there, but I did find a way through and you could try doing this." And you suddenly realize, "I actually know about this."

This is memory in the sense that the Buddha is talking about it. It's not that I'm sitting down and thinking, "Oh, what happened then? Maybe it's in the filing cabinet somewhere." It's just that there's a problem now, and out of apparently nowhere, suddenly, "Ah, I'll try this. This seems to be the right thing to do." And often it is.

So this kind of experience is familiar to anyone who has cultivated a craft. You look at it properly and you know what to do about it. And someone who doesn't know the craft can think, "Wow, that's impressive." But for you it's like, you know, it's no big deal.

And then we come to *pañña-veyatia*, the lucidity of wisdom. So you can see in these previous three, what's been happening is that an understanding has been developing over a period of time. Not quickly, but over a period of time, some kind of understanding has been developed based on the basic practice of mindfulness, which is tracking experience over time.

And then we have *pañña-veyatia*, lucidity of wisdom. Now this involves the capacity to discern the patterns and directions of what's being held in the mind. So it's more than holding data—it's the ability to navigate data, to use it in some way. So something has been experienced, something has been learned, but how well do we know our way around it?

So the Buddha's lucidity of wisdom is shown in this example by his capacity to discuss all the subtle nuances of Satipatthana with these four perfect students for a century and still there's more that he knows. So he knows a complex landscape in all of its detail. And he knows how to move around.

So, for example, let's say that we're living in the big city and we join a group or an organization that meets once a week in the evening. And let's assume that these meetings take place in a part of the city that we have never been to or rarely visit. And we're a bit concerned about how we're going to find our way there on the first meeting. But fortunately, a friend rings us up and says, "Look, I'm going there too. Don't worry about it. I'll drive you. I'll pick you up at your place and I'll take you there." So at the time allotted, car pulls up, step into the front passenger seat, off you go. And he takes you there.

Now let's assume another scenario, exactly the same, except just as you're leaving, your friend says, "I can drive you there this week, tonight, but over the next few weeks I'll be away and I won't be able to drive you again. You're going to have to make your own way there." And you say, "OK, no problem," and off you go. Now in both cases,

you're sitting in the front passenger seat, being driven through the city to a particular destination. In both cases, you're seeing exactly the same landscape. Is there a difference in the quality of your awareness in the two circumstances? Yes.

In the first instance, it's simply seeing. You are present—right now I can see this, right now I can see that. You are in present moment experience.

In the second instance, you are certainly in present moment experience, but something else is happening. You're not just undergoing a series of events, but placing each one into a wider context, a wider landscape. If you didn't do this—let's say your friend was taken by surprise and thought he could drive you next week, but it turns out he can't, so suddenly you're driving there yourself—the experience might be something like: "Now here, I know we turned here, but did we turn left or right? Ah, that pub—I recognize the pub, but was it early in the journey or late? And that petrol station, that looks familiar, but did I see it on the left side or the right side?" There would be general confusion. Maybe you'd get there, but if you're tracking that journey, then you're looking at each event as part of a broader landscape, mapping something out as you go. You're creating meaning out of each experienced event by seeing how it fits into a broader pattern.

And this is the action of mindfulness. This is what mindfulness is all about. It's not just awareness—it's awareness over time, in the context of remembering the pattern of events, how things flow, how things fit together.

This is why there's an association between mindfulness and wisdom. Satipatthana, the cultivation of mindfulness, the establishments of mindfulness, is a wisdom practice. Often, instead of satipatthana, people will say insight meditation. Sometimes people say mindfulness meditation, sometimes insight meditation, and sometimes they get confused between the two. But this is why there's a close association between mindfulness on the one hand and wisdom on the other. It's because of its relationship to time and the activity of tracking experience over time so that patterns start to emerge.

Mindfulness—the job of being mindful—is not just being aware, but being aware in such a way that wisdom can emerge.

This is why, for example, I talked earlier about the relationship to distraction. I suddenly realize I'm distracted, and it can be useful at that point to look back. What happened? Just to check, to see if I can see it. Now I don't spend time thinking about it—if I have to think about it, it's not there. But I might just look there and recognize, "Oh, that happened." And so it's like seeing a pattern. In this instance, this arose because of

that. The next time something happens and I recognize I'm distracted, what's that? It might be the same thing, it might be something different. But I'm checking for the pattern.

As we go through this retreat, we are interested in the patterns—for example, asking the question: What's feeding this? This has been happening, but what's feeding it? Or what does this feed? There's an interest, a curiosity involved. How does all this unfold? How does it work?

The use of questions can be useful. When we ask a question of our experience, we don't think about it. If I have to think about it, it's completely useless. The question directs awareness.

Secondly, if I ask a question in the course of practice, the answer is completely irrelevant. What's important is the question. If it's a good question, it will stimulate something. Something will happen, something will become clear. The answer is just blah blah blah. But I can ask a question of my experience and then see something directly because the question aims awareness.

What we're talking about here is investigation, the second of the factors of awakening: dhammavicaya, investigation of phenomena. The way I see it, mindfulness has this very direct, earthy quality to it. It's like knocking on a door.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.

Each time I note, it's like bang, bang, bang. Let's say I'm going to visit someone and I have reason to be certain that they're at home. I knock on the door—bang, bang, bang, bang. But nothing happens. Just over there is a window. So I step across to the window and have a look inside. I can't see them, but I know they're in there somewhere. And so I keep looking in the appropriate direction.

The knocking on the door is like noting an object. There's a clear object—this is what I'm after. Looking through the window, the object isn't there, but I know there's something there. And so there's a direction to my awareness. This first one is like mindfulness and the second one is like investigation. Sometimes the mindfulness predominates and sometimes the investigation predominates, but they're both part of the scene.

If we have the mindfulness without the investigation, then we might become very mindful in the sense that we can creep about incredibly slowly and impress all our friends. We might develop very good concentration, but we don't necessarily get any wisdom. There are people who manage to do this practice for considerable periods of

time and don't seem to develop much in the way of wisdom. Maybe it's because the investigation factor is weak—the interest in and concern with the patterns of experience is not really there.

When we do this practice, we are learning to navigate our way through a landscape: the landscape of our own experience. We're learning to understand how all this fits together, how it works.

This first of all requires time. We have to give ourselves the time to acquire a skill. So don't be upset by failure. Of course there will be failure. Our old habits will reassert themselves again and again and again. But that's irrelevant.

I read in one dharma journal somebody's brief article, and I remember one bit from it. The writer said, "One of the basic qualifications for a person to learn how to meditate is the willingness to live with failure." I think this is profoundly true. For any new student who walks in the door, I think they should be questioned: Are you willing to live with failure? Because if you're not, you're wasting your time.

This willingness to live with failure—in other words, the willingness to keep at it over a period of time and give it the time for something to emerge—means slowly, gradually learning the craft. That involves applying a certain intelligence to the whole enterprise. There's also a degree of creativity involved in the practice. It's not just mechanically noting a meditation object that has been given to us by someone else. There's more to it than that.

By historical and cultural accident, I learned this practice in Burma. Burma is a very traditional and authoritarian culture in which obedience... I used to subversively think when I was at Mahasi Center that the two pillars of the Theravada are blind faith and mindless obedience. These are the two fundamental pillars of the most terrible of all the vadas: the Theravada.

They would agree with you. They would agree. That's the point. That's exactly right. As was explained to me, one of the signs of a good student is a good student never asks questions. I was told that when I visited a lay abhidhamma study group. It was interesting.

The mind state in the monasteries is medieval. The Sayadaw is up on the throne. What he's teaching you is what's in the books. You can check because the books are right there. And therefore it's the Buddha. And so that's it.

"Just believe it and do what I tell you. And no correspondence will be entered into." I remember one talk Upandita gave us. He was speaking to a room full of people who he had reason to believe would mostly end up being dharma teachers. And he was saying, "Look, you have come from other countries to Burma to learn how to meditate. You have come from other faiths, other traditions. And because you are bright and questioning and you have investigative minds, you have seen through the delusions of these false views that you were raised in. And as a result, here you are in this room listening to the Buddha Dharma. Now you can drop all that because what I'm telling you is the Buddha's teaching and you just bloody believe it." He didn't say bloody, but that was the message. No more investigation. No more thinking. No more asking questions. You've arrived at the truth—just believe what I tell you. That's the attitude.

The odd thing was that in the midst of all this dogmatism, the actual practice that he taught was a completely open inquiry. It was astonishing how he could manage to somehow hold these together, but he did and he does. The practice itself is a completely open inquiry into the nature of experience, but at the level of concept the whole thing is totally shut down. In this culture that doesn't work.

And if we try to do it—and some people do because they're full of faith—it just gets locked down. You can get a whole series of nice meditation experiences, but really that's it. Life doesn't transform the way it's supposed to. This practice is designed to stimulate wisdom, understanding. So it requires this sense of investigation, play, creativity.

The weakness in our culture, of course, as Upandita also pointed out, is the absence of saddha—inadequately translated as faith. We, as a culture, tend to come to the practice overly cognitively and with an unwillingness to trust, an unwillingness to trust the Dhamma or the Buddha. And this really is a handicap. And it slows us down.

Both are important: saddha and paññā, faith and wisdom. We might talk about these later in the retreat. But in terms of the way that we actually learn the method, it's not about reproducing someone else's instructions. It's about taking the instructions and making them our own and finding a way to use them to investigate and navigate this whole inner landscape of our experience and get to know how it works—what it does, how it moves, the patterns of it, the rhythms of it. And this is the wisdom aspect of the practice. And as you can see, it's closely associated with mindfulness.

Faith is the heart aspect. It has to do, for example, with the commitment, the passion, the ardency. And it has to do with the opening up of the whole field of vedanā as well, to me. And it also has to do with the opening to possibility. The universe is a lot bigger than anything I think it to be. And the willingness to open up to different possibilities is an aspect of saddha.

One way of looking at it, a very traditional way of looking at it, is: once you get a sense of the Buddha then you recognize he actually knows more about what's going on than I do. So I think I'll trust his opinion on the matter. I won't necessarily believe it, but I will certainly trust him. I would want to find out for myself, but I would be willing to step out in that direction if he recommends it to be a good direction.

Which obviously increases as your practice develops and you see the Buddhist teaching. So you get a confirmation system going. You first recognize, particularly in this culture, first comes... You try it out for perhaps cognitive reasons. That is to say, mindfulness is popular, psychologists like it—how could the psychologists be wrong? So you give it a go, and you're prepared to give it a go. And then perhaps quite quickly you recognize, "Oh yes, something's happening. This has a real possibility," or it's already helped.

And so you have that little amount of saddha and then you take another step forward and it works, and so the wisdom develops and the saddha develops so that they relate to each other. And I think at some point there is a click, there's a shift in which the saddha extends beyond the wisdom. There's a willingness to trust which involves a willingness to leap into the completely unknown.

There are some people who seem to maintain a cognitive relationship to it. And this is always like a balance sheet: this amount of effort, this amount of investment—what result will I get from it?

And at some point, I think basically progress stops. It's like you can get so far with that kind of attitude, but then that's it. At some point, you've got to be willing to take the leap if you really want to go further. And you won't take that leap without saddha.

So it suggests the heart has more breadth than the mind - the heart can hold more. I would agree with that. The heart definitely holds more and goes deeper than any cognitive understanding. Cognitive understanding is always just catching up.

I remember one Dharma gathering on the mid-north coast. We used to have these discussion sessions at the end. There were three teachers: Christopher Titmuss, the main teacher; Subhana Vazaghi; and me. One time, the question came from the audience: "Is Buddhism a religion?" Subhana answered first, explaining, "No, no, no, we're

studying the mind." Christopher gave a similar answer. When it was my turn, I said, "Well, I don't know if Buddhism is a religion, but I do know that I speak to Buddha and sometimes he answers." That's how I feel.

Could you expand on that - when you speak to Buddha, he answers?

Sometimes. Mostly he just listens. But sometimes he answers. And when he answers, he always says really good stuff. He's been very helpful over the years.

I'm not sure if I'm tricking myself, but to me there's a close link between the imponderables and faith. Some people are unwilling to go along until rebirth and nirvana and everything is explained perfectly according to how they can currently understand things. Whereas anything I don't understand gets bundled in the imponderable - which in my case is an enormous basket of stuff, not four things but forty million. This mental approach allows faith to continue because it's like, "Yeah, he'll tell me later," or whatever. It may or may not be revealed. Do you agree that's the link between cognitive understanding and faith?

Yes, it's one way of approaching it. It's one way of recognizing the limitations of the cognitive. Sometimes in retreat discussions, it's like a traffic jam where a person is wrestling conceptually with something I've said, which they don't conceptually get, and they just won't let go. Everything jams to a halt because this one person won't let it go until they hear a verbal formula which can be appropriately filed away within their cognitive structure.

When I say, "Look, don't worry, just forget about it. Maybe in five years, maybe in ten years it'll click, maybe not. You don't have to understand it," they respond, "No, that's not good enough. You've got to give me the formula so I can tick the box."

So there's a limit to cognitive understanding. But there is an understanding which goes beyond that, and that understanding is part of saddha. Saddha is not belief - not belief in a doctrine because someone says it's true. It's the heart's recognition of what is true.

It's rather like falling in love. You meet someone and you know this is the right person. Now imagine if you have that experience, but then an appropriately trained psychologist brings you a checklist requiring you to write down the data which supports this radical conclusion. Of course there isn't any. There's no way there could be. It's just impossible.

Saddha represents a different kind of knowing - a knowing through the heart rather than through the head. What we've been talking about tonight, this paññā, paññā-vimutti, the liberation of wisdom, is essentially the cognitive aspect. Saddha is the heart aspect. But when both are mature, they come together. They're like two sides of the same coin.

When we go to those deep places in meditation - I don't know how you respond - but those places are beyond the cognitive, aren't they? Being cognitive doesn't work there. There are no thoughts, no concepts. But if you want to explain it to somebody else, then it becomes cognitive again. We need to be able to drop all that conceptual framework and go, and I think saddha actually carries you there.

And the cognitive is bound up with language. So it's socially necessary. When the Buddha was awakened and he first thought—or it was suggested to him—that he should teach, he didn't want to because he thought there's no way that anybody's going to understand this. There's no way I can put this in words. Absolutely no way.

But he struggled and he found a way. And that's one of the reasons why the tradition reveres him—that he actually managed to do that, so that others can actually get a glimpse of it. But even then, of course, it's not just the words. You structure attention in a certain way. You do a certain practice. And then, ah, that's what he's talking about.

"Isn't that the function of the insight knowledges—to develop faith?"

Yeah, I think that's one function of the insight knowledges. It develops both wisdom and faith. And some—it's like udayabbaya ñāṇa, arising and passing away—faith is very strong there. But of course faith can be challenged in the dukkha ñāṇas.

So if you don't have the faith, if you don't have the saddhā, then you have a much harder time. And in this culture, this is a problem for people who do go through the insight knowledges. In this culture in particular, I think, they lack the degree of saddhā that you would have if you were Burmese.

"Interesting. It's saddhā that gets you through those."

"I've never experienced this dukkha that you speak of."

Let me ask you one simple question. Has it ever been horrible, horrible, horrible? If the answer is yes, you've experienced the dukkha.

"Strangely, when you said before that to meditate one has to have the willingness to live with failure, my hearing aids and my misperception—actually, I heard you say to meditate you need to have the willingness to live with faith. That's what I heard."

Interesting.

"And I translated that as trust and confidence. Because I know what you mean."

I think it's quite true. I mean, that's what you've ended up saying. You've also said that you have to have a willingness to live with failure, of course. But you also said that what drives us—we don't have a conceptual understanding of what nirvana is, and the reason we continue is because we have faith in that. We can see that we have confidence that there's something—there's freedom from suffering. That's why we have the willingness to meditate.

There's also, actually related to this, the problem of secular mindfulness. A lot of the propaganda in favor of mindfulness is all the "hallelujah brethren, this will solve all your problems," and it completely ignores the dukkha aspect.

"Absolutely. And people are in for a rude shock."

Well, they're already—I mean, can I just go off a little bit? They're already doing that now. I'm going to write a paper on it because there's already articles coming out—bad press about mindfulness now—because people are experiencing dukkha ñāṇas. They're experiencing negative side effects. There's "the dark side of mindfulness." Listen to all the articles—"dark side," "bad press." When you pay attention to experiences, what happens?

"Many years ago I was on a ten-day retreat with Sayadaw U Janaka, and this very new yogi asked, 'How does one get enlightened?' And he replied, 'One has to be able to know disappointment.' I thought that just really struck a chord with me."

I was reading through some of the websites and articles on the dark side of insight, checking it out and seeing what they had to say. And it was very obvious that there was a major lack of faith, a major lack of any appreciation of the devotional aspects of Buddhism, a lack of appreciation for things like the brahmavihāras as practice—reverence, faith, those religious-type aspects that I think keep the heart stable and keep the heart open and malleable and soft.

When you are facing dukkha, it's the heart stuff that's described by the Buddha as—is it appamāṇa, immeasurable, boundless? Whereas all the cognitive stuff is never described as boundless. It's always the qualities of the heart that are described as potentially boundless.

So I think that the religious aspect comprises the protective practices that keep you balanced.

The use of the word "religion" opens up a huge minefield. Well, you know, I'm in robes. I don't know how to say it otherwise. We'll grant you that permission.

It's delicate territory to negotiate. But we seem to have wandered off the point. I've forgotten what the point is.

So, thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 12

Tracking Choice

Patrick Kearney · 52 min

Patrick Kearney explores cetanā (choice or intention) as a meditation object within the framework of the Satipaṭṭhāna practice, focusing on the third foundation of mindfulness - cittānupassanā (contemplation of mind). Drawing from his extensive retreat experience in Burma, he examines how the Buddha's technical terms around choice and intention - including saṅkhāra (formations), sammāsaṅkappa (right aspiration), and adhiṭṭhāna (determination) - all center on the direction we send the mind.

Kearney illustrates these concepts through vivid stories from Burmese meditation centers, including the intense practice of noting intentions in walking meditation and the extraordinary determination practices he encountered. He explains how cetanā differs from our conventional understanding of intention, operating at much deeper levels of consciousness and manifesting as pre-verbal impulses and micro-decisions that construct our lives moment by moment.

The talk offers practical guidance for tracking choice as it arises in meditation - whether as physical or mental impulses, decisions between possibilities, or the subtle intention to think. Kearney emphasizes that even unsuccessful attempts to catch intentions serve to refine our aim and precision of awareness. He connects this microscopic level of sammāsaṅkappa (right aim in meditation) to the macroscopic choices that determine our life's direction, showing how understanding the arising of choice reveals the full range of possibilities available in each moment and opens the door to genuine freedom.

We've been going through the four Satipatthanas. We talked at first about the body, with different exercises there. Then we explored briefly with vedana, with feeling. Now we've started on citta. Yesterday we used thinking as meditation object. Thinking is normally used as a secondary object when it becomes a distraction. Not many people use it as a primary object, as a grounding object, although some do. They are unusual.

When we talked about vedana, we discussed this whole elemental realm of affect from which comes what we do, the movements of the heart. We also talked about the role of cetana—choice, decision, intention. Today we're going to speak more about tracking choice or intention as a meditation object, as an important part of the citta.

First, a bit of background. The Buddha has a number of technical terms that center around the concept of choice or intention or decision. All of them are about the direction that we send the mind in. We've already spoken about the way the Buddha uses the image of the path. That's obviously quite important to him.

Every path has two characteristics. One is someone has been there before. You can't have a path unless someone's already been there. So path implies a tradition going back into the past. One image the Buddha uses is the story of someone who's off in the bush and discovers an ancient path—overgrown, unused for a long time but obviously once used. So he follows this path and discovers this abandoned city, then goes back and recommends to the king that they clear up the path and restore the city. The abandoned city is Nibbana and the ancient path long forgotten is the path rediscovered by the Buddha.

So path has this sense of someone else having been here before. But equally, as that story points out, path has direction. A path leads somewhere. This sense of direction is really crucial for the Buddha.

You have terms which revolve around this sense of direction. For example, sankhara, particularly in the five aggregates, the khandhas, the five bundles. Sankharakkhandha represents the stream of impulses, desires, fears, and so on that flow through the mind—the stream of choices or intentions, what we are moved to do at any particular time. They're called constructions or formations because these are the main constructive or formative influences in our lives.

When we look back as adults, we can see that what we've been doing is constructing a life—this life that each of us is living. We've been working on it for a long time. We might not be particularly pleased with the end result, or we might be very pleased with the end result, but in either case, what we've got is something that we've been working on for a long period of time. We've been working on it through the choices that we've been making. These choices are sankharas, constructions, because they construct our lives.

In the Eightfold Path, the second factor is sammasankappa. Sometimes this is translated as right thought—traditionally the most common translation in the older translations. It could be translated as right intention, could be translated as right aim. I translate it as right aspiration. There's no exact English equivalent, but in every case it refers to the direction in which we send the mind.

In a broader sense, particularly if you look at the major decisions that we make in our lives, we send the mind in a certain direction. This is what I'm going to do. This is where the heart and the mind are headed for.

So I go through school and come to a decision that I'm going to go to university, and then I'm faced with a fundamental choice. I could study something totally useless and pointless like economics or law or business, or I could study Buddha Dharma. Which one will I do? Depending on which decision one makes, one heads off in a certain direction. That direction will have a lot of influence. I choose a particular career stream, let's say, and then I have a particular group of friends and associates.

I have a particular group of elders, seniors, teachers, and bosses. I discover there are certain things I should learn, other things I should simply keep up with and know about. There are certain kinds of conversations I will have with these people, certain fashions that I will quickly hear about, certain things that I discover are approved of or disapproved of, encouraged or discouraged. My life starts to be shaped in a certain way.

Alternatively, if I make the wise decision and study Buddha—though there isn't much opportunity in Australia to study Buddha at universities—then my life will be formed in a different way. And in the process, I will become a different person.

Then you get another term: *adhitthana*. Anybody who's done Goenka knows all about *adhitthana*. This is resolution or determination. This is a deliberately created, even forcefully created intention, choice, or direction—a determination. In terms of meditation practice, perhaps force is the wrong word. So I might make a determination: "I'm going to sit for an hour without moving." That's a determination, though it's not really forceful. If it's forceful, it's definitely not going to work. But a determination, a resolution: "I'm going to do this."

The most famous one is the Bodhisattva's resolution just before he sat down at the Bodhi tree: "Let flesh and blood dry up. May only bones and sinews remain. I will not move until I have attained my goal." When I think of that and I look around at the meditators... I shake my head. Life is full of contradictions.

In Burma, as I said, there are heaps of different methods. I discovered one of them when I was practicing at Mahasi, which is Sayadaw U Janaka's place just north of Rangoon, not far from the main highway. At some point the place was visited by a group of people from a neighboring meditation center just up the road, and I was invited to go and visit. So we piled into a taxi and headed north up the highway, then turned off to the left.

There was this enormous place—it was huge. At that time of year, it was largely deserted. Apparently it's full to bursting during the *vassa*, the rainy season retreat. Looking around, the kinds of people who were there were quite different from the kinds of people you see at Mahasi centers. At Mahasi centers you see middle class and upper class people. In this place, there were more lower class, working class, peasant-type people.

The practice there—this place was founded by an arahant who in the early 20th century was a local bandit. He used to go around robbing people, and his wife got concerned because she thought that he was going to head for a very bad rebirth. So she tried to convert him to religion.

The way that she did it was through a connection to a famous teacher called Sun Lun Sayadaw. He was a farmer who got religion. The only meditation instruction he got was from a fellow villager who had been to a retreat, who said, "Oh, you just note body sensation." So this farmer decided, "Right, body sensation, that's it." Complete *adhitthana*—he just noted body sensation all the time and started developing concentration. But feeling he had to go further, he dropped out from being a farmer and went into the forest and just sat. He would sit for hours, days, just noting body sensation.

If you ever try it, apparently it's a very good meditation object. What you do, if you want to try it today—let's say as soon as this talk is over, until lunch—just sit completely still. At some point body sensation will become strong, and it becomes a good object. So this is the method.

This Sun Lun was what we would call middle class, but not highly educated. He drew his audience from that class and taught in a very simple way. One of the ways in which he taught was by creating cartoon books—graphic novel-type things with lots of pictures and captions on how to do this meditation practice, so that people who weren't particularly literate could read it, and certainly not intellectual.

Anyway, the bandit's wife gets one of these comic books and she says to her wayward husband, "You really should take up meditation practice. Here's how."

He gives him the book. And he looks at the book. Now this guy is completely illiterate—he cannot read the captions. But he can look at the pictures. So he studies the pictures, works out the meditation method, and starts doing it.

Pretty soon he's abandoned being a bandit. He's also abandoned his wife. And he's living in the local cemetery, sitting on a grave. What he would do is generate a bit of samadhi by forced breathing—hyperventilation—and then just sit for hours or days at a time.

In the local area, people begin to notice that the bandit is no longer banditing. People begin to gossip: where is he? And it turns out that he's sitting for hours or days at a time on top of a tombstone in the local cemetery. Now, in any civilized society, what would you do? You'd call the police or you'd call the local mental health team. But what do they do? They go and feed him and look after him.

After two years of this, he's an arahant—fully awakened. So he creates this meditation center.

If you go to this place, the first thing you do is sit down and start hyperventilating. If you want a decent bit of concentration, you do it for a couple of hours at least. Then you drop it and just go into whatever's left—body sensation. If you want a halfway reasonable sit, it'll be a twelve-hour session. To go into the hall and come out after three hours—that's pretty wimpy. You're obviously not serious.

Now, if at the end of twenty-four hours you haven't moved—because you're being monitored—people will come and feed you water. Particularly if you're there for several days, you'll be washed and hydrated and looked after. So you don't have to worry while you're sitting. This is intensity sitting.

I went into the hall on a normal, quiet day. They have these enormous loudspeakers, and they play dharma talks from this original founder, which I couldn't understand because it's all in Burmese. But what you'd associate with listening to a dharma talk would be something like gentle instruction about peace and calm. But the sound coming out of these loudspeakers was shouting: "You've got to sit there! Don't move! Hold on! Keep going!" The loudspeakers are made of metal—really tinny.

Apparently this is hugely popular. But to do it, you have to be incredibly physically tough. And looking around, these people are. People who spend their lives working in the fields—they are tough. We're pathetic physically in comparison. "It hurts a little bit"—that's the standard attitude of the Australian meditator—but there's none of that nonsense there.

This is adhitthana. This hyperventilation is yoga—it's pranayama—and it is very effective for settling the mind. It's fantastic, if you could do it. But it didn't take long for me to figure out that this wasn't for me. And in fact, it wasn't for foreigners.

They had only had one foreigner who had actually practiced there. They were hunting for others. That's why they were interested in me. I said, "You've got the wrong person."

Let me ask you something: has anybody other than the original enlightened master of that tradition ever been enlightened since? I presume so—I don't know. I mean, there are lots of enlightened people in Burma.

To clarify what hyperventilation is: it's deep breathing, deep and fast, getting the diaphragm going like a bellows. "How come you don't faint?" someone asks. Well, you can faint. Some people do, but what usually happens first is you get tingling in the face, or trembling. If you want to experiment with this, I advise you to do it in your rooms—so if someone doesn't come out of their room for a couple of days, well... *laughter*

So this is adhiṭṭhāna. But again, it's about setting a direction and putting energy behind it.

Finally, we get to the word cetanā, the most commonly used one, usually translated as "intention." I prefer to translate it as "choice."

I don't like the translation "intention"—I think it's far too weak. In English, if you say "intention," it's coherent to say that one can act against one's intentions. We have the saying "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." In our cultural context, that makes perfect sense. But in a Buddhist cultural context, it's incoherent. If hell's over there and you're going in that direction... what? It just doesn't match.

Intention seems too general for me. Choice is specific. For example, I come down here and enter this room with the intention of giving a good talk—but choice is specific. Right now I choose this word. Right now I choose that word. Right now I choose to cut off this completely irrelevant conversation about hyperventilation and change the subject! *laughter*

So intention can be very broad, but choice is quite specific. What the Buddha is talking about is something much more specific rather than broad.

"Patrick, in English they have the word 'volition.' What's the difference between intention and volition?"

Volition would fit too with cetanā. Sometimes you see it. Saṅkhāra, as the fourth aggregate, is sometimes translated as volition or volitional formations. So volition would also work—it means will, voluntary action.

Voluntary, yeah. Same root, I presume, as voluntary.

So for the Buddha, chetana goes very, very deep. That's another difference between our sense of intention and the Buddha's sense of chetana. Intention goes to a certain depth and then it stops. But for the Buddha, intention goes really, really deep.

For example, the intention to think. Some people, when they meditate, are bothered by thinking. In fact, they would go so far as to say, "If only I could stop thinking, then I could meditate."

If you become a Dharma teacher and you simply point out to them, "All you have to do to stop thinking is to decide not to," what you would be telling them is the truth. Are they likely to be happy with that? No. They'd probably get angry with you. "What are you talking about? I'm not choosing to think. It's happening to me. I don't want to think. My volition is not to think. My determination is not to think. What the hell are you saying to me?"

Well, I wouldn't quite put it that way. But the fact is that if a thought arises, it's because there's been a choice to think. Now, depending on what you mean by thought, when we're playing with thought, people are saying mental contents arise, images arise, cognitions arise. These appear to arise spontaneously, but we go in and grab one of those and we turn it into something. That is a stream of choices. As soon as we choose, as soon as we drop the choice, the thinking stops.

Was there an intention at the very birthplace of the thought, or just sort of after the proto-thought? That would be a very interesting thing to look at. As far as I can see, the mind simply throws up. That's anatta, right? That's often given as an illustration of anatta—not-self. The arising of... the birth of it. Somebody said, "If it wasn't anatta, why would I be thinking all this stuff? I wouldn't be thinking, you know, 99%..."

But that's the other thing which people find very weird about the Buddha's teaching about choice: choice itself is anatta. It arises through conditions. There's no one choosing. This is why some people will insist there is no such thing as free will in Buddhism—because what they're saying is there's no such thing as someone who has a will which is free or otherwise.

But there is choice in the Buddha's teaching, and this choice goes extremely deep, much deeper than we would normally think it goes. But it too is just another conditioned phenomenon. It comes and goes depending upon conditions.

You can see it, for example, in addiction. If someone is caught up in an addiction and then you give them helpful advice—"Why don't you just stop? Just say no"—then this advice might not be seen as helpful, because from the subjective point of view, "I'm not choosing this; this is choosing me. I'm under the grip of something."

But in fact, it is a choice, because otherwise it would be impossible for anyone ever to overcome an addiction. But people do. Circumstances reach the point where the person decides, "That's it, I'm not doing this anymore." It may have to be extreme circumstances for the conditions in which that choice can arise, but ultimately that's what it is. It's a choice.

That choice has to be cultivated. If you're recovering from an addiction, you can feel each day that you've got to make the choice again, and again, and again, and again. The choice sets direction—your life will head in a certain direction because you're making these particular choices.

So the Buddha says, *cetanā* is *kamma*. Choice is action. The Buddha has a particular interest in this aspect of the heart-mind's activity because when we talk about *cetanā*, we're talking about that part of our experience that we can do something about. That's why it's so absolutely central.

Someone might ask: The choice of the addict—that's an act of will. It seems like an oxymoron to say that choice is a product of dependent origination. It seems so deterministic. How can you have choice if you have this process of dependent origination? Isn't it an act of free will to reject one's dependency?

This is why the radical nature of the teaching of dependent arising strikes us as so strange from our cultural perspective. We think, "How can that be?" But for the Buddha, *cetanā* is like anything else—dependently arisen.

In your sense of cause, you seem to have a model where one thing determines the result—what Aristotle calls the efficient cause. In Western philosophy, that's usually how cause is understood. But notice how in the Buddha's teachings, people often talk about causes and conditions. The Buddha has a broader sense of cause.

The basic model is found in this little two-line verse that appears again and again:

"When this is, that is.
From the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, that is not.
From the cessation of this, that ceases."

That's his teaching in a nutshell. It's about this and that—one phenomenon, another phenomenon. When this is, that is. When this is not, that is not. That's not causation in the European cultural sense. That's association.

Let me give you an example based on a story someone told me years ago when I was doing my PhD at the University of Queensland. A friend spent time on Stradbroke Island with the traditional owners. One day they were sitting around, and out of the blue, one of the young men said, "We should go fishing tomorrow because such-and-such fish will be biting off the north head."

My friend had the presence of mind to ask, "How do you know?"

The guy looked at him as if he was a complete idiot and said, "Didn't you see that flock of birds flying south just now?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, at this time of year, when those birds are flying south, those fish will be biting off the northeast head."

He's not saying that the birds flying south causes the fish to be off the northeast head. But where you have this, you have that. When this is, that is. When this is not, that is not. This is what we would call association, but for the Buddha it was part of dependent arising.

And he says, "From the arising of this, that arises. From the cessation of this, that ceases." That's more cause in our normal sense.

For the Buddha, everything is subject to this except the unconditioned—*nibbāna* itself. And that includes *cetanā*. There's always something associated with *cetanā*. For this choice to be made, there has to be something else happening that supports the arising of this.

If I want to change this, then I change that. If I can change that in a certain way, this will not arise. So no matter what it is—I'm in the grip of an addiction and I decide, "I think I'll just have one more." Now that decision is accompanied by a lot of other conditions.

Another principle of this is there is no single cause and no single result. They don't exist. You get a whole complex bundle of causes and conditions, and the result is a whole complex bundle of results. So nothing is alone. That decision was supported by a whole series of accompanying circumstances. If I can chase the right thing in that bundle, then the decision will be, "I think I won't have another one." That's the way it works.

There's a whole different way of coming at it. It's got a lot to do about the relation with time too, because the Western mind seems serial. While this associative thing is a broad spectrum, a sort of matrix of things. So you get conditional relationships which require time, which are diachronic, and you also get causal relationships which are synchronic.

For example, when we talked about vedana, where you have contact, you have feeling—it's not that feeling comes along later. So that's a synchronic relationship, not a diachronic relationship. Whereas you might talk about if you're a good little meditator, you'll be reborn in heaven. That's a diachronic relationship. It requires time. Both forms of relationship work, including in the Patthana where the result comes first and the cause comes later.

It seems to me the very first power factor has a lot to do with the causality of choices, which is the view—right view, wrong view. And your view, not in the small, but the broad—your worldview, the matrix of conceptual frameworks that you're in—is very much the causal condition for choices. And as you get more information from Dhamma talks or from people around you, then that changes, your view changes, and then the choices that can be made arising from it change.

I don't think it's an accident that samma sankappa and samma ditthi are linked. So cetana, choice. So getting to know it from a meditator's point of view is very important—becoming sensitive to the arising of choice or intention. Thanissaro translates cetana as decision: "the decision to act," which I think is quite good.

If you're looking for it as a meditator, how does it present? How do you know that you find it? Actually, if you do the classic Mahasi method, then noting intention is an important part, and they usually present it in walking meditation first on the grounds that it's easier to find in the walking.

I have to confess that when I went through this classic Mahasi training, this is part of the training that I found incredibly frustrating because I could never find intention. Just never found it. And it was really embarrassing.

In Burma when you go for your interview, it's kind of lined up and it's very assembly line. So you listen to the people who are just in front of you. You get to know several people's practice because you're in the room at the same time. Sayadaw U Janaka really used to emphasize intention. Part of the questioning in every interview would be, "And are you getting intention in the walking?"

And the meditator would say, "Yes."

And Sayadaw would nod in satisfaction.

"Next, are you getting intention in the walking?"

"Yes, very good."

"Next, to me, are you getting intention in the walking?"

"No."

"Please, try harder."

I just never got it.

There was one time when I was doing walking meditation early in the morning before breakfast. And suddenly and completely spontaneously—I wasn't looking for it—there it was.

I was walking down the hall and there was this cascade of intentions. It wasn't one per step—nothing so gross, nothing so crude. It was this flow, like a waterfall of little golden intentions. Hallelujah! And it just flowed down, flowed back up again. And it's never happened again. Not once.

I could find intention in the mind. So I've had to work on intention because it's always been so obscure to me.

How does it present? To me it presents in either two ways. It can present as an impulse—either physical or mental, so either impelled by body or impelled by mind. For example, the impulse to scratch, the impulse to look at something, the impulse to reach for something, the impulse to listen to something. This morning when I came out into the staff room for breakfast, I won't mention names, but I did hear voices from people who are apparently meditators speaking. And so there was an impulse to listen. The impulse to think.

So it can present as an impulse, or sometimes it presents as a decision between possibilities. There's a moment in which, well, I could do this or I could do that, and I'll go for that one. You might see it, for example, when you're meditating and you suddenly realize you're thinking. I could keep this going or I could go back to the meditation object. I'll keep going. It's right in front of you. Suddenly there are these different possibilities and I'll take that one. It's over in a nanosecond but it can be quite clear.

Kim, are you raising your arm for a purpose? Or not? I could embarrass myself for heaping on more seconds. I'll just check and see if anyone's looking. And of course they are. I find that everyone's looking at me all the time.

We can see it in changes in body posture. Let's say I'm doing walking meditation and I'm standing at the beginning of the path, and I'm about to move. How do I know I'm about to move? Or I'm coming to the end of the path and I'm about to stop. How do I know I'm about to stop?

You can see it in terms of changes of body posture. One obvious way to do it is when the posture hurts and you decide, I want to move to get comfortable. This is where an adhiṭṭhāna might be useful. You could set an adhiṭṭhāna, a determination: I will not move. And then that makes the impulse to move really clear. And then you can just—ah, there it is. Of course, at some point you move, but getting to know that impulse and the decision is useful.

In the walking, it may be easier in the non-routine movements, like stopping, turning, starting, and also in the distractions.

"What was that?"

"Patrick, in the example you gave when you were doing the walk and you had all those intentions arise for you, like a cascade of them. What were some of the other ones other than lifting, placing?"

"Well, there was no conceptualization like that. That kind of conceptualization would have been too crude."

"Or the pre-verbal impulse?"

"Yes, pre-verbal."

"You said there was a cascade of them. I'm just wondering what some of the others might have been."

"No, just movements."

It's like every little bit of the movement was accompanied by its own intention. It was like walking through water. It's quite strange. But it wasn't me doing it, it just happened.

You can see it in distraction. The mind is clear and it's on the meditation object. Now because it's on the meditation object there is a whole series of choices to keep it there. And then suddenly the mind decides to go off into habitual thought or habitual anything. At some point you get that impulse, and that's the manifestation of the choices. So to have a look at that impulse.

One way of playing with it, if you're doing it in the walking meditation, is you've got your track standing at one end, and you make the adhitthana, the resolution: from here to the end of this track, I will not think. And then you just walk. Now you may or may not think during this course but if thought arises you're more likely to catch the impulse to think. Another variation would be, if that's too ambitious, from here to the end of this track I will catch the very first arising of thought. And so you catch the moment that it pops up and along with that you might catch that initial impulse to think. At the end of the track you stop and then you reflect on what happened, and you review the experience.

Turn from here to the end of the track, either I will not think or I will catch the moment that thought arises, and then you just meditate normally. But you set yourself up to be alert to the arising of the thought, and so you can catch it very quickly, and you may even catch the intention, the decision to think. And again, this is another way of working with thought. If thought is a problem, it can be very useful not to have the attitude of I'm going to smash it with a hammer and suppress it, but rather I'm going to find the impulse to think.

Some people, the classic way, of course, in the walking meditation is the impulse, the decision to lift the foot, the decision to push the foot forward and the decision to drop the foot. And you notice one of the weird things that can happen is if you're really, really on the intention, you're paralyzed because it doesn't arise. It doesn't like the spotlight. I find that interesting. So if someone's standing completely still for long periods of time, they could be doing standing meditation or they might be tracking the intention to move. You don't quite know. If they've got one foot up in the air, that's a giveaway.

A few games you could play with it. The intention to think I find really interesting. That's an intention I can catch. I can't find the intention to walk, but I can find the intention to think. And this, one of the things that's important about this is it's all about aim.

All of these exercises are exercises in aim. So instead of aiming the awareness at the thought stream, for example, aim at the stream of choices that produce the thought stream. It's this very subtle shift in the aim. Instead of tracking the movement, aim for the stream of choices that produce the movement. Again, it's this shift in aim. Very subtle.

Tracking mind especially, working with the mind, is always a matter of refining aim. So, for example, not the sensation, but the painful tone of the sensation. Or not the painful tone of the sensation but the aversion that arises because of the painful tone.

These are little shifts in aim of the awareness. Not the content of the narrative that the mind is producing but the emotional flavor of the narrative. And again it's just a little shift in aim of pointing the awareness somewhere else.

When you work with aim, for example in tracking choice, even if you fail, you succeed. Because even if you don't find what you're looking for, because you're practicing your aim, your mind is getting more precise. So, for example, and this has been my experience, you might have the intention or the resolution to do walking meditation and to follow the intention to move rather than the movements. I find I don't get the intention to move. I fail. But the movements themselves become a lot clearer because the aim is getting better.

So if you do these, treat them as exercises in aim, and it doesn't matter if you don't hit the target. Your aim is getting better anyway. And as such, it's very useful. So it's always useful to refine your capacity to aim awareness as accurately as possible, especially when you're working with the mind.

That is sammasankappa. Right aim, right aspiration, on the microscopic level. So on the macroscopic level, it's what will I do with my life?

On the microscopic level, it's will I know this or that? Will I send the awareness here or there? So sammasankapa is right... Sankapa is aim or intention, the second path factor. This is Upandita's translation. He was the first one who said this. He said this can be seen as right aim in the context of meditation. It does fit. And again, path, aim, direction—they all fit together.

The Buddha is very strong about this. Sometimes the discussion comes up about obsession with goals, and I pointed out the Buddha doesn't talk much about goals. He talks a lot about setting a direction and aim, and this is part of that. But getting to know one's intentions or choices or decisions and how they come up from the unconscious, how they bubble up, is extremely useful for getting to know oneself and for what one is doing with one's life.

This is all in the area of karma—the choices that I make, the decisions that I make. What conditions my choice to do this? Why is it that I always choose this? What's conditioning it? What's feeding this?

So working with choice or aim is all about uncovering that whole morass and bringing it up, bringing it to light. Once it's uncovered, then there's the possibility of doing something else. The thing about habitual action is that there seems to be no choice because I don't see the choice. But if I see the arena of choice, then there's the possibility of something else.

I think when the Buddha talks about freedom, this is what he's talking about: that in any given situation, in this situation, I have a range of possibilities. There's something I can do about this. But to have that full range of choices, I have to be very clear about what's happening in the depths of the mind. What are the possibilities of choice? What's conditioning my normal choices? What's behind it? What's accompanying it?

Any questions or comments?

Okay. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 13

The Insight Chorus - Part 1 - Impermanence & Emptiness

Patrick Kearney · 1h07

> *In this first part of examining the insight chorus from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Patrick Kearney unpacks the pivotal verses that appear after each of the four foundations of mindfulness. He explores how the practice evolves from tracking "body as body" internally and externally to perceiving the arising and passing away of phenomena—the fundamental perception of anicca (impermanence). Kearney explains how this represents a crucial foreground-background shift where the meditator begins to see change itself rather than changing objects. The discussion culminates in the profound phrase "atthi kāyo" (there is body), which the Buddha uses to indicate śūnyatā vakrānti—the entry into emptiness. This represents complete intimacy with experience, free from agenda and the sense of a separate self doing the practice. Drawing on the Mahasi method and contemporary scholarship, Kearney demonstrates how insight meditation truly begins only with the perception of impermanence, marking the transition from preliminary serenity practice to genuine vipassanā.*

We've been going through the Satipatthana Sutta, and tonight and tomorrow night we're going to have a look at the chorus of the discourse, which is about insight.

We looked at the opening section, the udesa, the introduction, but if you look at the structure of the whole discourse, it consists of 21 sections, and at each of those sections there's a chorus which is essentially the same. The only difference is that it applies itself to the immediately preceding section. So it's like a song with 21 verses, each one ending in the chorus. Remember, we talked about how this is an oral tradition, so everything is chanted, sung. Think of learning a song with 21 verses and the same chorus. As we pointed out, repetition indicates importance. So if I learn this song and 20 years later I happen to be meditating and music pops into my mind and this song pops up, what am I most likely to remember? It would be the chorus. So this is the central aspect.

The Satipatthana Sutta is a kind of weird one. There's virtually no narrative. All you've got is the Buddha wandering around the Kuru country, and then he gives this discourse. At the end there's a prophecy: basically you do this and you get enlightened. The rest of it is just this series of meditational exercises arranged according to four categories: body, feeling, heart-mind (citta), and phenomena. We're going to have a look at those four later on. And it's very artificial.

According to contemporary scholars, it's likely that in its original form it was briefer. I don't keep up with this stuff these days. I've got Ajahn Sujato's History of Mindfulness, and he does this whole elaborate analysis of the text which looks very interesting, but I haven't studied it yet. The point being that it's quite possible that this discourse was built up over time and it seems to have functioned as a kind of meditation manual.

Let's say you're in an oral tradition, so the only way that you can convey information is through the mouth. And let's say you're part of an organization which is rapidly spreading and is in fact international. The only way you can standardize the teaching is by chanting something, memorizing it, and passing it on, so everybody chants the same thing. So I think that the Satipatthana Sutta would have functioned as a kind of root text meditation manual that people would have memorized, and different people might have added different things to it because they thought this would fit. And then we end up with the version that we've got.

Now here we're going to look at the chorus, which is quite brief. It's, I think, four sentences. The Buddha would do the first appearance, which is all about body. So the first satipatthana, the first practice is tracking body as body, which we've been talking about.

Then the chorus begins, and this is typical: the Buddha is describing what the practitioner does. I think in the psychological world this is known as an operational definition. Something is how you do it. So he's defining the practice in terms of a description of how one does it.

"In this way she lives tracking body as body internally, or she lives tracking body as body externally, or she lives tracking body as body both internally and externally."

So you have the introduction of this idea of internal-external. And what's that about? I think this is a reference to our normal sense of subject-object duality. Our ordinary, normal, taken-for-granted relationship to the world is based on the fundamental assumption that I'm in here and you lot are out there. And so my world is neatly divided into these two parts. There's me here, there's you there.

Now this is not something I have to think about. It's not something that I have to remind myself of. If I'm lining up for a nice lunch I don't have to think about maybe I should grab this first before any of those other buggers get there. It's just built in. It's just inherent. This basic sense of separation and distinction. So there's a sense of a boundary between me in this body and you all and the rest of the world: internal-external.

"In this way she lives tracking body as body internally." So this would be our normal meditation practice where we're following physical sensation, and when I'm doing this I'm not tracking your physical sensation, I'm tracking this physical sensation in here.

"Or she lives tracking body as body externally." How does one track body as body externally? Well, we've got five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching.

So looking at all of them, seeing is generally external—I see out there, I hear out there. We have smelling, tasting, touching, which are much more intimate, yet even they refer to an external world. With touch, I touch this externally. So this is where the mindfulness of body extends outward.

For example, let's say I'm doing walking meditation outside. I'm also seeing what's happening and hearing the sounds. I don't simply exclude that—"No, no, I mustn't see, I mustn't hear, I must just be doing walking meditation." It includes all of that. The meditation object starts to expand, and my relationship to the external world begins to be affected.

We've talked about how when we develop a certain degree of mindfulness, the world appears differently. It appears much fresher than before. A normal, routine sight or sound appears differently.

We've spoken about mindfulness as memory—remembering the present—so it's based on memory. Another mental quality based on memory is perception. In Pali, *saññā*—perception is recognition. When I meet someone, for example, the first thing I do is rapidly assess: have I met this person before? Stranger or not stranger? I sort this out pretty quickly, usually quite quickly. Sometimes I have to think about it, but when I know someone, I just know them.

When a monk enters the interview room, I don't spend the first five minutes staring at him trying to work out what this is. I know. It's just obvious. And again, I'm not thinking about it—it's just recognition. This depends on the past, on memory. So perception and memory are quite similar.

There's a close connection here, because later on, when the tradition asks what gives rise to mindfulness, what stimulates mindfulness, one of the answers is clear perception. This has to do with what we've talked about as the earthy, grounded, direct, face-to-face quality that mindfulness has. It's a direct engagement with the object of experience.

So mindfulness and perception are very similar, but you can see the difference: perception is stale. I've been here before. I've met this person before. I know who this person is. I can anticipate what this person will do or say because I know them. There's a staleness in the encounter. It may even be that I'm not really paying attention to the situation because I already know.

Have you ever had the frustrating experience where you're talking to someone and explaining something to them, and you can see their eyes glaze over and they switch off because they've decided they know what you're trying to say? But they actually haven't. They don't know. But it takes a lot of effort to actually break through that wall of determined resistance: "No, I'm not going to hear what you're saying because in my mind, I've already categorized it."

One example I came across, which I've always remembered: Many years ago, I was traveling in India around the holy places, accompanying a French Buddhist monk who had spent years in Thailand. He was dressed all in Thai robes, behaving very Thai—*phak Thai bhikkhu*—and spoke fluent Thai. We used to stay at the Thai monasteries at the different holy places, and of course he would do the talking because he was the one who would get us in.

At one of the monasteries, the old abbot came out to see these visitors. This French monk starts speaking to him in Thai. The abbot begins with a few halting words in English: "Who are you?" or whatever. And this guy is responding in fluent Thai. The abbot's going, "What? What?"

What's that? What?" and really concentrated, trying to work out what this guy is saying. He just can't get a word. I mean, it must be his bizarre French accent when he's speaking Thai that he can't figure out a single word. It took this abbot several minutes and a lot of effort on the part of this monk before it finally dawned on the abbot: this guy is speaking Thai, and I can understand every word that he's saying.

This is perception, and it has tremendous power and this quality of staleness. Mindfulness is also a form of perception, but it's characterized by freshness. That this encounter, which I remember, is new. It's quite paradoxical. I remember it, but it's completely new. I've never been here before. And this encounter is entirely new. I've never been here before.

So we have this sense of recognition of the world based on this division, this subject-object division, which is built into our perception. And as the mindfulness develops, this begins to be subverted. I'm not simply mindful of what's going on in here; I'm mindful of what's going on out there. And the whole sense of this inner and outer world that I previously had starts to crumble, and something else is going on.

Basically, the sense of an absolute boundary between inner and outer, self and other, starts to fade, starts to crumble. And with it, the power of our sense of being a completely separate self begins to fade.

It comes out in different ways. Like people who practice together in silence over a period of time—they begin to realize there's a sense of community. There's this sense that I know these people, even though I've barely spoken to them, if at all. But you get a feel for the people.

Also, we start to recognize—we go through pleasure and pain. Let's say we go through our pain, internal, and we can see what we do when we're in that pain. And we might recognize somebody else behaving like that, and we know, oh, I know that. They're in pain. It's the same kind of pain, because they're doing the same sort of thing. And there's this sense of intuitive empathy that starts to develop.

So I begin to realize that the movements of body and mind that I'm tracking are not mine. They're not unique to me. They are, in fact, universal. What is true here is true everywhere. The experience that's happening is not personal. It's just nature. And nature is universal and belongs to everyone.

I think in our culture we tend to resist this one, compared to some Asian cultures—for example, the Burmese. In Burma, when you have the interview, the one-on-one with the teacher, it's very unusual for it to be private. Normally there are other people in the room. For example, you've got other meditators lined up beside you, so it's like an assembly line. So other meditators close to you in the line know exactly what's going on in your practice.

And from our culture, we tend to be uncomfortable with this because it's personal. Therefore it's private. And so here, when you have the interviews, it's always one-on-one, closed room, don't listen, hush-hush. And that kind of fits our culture. That seems to be appropriate.

I remember the mild frisson of shock that I had in Burma when I was going for an interview with the Sayadaw. And in the same room, sitting along the wall, was this family—Mum, Dad, Grandma, kids. And they're all kind of chatting to each other and looking interested. I think, who are they? Obviously they're the audience and I'm here to amuse them.

But they were the family who donated the meal for that day. Now they've just handed over loot to support the foreign meditators and they want to see what kind of return they're getting for their investment, which is perfectly reasonable.

But it's quite clear that for all those Burmese, there's nothing personal in this engagement. At all. It's just what it is. Privacy in Burmese doesn't exist as a word or a concept in the language. Similarly in India and other places. It's like it isn't personal—just what it is.

So we get to see that as the mindfulness develops.

This first line conveys this development beautifully. Then in the next line: "She lives tracking the nature of arising as body, or she lives tracking the nature of ceasing as body, or she lives tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body."

This represents the arising of the perception of impermanence. The perception of impermanence is absolutely fundamental for the Buddha in terms of the development of insight. Insight is always expressed in terms of the three universal characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anatta—impermanence or change, pain and suffering and unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. They're always listed in that order because they progress from gross to subtle.

Of the three, the most obvious is impermanence. Have you noticed that things have changed? If you stopped people in the street and asked them, "Have you noticed that things change?" they'd say, "Oh yeah, things are really different." Everybody knows that things change. It's obvious. Impermanence is the most gross.

If you went up to someone in the street and said, "Have you noticed that you don't actually exist?" they'd probably wonder what you're talking about. It's not at all obvious.

Even the second one—if you asked, "Have you noticed that life contains pain?" they'd probably say, "Yeah, I've noticed that." But if you said, "Have you noticed that all conditioned experiences are dukkha, are unsatisfactory?" they'd probably look at you

strangely and say, "What the hell's wrong with you? A bit pessimistic, aren't you? A bit negative? You must be one of these pessimistic Buddhists. You should get out more. Get a life, go surfing, whatever."

So it's a progression from the obvious to the least obvious, from the gross to the subtle. But the three of them are a package. It's basically the same thing—except it's not a thing—but looked at from different angles.

You find different people have different sensitivities. Some people are particularly sensitive to the perception of impermanence. Some people are particularly sensitive to the perception of dukkha. And some people are particularly sensitive to the perception of not-self.

Anyone care to guess which is the short straw? If you happen to be one of these people who's particularly sensitive to dukkha, you've drawn the samsaric short straw. I know because that's me, basically. I would much prefer to be sensitive to anatta, or even to impermanence.

What would it mean to be sensitive to anatta? Some people just get it without any particular difficulty. Usually they're people who in their normal everyday lives hold themselves quite lightly and are quite adaptable in any situation, playing any sort of role. If they go to the office and they're supposed to be the boss, they walk in and they're the boss. If they go home and they're supposed to be the nurturer, then they're the nurturer. There's no conflict. It's like almost inhabiting different personalities that are appropriate for the occasion. I suspect such people would make good actors.

These would be people who you wouldn't regard as being particularly ego-driven. Not so stubborn people—though not necessarily. There's a whole range of characteristics and personality traits. We're talking in very broad brush terms.

I remember once running a retreat where a couple of the meditators, quite young people...

Although they were very young, had gone through drug addiction and were coming off it. They were using meditation as a support. And it didn't take long to realize that these particular people were acutely sensitive to dukkha. Obviously that's why they got into the drug scene—to get rid of it, push it away.

So these are the three characteristics that constitute the field of insight. Impermanence is always mentioned first, partly because it's, in general terms, the most obvious, but also because there's a sense in which you can do it. You can do impermanence. You cannot do not-self, because the one who's doing it is the self. You could do dukkha, but I

wouldn't recommend it. Some people do it—people with very macho approaches to meditation. "I'm going to sit for three hours and sit through the pain, and I don't care." But this is not necessarily to be recommended. But one can do impermanence.

So previously the Buddha has been saying she lives tracking body as body. And we've talked about how what this is about is cultivating this clear, clean relationship to the experience. This sensation is just this sensation. It's not my thoughts about the sensation. It's not my judgment about it. It's not what I want it to be or don't want it to be. It's just this sensation, full stop—that's it. Just this.

But here the Buddha says she lives tracking the nature of arising as body, the nature of ceasing as body, the nature of arising and ceasing as body. Now what this is talking about is a foreground-background shift. Remember we talked about foreground-background. If I pay attention to something, well first of all, in each of the six sense fields, I'm presented with this field. So let's take the visual field. There's an entire field here. If I pay attention to something—in other words, if I look at something—then that something now occupies the center of the field and the rest of the field is around it. So center, periphery. Now that center can be shifted, so I can look over here—bang, center, periphery. I can look over here—bang, center, periphery, or foreground, background.

Now it doesn't matter where I look, there's always that structure: foreground, background, where the focus is on the foreground. And we've talked about this as constituting the structure of noting. To note something in the language that Mahasi Sayadaw uses does not mean to write something down about it or to name it. It means to be deliberately aware of it, to attend to it, so that that something now occupies the center of the field. And we talked about how this relationship is essentially active. I'm doing this. I'm directing awareness, bang, to this. And then there's the background. And the relationship to the background is receptive. It comes to me. I'm not going to it.

Now, when I do this, and I do it particularly with this practice, as I keep doing it, I notice that my object—we call this the object of awareness or the meditation object—I notice that it changes. In the time that you've been here, has anybody noticed their meditation object changing? Yes? I'll take silence as assent. According to Buddha's custom, when he remained silent, he was agreeing.

So we tend to notice that the object of awareness changes. If you're practicing a method that is designed to generate insight, you will be encouraged to notice change by the way that the method structures your attention. Let's say you do Goenka Method and you've got a ten-day retreat and you spend the first three days doing ānāpānasati just focused on the breath at the nose tip to get some concentration going. Then what do you do?

You sweep the body systematically up and down, and what are you constantly being urged to see? The changing sensations. Don't stay at one part for very long—just keep moving. Why? Because you're being encouraged to see change. And this is what I mean by "doing change." You can deliberately cultivate that perception.

The way Mahasi Sayadaw structures this is through the framework of grounding object and secondary object, particularly beginning with distraction. I'm following my meditation object when suddenly I know that I'm distracted. We've been talking about this whole process. Now if I'm just meditating for serenity, as soon as I notice that I'm distracted, I simply drop it, forget it, and go straight back to the meditation object. I have absolutely no interest in this distraction whatsoever. As soon as possible—back to the meditation object. The emphasis is on the continuity of awareness with this one meditation object.

But Mahasi says no. As soon as you know that you're distracted—in other words, awareness has gone from here to here—as soon as you notice that turn, face it, directly encounter it, note it deliberately, maybe briefly, maybe for a longer period, and then deliberately come back to the grounding object. In other words, awareness goes here, then there, then back here, then there, then back here: here, there, here, there, here, there—change, change, change, change, change. The method is designed to stimulate that view of impermanence. It's doing impermanence.

Does that make sense?

"So just pulling the mind back without noting—is that not vipassana? Is it more of a serenity concentration practice?"

Yes, it's more on the serenity side than the vipassana side, where the only interest and concern is with a single object. You just don't care about anything else. The other stuff has no significance—it's not important. Whereas here, we've been talking about the nature of distraction. How does distraction work? There's the forgetting, there's the remembering, what feeds the distraction. In other words, look at the process of distraction. It's important. It's significant.

Now, it would not be significant to someone doing serenity practice. "I don't want to hear about distraction. I don't care about distraction. I just want to stay with the one thing." But with Mahasi, it's "No—start to be interested in the distraction."

Depending on the teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita is definitely more interested in the grounding object than in the secondary object. But even there, what he wants to know about are the changes in the grounding object. Let's say I'm doing breathing as a medit-

ation object for serenity. All I want is a nice smooth experience. I'm not interested in how it changes. I'm not interested in whether the breathing five minutes into a sitting is the same as the breathing fifteen minutes into a sitting, or thirty minutes into a sitting.

But if I'm reporting rising and falling of the abdomen to Sayadaw U Pandita, he wants to know: How does it change in the course of the sitting? He wants to know how the secondary object changes. It's all about change.

So you're being trained to perceive change, and you start to see it even when before you never noticed it. The way I talk about it, I say: Start getting interested in the fact of change. Start being particularly interested in the intersections of experience—the place where one thing becomes another. That's interesting.

And I talk about it in terms of: Something happens. What's feeding this? Change. What does this feed? Change. Change.

So we start and the foreground of awareness is occupied by a meditation object that changes. So we've got foreground meditation object and we're noticing that there's change. There's a sense in which the background is change. Foreground, meditation object. Background, change.

At some point, there's a perceptual shift and we realize that what we're looking at is not a meditation object which is changing. We are looking at the fact of change and it's happening in this particular meditation object. It's a perceptual shift. Does that make sense?

Now this shift is not something that we can do. What we can do is train ourselves to be sensitive to the fact of change. But this foreground-background shift, when what we're noting is actually not so much the object but the fact of change manifesting in the object—this is not something that we can do. It's something that happens, or doesn't happen, when conditions are ripe.

It's very subtle. In fact, it's so subtle that it can happen and the meditator doesn't even realize it. And it can be days, weeks, months later that it suddenly occurs to the meditator, "Oh, this is what's been going on. I knew my meditation was different somehow, and now I realize that's what's different about it. Actually what I'm looking at is the fact of change, which is happening in these familiar things."

So it's not something that can be done, it's not part of our agenda. We can't do it, but we can prepare the ground for its arising. The Buddha often uses agricultural metaphors. I cannot make an apple appear, but I can plant an apple seed in the appropriate place and look after the tree. And sooner or later, an apple will fall into my hand. But I can't make the apple appear.

So what we're doing is preparing the ground and cultivating the conditions so that this perception of impermanence will arise.

"Patrick, I'm a little bit confused. I'm probably suggesting I'm way away from being able to observe this, but are you saying that when the foreground shifts to the background—oh, sorry, yeah, so when the background comes into the foreground generally, and you notice that actual movement of that, is that the point of change that you're talking about here that's different to the aspects of change that we might see?"

Usually at some point you notice that that shift has already taken place. Generally you don't see the actual shift take place, although you can, but usually you notice it's already happened. As I said, it's so subtle that often people don't even notice it. When it happens, they don't notice it. It's only later that they realize this is what's happening.

We got a taste of that this morning when we were doing that exercise where you're holding the meditation object. Then you loosen your hold a bit and then allow things to move. That's designed to give you a taste of what that might be like. But the fact that you're struggling with the concept has got nothing to do with whether or not you're actually perceiving it. These are two completely different things. One has nothing to do with the other.

"When you say 'do,' we can't do it, I'm understanding that we can't necessarily say, oh yeah, intellectually, there's change. What we need to do is have an experience of it, so that it arises as an internal insight, rather than a thought about things."

It's not like an insight that arises from thinking about someone telling you that your mind changes. Most people will say that, but they really don't have the experience of that until they notice these foreground-background shifts. And that's another aspect of the relationship between concept and experience.

At Mahasi Center they have a number of different teachers who teach different populations, and so there's one or more teachers whose job is to teach the monks who have done the study—the monks and the nuns who have studied and have got their Dhammacharya or further degrees. Because the basic pattern for a career monk or nun is first you study, then you meditate.

And so these monks would come into the meditation center with a degree of understanding of Buddhist philosophy which would make a person from a Western university with a PhD in Buddhology look like a kindergarten kid. And of course they think they know. Apparently they're very careful about who to pick to teach these characters because these are the hardest nuts to crack—because they think they know. So the concept gets in the way.

And Sayadaw U Pandita always liked it when a new student would roll up and they know absolutely nothing about Buddhism, and they'd be delighted because the concepts are going to be minimum interruption here.

So this is the perception of impermanence starts to develop, and according to the tradition, insight meditation begins at this point. So let's say you're doing Mahasi meditation and you're told that the Mahasi method is an insight meditation technique. And so you start—yes, rising, falling, distraction, rising, falling, whatever. You are not doing insight meditation. You are doing a preliminary serenity practice.

Insight meditation begins with the perception of impermanence. When the meditation object is the universal characteristic of impermanence.

That's the beginning of insight meditation.

Further, her mindfulness—and I was mistaken in the early part of this, it's actually three sentences we're doing tonight, but I think we've got time for this—Further, her mindfulness, *atthi kāyo*, there is body, or body is, is established just for understanding, just for continuous mindfulness.

This sentence gets variously translated because the language is really simple but the concepts are really hard to get a hold of. Her mindfulness, *atthi kāyo*, is established, *ñāṇa-mattāya, paṭissati-mattāya*—just for understanding, just for continuous mindfulness.

So let's go through these terms. What gets established is the mindfulness, and this is again in relation to where the body is the meditation object. Mindfulness is established, there is body, or body is, or this is body.

What is happening here is that the Buddha is squeezing language to try to convey complete intimacy with the meditation object. And this expression, *atthi kāyo*, there is body, or that's body, represents what he calls *suññatā vakkanti*, the entry into emptiness. What it refers to is a relationship of radical simplicity and radical intimacy. It's just this. Just the experience itself, not projecting anything onto it, not assuming anything about it, not trying to get anything from it. It's just this.

So everything else falls away. Remember I talked about how when we start to practice we notice that our normal relationship to experience is one of "What's in this for me? What can I get out of this?" So I'm always judging the experience. This meditation period—is it good enough for my purposes? Am I developing a nice concentration or a nice insight? And even this inhalation, this exhalation—is it good enough? Is it serving my purpose? So the relationship is instrumental. I'm doing something to get something. Have you ever approached meditation like that?

What the Buddha is talking about here is where all that falls away and it's just this. I'm not doing it for anything. And it's nothing more than what it is.

Another way that the Buddha talks about it is *tathatā*, suchness, just thisness. So you have the term *tathatā*, just thisness, and you have the *tathāgatā*, the one who is in a state of gathā, just this—the *tathāgata*, the awakened one.

"Just this *tatha*?"

Tatha, yeah. T-A-T-H-A. And then if you turn it into an abstract noun, like empty, emptiness, you add *tā* at the end—T with a long A, with a macron on top.

"Isn't there also a trick with that? It says coming and going or something like that."

Oh yeah, it's *gatha*. *Gatha* is past participle of the verb *gacchati*, to go. So *gatha* can be "is gone." *āgatha* is "come." *Tathā gatha* could be broken up as *tathā gatha* or *tathā āgatha*—thus gone, thus come. And different traditions translate differently. I think that in the Chinese, because Chinese is very different from Sanskrit and Pali in terms of its structure, they had to pick one of the two. I think they might have picked the "thus come" as the characters, but I can't remember now.

"Aren't you doing it to get enlightened? Is that a personal question?"

Well, yeah, obviously from the source of the question, it's a personal question. Because you're saying that the judgment about the breath or what I'm doing right now, is it good enough for my purposes? And then you just... it sounded like the idea was that you're not doing anything to get anything and yet which I'm happy with but I kind of feel that I ought to be doing it to seek enlightenment.

All of that—I'm doing it for enlightenment, I ought to be doing it for enlightenment—all of it belongs in the realm of concept. It's a concept about the experience, it's not the experience.

One time that struck me quite clearly over the past few years. I've been doing my own retreats at Saranath Buddha Sanctuary, this place where I teach in Malaysia in December, and they have these magnificent huts that as a visiting teacher I get to live in. Big tropical hardwood veranda for walking meditation and so on. And when I'm practicing there, every day I clean it out. So it's very minimalist and I sweep the floor and then I mop the floor. And I do it as a kind of mindfulness exercise.

And one day I was doing the mopping. And I wasn't thinking, I was just mopping. And then suddenly a thought arose in my mind. Years ago, doing Zen meditation, being part of the Zen tradition, I'd heard the expression—and this is Japanese samurai Zen—wielding the sword with empty hands. And I, of course, had no idea what they were talking about, other than carving people up. But it was like I suddenly realized I was wielding the mop and my hands were empty. There was nothing there except the mopping. It was totally intimate.

Now at the level of concept I'm cleaning the floor so I have a nice clean environment which helps me meditate. But in that movement, none of that was there. It was just that's all. And this is, there is body. This is what the Buddha is talking about. So it's the experience of complete intimacy with whatever it is that you're doing.

You're looking very suspicious.

I believe you conceptually, but I don't get it.

And I'm bending over the lines and put it on the back burner.

Put it on the back burner. It could be happening tonight or tomorrow. Because time's got nothing to do with it.

And then, so, atthi kāya, body is, or there is body, just for understanding, just for continuous mindfulness. Jñānamattāya patissatimattāya. The mattāya, it can't be translated literally, but basically it conveys the sense that there's nothing beyond this. This is not for anything. So there's understanding which isn't understanding for something. It's just, I know this.

And then you have the same with not sati but patissati. Usually the Buddha uses the term sati, mindfulness, but sometimes you find patissati. And different scholars have different ideas about this. Some people say, look, it makes no difference. Sati, patissati, take your pick. Who cares? It's the same thing. I always am suspicious of such things because when I read the Buddha, it seems to me that he's very careful with language. So if he says patissati, it's because he means patissati. So I'm assuming that there's something else going on.

The prefix pati indicates again. It's like the English "re," as in remember, recognize, recognize, know again. It has the same function. So patissati is continuous mindfulness. So mindfulness without a gap, unbroken. And when mindfulness is unbroken, when it's continuous, then it becomes really, really strong, very powerful, very quickly. It doesn't take long for this to get really strong, if it really is continuous.

Pati can also indicate back in a recursive sense, so to look back. In other words, here it's mindfulness of mindfulness. Remember we talked about awareness of awareness. There's this recursiveness within awareness itself. So we're not just aware, but we know that we are aware.

Here the recursiveness has matured to the point that it dominates the experience. And this recursiveness is always associated with clarity.

It's like when I am distracted by something—at first, when the distraction begins, I don't know that I'm distracted. Then suddenly I know that I'm distracted. In that sudden knowing, the whole situation becomes clear. Before it wasn't clear—it was like a dream. But then suddenly, bang, it's completely clear. The situation is totally clear.

With that clarity, the awareness is penetrating, stable, and again, clear.

So patisati indicates both the continuity of mindfulness—and if you read Anālayo's book on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, he goes for this interpretation. He says this is what it refers to. But to me, it also indicates the depth and the clarity of the mindfulness. In other words, it's mature. The mindfulness is mature.

And again, the phrase matāya—paṭisati matāya—means all of this is not for anything else. There's no agenda here. All agenda is gone. Complete intimacy.

So the practice is radically intimate and radically simple. There is no sense, as I said, of any agenda, and therefore there's no sense of anyone who has an agenda. There's no sense of anyone who is defined by the agenda.

I walk into this retreat with an agenda. I come here because I want something. If we didn't want something, we wouldn't be here. So we've all come looking for something. We want something. And we are, at least in part, defined in terms of what we want.

When that agenda disappears, that sense of definition disappears. That sense of identity disappears. If there's no agenda, there's no self. There's just this.

I think, although there's more to discuss here, we've pretty much covered it. That's the first three sentences. We'll do the next sentence tomorrow night.

Any questions or comments?

"Would you mind just reading the original again?"

I should have them together on different pages. Here it is:

"In this way she lives tracking body as body internally, or she lives tracking body as body externally, or she lives tracking body as body both internally and externally. She lives tracking the nature of arising as body, or she lives tracking the nature of ceasing as body, or she lives tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Further, the mindfulness 'body is' is established just for understanding, just for continuous mindfulness."

So those are the three sections. And as you can see, there's a lot in those sentences. This is typical of the suttas. They're compacted for memorization purposes and meant to be unpacked. So this unpacking is commentary.

This is how all the traditions are conveyed—you have sutta and then you have commentary. After the Buddha, this whole idea of sūtra became highly developed. Have you come across the Yoga Sūtras, potentially? Those are centuries after the Buddha, but they're a good example of the genre. The prize basically went to whoever could pack the most meaning into the fewest possible words. This was an art among those who composed these texts. The job of the teacher was to take it apart and unpack it.

"Patrick, that last sentence—I think I've always come across a translation that says 'there is body, this awareness is established just enough for complete mindfulness.'"

That's the *matāya*. It can be translated as "enough" in the sense of—it can be either "just enough," no more than just enough, grammatically translated and interpreted as that. Just enough for this—a kind of minimalist approach. Or it could be, *matāya* could mean "for just this."

Yes, so what you're suggesting is actually a totally different interpretation—which I find more convincing myself. Certainly a much more raw and profound kind of interpretation. You're saying it is just as it is, as you've been saying—no agendas. Rather than the bare minimum you need to get through, rather than fifty percent on the scorecard.

I've seen those translations and they didn't make a great deal of sense to me. When I borrowed into the Pali, I thought no, I think they're talking about something else. But this again is my interpretation, and we've spoken about this process before.

This is something I did when I started my PhD in Buddhist studies. I was faced with the challenge that I wanted to do a meditator's reading of dependent arising, because previously—not so much these days—but most scholars who studied early Buddhism were not meditators, and they really had no idea what it was about. And so you get these bizarre interpretations.

But if you're in an academic context, you can't just say, "Oh, all those fellows there, they're all wrong because they didn't meditate, but I'm a meditator, so you can believe me." You can't get away with that.

So I had to figure out a methodology by which I could do a meditator's reading of these texts. I spent a long time studying methodology and was aided by my associate supervisor, whom I carefully picked. He was an expert in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the prophet Isaiah. He knew absolutely nothing about Buddhism except what I told him, but he knew pretty much everything there was to know about how to read an ancient text. So he was fantastic.

My first chapter was all about different ways of reading texts and different ways of reading these texts. The examples I gave: take someone like Mahasi Sayadaw. He's reading the text as a practitioner, but as a practitioner who is committed to the full Theravada orthodoxy. So there are certain interpretations that he finds permissible, and others that are not, and are simply never mentioned.

If you read Ajahn Buddhadasa, the famous Thai teacher, writing about dependent arising, he's coming out of the Theravada tradition, so he's got this loyalty to that tradition. But he's reading it as a practitioner who has no commitment to the Theravada orthodoxy. So he comes across as quite different.

You read someone like Jack Kornfield—he's reading the same thing, but he's not committed to the Theravada tradition. He's reading it in a completely different cultural context, matching it up against Western psychology on one hand, personal experience on the other, bringing the text and experience together. So you get different communities who read these texts in different ways, and they come up with different things.

Which is the right one? There is no right one.

If you're a practitioner, how do you know if your understanding of the Buddha is correct? It's really quite simple. Is this understanding leading to the lessening of *dukkha*? Is it leading to the cultivation of the wholesome and the abandonment of the unwholesome in your life? If it is, it's the right interpretation. If it works, it's the right interpretation.

So there's always room for different ways of reading, again because they're so dense. Grammatically there are all sorts of ways you can read this, and even philosophically there are all sorts of ways you can read it. But when a practitioner or practitioner community reads it, they're reading it from a particular angle, within a particular culture, for a particular purpose—and that will affect the whole thing.

One thing that Ed told me once, my associate supervisor—he said, "Imagine you're on this side of a river. On the other side of the river is the text that you're studying, and the river represents time, thousands of years maybe. If you're doing historical study, what you think you're doing is crossing the river to go to that text. But the other way of looking at it, or the other way of doing it, is you don't cross the river to the text. The text crosses the river to you."

In other words, here I am today reading this. It's a whole different project. And as practitioners rather than historians, that's what we're interested in. What does it mean to this community today? That's what's important.

And that's what governs the way that I interpret these things.

Any other questions or comments?

Okay. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 14

Awareing

Patrick Kearney · 1h15

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney shifts focus from meditation objects to the process of 'awareing' itself—exploring the mind that knows the meditation object. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he guides three progressive exercises that develop sensitivity to both the object of awareness and the awareness that observes it. Kearney discusses the complementary practices of 'noting' (actively directing attention) and 'noticing' (receptive awareness), explaining how both approaches serve different temperaments and circumstances. He addresses the relationship between samatha and vipassana approaches, the role of vedanā (feeling-tone) in developing sensitivity, and the importance of recognizing wholesome pleasure in meditation. Using John Hale's metaphor of seeing through a window into a garden, he illustrates how awareness itself can become visible—like recognizing the window through which we view experience. The talk includes practical guidance on open awareness practice, its potential benefits and pitfalls, and how different meditation styles suit different minds and moments in practice.*

Over the days we've been looking at different aspects of the practice, basically examining different possible meditation objects. As we mentioned, one thing that characterizes satipatthana is that anything at all can be a meditation object. This is one of its characteristics that makes it impossible to really pin down.

Today and tomorrow we're going to approach it from a different angle. Instead of being concerned about the meditation object, we're going to look at the process of being aware of the meditation object. Remember we talked about this—we're always working with this dyad: there's awareness and the object of awareness, or we could say there is the process of awaring and there's what we are aware of.

Today we're going to have a look at the awaring.

We're going to do three little exercises and have a discussion in between them.

Let's start with the first one. If you get into your meditation posture and from there, settle awareness in the body. I'm going to mention breathing as the meditation object in these exercises, but I'm using breathing not because you're supposed to be using breathing, but as the generic meditation object. So if you have something else, just use

that something else and translate in your mind. When I talk about breathing, I'm talking about whatever your meditation object is. But otherwise, just use the breathing if that's not a problem for you.

So, settle awareness in the body and begin to focus on the movements within the body that indicate breathing. Track the movements of your breathing. As you track the breathing, are you being distracted? And if so, how?

Rather than ask you what happened, I'd just like to make a comment. Or ask you, actually, would you regard this exercise as being pretty much kindergarten playtime—bleeding basic? Like, follow your meditation object. Are you being distracted?

I think it depends on what you make of it. What did you make of it?

"I was really interested to see that my breathing had changed from before. That was fascinating. And then really watching if distraction came in. I'd really been interested to see if it would."

"And did it?"

"No. There were things on the periphery but they didn't distract me. So it was really interesting to see like a challenge. So I enjoyed that."

Good. Anyone else?

"I noticed that after I was being distracted as usual by thoughts, but after you asked were we being distracted, the thoughts didn't actually—after that they didn't take my attention away. There were still thoughts but I was able to keep them within the awareness of the breathing and the thoughts together."

I mean, I managed to disturb your distraction. I distracted you from your distraction. It's a pity that from time to time I don't have that little reminder.

"I thought your question was interesting, Patrick, because in a sense it is the basic thing. To me that's the thing with meditation—in a way it's always the same thing but then it's always different too. And I found it very interesting to have the breathing and to be kind of noticing the distraction within the breathing, within the awareness of the breathing."

So the view has changed over the years.

"It's really weird. This time when you went, 'I'm distracted,' my mind went, 'Oh, okay then.' And it took it like a command. All right, then off we go. I don't think that's quite what you meant. That's what it took."

That's what the responses are getting at. On the one hand, this is going back to beginnings—really, really basic. But the view has changed as we practice. You notice that what we were doing there was following a meditation object and then following the mind that knows the meditation object. So there's the meditation object and it's doing certain things, but I'm also noticing the state of the mind that's doing the meditation. Is it distracted?

Is it not distracted? If it's distracted, how is it distracted?

So we've got two things. We have the object of awareness, we have the mind that is doing the awareing, and we're actually aware of both. Now this is very ordinary, but at the beginning it comes as a shock to the new meditator.

People often when they start a meditation practice report being shocked to discover how much they think. In fact, some meditators when they do their first retreat are absolutely convinced after several days that this meditation is making them think ten times more than they ever have before. They're absolutely convinced of it. Whereas the most likely explanation is they're just ten times more sensitive to the thinking which is already going on.

So as we do this practice, the mind becomes more sensitive and it notices more. It notices more about the meditation object, but it also notices more about itself, the mind which is doing the awareing.

My experience also is, if there's something particular I want to focus on, and I'm tested—like, I'm tested by this and this and this—are you really wanting to do this? So you uncover the relationship. It jumps out to be recognized.

So what we're interested in this morning is exploring the mind that is doing the awareing and checking that out.

Shall we have another exercise? We'll take it one step further. Again, establishing your posture and settling awareness in the body.

Begin to focus on the movements within the body that indicate breathing. Track the movements of your breathing. How is your breathing? Is it gross or subtle? Are the movements of the breathing high or low? Do they stay the same or are they changing? Are the movements long or short? Study the details of these movements.

How is the mind that is tracking the breathing? Can it follow the breathing without difficulty, or is it easily distracted? Is it interested or bored? Is it peaceful or agitated? Is it alert or dull? What is the state of mind that's tracking the breathing?

So do you see what we're doing in that one? Track the meditation object and at the same time track the mind, the condition of the mind that's tracking the meditation object. Could you do that? Is that possible?

"Yeah, no problem. I thought that breathing sort of fell into the background a little bit when I did that."

So there's a foreground-background. It's not that they're both equally there. It's just that you foreground one, but there's others in the background. Then you can foreground the other one, and the first one's in the background. But they're both there?

"Yeah, yeah. It was a subtle shift, shifting back, but it was still there. It sort of broadened out to sort of take in more of the mind and what it was doing."

So it involved a broadening out of the field, not being focused in.

"My mind is like lint. After a while the mind is lint with the breath, and then there's sort of that awareness watching it."

"The breathing initially is different to that later on. That's what I noted, that at first it's quite sort of labored almost. And then I started to go to something what I would describe as pranayama. It's like the three-step breath and then roll out. That happens to me frequently. I get that quite often. And then after that, there is a phase where the breath becomes really deep. And that's when the mind is lost at peace, becomes very quiet."

So before then, when the breath is labored, what's the mind like?

The breath is labored, the mind is labored. But then the minute that sweeping rhythm takes over, the breath comes together somehow and everything settles.

When the breath is labored, the mind is laboring. Indeed. So you have the object, the mind that knows the object, and also the relationship between them—a connection, things happening between them.

Doing this practice involves an opening out, not being tightly focused on the object. I'm opening it out so I'm getting a sense of more around the object. The body served well as the object initially, but since the body isn't my primary object at the moment, I shifted to feeling, which is what I'm working with. Then I found that feeling is a bit more subtle than the body. It was too much to have two really subtle objects—the mind is subtle and the feeling is subtle—going at the same time. That combination just slid out and dissipated into distractions.

So I came back to the body as the grounding object, and then I could keep the object and that awareness together. But not if it was a more subtle object.

Many years ago, John Hale tried to explain to me the nature of the first insight knowledge, the first vipassana ñana. He explained it through this little thought experiment.

Imagine, he said, this practice is like you're in a room that looks out over a garden through a big picture window, and you're looking through the window at the garden. Your teacher is beside you, urging you on. The teacher says, "Look out there and tell me what you see."

"Well, I see the garden."

The teacher is not satisfied. "Look more closely. What do you see?"

"Oh, I see a rose garden."

"Look more closely. What do you see?"

"I see a bed of roses."

"Look more closely. What do you see?"

"I see a single rose bush."

"Look more closely. What do you see?"

"I see a single rose."

"Look more closely. What do you see?"

"I see a rose petal."

"Look more closely. What do you see?"

"I see a dewdrop on the rose petal."

"Look more closely. What do you see?"

"I see the window."

What we're working on now is learning to recognize the window. And the window can be the hardest to see because it's the most obvious. The window is, of course, awareness itself. Awareness is the medium through which we look out at the world. It's so obvious that it's easy to miss, but it's an essential aspect of the whole thing.

If the window is dirty, the view changes. If the window is wet, the view changes. If the window is colored, the view changes. If the window is clear, it seems to disappear.

But it's still there. And as the practice develops, we begin to notice the window and we can even pay attention to it.

This is bound up with what we discussed when we started the retreat—how the two basic movements in the Mahasi approach are noting and noticing. When I note something, I am deliberately aware of it. I aim my awareness, choosing to be aware of this particular thing. For example, we talk about the grounding object or the primary object. I deliberately aim my awareness and make that particular experience the center of my field of awareness, bringing it to the foreground while everything else goes to the background.

This is the foreground-background structure we've been exploring. What I'm noting, the point of interest, becomes the foreground. The background is still there, but the interest lies in the foreground. So I am noting the grounding object or primary object, and I am noticing everything else.

Another way of looking at it: we do the noting—noting is active, it's what we do in meditation practice. We don't do the noticing—noticing is receptive, we receive what's happening. It's the difference between sending awareness out to the meditation object versus allowing the meditation object to come to us. These are the two basic movements, though there are different combinations and balances between them.

Usually when people start meditation practice, what's emphasized is the noting: ground yourself on this, do it. The quality of effort and determination is quite strong. But as the practice develops, the noticing also becomes stronger because the mind becomes more sensitive and receptive.

Some approaches to meditation emphasize the noticing, the receptivity. Some approaches actually use that as their grounding object from the very beginning—practices like Dzogchen, Mahamudra in the Mahayana, Shikantaza in Zen, open awareness as discussed in Theravada.

It's interesting how fashions change. When I first went to Malaysia some years ago, it was all Mahasi, Mahasi, Mahasi. Every student I interviewed came from a Mahasi background. Over the past few years, it's all open awareness, open awareness, open awareness. The Mahasi Method is just so twentieth century—really, why would you bother? Presumably one day the fashion will change again.

The teacher having a big influence in Malaysia is Ajahn Dtjanissaro. At Sasanarakkha Buddhist Sanctuary, the abbot Bhante Aggacitta and his second-in-command Bhante Kumara are both now practicing Ajahn Dtjanissaro's open awareness style, so it's particularly prominent there.

Noting makes the mind stronger and sharper. You'll notice those exercises we did early on were all about precision aim—send your awareness to precisely this, not that, but this. Noticing makes the mind more sensitive.

Noting is closely linked to effort, obviously. Noticing, I think, is closely linked to vedanā, to feeling tone. It's about cultivating sensitivity. Remember when we talked about vedanā in terms of phassa, contact, which refers to the activity of the six senses? Each sense for the Buddha is a particular kind of sensitivity. Mind—the word the Buddha uses is mano, which is cognate with our English word "mind"—mano is a sensitivity. The noticing is all about cultivating that sensitivity, making it more receptive, more sensitive.

So, as the practice develops, we start to work on – well, rather, we have more options available to us. Do I emphasize the active, or do I emphasize the receptive? Or do I have a mixture between them? And when do I move from one to the other?

The noting emphasizes the object of awareness. The noticing emphasizes the mind that's doing the noting. And of course, the object might be the mind. So I'm noting a mind state, but there's a mind that's doing that. And I could be noticing that mind. Is this making sense?

This is the kind of arena within which we play, and we can play different styles depending on circumstances. But I think that one aspect of this is, over time, becoming more sensitive to the mind which is doing the practice. This plays an increasingly important role.

Last night when I was talking about how we can approach the practice simply as a set exercise where I'm just obeying orders, I might be so fixated on the noting that I completely cut off from the mind that's doing the noting. This does happen. It's possible, for example, if we have an aversive mind – and I won't name any names, I won't confess to this – but if we have an aversive mind and we're diligently noting, we can use the meditation as a way of burying the aversive mind.

I don't know if you have, but I've met long-term meditators who are quite dedicated and quite skillful. And they're the kind of people that I would not like to meet alone on the street on a dark night, because I would not like to be there when the lid blows off. I just get this sense, it's like their meditation practice is keeping the lid firmly closed.

Pressure cooker. Some people can do it because they have good concentration power. But sooner or later that lid's going to come off, and I would much rather not be around when it comes up. But if you've been around the traps long enough, you probably have met somebody like this.

Samadhi, concentration, has this effect. One image the Buddha uses is this: he says concentration is like a pool of water choked with water weeds. You have a big earthenware pot, and you put it on top of the water and it just floats there. But it starts to absorb the water. The more water it absorbs, the heavier it gets. And the heavier it gets, the more it sinks. So you look into the pot – ah, the water is completely clear. But just outside the pot, it's a complete mess.

Samadhi suppresses the defilements, the kilesas. That's its job. That's what it does. And it's possible that if we're so focused on pounding away on the meditation object, that we can actually bury all the problems that brought us to the meditation in the first place. But sooner or later that pot is going to disappear and back it comes again.

So I think an important part of this whole thing – we'll be talking about it as becoming increasingly intimate – is moving towards the receptivity, the sensitivity, the noticing. It plays a very important role. And it's clearly obvious in daily activity, for example. That's one area where its role is so clear, because I'm not actively doing something there. I'm not doing a set meditation exercise.

*_Question_*: Do you have a note that you use to note them? Do you have to notice them? Like this morning, for example, I was coming out of meditation and walking, and I noted "knowing, knowing" as I was walking, which is sort of cognitive. You're using a cognitive strategy for a vedana experience. I noted that it was interesting because I was becoming cognitive about the feeling experience of knowing.

This is part of the inherent recursiveness of awareness – the awareness of the awareness. One of the ways in which it's spoken of is this metaphor of light. So the light illuminates everything, including itself, in a sense. It's just a question of where I look. Wherever I look, it's illuminated, including the light itself.

This approach—this direct awareness practice—is actually found throughout all the traditions, though in the West, some schools seem to have cornered the market in terms of marketing. Mahamudra and Dzogchen practitioners, when you read their literature, write as if they've invented something entirely new.

I often listen to John Dunne's talks—he's a guest teacher at Upaya Zen Center, which produces some truly fascinating content. Dunne is both a Buddhologist and academic in Buddhist studies, specializing in Tibetan Buddhism while maintaining his own practice

within that tradition. He's deeply connected with cutting-edge neuroscience and contemplative research—the Mind & Life Institute, the Dalai Lama's scientific dialogues, all of that territory.

When he teaches meditation from the Tibetan Mahayana perspective, you'd think listening to him that the Tibetans invented everything—as if the Buddha knew nothing about these methods, but fortunately the Indian Mahayana philosophers started developing them centuries later, as if this understanding was completely unknown beforehand and as if nobody else has access to it. It's quite peculiar, really.

But in fact, I think this awareness runs through everything, because it's in a sense bleeding obvious—an underlying, essential truth that's not even particularly esoteric.

Shall we do one more exercise? We'll take this exploration one step further.

In this practice, you'll notice we're engaging in something two-fold: having a meditation object and noting something, while simultaneously cultivating sensitivity to the arena within which this takes place—and this arena is the mind that's doing the meditation. So we're going to take another step into that territory.

Construct your posture, then settle awareness in the body. Begin to focus on the movements within the body that indicate breathing. Track the movements of your breathing. Follow your breathing. Be interested in what is happening to your breathing. It is as if you are holding the movements of your breathing with your hand—holding it there so you can follow it.

Now relax your hold on your breathing so your hold is more gentle, less intense. Allow yourself to become sensitive to the broader field of awareness around your breathing. Become interested in the whole field of experience of being aware of breathing.

Don't do anything with the breathing, but just hold the mind steady. The breathing comes and goes. Be interested in this without clinging to it. The mind changes all the time—be interested in this without clinging to it. Awareness moves from one object to another. Be interested in these movements without trying to stop them.

Don't force anything. If the breathing slips out of view, let it go. Just notice that it slipped away and what replaced it. Things come and go. Let them. Just stay aware that things are coming and going.

If you get lost in thought, come back to breathing. When you feel settled and stabilized, relax your hold on your breathing and open up to the mind itself, letting the objects of awareness come and go.

How was that? What happened?

"Pleasant later."

"Just let the thoughts come and go and don't note them. Is that another type of meditation?"

That's the noticing—that's open awareness, that's the straight noticing.

For me, it's like setting up a posture. When I meditate, I set up a posture of the body, and then within that posture, I meditate.

With the mind, it's like setting up a posture of attention, and then if I simply hold that posture, I can let go of the specific object. Things are moving, but that posture of attention remains. It's like everything is just moving in and out of awareness and I'm simply with it. It's rather like establishing a posture of the mind.

"Would I get in trouble with a Mahasi teacher if I did that?"

"You'd definitely get into trouble. Well, not necessarily."

I stumbled into this at the Mahasi Centre with two different teachers. One time with Sayadaw Lakhna, I was doing the practice, noting the primary object. I remember coming into an interview and saying, "My primary object has changed. It's now the entire universe. Is this okay?"

"Yes, it's okay."

The same thing happened, but it arose spontaneously. Later it shifted back to something more normal. The same thing occurred once when I was working with Upandita. I asked him the same question, because I knew he's fanatical about rising and falling. I said, "Well actually, the mind doesn't want to note rising and falling. It just wants to note the whole universe. Is that all right?"

He laughed and said, "If you're noting the whole elephant, why should you be worried about the details?" You know the image of the elephant.

My experience with all those teachers is that if it happens spontaneously, they don't care. If you direct it, if you change it intentionally, they don't like that, because they've got a certain agenda.

I think one of the strengths and weaknesses of the Mahasi method is that it has a very specific agenda and wants you to jump through very specific hoops for a very specific result. That gives it tremendous power that I think a lot of other approaches just

don't have. But equally, that's its shadow, its weakness—that it only does that. There comes a time when that becomes too narrow a box and it's time to move out of the box. But to go through that kind of training is immensely valuable.

"My feeling is that this follows my experience. I started very much with noting, and it was a big struggle. It became a lot easier when the noticing came in, when I let the noticing arise."

Yes, that's on the open awareness end of the spectrum. There have been times when that sort of thing has arisen spontaneously. But today, doing it as a direct practice—sitting down with the intention to work with open awareness—I've never really practiced in that way. A couple of times when I found myself with teachers like that, I felt like I didn't know what to do. The biggest experience was incompetence—the lack of skillfulness was really obvious to me. It was very much a feeling of "okay, well, back to kindergarten."

"What about this morning? Were you incompetent during that last exercise?"

"I was feeling that last night. Yesterday kind of sent me off in this general direction, and I feel like I'm wallowing around in a big swamp with no clue what I'm doing or where I'm going. Back to kindergarten—A is for apple, B is for bat, C is for cat."

Kindergarten is very useful. She just wanted to move quickly through the alphabet.

"Is there a shadow side to too much noticing?"

Yes, both approaches have their shadows. Every technique has its disadvantages. Every technique has its strengths and its weaknesses. There's no such thing—as I said at the beginning of the retreat—as the one true technique.

What you find is that some people do better with noting than with noticing. Some people do better with noticing than with noting. It just suits their minds. At certain times it's better to notice rather than note. At certain other times it's better to note rather than notice.

This depends on circumstances. Again, this comes back to the skill of the meditator. You've got to work it out for yourself. What we've been doing this morning—is this relevant to you or not? If it's not, forget it. Don't bother with it. But if it's relevant, if it's interesting, if there's something there, then play with it. Explore it. See what's going on. What does it have to offer? What is the dark side?

The dark side of open awareness is exactly as you've been talking about—floundering. Don't know what to do. Sliding. Space-outs.

One student shared: "When you said take a posture of the mind, I had huge washes of indigo and green with visual hallucinations. Thoughts were just gliding over the top like on a sheet of ice, but they couldn't come into this incredible space. It was total bliss."

The variety of responses is always amazing. But you can't generalize from one guided meditation experience—it may never happen again. Minds are incredibly different.

Some minds cannot take the noting. They cannot do it. They can try for years and it just never works. They get tied up in knots. Nothing settles. But give them the universe as an object—completely present, right there—and they flourish. Other minds are the exact opposite.

Part of the whole process is getting to know how this mind works and adapting to it.

A student asked: "Do you think you could delude yourself into thinking you are practicing correctly with open awareness?"

Absolutely. I think that's definitely the shadow—that you can basically not be meditating and persuade yourself that you are.

Another student reflected: "My practice is basically that kind of open practice, but I doubt myself. I think I should be doing something else—this is just too busy. One teacher told me I was just craving non-existence and dismissed it."

One of the challenges of open awareness practice is that the experience can be so subtle that it's actually difficult to tell whether you're meditating. The experience is subtle and natural. When I'm really focusing on something and developing samadhi, there's a kind of artificiality to it—this is not normal. There's an obviousness to it. I know this is a meditation state. But with open awareness, the result is so natural that it can be hard to tell. There's so little doing in it that it can be difficult to discern.

What you want to do is check the state of mind. Is the mind clear and at ease? This is the sensitivity aspect. You learn, particularly with open awareness, to read the mind—to read the state of mind as it's meditating.

Is the mind clear and at ease? If you're not really meditating, the mind will not be clear. The attention might be moving from one thing to another, but is there a continuity of awareness? Can you actually see the movements? Not that you wake up here, then wake up there, then wake up somewhere else.

Can you actually be aware of the movements? Is the mind clear as you do this, and is the heart at ease, peaceful, not disturbed, not caught up with longing and grief for the world?

So longing and grief for the world, longing and sorrow for the world. Is it falling into emotional entanglement, or is there a sense of stability, ease within the heart? And the window we're talking about—is that completely clear? And is there a continuity of awareness?

Then you tick those boxes and you realize, no, this is not normal deluded consciousness at all. This is quite different. It's subtle, subtly different, but it's definitely different.

What comes up for me is: And what next? And then what? It's like, here I am, and it seems like I've ticked all those boxes. And then what? Yeah, interesting question. And that's what I think is one of the interesting things about this style of practice—the "and then what."

Part of that is actually the perception of impermanence, the felt sense of no future. If I'm not meditating, if I'm in a normal, agitated, deluded state of mind, I know what's going to happen next. I've been here before. I know that soon I'm going to end this talk and head upstairs. I'm quite confident in that. But when I'm really clear about this right now, I really don't know it. I can imagine it, but I don't know it. I don't know what's coming next. And that's one of the flavors of the perception of impermanence.

When the Bodhisattva came to a dead end in his ascetic practices and realized this was a dead end and he had to change track, the question that he asked himself was: Why am I afraid of pleasure? And he resolved, "I will not be afraid of pleasure." An ascetic would ask that. I find that very interesting. I missed it for forty years or something.

The relationship to pleasure is really important. It gets you back to this visual bliss out, which happens to me when I'm doing open awareness.

"What, visual bliss out?"

Quite often. I remember being very confused and asking—I wasn't just doubting him, and I didn't really like his answer, but it kind of makes sense. His answer makes sense. His definition of meditating is really... it makes sense now. His explanation makes sense, because he says meditating is rather than really meditating. It's a bit circular.

For me, a touch too circular. So I thought, well, I'll just daydream. And if it's this easy, far out. Then I was driving home the very first time I did it, thinking, did I meditate? Like, what the hell? I was very confused, but also very blissed out.

As I was driving home, anyone who needed to be let in ahead of me, I let them in. I was just acting like such a nice driver. I'm not a horrible driver, but I don't notice all the other vehicles. So I was thinking maybe I was meditating, and the only way to know is that the fruit of it is some kind of driving compassion—unless that's just the fruit of samadhi, because I do get that sort of "well, so what" feeling, you know?

It is very subtle.

And this is true of any meditation approach. The deeper you go, the more refined and subtle it becomes. And your appreciation of what's going on has to adjust accordingly. With open awareness, this can be trickiest to work out, but I do think the shadow of open awareness is the wallowing—people who just persuade themselves that they're meditating when they're actually quietly spacing out. It's the middle way—it's always the middle way.

But there's nothing wrong with pleasure. In fact, developing concentration, samadhi, is one of the factors, and the Buddha says the immediate cause for the arising of samadhi is pleasure.

Of course, the predominant lay meditation tradition in our culture comes out of the Burmese insight tradition. If you're doing a traditional insight meditation practice, then what will tend to become most apparent to the meditator is dukkha rather than sukha. As one teacher at Mahasi Centre explained to me very cheerfully, he said, "Samatha meditation is close to sukha. Vipassana meditation is close to dukkha." And I thought, "Damn it! I'm in the wrong place."

So there is an emphasis on the relationship to dukkha in insight meditation with a capital I, capital M. And sometimes that has resulted in a culture which is actually fearful of pleasure. "So don't go there. Or it's dangerous, don't cling, don't cling." Okay, fine, don't cling to pleasure. But equally, people can cling to their pain. People do cling to their pain, ferociously. It's not that there's any particular danger in clinging to pleasure. There's an equal danger in clinging to pain. So don't worry about the pleasure. Enjoy it. Use it.

"Can I make a comment? In 1982 I was meditating for Joseph Goldstein, who was very much coming from the Mahasi approach then. And I was incredibly restless. Just so restless I couldn't even sit still. And he said to me, 'Just let your mind do what it wants to do. Just let it be like that.' And he described open awareness. He said, 'Practice that.' And it was the best antidote to restlessness. So, you know, I think it's around...

That was after he had written Insight Meditation, that classic book. I think he wrote it in 1979 or something. But that's coming from the Mahasi approach, and it's a strategy for..."

"You know what you said about the right effort? It just came to mind when you spoke about the right effort, in relation to this very disciplined approach with concentrating on the object and then also letting go. It's when you put the right effort—what is appropriate at the moment."

Yes. Absolutely. It's something to do with that. It's that sort of being aware and knowing what is right. And what's appropriate to the circumstances. And it's a constantly moving feast. It doesn't stay still. So it's a question of adapting. But it's also a question of meditating according to your particular kind of mind and finding a way that suits this mind.

"Back to the pleasure thing, you know, you were talking about vedanā the other night. But when you get to the second categorization of vedanā—so there's pleasant, unpleasant and neither—but then there's that ethical division of wholesome and unwholesome. So what we tend to forget is the wholesome pleasant feelings that are beneficial, useful and leading on. So it's all very well to remember the wholesome, unpleasant feeling, but we tend to imagine that somehow there's unwholesome, pleasant feeling and wholesome, unpleasant feeling. Well, that's not the way it is. There's any of the three—pleasant, unpleasant or neither—that can be wholesome or unwholesome, depending on the context and what the ethical result is."

So if you're having a pleasant feeling in your meditation, it's just as likely to be wholesome, especially if it encourages you to do more meditation and stay on the path and keep moving onwards. This is definitely a crystalline form of pleasure—bliss, happiness, and the like.

So play around with these teachings. If what we've explored this morning doesn't suit you, simply forget about it. Chalk it up as the morning's entertainment and move on. But if there's something useful here, then play with it, experiment, and make it your own.

Thank you for listening, and may your practice continue to unfold with wisdom and joy.

CHAPTER 15

Restraining the Senses: Indriyasaṃvara Practice

Patrick Kearney · 1h09

> *Patrick Kearney explores indriyasaṃvara, the Buddha's practice of restraining the sense faculties, which precedes formal meditation training in the gradual path. This foundational practice involves not grasping at the nimitta (themes) and anubyañjana (features) that draw our attention through the six sense doors - eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.*
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> *Drawing from the gradual training suttas, Kearney explains how this practice protects against unwholesome states of longing and sorrow (taṇhā) by cultivating radical receptivity rather than active engagement. Unlike advanced non-dual practices in Mahāyāna traditions, this approach is presented as basic training that prepares monastics for meditation.*
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> *Through guided exercises with seeing, hearing, and thinking, participants learn to receive sense experiences without the habitual 'doing' that creates entanglement. This practice of 'not-doing' cultivates natural mindfulness, equanimity, and ease while remaining fully open to whatever arises through the senses. The teaching emphasizes how this same principle applies both in formal practice and daily activities, offering a path of effortless awareness grounded in early Buddhist methodology.*

Yesterday we were looking at the structure of attention. We've been talking about the difference between the active and the receptive aspects of the practice. In the active mode, awareness is actively sent out to seek the object of awareness and hold it. In the receptive mode, awareness is simply sensitive and the object comes to us.

We talked about the way Mahasi expresses this distinction. He talks about noting and noticing. Noting is the active aspect—we go out. Noticing is the receptive aspect—we let it come to us. Yesterday we practiced with a kind of halfway house, where we send the awareness out and study the object but we also cultivate a sensitivity towards the state of the mind that's doing it. In the final exercise we were holding the attention steady but allowing different things to come and go through that.

We're playing around with the structure of attention, and today we'll take it another step further. We'll go back into pure noticing, pure receptivity and playing with that.

The particular way that we're going to do it is something extremely basic. These kinds of open awareness practices that we discussed yesterday you find throughout Buddhist traditions. In Mahayana there's a fair amount of marketing about how highly

advanced they are. Dzogchen, Mahamudra, Shikantaza—these are presented as very high-level, advanced practices, and obviously if you do them, if you're not enlightened, you're well on the way.

The way we're going to play with it today is one way that the Buddha talks about this in which it's not an advanced meditation practice. In fact, it's not even a meditation practice. When we do this exercise today we will not be meditating. You will not be establishing your meditation posture.

What we're going to do is indriyasaṃvara—restraining the senses. This is such a foundational practice that when the Buddha talks about it, he places it not in meditation—bhāvanā—but in sīla. If you look at the texts on the gradual training, restraining the senses comes just before the beginning of formal meditation practice. Apparently the original context would be that if you ordained as a monk or a nun in the Buddha's time, before you started your meditation practice, during your boot camp training, this is one practice that you would do. This would prepare you for meditation practice.

This is how the Buddha talks about it. He's describing the practitioner and talking about the relationship to the six senses:

"On seeing a form with the eye, she does not hold on to its themes and features. Since if she left the eye faculty unguarded, evil, unwholesome states of longing and sorrow might invade her. She practices the way of its restraint. She guards the eye faculty. She undertakes the restraint of the eye faculty.

"On hearing a sound with the ear, she does not hold on to its themes and features. On smelling an odor with the nose, she does not hold on to its themes and features. On tasting a flavor with the tongue, she does not hold on to its themes and features. On touching an object with the body, she does not hold on to its themes and features. On knowing a phenomenon with the mind, she does not hold on to its themes and features, since, if she left the mind faculty unguarded, evil, unwholesome states of longing and sorrow might invade her. She practices the way of its restraint. She guards the mind faculty. She undertakes the restraint of the mind faculty."

The whole thing revolves around themes and features, and the relationship with themes and features. In Pali, this is nimitta and anubyañjana. Nimitta is usually translated as "sign" and we've already talked about it with that translation. Here I've translated it as "theme"—I think I got this from Ṭhānissaro—and I think it fits well when we consider how the senses operate.

If you think about the eyes and pay attention to what they do, you'll notice they're constantly scanning the visual field. They're quite active: check, check, check, check. They're very sensitive to movement. There's a bit of movement and the eye goes there: What's that? What's that? What's that?

The theme indicates the general impression of the sense object when we first notice it—what's distinctive about it.

What draws us in? This "what's that" response sets the stage for deeper engagement.

Features are the details that appear when we go in and examine the object more closely and start to chew it over, trying to get a sense of what's going on and extract something from it. Both themes and features pull us into entanglement with the experience, and we react to it. Vedana comes in. We respond to it—we like it, we don't like it. We want to do something with it, get something from it, or lose something through it. We become entangled with the sense experience, and this is called the unwholesome states of longing and sorrow, which is basically craving, tanha.

We've talked about how this works in seeing. Something will grab the eye as it scans the field, then hold the attention. Just now, as my eyes were scanning the audience, they struck René's orange sock. Bang! There was a moment when the eyes fixated on that orange—the theme. Now let's say this really grabbed my attention and I start to examine it. Then come the features: "That looks really weird. It totally contrasts with the sober black and grey of everything else. I wonder if it was an accident." I start to chew it over, and the mind begins to work the experience—liking, disliking, interest, disinterest, "what's in it for me?" I start to get entangled with it. You can see how the process works.

You can observe this with the eyes regarding beauty and ugliness. The eyes scan the field. If they strike something perceived as ugly, they react: "Ooh, what's that?" and get entangled—"It's awful." Equally with beauty: "Oh, what's that? That's really nice," and we start to get entangled.

For the Buddha, the senses are active, going out and scanning their respective fields. Something strikes the sensitivity—"Oh, that's of interest." That's the nimitta, the theme. There we get drawn in and start chewing it over. The Pali for this process is anubyanjana—features—and the whole mechanism is called indriya samvara, restraint of the faculties.

This works the same way with all the senses. Take the mind, for example. Thoughts constantly arise—bits of mental stuff that the mind keeps throwing up. Then the attention goes to one of these and seizes upon it. For instance, there's an image of something that happened, something that might happen, or something that is happening that shouldn't.

In other words, something irritating. And the awareness goes bang, straight to it.

It has been known—I'm sure it doesn't happen in this hall—but it has been known that meditators in meditation halls often have their minds stimulated in this way by the behavior of their fellow meditators. These are advanced and highly experienced meditators. I'm sure no aversion has arisen regarding the behavior of our fellow inhabitants of this meditation hall. But if it did happen, you would notice how there'd be something arising first of all in one of the physical sense fields—hearing or seeing most obviously, smelling as well. You've got to tell me about this later! And then in the mind, thought arises.

Now this grabs the attention. This is the theme, and the theme here would be one of irritation: "This should not be happening." And the awareness would go to that and start to expand it and turn it into a story. "What the hell does he or she think they're doing? Where do they think they are? Were they born yesterday? This is supposed to be for experienced meditators." Blah blah blah blah blah. And this story of irritation and aversion begins to unfold.

Now you notice that when this happens, we fill in the details, and then there's a particularly juicy bit and we move on. Then we stop and we go back and we chew over that bit again because that was really good and that got us really riled up. Then we move on and there's another particularly irritating bit, so we come back and chew over that. So this chewing over the experience—this is the anubhyājana, the features. The theme is the initial impression, what draws us in. And the features are the way that we chew over it. And the more we chew over it, the greater the agitation within the citta.

The features are the details, and we often find ourselves going back and chewing over the same bit because it's particularly juicy. Having experienced a bit of that myself, I could just speak for myself and say it gives me an enormous sense of satisfaction in two closely related ways. One is the satisfaction of being right when everyone else is wrong. So it's pleasurable—there's a pleasure in that. But also I feel more real when I'm doing that. And in certain circumstances, depending on how angry I am, I also feel very powerful. There's a sense of power that comes from this.

The craving for existence includes craving for pleasures.

"Can the theme for the mind be a rejection of something else rather than an attraction?"

Yes, but the attention goes to that rejection. So there's an attraction to the rejection. We're talking about the movement of the senses.

Any other questions?

Now, not holding on to themes and features—what does it mean in practice? This is a practice of radical relaxation. Basically, if I look at this whole process of themes and features, all of it involves work. It's active. Think, think, think, think, think. Look, look, look. Like, like, like, like. Dislike, dislike, dislike, etc. It's all active—I'm doing it. Actually, after a few hours of this I feel quite exhausted and I need to take a break.

Not holding on to themes and features is just relaxing. So this practice focuses on the work required to maintain this entanglement. It's active. It's energetic. It's too much work. I'll just let it go. I'll just drop it and relax.

So we learn to receive whatever comes through any of the six senses. Accept it. Relax. Let it go.

This practice is one of not doing anything, and what I discover as soon as I start to do it is that the determination to do something with the experience is really strong, so it keeps coming up. But as soon as it comes up, I recognize the doing and I drop it, and I just relax. Does that make sense?

So this is what we're going to play around with, with just three of the senses. Now we're doing this according to Buddha's instructions, so it's not meditation. So do not take up a meditation posture.

You can stand, sit, walk around, lie down—basically do whatever you like. I'm restricted to this area because I've got the recorder, so I won't be wandering around. And also, do not close your eyes because we're going to work with seeing. It's difficult with your eyes closed—you kind of miss a lot. Some people like to look out windows and whatever. Basically, we're not meditating, so just do anything.

And relax. Just relax. Don't be doing anything. Just relax.

Open your awareness to the body. Don't work to focus on any particular part of the body. So just feel the body. Maybe the body awareness is kind of moving around. Let it move around, just spontaneously. Just feel the body. Don't do anything. Just be here.

When you feel awareness moving towards an object to do something with it, relax. Don't do anything. Just be.

Are you seeing? Bring awareness to your eyes. Relax your eyes. Receive sights. When you find your awareness moving towards something to look at it, relax. Come back to your eyes. Don't look, just see.

Are you hearing? Bring awareness to your ears. Relax your ears. Receive sounds. When you find your awareness moving towards something to listen to it, relax. Come back to your ears. Don't listen, just hear.

Are you thinking? Bring awareness to your mind. Relax your mind. Receive thoughts. When you find your awareness moving towards something to think it, relax. Come back to the mind. Don't think, just know that there are thoughts.

You can go back to meditating now.

Katie, you look exhausted.

"It is extremely difficult. That's quite a common reaction."

"I thought if you hadn't told me to do it, it was the middle of the day, dead smack, I think. But it isn't. Getting the effort right is... Did you do any sloth and torpor?"

"I didn't, but I realized that's not quite the point. So I resumed this, but the not doing of things is quite difficult for me anyway."

Anybody else? Anybody else have difficulty?

"I noticed a little reluctance at some moment when I saw something and I had the impulse to go there, and I thought, 'No, I'm not supposed to do that. Let it come to me.' So I didn't have the experience of going to the thing, and that felt strange. But I was a little... I wanted to do it."

It felt like a loss not to do it. And I had a sense—well, that's my thing. You know, that's what I do. And I can't do my thing. Anyway, I could simulate it with that feeling from waking up, from sleep to waking up. When you're slowly coming up from sleep. Yeah, that's the only way I could manage it. The mechanism of the eye, because I was lying down, always wants to get a depth of focus on something. It's sort of the way the thing works. So I had to sort of simulate a kind of blurry, relaxed eye.

When you say you simulated it, does that mean you were doing it?

I was doing it, yeah. But if I hadn't, I would have focused on something. If you hadn't done it, you would have done it—you would have done something else. That's one of the things about this exercise: it is so hard to drop doing.

I have seen this as well. It's so automated to, like you said, pull focus on something. But with hearing and thinking, I train myself to be able to sort of—I think—just let it kind of roll in without having to attach to things. So it's difficult to do it with sight, but the hearing and the thinking was easier.

Easier. And that's, you think, because of prior training? Or maybe because of the mechanism of sight and what it tries to do.

So you're not sure, in other words.

Yeah.

When I did a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita many years ago, there was a riddle he kept posing that I didn't quite get at the time. He was saying something like, "What is it when the mind doesn't go out or doesn't come in?" As far as I understand it now, it is what we're talking about. It's not going out, going onto anything. It's not coming in internally. That does describe what we were exploring, by the extent we manage to do it. But it wants to. It definitely wants to. One or the other.

Did anybody find a sense of ease?

Yeah.

Tell me about the ease.

Well, I started by accessing my inner lazy sloth. And every time an object would come up, I'd think, "Oh, I can't be bothered." And it would be as clear as clear. And I'm like, "Oh, I can't be bothered. I'm just going to chill." And then I thought, "No, I can't even be bothered to chill because that's doing something." And so, you know, I thought, "Oh yeah, not doing, just being." And yeah, that's all right. It was very relaxing. I feel very relaxed.

Good.

I found the hearing easy because I've got really strong tinnitus. I've just trained myself over the years not to go there as a meditation object. But the other senses were harder.

What about mind? Not thinking, but just knowing that thoughts are there. How did that go?

That was the easiest.

That was the hardest for you? What was the easiest for you?

The headless way kind of thing, and it just flows where you're just aware—it comes through you.

It's interesting that each sense modality is easier for different people, probably because you've been practicing it. I suspect you've been practicing it with thinking, hence easier. But it's difficult when we're not used to it. Like anything else, we can train ourselves. But the thing about this particular form of training—it's a training in not doing.

And when I do not doing, basically what I do is I set myself the task of noticing any doing. It's like I seek to become sensitive to activity. And as soon as I notice it, I let it go. Like we were talking about this morning with stretching. And sometimes I can and sometimes I can't let it go. But the project is: notice activity, notice doing, and when you notice it, relax.

So it's a constant letting go and relaxing. The awareness becomes, in my experience, very acute because the mind and the senses are constantly doing. It just becomes very clear. I find it especially interesting in the mind.

We did this as I said—don't meditate—because I'm presenting it partly the way the Buddha presents it. But I also do this as a formal meditation practice. I will sit down in the meditation posture and my project will be to sit there and don't do anything. And as soon as I notice myself doing something, drop it, relax.

I find—actually I found this here—when I start doing this practice, I become acutely sensitive to posture. Because if the posture's out, the body's tightening. It's working. And I become aware of that. The only way that the body can relax is if it comes back into balance and then can relax. So I find this practice makes me very much aware of posture, because that's the only way that the body can minimize its doing—by being balanced.

When I move, if I do this in walking meditation, the movement tends to become graceful for the same reason. There's minimum doing in the movement. Mind becomes peaceful because there's minimum doing, but it's not a particular samadhi state because I'm not trying to do samadhi. I'm not doing anything. But everything starts to calm down, and it's a wide open kind of awareness, which I find quite interesting.

"So if something grabs your attention, like with the looking, I was scanning the room, trying not to look, and Buddha, every time I passed, grabbed me like the impulse was there. Look! So it's like catching that before it happens?"

You catch it when it happens. It's like you notice the activity of it. What you focused on here isn't the object, but the activity, the work involved. So it caught me and said, oh, no, we're not doing that. So you might keep your eyes in the same direction towards the Buddha, but you just relax. And it does come out as a soft focus that people often experience. Sometimes people say the eyes go out of focus, but certainly the focus becomes soft.

Sometimes people say, for example, looking out the window, when they look, everything's quite clear and sharp, but with this, everything becomes a bit blurry because they're not... Yeah, and that's another thing which can happen. Peripheral vision becomes more open.

"It strikes me, Patrick, that we are doing this in our practice anyway, and maybe that's part of the reason why we get more energy. After a while we get that really very clear sort of energy which to me is different from any other energy that I experience."

Yeah, this is like we're picking particular aspects of attention and how the mind is structured and just working on that particular aspect. We're doing this consciously, whereas it's kind of in my practice.

"I think one of the difficulties I had relates to something that Marion said, when she said, do we do it before? And you said, no, you catch it when you do something like that. I think I was trying to prevent it."

Yeah, so you were actively trying to prevent action. You were doing to prevent doing, which is, of course, another form of doing. But it does show you how deep the doing goes. "I'm not supposed to be doing, so I better do this." So it becomes incredibly complicated. And sometimes people do experience this as just being mind-bogglingly complicated. But it's complicated because we haven't let go of the doing. Once you let go of the doing, it's like, ah, there couldn't be anything simpler.

You can use this as a formal practice, and when I read about these advanced non-dual Mahayana approaches, usually this is what they're talking about. But it's also very good for daily activity, where you're not doing a formal meditation practice and there's nothing to do except—let's say I'm walking from here to the hall—there's only one thing I have to do and that's to walk from here to the hall. But if I'm paying attention, I notice actually that's not enough. The mind, the senses have got to do lots of other things along the way.

Well, actually, I don't have to do any of that. I can just relax and walk to the dining hall. That's it. Nothing extra.

And when I notice the determination to do something extra, oh, no, too much work. Can't be bothered. Drop it. Just relax. So it's quite simple. It's radically simple. And when you hit it, it's really nice because it's just relaxing. I just don't have to do any of this.

But it's tricky because I find myself trying to do this. It sort of clicks in on a long walk sometimes. Absolutely. And it's all just moving through space. Something is. That's how I feel after a retreat—I'm just walking around, not having to meditate. So you can relax the effort, but all of those mental qualities you're cultivating during the retreat, they're operating. So it's like you're getting the afterglow. But here, it's like try to tune into it during the retreat.

And you notice that—I've been talking about how the Buddha presents this before meditation. I've waited a week before presenting it because it's easier to get a sense of it when you've had the momentum built up through the practice.

The context that the Buddha talks about with this is especially with the alms round for the monks and the nuns. So the monks and the nuns ordain and they go off, they live in a sheltered workshop where they can focus on their meditation practice. But the way the Buddha set the system up is once a day they have to engage with lay society. And so that's the danger time.

When you do that, don't just relax. You're not trying to push the evil lay society away. You're just not getting involved. You just relax. Which is very interesting. Faced with sin and temptation, what should you do? Just relax. Sin is just too much effort.

That's a very interesting teaching. Lucky you. That's the secret of my virtue—a lazy man's virtue.

It's strange to be receiving and not to be saying thank you. Thank you. Oh, actually, no, don't put that in my bowl. You're not supposed to do that. Just receive it. Don't look at them, don't say anything. I find it very, very odd being on that. It's very interesting.

And that's the other thing. When sensory restraint is presented in meditation retreats—the way I've worked in Zen and in Theravada—it's being presented in the context of a retreat in exactly the same way: don't look around. Keep your eyes down. Don't listen to anything. Create your own little bubble and stay within that bubble. And this is sensory restraint.

Now you notice that's not the way the Buddha talks about it. Sure, open up. Look around. But don't do anything with it. It's different.

You're not trying to shut anything out. You're open to everything, but you're not going out to get involved. Because as soon as you notice yourself going out, ah, too much work—drop it.

A student asks: "Is the term 'choice-less awareness' used by Buddha?"

No, that term was invented by Krishnamurti and then taken up. It became very fashionable. But the term itself comes from Krishnamurti. Though you can see that this is where it's coming from—it's closer to that, yes. It's not quite that, but it's getting closer.

That so-called definition of mindfulness is really a very good definition of a particular style of meditation practice. And that's the other thing about these very simple practices. Sensory strength, also *sampajjana*—clear understanding—which the Buddha associates always with mindfulness, and which if you're in a Mahasi-style meditation retreat, is again very basic. But mindfulness and clear understanding the Buddha will also talk about in terms of being a very advanced practice in some suttas.

And basically it's the same practice. The simplest basic kindergarten practice, the most profound advanced practice—it's in fact the same practice. It's the same practice all the way through. It's just that we get better at it, basically. But it's the same practice. You get able to wring more out of it—squeeze more out of it.

"It's interesting that it's referred to as sense restraint, and yet it's actually sort of enhancing everything."

Because what's for the Buddha the sense—well, it's actually the *indriyasaṃvara*, the restraint of the faculties. Here "the faculties" is translated as sense restraint, but actually it's faculties. But these faculties in this context are the faculties of the senses.

Now if you look at this word *indriya*, it's derived from Indra, and Indra is one of the old Vedic gods. And he's the equivalent of the captain coach of a footy team. Indra is a war god. And he lives in this big castle in the sky. And he's a big, buffy bloke—think of rugby league.

And he gets up in the morning, and what he wants is a bit of biffo. So he gathers his mates, and they're all in the castle, and he's the leader. They leap on their horses, put on their weapons, and they charge up looking for a fight. And fortunately the Asuras are there, all geared up and ready to go. And so they spend all day hacking and bashing and biffing and attacking the Asuras, and they win. Every day they win.

So they're really pleased, and they go home, and they feast, and they eat, and they drink, and they party, and then they crash out. And then they wake up again and—let's do it again! And this is Indra's life. But he leads from the front.

So an *indriya* is an action, an activity that leads from the front, that's going forward. So you have the *indriyas* of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom—the five *indriyas*—because these are the mental qualities that go in front towards awakening.

And the Buddha says—and this is the aspect of the senses that he's looking at—this idea that the senses go out, they head out to engage, and that's the aspect of the senses that's being restrained. So it's the restraint of the action of going out. There's no English equivalent—the intention is bound up with it, intention, activity, effort, the whole thing, the active aspect of the senses.

So it's not that you're trying to shut down the senses, but the senses have two aspects: the going out and the receptive. If you drop the going out and you just have the receptive, it is an opening out. And because you're paying attention to that, it becomes even stronger. There's that expression: keep your eyes peeled.

"If one's restrained successfully, would you say the result is a little bit like equanimity?"

Equanimity. Because first of all it's regarding all constructions, all formations—because it's all the six senses. And reactivity drops away because all reactivity is action, is activity.

So it's also... I would imagine the Buddha spoke about it as a protective measure. He says "guarding the mind"—non-harming of the self. And it involves mindfulness. Your mindfulness has to be really good to do this, or alternatively, when you do this you really cultivate mindfulness strongly. But of course if you cultivate mindfulness you cultivate equanimity because they go together. So it's closely associated with equanimity.

This is very similar to what we find in the Satipatthana Sutta, where the Buddha speaks of guarding the sense faculties. The way he's expressing it here is like what he's explaining to people when they're just starting out with it. But as I often point out, in different contexts it's really the same practice but talked about from different angles and developed to different depths. The practice itself is the same, but you can talk about it in different ways depending on context.

It's definitely mindfulness. When you look at what he says—if she left the higher faculty unguarded or unprotected—when he talks about mindfulness, he talks about the function of mindfulness to guard, to protect. So mindfulness is implied. "Unwholesome states of longing and sorrow might invade her. Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, she leaves tracking bodies." It's the same expression.

So that tendency to go for something is craving. This practice really puts you right in touch with craving. It's right on the edge—it makes craving really evident. I've got all this vision now, these hordes of galloping energy, galloping out through all my sense doors, being all very excited and looking for something. We definitely want drama. I mean, why else are soap operas so popular? You've got to have a bit of drama.

The sequence goes: contact, which includes vedanā, and then craving, and that's where your action is. Contact, vedanā, craving. But vedanā comes with the contact. So the contact's there, but this practice is about not acting on the craving. The non-doing is actually between the feeling and the craving—a non-acting on craving.

When the Buddha talks about craving, he talks about its restless quality. If you look at craving, you notice how the mind will move from one thing to another to another—this, this, this, this, this, this. What's consistent throughout is what I call a sense of urgent necessity which accompanies craving, but the object of craving is constantly moving. I want this, I want that, changing. So craving has this restless energetic quality to it.

Here you're addressing that not in terms of the object of craving but in terms of the energetic feel of it. And you're bringing in your dharmic laziness. It's like it's just not worth the effort.

Just relax.

This approach gives us a chance by recognizing this faculty and sense in the moment when we can actually intercept and do something skillful. Once you settle into this practice, all of these different qualities—these different mental factors—can become apparent as playing some part in the unfolding drama of experience.

In practice, each individual meditator will notice different aspects. One meditator might notice the cetanā, the volition, and then it becomes a cetanā exercise for them. Another meditator might notice the vedanā, the feeling tone, so for them it becomes a vedanā exercise. Another meditator notices something else entirely, and for them that defines their particular exploration. But all these factors are present and playing their part in every moment.

I recommend this to you as a daily activity practice, and also, if you want to explore it as a formal sitting practice, it's quite interesting. Of course, you can do exactly the same practice in both contexts—formally and in daily activity. What we're doing here is presenting possibilities. This is one possibility; it's not compulsory. If this doesn't appeal to you as something worth exploring, don't bother with it. Just keep doing what you're doing. But if this feels like it could be useful or interesting to investigate, go ahead and explore it.

Someone asked about the exercise we did yesterday, where we were looking at the movement of awareness as objects came into awareness: "Is that doing? Because the awareness does move from object to object."

In both cases, we're simply letting it move. Like yesterday, we maintain a posture of attention and just allow the awareness to move naturally. This current practice is very, very similar. Maybe in practical terms you can't tell the difference, and that's perfectly fine.

This points to how our training often works—we're always uncovering what previously we had not seen. In yesterday's exercise, you were doing that by having this project: "I'm going to notice that movement. I'm going to notice when awareness goes somewhere." It becomes a matter of "Ah, gotcha. Gotcha. Gotcha." It's a very interesting exercise because it's making you sensitive to those movements.

The day will come when you don't have to make such a deliberate effort. You won't need to think "Gotcha!" You'll just see it naturally. It'll simply be obvious. But when you start, it's necessarily a deliberate project. You're training yourself to notice these subtle movements. As people were sharing yesterday, they could do it in one sensory modality but not another, because they had practiced with that particular sense door before. When you practice something, it becomes natural.

One person mentioned, "The thing that really distracts me is sounds. My mind immediately goes to 'What was that? That's a bird' or whatever." If you practice this approach specifically with sound, those sounds begin to relax their grip on attention. You might choose to practice just with the auditory sense door and not bother with the others, because sound is particularly problematic or particularly interesting for you—it stands out.

Another question arose: "If you're doing this with mental formations—images and thoughts coming up—and you're not noting them, you're just sort of letting them be, how can you not get attached? How can you just let them be without doing vipassana?"

Well, perhaps that letting-be is vipassana. Maybe it's a non-active form of vipassana. When you're not getting entangled with the mental formations, they don't take on a life of their own.

This brings up an interesting point: How many of you felt that you could successfully relax the mind? And how many thought, "What does that even mean?"

I find this question fascinating. Mind is a sense activity—it's a sense door with its corresponding sensitivity, but it also has its corresponding activity. If there's an activity, it should be possible to relax it.

So can I relax the mind? Relaxing the other senses is also relaxing the mind. I had this moment where I looked at Blake's notes and I just dropped it. That was a mental thing. It was a visual thing, but also a mental thing.

With relaxing the eyes and the ears, they have location. So you can find them in order to relax them. Bring your awareness to your eyes—I know where they are. But where's the mind?

A student asked: "In this receptive awareness, is there also space for occasional light naming of things?"

Yes, if you want to. You reduce the floundering, you work out your own way of doing it. You don't obey orders. This is a different way of relating to the experience, and once you start to play with it, you start to modify it according to your circumstances—how you can actually explore this and what you can do with it. It's much more important than rigidly following orders.

"But isn't sort of a bit of... Naming feels like doing something."

It is doing something. But it kind of just stops the chaos just for a moment, slows it all down.

Buddha has the expression "using a thorn to extract a thorn." So in this case, using activity to drop activity. It's right effort. It would be an example of right effort.

Another student shared: "The first two exercises, I felt like I had some understanding of what we were doing there, but I was aware of the commentary in the mind all the time—how I was doing it right. Even when I felt the gaze was soft, still that commentary all the time in the mind. So then when we came to the mind, commentary is still there about the commentary."

In that case, you might want to just do it with the physical senses. Keep it simple. So you get a feel for it in the physical senses. Once that's established, you might be able to do it in the mind as well. Because as René was pointing out, you actually cannot relax the physical senses without relaxing the mind. The mind has to relax when you're relaxing the senses. But you might just stick to the physical senses and not worry about the mind until you get a clearer sense of what's going on. Just let it run—too much effort to try to get rid of it.

"I'm not trying to be too theological, but doing nothing is doing something, isn't it?"

You could say that, but that's alright. Circular.

"I often forget the names of things and I've always wondered whether it was dementia or not. I don't think it is dementia because it's always been this way. I can never remember the names of people or things. But when I'm meditating, sometimes I'll try to think of something. There'll be a thought that comes up—what's that name? And I notice an effort to try to remember the name. And I literally let it go. And maybe that's reinforcing my condition. But it's that practice of letting... There's an urge, there's a desire to want to know the name or something. I notice the urge and I let it go."

That urge to name is really fundamental. And in fact, one of the terms the Buddha uses for mind is nāma, which literally means "name." It's the process of naming an experience.

So nāma-rūpa... Rūpa is form in its original sense of visual form—how something appears to the eyes. Ajahn Sujata's translation of nāma-rūpa, which I think is sheer genius, is "named appearance." So something appears and we name it. And that's what we're doing all the time. Often it's translated as "name and form." Sometimes the old translation was "mind and body," but that misses the point.

Not being able to know what something is leads it to fall into the neither positive nor negative category, and then it just agitates. There's that challenging quality—it's so difficult to simply say you don't know. We want to give it a name, even a placeholder like "imponderable," because not knowing is quite agitating.

Someone asked: "Does this mean that as you get older, the imponderables increase?"

Yes, they do. I'm reminded of a koan where the abbot is saying goodbye at the end of a retreat—they have three-month retreats, and then the monks scatter. He was asking each departing monk, "Where do you plan to go?" One of them replied, "I don't know." And the abbot responded, "Not knowing is most intimate."

That's the flip side of confusion—the intimacy of not knowing.

When Emperor Wu of southern China was interrogating Bodhidharma, the emperor asked, "Who are you?" Bodhidharma replied, "Don't know."

There's that famous Korean Zen teacher who went to the USA—Seung Sahn Sunim. He would say, "Just keep that don't-know mind." But you can't maintain the don't-know mind until you actually reach it. Getting to it can be quite a journey.

I think it was he who kept asking "What is this?" throughout his meditation practice, right to the end. He claimed there was no other meditation—only "What is this?" This is one of the basic koans used in Korea, one of the most popular koans in the Korean tradition.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 16

The Insight Chorus - Part 2 - Independence

Patrick Kearney · 57 min

> *Patrick Kearney continues his exploration of the insight chorus from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), focusing on the profound final sentence: "she lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world." This talk examines what true independence means in Buddhist practice - moving beyond the conditioning factors of desire (taṇhā) and ignorance (avijjā) that keep us bound in cycles of seeking and dissatisfaction.*
>
> *Drawing on the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising (paṭicca samuppāda), Kearney explains how our sense of self and reality depends entirely on supporting conditions. He explores the concept of "unlanded awareness" (apaṭiṭṭhita vijñāna) - consciousness that doesn't depend on or grasp anything - using vivid analogies and references to both Theravada and Zen traditions. The discussion includes practical guidance on uncovering our deepest patterns of clinging through mindfulness practice, and how to cultivate the radical uncertainty that allows genuine awakening to emerge.*
>
> *This dharma talk offers both philosophical depth and practical wisdom for understanding how liberation manifests as a completely different way of being in the world - one characterized by complete freedom from the need to grasp or control experience.*

Last night we started on the insight chorus of the Satipatthana Sutta and we got through three sentences and tonight we'll do the fourth.

So what we did last night, the Buddha says, in this way she lives tracking body as body internally or she lives tracking body as body externally, or she lives tracking body as body both internally and externally. So here we see the weakening of the basic self-other division.

She lives tracking the nature of arising as body or she lives tracking the nature of ceasing as body or she lives tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. So this is the perception of impermanence. And of course along with that comes perception of dukkha and of not-self. So the development of insight.

Further, her mindfulness, there is body, is established just for understanding, just for continuous mindfulness. So then you get a clear, direct intimacy with the experience which is continued over time.

And then the final sentence, and she lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. So this is what we're looking at tonight. And this final sentence, she lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world, indicates the maturity of the practice and the maturity of the realization of the awakening itself. And you notice again, it's about a way of life. She lives independently. So this is not just about some kind of meditation experience. This is a whole way of life. And the not clinging indicates the sense that there's nothing further to be gained from anything really.

So let's have a look at what this idea of independence involves by looking at what happens before independence. And there are two major conditioning factors. The first is desire.

Why do we practice? Why do we take up any kind of meditation practice in the first place? Well of course it's because we want something. In other words, we are not satisfied with what we have now. We're not satisfied with this current situation. We want something better. Otherwise, we wouldn't bother. So we make effort because desire is the basis of effort. This is something that the Buddha is quite clear about.

Now, the way this works out is what we've talked about before, that our relationship to any experience, but you can certainly see it in the course of the meditation practice, is dominated by a sense of what's in this for me? What can I get out of this? And what's underneath that is a sense of things are not good enough yet. So we have an instrumental relationship to experience. We're constantly trying to massage it and manipulate it to make it suitable for our purposes. And there's always a gap. There's always something missing. There's always something more we need to do. And this is a relationship to the practice and to life that's dominated by what the Buddha calls tanha and avijja. Tanha is usually translated craving, literally it means thirst, and avijja is ignorance or delusion.

Along with desire, of course, there's also time. When experience is dominated by a sense of something to be gained or something to be lost, then time becomes real. We find ourselves resisting what's happening now because we're convinced that what will happen later is going to be more important or what did happen before was more important so we don't fully commit to the present because what's happening now is just a prelude to something more important that will happen later when I finally get what I want. And this means that what's happening now can be dismissed. If I've judged it as not good enough, then I can just forget about it. I'll just forget about it today and start again tomorrow. Have you ever thought that?

But when we are entirely intimate, then this experience now, whatever it is, is already enough. There's nothing more to gain, and there's no thought of anything that's going to come later, or even anything that did happen before. Any felt sense of past and future dissolves.

Now this doesn't mean that we don't think of past and future but in the very act of thinking about past and future it's perfectly clear that this is just a thought and it arises now. And there's the world of difference between a thought about the past or the future that arises now and being lost in the fantasy of past and future. And when that perception develops even any concept of the present dissolves.

And at this point there's no possibility of wanting anything else because there's no sense that anything alternative to this is even possible. It's just ridiculous.

Now here we're getting into the area that the Buddha calls, in this context, independence—in Pali, anissita.

So let's get a sense of independence by first looking at what the Buddha means by dependence, which is nissita. Nissita means dependent on, attached to, supported by.

This again comes out of the Buddha's fundamental assumption, his fundamental framework of dependent arising. This states that whatever we experience arises because of conditions other than itself. So if something is happening—which it is—there must be something else which conditioned it to arise. Otherwise it wouldn't be here. So this, which is happening now, is dependent upon, supported by, these other conditions. Take away the conditions, this collapses.

You might be having a satisfactory meditation and you might be convinced that finally you've got it. This is it. Now I know exactly how this practice works. There's no problem whatsoever. I've conquered it. And just at that moment, the door swings open very noisily and a guy in boots walks in and says, "I've got to look at the heater. Could you move?" And suddenly it all collapses. Because the conditions that supported it have just vanished. And with that, the experience vanishes.

This lesson is useful, especially for experienced practitioners. People, as their practice develops, might go through very difficult emotional situations where what we could call trauma arises in the heart, in the mind. It completely knocks us out and we stagger up a couple of days later and continue the retreat. We seem to get over that. Years go by, that's gone, and we think, "Phew, cleared that one out. I'm over that." And then suddenly—bang—it's back again. Haven't seen this for five years, ten years, fifteen years, and bang, it's back again, just like it was.

It's easy to think, "Oh, I haven't really made any progress," or "My sense of progress is an illusion." Well, it is, insofar as I think it's mine, but basically it's just conditions. If the conditions are such, the problem does not arise. But if the conditions are something else, it arises. It's actually got nothing to do with me. It's just conditions. That's all.

So this is the Buddha's basic framework—dependent arising. The reality of something, of an experience, is inseparable from the reality of what supports it.

For example, one area of experience that the Buddha is very interested in is my sense of self. I think I am real. In fact I'm pretty much convinced I'm real. Certainly sitting up here I feel real. Now I think I'm real in part because you think that I'm real. At least you treat me as if you think I'm real. So I think I'm the teacher here. I'm just quietly minding my own business up in the sunroom and people come in one after the other and they want to talk about their meditation practice. So I must be the teacher.

"Imposter."

Exactly, but don't tell anyone.

There's a friend of mine who lived in Japan. He said he knew someone—this woman who was another foreigner living in Japan—who would work in these Japanese companies, and she was very successful. But she'd work two or three years and then quit, and then join some other company, work two or three years and quit, and join some other company. She'd go through this pattern. About two years she would last. And once he asked her, "Why do you do that? Why do you quit every couple of years?"

I mean, it just causes trouble for you. And she says, "As time goes on, I get increasingly agitated and worried that sooner or later they're going to find out that I'm faking it. So I quit before they can."

And his comment on this was: she had a good realization into anattā, but the problem was it didn't go far enough. She didn't realize that everyone is faking it. So yeah, we're all faking it.

I think I'm real in part because you think I'm real. There's an external social support for the self. Also internally, my thoughts about myself. Each day I get up and I think about myself—who I am, how I got here, how it's going, how it might go in the future. And the drama of my life flows through my mind. This drama seems real, and the emotions associated with this drama seem real, so I must be real.

Then there's the whole thing about possessions. This nice classy Korean jacket—this seems real. And it's mine. So if this is real, and it's mine, then I must be real. This body seems real, and this is mine, so I must be real.

I'm caught up in this network, this incredibly complex network of experienced events that together create the sense of the reality of me living in this world. And all of those events are dependent upon, supported by something else. Without those supports, it would not be here. And therefore this sense that here I am in this world would not be here. So it's entirely dependent.

Does that make sense? So that's dependence. The opposite is independence—anissita.

Now how does the Buddha speak of that? In one discourse, the simile of the snake, he speaks of the citta, the heart-mind, of a tathāgata. And tathāgata—we talked about this maybe yesterday—is an awakened one. One who is in the state of gone to, come from: gata, tathā, just—just come, just gone, just is.

What is the state of the citta, the heart-mind, of an awakened one? The Buddha says: "When the devas, including Indra, Brahma and Pajāpati, seek a practitioner whose heart-mind is liberated in this way, they cannot get hold of anything that a Tathāgata's awareness depends upon. Why? Because a Tathāgata is untraceable right here and now."

So here he's talking about the citta, the heart-mind, rather than the body. The devas including Indra, Brahma and Pajāpati—these are seriously senior brahma devas. And devas have much more refined and powerful perceptions than human beings. They can perceive things that we cannot.

Now, they look for an awakened one. They've heard a rumor that there's an awakened one in the human realm. And so they go searching. And they cannot find the citta of the awakened one. They can find a body that's walking around, but they can't find the citta that animates this body.

Remember all those stories about Māra who comes and bothers the Buddha and other awakened ones? I think the reason why he did that was because he was really edgy and agitated because he couldn't find this person. There's the body, but where's the citta? I think it really bugged him.

They can't find it because such a citta is untraceable right here and now—because they cannot get hold of anything that the awareness of such a person depends on, is supported by. There's nothing that it depends on. There's nothing that supports it. So it can't be found. It can't be grasped.

I cannot grasp my sense of myself in the absence of those things that support it. But what if there's nothing that supports it? Then how can I get hold of this self? I can't.

One way of looking at this is that ultimately what it all comes down to are concepts. I think I am real. I believe I am real. I perceive myself to be real because I perceive this to be real, which supports me. I think this is real, which supports me.

So it all comes down to concepts.

And concepts involve language in the deep sense of how we name ourselves and our world. The meaning we give something, or the meaning that we give to something. So we trace ourselves and others through concepts, through labels, through language, through names.

But what the Buddha is suggesting is that an awakened citta, an awakened heart-mind, cannot be captured by any kind of language or concept or description. There's nothing we can get hold of to pin it down as something, as anything.

In the Atthiragasutta, the Buddha uses an image which I really am very fond of. He says: a roofed building or hall has windows to the north, the south and the east. When light enters a window at sunrise, where would it land?

So that's the question that he gives to the students. And of course, you all know the answer because it's pretty obvious.

"On the west wall, Bhante."

So the sun rises in the east. There's a roofed building or hall. It's got windows to the north, the south, the east. Light enters the window at the east. Where does it land? On the west wall.

"If there was no west wall, where would it land?"

"On earth, Bhante."

"If there was no earth, where would it land?"

"On water, Bhante."

This is ancient Indian cosmology. You have the great earth which is supported by the great ocean.

"If there was no water, where would it land?"

"It would not land, Bhante."

So "not landed" awareness is apatitita vijnana. And it's compared to light that doesn't land anywhere.

Now, in English we have a saying: "to see the light." But we actually don't see light. What we see is what light illuminates, what it lands on. So we gave the image of awareness is like light. I step into a dark room, switch on the light, and the room is illuminated. We don't see the light, we see the room. But the fact that we see the room means there is light. So the light lands upon the people, the furniture, the walls, and so we see what's going on.

What would we see if the light did not land anywhere? What would be available? That we have the light, the awareness, but it doesn't actually land anywhere at all. What can we say about such a situation? Does the light exist? Does the light not exist? Or does any kind of concept that we create about it fail? And if concept fails, what's left?

Now this term, "unlanded," is apatititta, and the same term turns up in Sanskrit as apratiṣṭha. And it's found as a technical term in the Mahayana. So it turns up in the Diamond Sutra, which is a key text for the Mahayana. Here it's translated as "unsupported."

The Buddha there says: "Therefore, Subhuti, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva should give rise to an unsupported heart. A heart not supported anywhere. A heart unsupported by sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles or phenomena."

So the purpose of the practice for a bodhisattva, someone practicing the Mahayana, is to give rise to a citta which is not supported anywhere. Not supported by anything. Nothing in the six senses supports this heart-mind.

That's from the Sanskrit version of the sutra. In the Chinese version the same phrase is translated as "dwell nowhere and bring forth that mind."

So this is the "nowhere" that one is supposed to dwell.

Dwell nowhere and bring forth that mind. So live from that place of nowhere. And this phrase is very famous in the Zen tradition because when the young man who became the sixth ancestor, Huineng, was coming home to the village one day carrying firewood—since he made a living collecting firewood—there was a monk in the marketplace chanting the Diamond Sutra. When Huineng heard that phrase, bang, he got his first enlightenment experience, dropped his wood and headed off to the monastery.

So this is the unlanded awareness or the unsupported heart. This is something that is real, that exists, but it cannot be described. It cannot be captured by any concept.

Think about how description or concept works. I've got something, let's call it X, and I want to describe it. And so I do so eloquently, poetically, clearly. What I have is a network of concepts. What I don't have is X.

You might go home having done a meditation retreat and somebody asks you, "So what have you been doing for the past month?" And you might describe it very clearly. Would they know from that what you had done for the past month? No. That's why it's best to say things like, "Well, nothing much. Sat around. Did as little as possible, but it was hard. Went for a walk."

No explanation, no concept can capture the actual lived experience of anything. Similarly, the citta, the heart-mind of the liberated one exists—that is, there really is liberation—but it cannot be pinned down by any kind of concept. To recognize that, to actually live that, is the goal. To come out of that emptiness. How one lives that is the subject of much of the Zen literature. Of course, they play with this endlessly.

The koan I like to use to illustrate this is Case 40 of the Gateless Barrier, concerning a monk called Kuishan who was a disciple of Baizhang. Baizhang was one of the great early Chinese Chan teachers, and Kuishan was one of his disciples.

When Kuishan was with Baizhang's assembly, he was cook of the monastery. Now a cook in a monastery is a very responsible and very senior position. Don't imagine the cook is low down in the hierarchy. The cook is way up in the hierarchy. Otherwise they wouldn't be given such a job.

Baizhang wanted to choose a founding teacher for Mount Dagui. There's a nearby mountain suitable for a monastery, and Baizhang has been invited to create a new monastery. But he needs a teacher there—someone who will go there, basically camp out, attract disciples, attract money, build a monastery and spread the Dharma. He invited all his monks to make a presentation, saying, "The outstanding one will be sent." So this is an interview, a job interview essentially. An audition, a job interview. He's got to pick his best disciple for this job.

So he's going to be as fair as possible. He gets everyone together in the community and says, "Right, now we're going to pick the outstanding one among you." He took a water bottle, put it on the floor and said, "Don't call this a water bottle. What would you call it?" And he sits back and waits.

Imagine you're sitting there and there's this water bottle and you're thinking, "Okay, don't call it a water bottle. What do you call it?" Hmm.

Now, the top of the hierarchy is the head monk. The head monk runs the place for the teacher. He's second in command and obviously wants this promotion. He doesn't want to spend all his life playing second fiddle to the great guru.

He wants his own place. So he decides he's got to say something.

"It cannot be called a shoe," he declares.

Now generally at this point, if you're studying these stories, the Zen student sneers contemptuously at such a ridiculous presentation. But they're already primed to do that because usually the head monk in these stories plays the role of the idiot. But it's actually not a bad presentation.

What's the head monk pointing out? He's saying, "Okay, don't call it a water bottle. Fine. Obviously you don't call it a water bottle because you cannot capture this with concept. But you've got to be careful with concept. You can't just do anything with them. They have power. They can be dangerous or they can be useful. So you've got to be careful in terms of the way you use them. If you're teaching the Dharma, it's concepts, and you've got to be careful about what you say. You cannot call this a shoe, so you can't mess concepts up. Otherwise you create a mess, especially if you're going to be a Dharma teacher."

But Pai Chang was obviously not sufficiently impressed. So Pai Chang then asked Kuishan his opinion.

Now Kuishan is sitting there. Does he know that this is an audition? Does he know that this is a job interview? Does he not know? Is that why he's silent? Or is he silent because he knows that it is? At any event, he's called out. "Okay, your turn."

Kuishan kicked over the water bottle and walked out.

Pai Chang laughed and said, "The head monk loses."

Kuishan thereupon was made the founding teacher at Mount Guishan.

So—kicking over the water bottle and walking out. What was that all about? It's easy to read this as Zen anti-intellectual nonsense, kind of lawlessness, or do whatever you like. But it's much more than that.

Remember Kuishan's job. He was the cook. Now, it's a hungry community, and here everyone's been gathered for this really important meeting. There's no one in the kitchen. But who's responsible for making sure that the next meal arrives on time?

Kuishan. He can't fob it off on the kitchen staff—they're all at the assembly. Frankly, he hasn't got time for this bullshit. There are things to be done. So let's cut through the crap and do it. Kick the water bottle over, go back to the kitchen, make lunch.

And I think that's why Pai Chang laughed, apart from the fact that it was funny and made him laugh. What Kuishan was doing was just doing what needed to be done in the most simple, direct fashion. Just do it. And that's exactly the kind of person Pai Chang was looking for. And in fact, Kuishan did do it. He was sent off to the mountain and eventually developed a big monastery.

So this is one way that the Zen tradition plays with this sense of the unsupported heart, the unlanded awareness—but then how do you live from that? Beyond concept, not tied down by concept. Not the back story, but the forward story.

When Kuishan went to the mountain, it was apparently a very nice mountain, a very nice mountain with a flat area on top, perfect for a monastery. And Kuishan built himself a little hut and started meditating and waited for other people to turn up. And he waited. And he waited. And nobody turned up.

And eventually he thought, "No one's coming. It's a complete waste of my time." So he decided to leave.

He was walking down the path when suddenly he met a tiger. The tiger looked at him and growled. Kuaishan looked at the tiger and thought, "Hmm." He walked back to the top and returned to his hut, thinking, "Maybe I'm not leaving."

Not long after that, people started to turn up. It's an interesting story because the tiger is the spirit of the mountain. If you go to Korea—I don't know if it's like this in Japan—every monastery has a little shrine to the mountain spirit. The mountain spirit is invariably this old man with a long white beard, accompanied by a tiger. It's the tiger spirit of the mountain. So the spirit wouldn't let him go.

Part of the significance of this story, like many Zen stories, is that no description works. Performance works. Action works. But no description is adequate. These words about living independently, not clinging to anything in the world, are trying to convey something that cannot be described—something that can only be lived.

So it's futile to try to give a description. Perhaps a more useful project is to ask: How do we practice independence, rather than try to describe independence? How do we practice it?

The short answer is by not clinging to anything in the world. But if we're going to practice that, how would we go about doing it?

I think there are two fundamental movements. The first is to uncover our clinging—to uncover the point where we cling. Now, if we ask where we cling, the answer could be obvious. We all have problems, things we're stuck on. But it can also be very subtle. Sometimes the deepest clinging, the habitual clinging, we never see precisely because it's so habitual. Yet this is what pulls our strings.

Somebody said, "What makes a puppet a puppet? It's the fact that the puppet doesn't know that he's a puppet." That's the perfect puppet. We're driven by our clinging, and our deepest clinging we don't even know, because it's buried so deep. So the first thing is to uncover it.

One way to begin looking for it is by investigating our distractions. What prevents me—what prevents the citta from settling? What's getting in the way? Superficially we could say our distractions, but what that means is our clinging. The mind, the heart, is grasping, holding on to something. That holding is what gets in the way of everything settling down.

If the clinging is underneath the surface of consciousness, I don't see it, but it dominates and colors the felt situation. It's like wearing colored glasses—everything appears different. If I wear the colored glasses all the time, at some point I don't even notice that they're colored. I just assume this is the way the world is.

What we do when we practice is uncover our clinging. This involves ever-increasing intimacy, going deeper and deeper into the citta. When we find it, what do we do? Basically, we relax. And then, hopefully, we let go. The job is to let go of the clinging.

This is one of the reasons why the body work is so fascinating—because we can see this whole process in the body where it's much more obvious than in the citta, but the process is exactly the same.

In those stretches, find where it's tight. Find where the body in this movement refuses to go any further. That is the point of clinging. The mind is clinging to the perception that it's impossible to go further. Find that point and then relax. When the conditions are right, it gives way, and we go a bit further. There is a felt letting go.

So find where the holding is, rest the awareness on it, relax, let go. In the body work, we get a physically felt sense of that—of what the body feels like when we do it. This helps us feel it in the citta, where it's much more subtle, but it's exactly the same pro-

cess. Find the point at which there's a holding, the point that we cannot get beyond. Find it. Rest the awareness on it. Relax. Then at some point when the conditions are right, we let go.

When we let go, when we begin to inhabit the world of non-clinging, how does this world function? We're still in the same world that we are when we're clinging. There's still seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. So we are in a world of experience, but we are no longer in a world of named experience. That's the difference. No concept works, and so the mind cannot pin down this experience of not clinging as anything at all. This is what makes it so subtle.

Later we might look back and name it: "Ah yes, that was not clinging." But having named it, that name, that label has already missed the labeled. It's impossible to jump over this gap between the actuality and the name we put on it. That gap is always there.

So ordinary life goes on. We see, we hear, we think, smell, taste, touch. But we learn to recognize that while our seeing, hearing, thinking, smelling, tasting, touching are real, what we see, hear, think is not what we think it is. This whole process of experiencing is real, but what I think I experience is not.

Our perceptions and our judgments of what we are sensing are wrong. All of them. They may be useful because they get us through the day skillfully, but they are wrong.

If all these perceptions and judgments are wrong, what's right? As soon as we reach out to put a label on something, to name it as something, to say "this is what's right," as soon as we do that we are clinging, and what we're clinging to is certainty. Only concept gives that certainty. As soon as we cling, then we're stuck and we're in pain.

But when we recognize that our label does not match, that the concept is wrong, then it's possible to relax back into that gap, that space of uncertainty. But to relax into it.

Normally our response to uncertainty is to tighten, freeze, cling, because we don't like it—it's uncomfortable. Not knowing is not comfortable. So we freeze and create a concept that we can hold on to: "Ah, this is what's going on."

But if we can relax into the uncertainty, it's a whole different experience. The gap between the concept and the reality stimulates our curiosity. "I don't know—then what is it after all?" So the investigation arises.

I walk into a situation that, conceptually, I've encountered dozens, even hundreds of times before. Because of that familiarity, I fall asleep. I know what it is, so there's no need to stay awake. But when I walk into that same situation knowing that I don't actually know what it is, then I'm awake, interested, and curious.

What arises is what the Buddha calls sati sampajanya—mindfulness and clear understanding. When we think we know, we fall back into habit. And when we are in habit, we are in our state of habitual clinging, and we are asleep. We don't know what's going on. We think we do, but we don't.

This is why I like to tell people that what gets in the way of meditation practice is not distraction. Distraction is the content of the practice. The barrier to practice—even the enemy of practice—is habit. When we fall into habit, we're asleep. We fall into habit precisely at the points where we think we know what is going on.

But when we genuinely don't know what happens next—and this is quite clear as a felt sense of genuinely not knowing what's happening next—then we're awake, alert, curious, and interested. Then we are truly doing this practice.

So that brings us to the final sentence: "And she lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world." In terms of how one lives, this is the goal of the practice.

Any questions or comments? Does any of that make sense?

"Can I just ask a question about the previous three sentences? The significance of 'or'?"

Ah, yes. With these terms—I forget what it is in Pali—it's like a verbal tic. It's just a way of saying, "OK, then there's this, and then there's this, and then there's this." It's a way to signal that this is the next item, and this is the next. I can't think of an English equivalent. I haven't gone into this deeply, but I think it's just an indication—"okay, then comes this."

"It just struck me tonight when you read it again, that it's saying 'this or this,' so I sort of heard it as more like you could just focus on internal sensation and reach the goal, not have to do any of the others because of the 'or.'"

I think the part about dependent arising is that there's a sense in which reality is modular. Once you're intimate with one aspect of it, all the others will turn up. It's like a multidimensional maze. Once we're in at one point of it, other parts will arise.

So let's say, for example, internal or external. I would say that for some people, their entry point would be the internal. But once they're in the internal, then everything else is revealed. But for other people, the entry point would be the external. Once they're in that, then everything else emerges. And so on.

So it's laid out in a very linear fashion, but I doubt that it is actually that linear. I think it's more dynamic than that. There's a sense in which the Buddha is laying out possibilities, and then the meditator discovers which one they're sensitive to.

You get a similar thing where sometimes he'll lay out lists of synonyms. There's one passage where he's talking about dukkha, and he says dukkha is a boil, a dart, a disease, a tumor, and on and on, listing about a dozen different descriptions. When I first read that, I thought, "God, this is tedious." But one time when I was doing intensive meditation practice and going through a lot of dukkha, I was reading it and going, "Yes, yes, no, no, yes, yes, yes, no, no, yes, yes, yes."

So it's about accessibility. It's presenting how different people experience it. Do you experience it this way? Then catch this one and go there. Some people come in this way, others that way.

I'm not quite sure about the technical answer to that question, but these are modular systems and they're not as linear as they appear when laid out. But if you're going to say something, it has to be linear. You say one thing first, then another thing, then another thing.

So concepts have this linear structure, but the reality doesn't necessarily match the linearity of the structure.

Someone asked whether there was any significance to the "or" that was used in the first three sentences—the word "or." "She lives tracking body as body internally, or she lives tracking body as body externally, or she lives tracking body as body both internally and externally." So does this "or" mean you could do this or you could do that?

You do both of them. All of them. So what's the meaning of the "or"? Because in reality you're not really going to see arising without also seeing passing away. Although one of them could be emphasized at certain points, there are some flavors of impermanence where it's predominantly arising. But you don't see one aspect of the process and not other aspects.

We haven't seen the arising of that distraction—no, by definition we're there at the moment of its passing. So it can be that's a situation where it's just the passing and not the arising. And then you get in the classical insight knowledges you have udayabbaya

ñana, knowledge of arising and ceasing, in which you see arising and ceasing. And then you have bhanga ñana, which is the knowledge of dissolution, where you just see the ending of things.

People have different experiences. One time here, in a summer retreat, one of the meditators was going through dukkha ñana. What was apparent was the universal characteristic of dukkha. She'd be walking from here to the house through the garden in summer when everything's blooming. She'd say partway through the journey, what she would see is everything beginning—everything blooming, life springing up out of the ground, everything new, everything fresh. And then suddenly everything dying, everything ceasing, everything falling to the ground and rotting. And then everything blooming. And it happens several times, just from here to the house. It's like one aspect of change, another aspect, another, another one. So you can get all sorts of particular views that may last briefly or they may last for a period of time.

Any other questions? Okay. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 17

The Three Satipaṭṭhānas

Patrick Kearney · 1h18

> *Patrick Kearney offers a comprehensive examination of the first three satipaṭṭhānas from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), exploring how body (kāya), feeling (vedanā), and heart-mind (citta) form an integrated framework for mindfulness practice. He begins with the etymology of sati as "memory" or "remembering the present," distinguishing between sati-upaṭṭhāna (the activity of being mindful) and satipaṭṭhāna (what is remembered). The talk examines how body practice grounds awareness in the present through the five physical senses, with particular emphasis on tactile sensitivity's clarity and immediacy. Kearney explains vedanā as the affective dimension that moves us toward attraction, aversion, or confusion - the realm where ethical sensitivity begins to develop. He discusses citta as our general state or mood, comparing its natural luminosity to clear water that becomes disturbed by kilesas (defilements or "stuckness"). The three satipaṭṭhānas progress from gross to subtle while forming a triangle with vedanā as the apex - the key to intimacy with both body and citta. This exploration reveals how mindfulness practice develops from physical awareness through emotional intelligence to understanding the movements of the heart-mind that shape how we live.*

We've been exploring different aspects of sati and satipaṭṭhāna, and tonight and tomorrow night we'll review the four satipaṭṭhānas listed in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: body, feeling, heart-mind, and phenomena. We'll examine how the Buddha presents this entire project as an overview.

First, let's begin with sati, which we've been discussing—usually translated as mindfulness, but literally meaning memory. It refers to the quality of presence or remembering the present.

We can understand what the Buddha is pointing to by examining distraction, because when the Buddha talks about the absence of mindfulness, we can recognize this in our experience of distraction. We can understand the meaning of presence by looking at our experience of absence and what it feels like.

When are we not present? When we are distracted. How does distraction begin? Suddenly we forget. This forgetting is the opposite of mindfulness. We forget the meditation object, or we forget to meditate—these are the two flavors. We have forgotten what is present, or we have forgotten to be present. Then suddenly we remember.

When we enter into distraction, the essence of distraction in this whole experience is that we don't know that we are distracted. The mind has slipped away from where we put it, and we don't know that it's slipped away. The universal experience of distraction is: I fall into it and I don't know that I've fallen into it. That not knowing is distraction.

Distraction is not the fact that attention has moved from one object to another—that's not distraction. The mind moves; that's what it does. Distraction is found in the movement of the mind when we don't know that the mind has moved. We don't catch the movement itself.

We come out of distraction at the moment we know we are distracted. As soon as I recognize, "Oh, I'm distracted," that very recognition is memory. I've suddenly remembered—I've remembered what is present (the distraction) or I've remembered to be present.

These two flavors are actually built into the word satipaṭṭhāna according to the mysteries of Pali sandhi—the rules governing the joining of words. The compound satipaṭṭhāna can be read in two ways: as sati-upaṭṭhāna and sati-paṭṭhāna.

If we read it as sati-upaṭṭhāna, it's the activity of being mindful—the activity of remembering to be present. The second way, sati-paṭṭhāna, is what is remembered as being present—what we remember.

You have the activity itself, sati-upaṭṭhāna, and you have what it is that we remember, which is sati-paṭṭhāna. The traditional Theravada favored this second reading, satipaṭṭhāna. That's why in the old translations, satipaṭṭhāna is invariably translated as something like "the foundations of mindfulness."

If you've been around these circles for a long time, you would know satipaṭṭhāna as "the foundations of mindfulness." But you might notice that newer translations are appearing, like "the establishments of mindfulness" or "the applications of mindfulness." These newer translations come from taking satipaṭṭhāna as sati-upaṭṭhāna.

In fact, this is what the Mahayana tradition has always done. In Mahayana Buddhism, they've always taken it as sati-upaṭṭhāna. Modern scholars have decided that in this case, the Mahayana got it right and the Theravada got it wrong. Even the Theravadans are accepting this—people like Bhikkhu Bodhi now translate satipaṭṭhāna as "the establishments of mindfulness."

We've talked about how the basic activity here is anupassanā—tracking experience over time, creating this continuity of mindfulness which we can recognize as the felt continuity of awareness. It's something I can feel, that continuity, and it's quite a powerful experience if we can maintain it for any period of time.

So we have sati-upaṭṭhāna as the trackings, the doing of the tracking, and sati-paṭṭhāna as what it is that we are tracking.

Tonight we're going to look into this second aspect—what it is that we are tracking. There are four aspects of experience that we're tracking: body, feeling, heart-mind, and phenomena.

He's referring to our capacity to hear, our sensitivity to sound. Similarly, the body in the narrow sense refers to our sensitivity to touch, to pressure, temperature, movement, texture—all the countless physical sensations that arise and pass away moment by moment.

This is where mindfulness of body becomes incredibly intimate and precise. We're not thinking about the body or analyzing it; we're actually feeling into the direct, immediate sensations that make up our physical experience. The warmth of breath at the nostrils. The weight of the body sitting. The subtle vibrations and pulsations that we can feel when we really tune in.

And what's remarkable is that when we do this consistently, we begin to discover that what we call "body" is actually a constantly changing flow of sensations. There's no fixed, solid thing there. It's more like a river of sensation, always moving, always in flux. This begins to challenge our normal assumption that the body is this solid, permanent thing that I own or that I am.

The second foundation is feeling—vedanā in Pali. Now this is often mistranslated as "feelings" in the emotional sense, but that's not what the Buddha is pointing to here. Vedanā refers to the immediate affective quality of each moment of experience—whether it feels pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is something much more basic than emotions.

Every moment of sense contact has this quality. Every sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental formation comes with this immediate felt sense of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. It's like the emotional coloring of raw experience before we elaborate it into full emotions or stories.

This is actually a crucial foundation because vedanā is where craving gets its foothold. We feel something pleasant and immediately want more of it. We feel something unpleasant and want to get away from it. We feel something neutral and often become bored or distracted, seeking something more stimulating.

But when we can track vedanā with mindfulness, we start to see this mechanical process happening. We begin to see how our reactivity is conditioned by these basic pleasant and unpleasant feelings. And in seeing this clearly, we create the possibility of not being so automatically driven by our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant experience.

He's referring to sensitivity to sound. And this sensitivity is located in a particular part of the body. But he's not talking about the ear in a third-person sense. He's talking about the fact of sensitivity to sound.

A lot of meditation methods emphasize the body, but in particular the fifth sense field, sensitivity to touch. That's of particular importance because as a meditation object, sensitivity to touch has two major advantages, and both of them are linked to the clarity of contact.

First of all, body—which of course is actually all the five physical senses but particularly the fifth body—is now. It's just bleeding obvious that physical sensation is in the present. Thoughts and fantasies, where we usually live, they exist in time. It makes sense to remember the past. It makes sense to plan for the future in the mind. The body does not remember the past. It does not anticipate the future. It is now. A sensation, which is the only expression, the only language of the body, is always now.

So I can be completely caught up in some incredibly important reflection on past or future, and I'm so caught up in it that I don't notice the rock in front of me. My foot hits the rock, I come crashing to the earth. And when this happens, do I lie there, continuing to fantasize about past and future? No. I'm right here, right now. And of course this is why the sadhus love it when meditators report pain. When does pain occur? It always happens now.

So the body is radically simple and radically present. Every time I ground my awareness in body, I'm grounding it in the present, automatically, just by doing that.

And secondly, the body, this fifth physical sensitivity, is clear. We talked about contact and sensing. When we talked about the senses as faculties—remember restraining the senses—we saw how the senses will go out to engage in the world; they're active. This is the sense as an indriya, as a leading out.

But there's also a way in which we can look at the senses in terms of a receptivity. Something strikes the sensitivity. So sound strikes the hearing sensitivity. Light strikes the seeing sensitivity, and so on. And this impact is phassa, contact, literally touch. So we are touched by the sense contact.

And the later tradition says the touch of seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting upon their respective sensitivities is like cotton striking cotton. The touch of a tactile sensation striking the body sensitivity is like a hammer hitting an anvil. Whammo! It's strong and it's clear.

So if I want to develop mindfulness, and the tradition says one of the things which encourages the arising of mindfulness is a clear perception, where would I go looking for a clear perception? Here. It's the obvious place. So this is why the body is so important in meditation practices.

First we have body, then we have feeling, vedanā, which we've spoken about a great deal, so we've just got to have a brief look at it. As we said, it's the affective or hedonic aspect of experience, and we can compare it to the flavor of the sense object. But its characteristic is what moves us; vedanā is what provokes a response.

So we are struck by sense data and in that impact, in that contact, there is a response. The citta is moved in some way. That movement, what stimulates that movement, is the vedanā, is the feeling. So this is the whole realm of affect.

And the three basic movements of the mind, as we've talked about: attraction, the movement of the mind towards the sense object, to hold on to it—"I like this." Aversion, the movement of the mind away from the sense object—"I don't want this," or even "I'm going to hit it over the head to get rid of it."

And the third one, the third flavor is, "I haven't even noticed it." Indifference. Or, if I notice it, I'm confused—I don't know what to do about it. Should I hold on to it? Should I reject it? Should I hold, reject, hold, reject? This is the realm of doubt and confusion.

So this second Satipatthana expands the practice to tracking our response to the experience. It's not just the experience itself. It now includes how we respond to the experience. What does the mind, the citta, do in response? This is all about seeing that we are moved and how we are moved.

And this takes us into the realm of ethics—in other words, how we live. Here, for these purposes, ethics can be seen as our response to the universal human question: how should I live? Each of us is faced with this question. What do I do with my life? How do I live? And over the years each of us has produced an answer to that question, which is how we in fact live, and all the choices we've made to create that construct.

This whole project begins with vedana, because vedana is the realm of that movement, that determination, this inevitability of reaching out: "Yes, I'll definitely hold that one." "No, I'll definitely reject this other one." "I'll just ignore this other stuff because it's not worth paying attention to."

So in vedana we enter into what we could call the realm of ethical sensitivity. We start to become sensitive to the things that create the way that we live. And this is something that we do not find in the first Satipatthana, in body. There's no ethical sensitivity in the first Satipatthana.

If you have any doubts about this, just study the sports pages—particularly rugby league players—and the constant series of entertaining scandals that sports stars manage to get themselves into. Often you're reading about someone whose body intelligence is very, very highly developed. Especially in team sports, because in team sports the people who are really admired are not just the ones who have this particular set of skills required for that game, but the people who know how to read a game.

In the chaos, they seem to have this intuitive sense of what the other team is doing—not simply what they're doing now, but what they will be doing in the near future. The ability to anticipate that the ball, which is currently over there, will be over here within three seconds, and therefore right now I should be heading in this direction. If you follow a team sport and watch these sorts of things, these are the magic moments when suddenly it all comes together—this group intelligence. It's just amazing.

So people can develop a great deal of intelligence relating to the body, but ethically be completely stupid. Totally.

And you see also—perhaps for this audience this is a bit more controversial; it's one thing to put the boot into rugby league, it's another thing entirely to mention—that you see the same thing in the world of yoga. We find people who have an acute physical sensitivity and can put their body in any position and move any little bit of it, and yet in their ordinary lives they're ethically as thick as two short planks.

From a meditator's point of view, you can develop an acute sensitivity to such things as the rising and falling of the abdomen, if you're a classical Mahasi meditator, and again make absolutely no difference whatsoever in the way that you live. Or I should say, we. We can master a meditation technique based upon body, and it might have zero effect on the way that we live.

Where that happens is in vedana. That's where this begins. Seeing that we are moved. And how we are moved. And what is it that moves us? And what's the result of that movement?

So something happens and I reach out and I hold. And I don't even notice until I'm already holding. But to see that movement—ah, when I hold like this, I usually end up regretting it sometime down the track. So maybe I should think about some alternative strategy here. And then we start to see changes in how we live.

So this brings us...

to the third Satipatthana: citta.

Usually translated as mind, but that easily gives the wrong idea. I find the word mind way too cognitive. One of the things that attracted me to Buddhism and Buddhist practice is that it was all about the mind. And being, when I was young, very miserable and very intellectual, I could find refuge in mind. So I would find refuge in reading books—esoteric books. They could take me out of the world of my problems. I could hide away.

And I could hide away in nice books about Buddhism. Because it's all up here. But that's good because Buddha says we're developing mind. And where is mind? Well, mind is up here. Isn't it? And what do we do with mind? Well, we think. Isn't that what we do with mind?

So I find mind is inadequate as a translation. Citta covers the realm of what we would call the heart. So the realm of feeling. Emotion, mood.

One—I think personally the best translation for citta would be soul. Soul. S-O-U-L. You're looking at me very dubiously. Okay. Not in the Christian theological sense, but in the original sense, in Aristotle's sense, the soul. Like the ancient Greek philosophers would debate about the anima. That's Latin, isn't it? I don't know what the Greek word was. But it gets translated into English as the soul. That, I think, would be the equivalent of citta.

But with Christianity, you get—for the ancients, the human being was made up of essentially body and soul. And then the Christians came along and they added a third dimension, spirit, that they put on top. So you get this tripartite thing where spirit becomes most important and spirit is completely non-physical. And it has to do with God and not much to do with tacky things like the body.

But for the Buddha, citta and body are intimately entwined. In fact you can't have one without the other. If you have one, you've got to have the other. If there's a mind, it has to have a body—it's necessarily part of a body. If there's a body—in other words, remember we're talking about experience—if there's the experience of body, there has to be mind because what's doing the experiencing? It's mind. And if there's mind, there has to be body. So I'm thinking about something and the thinking is definitely mind.

But where is the thinking taking place? Remember we played around with this. It's connected clearly in some way to body. If this body wouldn't be here, those thoughts would not be arising. So for the Buddha, body and mind are intimately intertwined.

Patrick, you're not happy with the term heart-mind? Yeah, that's the usual one. I go for the compromised heart-mind. And sometimes I'll translate it as heart, because sometimes that seems to be the best context. And I guess sometimes it's mind.

Soul—the problem with soul is you've got to explain it to everybody. And some people wouldn't be convinced. It's becoming accepted, but I think we're learning it from the Buddha. I think this is part of the cultural interactions that's going on.

Well, in Asian cultures, they have no problems about this mind being here. No, that's not like the Western European culture. It's not the same degree of separation. It seems to be uniquely European that made this separation.

Chitta is a key technical term in Buddhist teaching and in subsequent Buddhist philosophy. Depending on context, it receives various definitions. In the Satipatthana Sutta, it's not given a precise definition. The meaning is more general. It's basically used in a broad sense to indicate our general state—how one is at this particular time. So it's close to what we would call mood, though not quite mood, but quite close to that.

It's like our routine greeting where we meet someone and say, "How are you?" You could say that what we're asking about is the state of your citta. Usually we say, "I'm good." Are we doing that to reassure the person that we're not evil? Or are we doing it to reassure them that we're not about to tell them the tragedy of our life—because actually we feel really awful—and ask, "Do you want to hear all about it?" In other words, we basically evade the question.

But if somebody asked you, "How are you?" and you actually, as a meditator, went into your citta, felt your general state, how you are at this time, and then told them, you would be presenting your citta.

Citta is very similar to vedana. You could say that citta is how one is at this time, while vedana is how one feels at this time. They're very, very close. In fact, for practical purposes, you wouldn't even distinguish them.

It's important with these technical terms—they are precise, but their precision is the precision of poetry, not the precision of science. So there's always room for disagreement, particularly from the meditator's point of view. I'm experiencing something. Is this vedana or is it chitta? It basically doesn't matter which one it is. What matters is that we can make sense of the experience—that we can first of all develop the sensitivity so we experience at a degree of intimacy that we normally miss, and that we understand, have some understanding of what this is and how it flows, how it works. Whether we label this particular experience as "Oh, this is vedana" or "This is chitta" really doesn't matter.

"Patrick, my understanding of vedana is specifically about, as you said, the hedonic dimension—the liking, not liking aspect. Whereas to me emotion is much broader and more varied. If I feel anger, for example, it somehow partakes of not liking, but it's a very particular kind of not liking. It's much more complex. It's a particular flavor that isn't about either liking or not liking."

There's actually no word in Pali that translates as emotion. It's not part of the Buddha's vocabulary. In one of those Mind Life Institute books that came out of those meetings about destructive emotions—somewhere around page 300 and something—the Dalai Lama actually says, "By the way, there is no word in Tibetan that translates as emotion." As far as he knows, there is no what he calls "Buddhist language" that has such a term. Certainly you don't find it in Pali.

"Why do you think that is? Is that because maybe the emotions are on the dimension of faith?"

What these concepts do is divide the world up in certain ways so that we can understand what's going on. They're very culturally specific. If we go back to the ancient Greeks, they asked the question: What is it that distinguishes human beings from all other species? In particular, what is it that makes us superior? The answer they came up with was reason. Reason is the distinctively human characteristic of what we would call the citta. Now if you ask, "What's the enemy of reason? What could sabotage reason?" The answer is emotion.

So you have this reason versus emotion categorization, which becomes very important in European culture. Whereas the Buddha is looking at things from a different angle. First of all, he's very precise in his language. Emotion is too general. If I can recognize an emotion, if I can recognize, "Oh, I am in the grip of emotion X," in order to do that I need a number of different things. I need, for a start, some kind of narrative in the mind, a story I'm telling myself and believing. Let's say I am angry and I can recognize that.

I have to have a narrative in which someone did something, or didn't do something, is doing something, or will do something that they should not.

"Do you think you would just recognize the constellation of body sensations from past experiences that equate to anger, for example?"

Then that would just be a series of body sensations. There wouldn't be anger. It feels like anger. And you might then—actually if you say, "Oh this feels like anger"—watch the mind go into overdrive, heading for the filing cabinet, pulling out nasty things people have done, riffling through: "Ah, this one. This is it."

So you've got that. It's also in the body. If there's any emotion, the body is being stirred up, as you point out. It's being stirred up in some way. So you have narrative, citta, body, and of course you have vedanā. And the vedanā will either be pleasant or painful.

To me it makes no sense to talk about an emotion which, in the vedanā—the affective feel of it—is neither painful nor pleasant. It's either painful or it's pleasant, and usually strongly so. Or even both, going boom, boom, boom, boom, boom between them. As I've been assured by one crotchety old bachelor: love. It can also be painful and pleasant at the same time.

And also with emotion, I don't think it makes sense to say that we are always in the grip of emotion. But we are always experiencing vedanā. So I think partly the Buddha avoids this term because it's too general. He divides things up into their component parts.

And partly he doesn't come from this European heritage. For the Buddha, if he's looking at the human being, his major dichotomy that he's interested in is not "Is this reason or emotion?" but "Is this kusala or akusala?" Is it wholesome or unwholesome? Does it lead towards the cessation of dukkha, or does it lead towards the cultivation of dukkha? That's what he's interested in. So that's the basic binary that you find.

"I can't speak Latin, but I believe the Latin that emotion comes from refers to emovere, which means to bring into action, to make move, which is similar to what we're talking about. What moves us. But the Buddha does talk about will, for example, but that could manifest in a number of the emotions we categorize, such as jealousy as well as anger and resentment."

So the basic movement of attraction—the movement of the mind towards an object—could be addictive lust at one end of the spectrum and the highest ideals for humanity on the other, and everything in between. So the whole range of things, some of which are emotions and some of which are not, would be covered. And similarly with aversion. A whole range of moods and emotions and so on would be covered, would emerge out of that elemental movement. So they're in a way more general—general in the sense of elemental. It's like getting into the elemental quality of these things.

I think to the Greeks, emotion was also just like a category of non-reason. It's a big category of things that aren't reason. It's not so refined.

And this is one of the things when we read the Buddha: we've got to accept the fact that he's coming from a different culture and he's reading things differently from the way that we do. And our tendency is just to read him in terms of our familiar cultural categories, but when we do that, we get him wrong. We misunderstand what he's actually saying.

"Another thing to think about is that Western culture doesn't have clear definitions of emotion in science. But when it comes to states of mind such as peace or even compassion, there are arguments about whether that could be called an emotional state, saying, 'Well, it's not really emotional because it doesn't have this quality and so on.' So it's interesting variations in the way we understand what it means."

Even in Western language, we're not clear about it. And you can see that in contemporary psychology, the incorporation of mindfulness and grappling with this whole new vocabulary. People trying to work out how to talk about it.

I think English is a pretty poor language in terms of trying to actually describe nuanced states of mind. It just doesn't have very many words. It's quite poor compared to Pali and Sanskrit.

Anyway, citta. The essence of citta is awareness, vijnana. And the Buddha compares this to clear, transparent water. So the mind that is purified is compared to a mountain lake where the water is quite clear, limpid and undisturbed. This is the kind of citta that we're trying to cultivate when we do the practice.

And the Buddha says someone standing on the bank of such a lake could look into it and see the bottom of the lake, along with the plants, rocks and pebbles at the bottom, and the fish all swimming about. So the transparency of the citta is something that we're cultivating. And the essence of the citta is that transparency, which here is compared to water that is clear and still.

The Buddha also describes this essence of citta as luminous, pabassara. So he'll talk about the luminosity of the citta. And we talked about this in terms of it's like walking into a dark room and then switching on the lights—everything is luminous. It appears in the light. So this is the essence of citta, this awareness, this clear awareness.

But this essence is disguised from us by the disturbances that enter into the citta, the kilesas. Kilesa is usually translated as defilement. That's the traditional translation. Kilesa comes from—and except in... You notice in Mahayana Buddhism they'll talk about it as afflictive emotions. Have you come across that one? Now they're coming based on the Sanskrit klesha. And klesha can be kind of backtracked to kilesa, or it can be taken to a different root meaning "to afflict."

I've often seen "afflictive emotions" in English translations of particularly Tibetan works, but what they're doing is first of all they're adding the word "emotion" to make it culturally familiar. So if you drop that, kilesas are the afflictions. That's what afflicts, what pains the citta.

In the Pali, it's kilesa, and the tradition derives this word from the verb kilesati, "to stick, to adhere." So the image is, let's say you have white cloth—you've got a new white shirt and you're having a nice dinner and you're a messy eater. Then at the end of the meal, as you're wiping the food from your face, you look down and you realize, "Whoops, I need to change this shirt." The shirt is defiled, it is dirtied, because something from outside the shirt—bits of food—are sticking to it.

So kilesati is to stick, to adhere. So kilesa, usually translated as defilement, could also actually be translated as stuckness. It's quite interesting. Stuckness. Basically, you could say that one of the fundamental values of the Buddha is freedom. What gets in the way of freedom is when we get stuck. When I'm stuck, I'm not free. And this stuckness is kilesa.

There's the Wallace translation—I think it's the Sanskrit translation of klesha from the word "to distort." Kles means to distort. I think sometimes some people take on klesh and some people from klish. You've got to have klesh or klish. This is the thing about Sanskrit—you can play with it. You've got a word and you can say, "Well, I can derive this from this root or that root or the other root and make something out of it."

And we don't know whether for some of these terms the Buddha would have started at the root and then created a technical term. But in other cases, there would have been this term, and then the commentator goes back to the root. But depending on what meaning he or she wants to put on it, they just choose different roots. "Yeah, I can derive this from this root. It gives it a much more interesting meaning."

There is this creativity with language in the Indian traditions. They play with language. And I think the commentaries—the set of other commentaries—I would guess the same is in the Sanskrit. So Buddhagosa would say, "What does this mean?" and he'd give a list of different meanings, playing with the word in different ways. "Well, you can take it as coming from this, in which case it means that. Or you could take it as coming from this and then you get this other meaning. Or you could take it this way and get this other one." And it just goes down the list. And the thing is, it means all of them. And if you want to play with it some more, you can have more meanings. You play with it. This is part of the poetry of it.

If the citta is disturbed, this is compared to water that's mixed up with color, with dye, for example—so it's not transparent, you can't see into it—or heated until it's boiling. Anybody had a boiling citta? Or covered with algae, clogged, sticky, or stirred up by the wind, or muddy. And these are, of course, all images for the hindrances. So the natural transparency of the water is lost. But you notice that the natural state of the water is transparent.

And this is the basic insight from which you get in East Asian Buddhism the idea of Buddha nature—where this comes from. So the investigation of citta is fundamental to this practice. And tracking the citta develops a sensitivity to the state of our heart, of our heart-mind. We become present to our inner state, whatever that is.

This understanding entails knowing how we feel—vedana—and therefore how we are moved to respond, to act, the choices that we make—cetanā, the sankhāras or constructions we talked about before. When we're talking about what we do, how we are moved to act, then we're talking about karma—action—and vipāka, its ripening, the results of that. This takes us into how we create the way that we live. And all of this is accessible through citta. So citta is the key.

When the Buddha talks about bondage, what is it that is bound? It's the citta. When he talks about liberation, what is it that is liberated? It's the citta. So the tracking of the citta is, you could say, the fundamental aspect of the practice.

Part of it—a really important part—is becoming aware of the difference between the kusala and the akusala, the wholesome and the unwholesome. The wholesome is a response, an action, which is pleasant within itself and leads to a good result—good in the sense of lessening of dukkha, leading away from dukkha. Something which is unwholesome, akusala, is painful within itself, in its nature, and it leads to a painful result. Learning to distinguish those is really central.

And of course it's not at all obvious. If you look at the human condition today and realize that this is the result of tens of thousands of years of people trying to make the world a better place—this is what we've got. So delusion is very powerful. We can pursue something our life long, convinced this is what's going to make me happy, only to discover that it doesn't. And of course in terms of the pursuit of economic growth, consumerism, and so forth, this is both very obvious but somehow everybody who has any kind of power in this society seems to be totally blind to it.

So we can't take for granted that we know the difference between the wholesome and the unwholesome, the skillful and the unskillful. You notice you get these two different translations. Kusala, sometimes translated wholesome, sometimes skillful. Akusala, sometimes translated unwholesome, sometimes unskillful. Wholesome and unwholesome points to the quality of that phenomenon itself. Skillful and unskillful points to the results of it. So it's two different sides, but they include both.

Another aspect of tracking the citta is seeing how we construct ourselves. We're constantly selfing, constructing a self. When we become sensitive to the movements of the citta, we can see just how relentless this is. And then we can get a sense of: is this kusala or is this akusala? Does it lead to greater freedom and ease, or does it lead to greater bondage and pain? Once we see that, then we can start to make different choices.

Now if we ask, "Well, how do we gain access into the citta?" We cannot think our way in. No amount of reading books is going to help. And we cannot force our way in. A heroic effort does not necessarily help us. We feel our way in.

But equally, with the first satipaṭṭhāna, the body—how do we get the awareness right into the body? How do we become fully embodied? We can't think our way in. We can't force our way in. We feel our way in.

So when we look at these three satipaṭṭhānas, first of all they cover the entirety of human experience. And you can see them laid out in terms of gross to subtle. The most obvious one is the body. More subtle than that is this quality of feeling, of affect. And more subtle still are the movements of the citta, the heart-mind. So it's a movement from the gross to the subtle.

Another way of looking at it, a non-linear way of looking at it, is it's like a triangle. The apex is vedanā—feeling. On one side is body and the other side is citta. Because how do I gain access into the body? How do I become intimate with body? Through vedanā. How do I become intimate with citta?

Through vedana. You could say that vedana represents intimacy itself. Because it's so close to contact, the immediacy of experience.

So that's another way of looking at the structure of the three satipaṭṭhānas.

In any event, these three satipaṭṭhānas cover everything, all aspects of human experience, which leads us wondering: why then is there a fourth, since we've already got every base covered? And we'll look at that tomorrow night.

Any questions or comments?

"How is thinking covered by citta?"

That's one of the activities of citta. This is a cognitive activity. So when you look at citta, you can see aspects of it are cognitive, aspects of it are affective. In the standard exercises in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, when talking about citta, it's like "with lust, without lust."

He doesn't specifically mention thinking in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which shouldn't come as a great surprise because, again, it's a template. I don't think it's meant to be absolutely exhaustive. It's kind of just setting up a basic template and saying, "Okay, have a look around here and have a look around there."

So we talked about emotions, which are certainly covered by citta. But once you look at emotion, you certainly come across thinking—it's part of the baggage. So it's not exhaustive in the sense that he's trying to cover every possible experience.

What I find interesting is that when the Buddha talks about thinking specifically—and in particular, for example, as a distraction—the term that he uses is vitakka vicāra. Now, when he's talking about the development of jhāna, of absorption, the first two jhāna factors are vitakka vicāra. Exactly the same words.

And you can get a sense of where he's coming from, because again, the Buddha is interested in process. He's always interested in the processes of body and mind.

If you think about the meditation process, what do we do with the awareness? We send it to the meditation object. Initial application—vitakka. Boom. Go there. Go there. Go there. Go there. When we get some momentum, we have vicāra, sustained application. We follow it.

If you think about the process of thinking, we've talked about the mind throwing up cognitions, like sparks from a fire. We send the awareness there—bang—vitakka, initial application. We grab one of those and we turn it into a story, a sustained application. It's actually the same process.

I've heard vitakka and vicāra described—Ṛūpī Ketan does this—you pick up some brass pot, vitakka, and then you polish it, you start polishing it. That's one of Buddhaghosa's images. Another one is like a flower that has pollen and the bee is attracted to it. The bee comes to the part of the flower—that's vitakka—and then he's hovering around. That's vicāra.

Another image is like an archer shooting at a target: aim, fire, aim, fire—that's vitakka. And then as he gets more and more skilled, it's just bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, hitting the target every time—that's vicāra.

You could say papañca is another way that people talk about thinking. A particular style of thinking.

"Yeah, like mental fabrication."

Yeah. Which you'll find, if you want to look at citta in vipassana, when you see driven by a desire for, it's covered in the territory even if it's not specifically mentioned. These days I translate papañca as "complication." Don't complicate it. Yeah, it's a great word.

Any other questions or comments?

"I have a question. It's not exactly clear what it is, but at the beginning of the talk you were talking about the different sense modalities and sensitivities, including the sensitivity of touch. And you were talking about the body as the experienced world, in some sense. What I'm wondering is whether, if I talk about a sense modality like seeing or hearing, I kind of think of it as the capacity for those activities, but not what is seen or what is heard. There was just something about the way you said it that made me wonder whether in the idea of—I suppose my experience, my world includes what is sensed, but does the body also sense? Is that also a part of the body? I mean, like the world that I experience?"

The entire experienced physical universe is kaya. This understanding has practical implications for our meditation practice. Rather than shutting off the physical senses when we practice, we can treat them as integral aspects of the practice itself.

You often see people on retreat keeping their eyes down, avoiding any kind of visual contact. This is indeed an excellent strategy if your goal is to maximize concentration, as it reduces sensory stimulus. However, if you're working primarily on developing mindfulness, you can also practice with eyes up and visually engaged. The trade-off is that it becomes more challenging to develop concentration because you're increasing the sensory input.

Yet when mindfulness becomes very strong, this increased stimulus doesn't create agitation or excitement. There's a beautiful balance that emerges.

When I started practicing Zen in the late seventies, we were instructed to sit with eyes open, facing a wall. You would gaze at this neutral surface throughout your meditation. I found this approach incredibly beneficial because I had a strong tendency toward sloth and torpor when meditating. The visual engagement helped maintain alertness and presence.

My favorite meditation spot during that period was in a house in Sydney that housed the first meditation hall of what was then called the Sydney Zen Group, now known as the Sydney Zen Centre.

This approach of including rather than excluding the senses reflects a deeper understanding of what body truly means in the Buddha's teaching—not merely the physical form, but the entire field of embodied, tactile experience that connects us to the world.

And it was the living room, and at the front of the room there was some kind of fireplace arrangement. I used to sit on the right-hand side of that—this was my favorite spot in the corner—because just on the wall there was a light which aimed itself directly at that wall. So I would sit here, eyes open, the wall was painted a light color, and the light would go bang, wham, straight into my eyes. It kept me awake, and I loved it.

I really got into the habit of sitting with the eyes open. When I moved to Theravada, I brought that with me. I can remember doing things like, for example, sitting in the meditation hall at Chithurst Monastery—the men's hall up above. There's this enormous stage, like a theater, with this big image of the Buddha teaching the five ascetics the first discourse. You've got the five ascetics, the sun, the moon, the deer, the forest, and so on. On that top stage were the monks sitting there. The main doorway was over

there, and people were constantly coming and going—going onto the stage, sitting there, arranging themselves, sitting for a while, then getting up and walking out. Laypeople coming in, sitting down, and so on.

I was sitting there with my eyes wide open, and all of this was taking place in my visual consciousness. What I was naming mentally was "seeing." But it suddenly hit me as being kind of meditationally ironic that what I was naming wasn't all this activity which I had no response to at all. It was my thinking. I was having visual thoughts, and I was naming those as "seeing, seeing" because that's where my attention was. I could see every detail in front of me—movement, stuff going on—but there was no response to it, no reaction to it whatsoever. When I was noting "seeing, seeing" for the mind, for the thoughts, the mental images, that really struck me. It's quite powerful.

So is this partly what the Buddha is referring to when he talks about contemplating the body as body internally or externally? I can detect the difference between physical sensations that are internal and external. I get a sense of it, for example, if I'm doing a stretch. When I do my own retreat and do the stretches, I'm in no hurry whatsoever, so I can spend a long time in a single stretch. I keep noting the sensation, and the sense of the posture drops away. The sense that I'm in this particular posture doing the stretch goes, and all there is is sensation. That's all. When that happens, it gives way—it's just air element movement along with the sensation.

People who use hearing as their meditation object often say first they know what they're hearing: "That's the train, that's the bird, that's the highway." Then later on, they don't know what they're hearing. That perception just drops away. It's just sound—not the sound of anything at all, just sound. The perception has gone. It's just sound as sound. Then further on, it just becomes vibration. It's like deconstructing the physical world. The physicality is still happening, but the world that it normally creates is being deconstructed.

You mentioned remembering having that "sound as sound" idea presented to you, and it seemed that that's where you should be aiming, which led to great difficulty. But I'm saying you don't necessarily have to aim for the perception to drop away, although it is a construction. All you've got to do is listen. The perception will drop away—this is always a natural process.

Sometimes you do get mistaken. This mistake can creep in with the way the project is presented to you, where you think, "I've got to get to there." But no, really the project is: this is the direction I'm heading. That's a very different project. You notice that the second project—aim in that direction—is all about process. And again, the Buddha is all about process.

If you take care of the process, the result will take care of itself. If you nurture the plant, you will get the harvest. If you're growing apples, you don't go out there every day and shake the tree, demanding, "When the hell are you going to produce an apple?" You could, but it wouldn't help. You just look after the tree.

And the apple comes. As long as it's an apple tree. And as long as it's growing in an area where apple trees flourish.

So the project is being interested in the process that emerges. What is the process happening here? How does it work? And how does that fit in with this whole new thing that I'm trying not to do of open awareness? How do you be interested in the process of open awareness without doing interested in the process?

Probably you just don't worry about that as being altogether too complicated. And just be interested in whenever you find yourself doing something with the process. So there I go interfering with it again. Just relax. Or there I go doing something. Just relax. Or there I go trying not to do something. Just relax.

The process is very fascinating. It's driven my whole practice for years—the actual interest in the process, whatever process I might be looking at. So yeah, I'm back to planting, I guess. Just being attuned to the quality of effort. Trying, trying. Don't try, just let it happen.

It's the world—the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world. Doesn't the whole world change with the citta? When the citta changes, my world changes. It's a completely different world. The trees are different, the sky is different.

So the world is a lot more malleable than we take it to be. It's one thing we discover.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 18

The Fourth Satipaṭṭhāna

Patrick Kearney · 1h09

In this comprehensive exploration of the fourth foundation of mindfulness, Patrick Kearney examines dhammānupassanā - the tracking of dhamma/dhammas. He clarifies the deliberate grammatical ambiguity in Pali between dhamma (singular - the teaching, reality, framework) and dhammā (plural - experienced phenomena). The talk covers key doctrinal lists from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), including the five hindrances and seven factors of awakening, explaining the practical instructions for recognizing their presence/absence, understanding their arising conditions, learning to abandon the unwholesome and cultivate the wholesome.

Kearney emphasizes that meditation practice requires a conceptual framework - there is no practice without theory. He illustrates how the fourth satipaṭṭhāna provides the Buddha's framework for creating meaning from meditative experiences, transforming particular insights into universal understanding. The talk explores how practitioners train themselves to perceive reality as dharmas - experienced events rather than independent things - leading toward the emptiness and not-self insights that characterize awakening. This represents the maturation of satipaṭṭhāna practice, where one abandons the world of self and things to inhabit a world of interdependent phenomena arising and passing according to conditions.

Last night we looked at the first three satipaṭṭhānas, and tonight we're going to examine the fourth. As we explored them, we pointed out that the first three—which cover body, citta (heart/mind), and in the middle, vedanā—encompass the entirety of human experience. This naturally raises the question: what is the fourth one doing?

If you look at translations, the first three typically receive consistent translations with little controversy over their meaning. The fourth one, however, appears with different renderings. For example, while the third one, citta, is sometimes translated as mind, you'll sometimes see the fourth one translated as "mind objects"—though I always wondered what a mind object actually is. Sometimes it's translated simply as "the dharma," and Bhikkhu Bodhi renders it as "phenomena." These different possibilities point to something significant about this fourth foundation.

Essentially, the fourth one is called dhamma-nupasanā in Pali. According to Pali grammar rules, this can be divided as either *dhamma* anupasanā or *dhammā* anupasanā. The second word is definitely anupasanā, which means tracking. The first word can be either dhamma or dhammā—the difference being whether it's singular or plural, dharma or dharmas.

I use the term "dharma" because it has entered the English dictionary as a borrowed word. This difference between singular and plural is crucial because it gives quite different spins on the meaning. I believe this ambiguity is deliberate, which is why it's impossible to translate adequately—it encompasses both the tracking of the Dharma (singular) and tracking the dharmas (plural). But you can't capture that in English, so translators usually choose one or the other. As I mentioned, Bhikkhu Bodhi chooses the second interpretation, dharmas, which he translates as phenomena. I usually follow him in that regard.

So there are two aspects here: dharma and dharmas. Let's examine the first one—dharma.

Dharma is a key technical term; the Pali word is dhamma. If you look up dhamma in the old Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary—a rather large volume with very small print—the entry for dhamma takes several pages. It's extensive, complicated, with multiple meanings.

Dharma can mean the way things are—reality itself. Dharma can also mean the teaching that points to the way things are, hence the Buddha Dharma—the Buddha's version of dharma as opposed to other dharmas. You might speak of the Christ dharma or the Krishna dharma. Dharma also encompasses, given that this is what's happening, what should I do about it? Here you encounter dharma as duty, as what one should do. "What is my dharma in this regard? What should I do about this?"

In the context of the fourth satipaṭṭhāna, dharma refers more to the second meaning—the teaching or the meaning one puts upon experience within the framework of the Buddha's teaching.

When we engage in these practices, we're cultivating intimacy with present experience. We do this consistently, but we do it for a reason. One of those reasons is so that some kind of meaning emerges from it—some kind of understanding arises from all this attention.

I'd like to compare this practice to having a big sheet of white paper and a pen or brush with black ink. Each time we note an object, each time we're deliberately aware of something, it's like taking that brush and making a dot on the big sheet of paper.

Then we note something else—another dot. Then something else—another dot. We keep doing this, and at some point, if we step back, we can see that some kind of pattern is emerging from all these dots.

In English we have the expression "to join the dots." This happens, then this, then this, then this, then this. At some point it means something. Some kind of meaning can be extracted from the experience. This is dharma in the first sense.

We've been discussing mindfulness and clear understanding—sati sampajañña. Mindfulness is remembering the experience, remembering the present. Sampajañña is clear understanding.

As we track experience over time, we start to understand what it is, how it works, what it flows into. Sometimes we speak of this in terms of what feeds this, what does this feed. We are cultivating an understanding. This is why mindfulness is associated with wisdom, as we've been discussing.

This understanding involves a movement in the practice from the particular to the universal. We begin with the particular—just this, just this. From there we arrive at the universal: the whole universe is this. We explored this yesterday through the perception of impermanence. This is changing. At some point we realize everything changes, including the person who's looking at change. This is a movement from the particular to the universal, and insight belongs to this realm of the universal.

We spoke yesterday of the growing ethical sensitivity that develops in the course of this practice. This ethical sensitivity can also be seen as a development of understanding. We start to understand the Dharma—the way things are, the way life moves. We begin to understand the Buddha's Dharma, his teaching about this and how it applies.

In the Fourth Satipaṭṭhāna, you encounter a number of doctrinal lists. In this discourse, in this section, doctrines are what get spoken about. In previous sections it was simply mind-body process, but suddenly in the Fourth Satipaṭṭhāna, doctrinal lists begin to appear. Two of them are the five hindrances and the seven factors of awakening. Some scholars think that in the earliest version of this sutta there were probably only those two, and that other lists were added over time. Of course we don't know this—it's pure speculation. But it's interesting speculation, and it certainly points to the importance of these two lists.

What these lists address is the sutta's expansion on this whole notion of ethical sensitivity. It's saying: not just be sensitive to what's happening in the citta, but look for these events in particular. Check these out. These are important.

The first list is the five hindrances, drawing attention to our obstacles. What gets in the way of this practice? This is what we need to study, and we've been talking about this throughout the retreat in terms of working with distraction. Here that general principle is being formalized with this official list of the hindrances.

The flip side is: what are we cultivating? The hindrances represent what we should be sensitive to and able to understand so that we can drop them. The counterpart is what we need to be sensitive to in order to cultivate skillful qualities. What helps us along the path? This is the classical list of the factors of awakening—five hindrances, seven factors of awakening.

Let's quickly go through these two lists. Each one could merit at least one dharma talk, so tonight we're simply going to survey them for an overview.

The five hindrances, which you probably all know: sense desire; malice or hatred or ill will; stiffness and dullness, or classically translated as sloth and torpor—which you must admit has a certain ring to it; restlessness and worry; and finally, paralytic doubt.

Regarding these, the Buddha says: "How does a practitioner live tracking Dharma as Dharma? Here a practitioner lives tracking Dharma as Dharma in terms of the five hindrances." How? Here he gives instructions—practical instructions in how to work with obstacles.

There are five things he says you should look for. We'll go through the first one, which is sense desire. The five aspects are: First, the practitioner understands that there is sense desire in her. When it's present, you understand it.

When there is no sense desire in her, she understands there is no sense desire in her. She understands the arising of unarisen sense desire. She understands the abandoning of arisen sense desire. And she understands the non-arising in the future of abandoned sense desire. He goes through the same pattern for the other hindrances.

You notice, first of all, that the job is to understand. This is a wisdom aspect, showing that the practice is maturing. The first thing we have to understand is the presence or absence of the hindrance. When there's an obstacle, we have to understand that it's present—that this is what's happening.

This is sometimes obvious when I'm completely overwhelmed by something. But it can be quite subtle, particularly in the realm of vedanā. If there's some kind of unidentified feeling deep in the citta that's just coloring everything, I don't really notice it because the mind is going out to the sense object. I notice that today is particularly dif-

ficult—the sense objects are really painful, quite messy, and I don't like it. What to do? I've got to slog away. Then I decide, no I won't. I think I'll take a break. I'll go for a walk. That sounds much more sensible.

So we're preoccupied with what it is that we are noting, and we tend not to notice what's underneath that—what's in the citta of the practitioner who's doing the noting. It might be, in this case, aversion or ill will, or it might be desire for something else to be happening. But because it's just underneath the surface, I might not necessarily even notice that it's there. Then as soon as I notice it and deliberately send the awareness into the citta—ah, that's what's going on—everything can then settle.

With these five hindrances, you've got the first two: desire and aversion or ill will, hatred, malice. These are disorders in affect—they're both about vedanā. Then you get stiffness and dullness versus restlessness and worry—these are disturbances in energy. Then you get paralytic doubt, which is a disturbance of the will. The hindrances cover a range of types of experience. They can be obvious, they can be quite subtle. Sometimes it's what's coloring the whole thing further up, but we just don't notice it.

So the first thing to do is to notice when it's present—what is present, what obstacle is present, what's getting in the way. What exactly is getting in the way here? To be able to identify that.

The Buddha also says to notice the absence of the hindrance. This is even more subtle. It's relatively straightforward to notice when something is present; it's harder to notice when something is absent. If I go to a social gathering, for example, it doesn't take me long to notice who's here, who's present. But it can take a while before I twig who didn't come. That's harder to recognize.

So noticing absence is harder to recognize than presence. I think this is particularly useful if you have a habitual obstacle. When that happens we tend to get upset about it: "Oh God, it's back again. Will this never leave me?" Then when it's not there we tend to take it for granted and just forget about it, instead of actually noting the absence of this obstacle and what it's like to be without it.

It's rather like in body work—there's tension in the body. You put the awareness there, breathe, relax, and release the tension. What is it like to release tension? What is it like to be without the tension? It's just as important to notice that as it is to notice the tension. They're two sides of the coin.

So we've got presence and absence of the obstacle. Then the third one is how the obstacle arises—in other words, what feeds this? Here we enter into an aspect of dependent arising. Presence and absence is dependent arising—things come and go. But things come and go because of something else. So this is broadening the investigation. Something happened and this hindrance arose. What is that? What feeds that?

Then you get the flip side: how the hindrance can be abandoned. This happens and the hindrance arises. Something else happens, and it drops away. So what's that one? How do I abandon it?

What conditions do I cultivate so that it goes away? When we look at how the hindrance can be abandoned, it's easy to take this as "how will I abandon the hindrance?" But sometimes it's not that at all. Sometimes it's just that I change the conditions and the hindrance falls away. It's not me—it's more like what I did was try something out and change the circumstances, and then oh, okay, it fades now. So I've discovered something.

And the last one: she understands the non-arising in the future of the abandoned hindrance. I think this means how this particular aspect of the hindrance can be outgrown so that we mature beyond it. So we feel confident that this isn't going to come back again. I've outgrown this. I can feel free from this now. Something will come up, some difficulty will come up, but not this. This is something that I've managed to outgrow.

Notice that all of this is more than simply being aware of it. Remember we talked about mindfulness of breathing and how the Buddha uses the verb *sikkhati*—training the mind to achieve something. Training the mind to become sensitive to the whole body, training the mind to calm the bodily formations. Here, the use of this verb *sikkhati*—to train—implies not simply witnessing, not simply being present to something, but actually taking the experience and steering it in a certain direction. I need to go here with this.

So with the hindrance, I recognize the hindrance, I need to abandon this. It's not just "I need to be mindful of it"—that helps to abandon it—but the project is to let it go, to drop this. So I set a direction in which there are certain things I'm deliberately trying to let go of, because they are *akusala* and they lead to harm and suffering.

Does that make sense? So this is all about abandoning the unwholesome, which summarizes a great deal of the path. Much of the rest of the path can be summarized as cultivating the wholesome, the *kusala*. And this is represented by the seven factors of awakening.

A practitioner lives tracking dhamma as dhamma in terms of the seven factors of awakening. How? And then he goes through all seven of them, and these are mindfulness, investigation of phenomena, energy, rapture, tranquility, equanimity, and concentration. Again, we could spend all night on these, but we're not going to. We're going to skip over them and just look at the structure, how the Buddha talks about them.

So the first one is mindfulness. The Buddha says: When the mindfulness factor of awakening is present in her, a practitioner understands the mindfulness factor of awakening is present in her. When the mindfulness factor of awakening is not present in her, she understands the mindfulness factor of awakening is not present in her. She understands the arising of the unarisen mindfulness factor of awakening. She understands how the arisen mindfulness factor of awakening matures by development.

So again, it's all about understanding. And the Buddha again begins with presence and absence. Is it here? Is it not here? Can I learn to recognize it? Can I recognize when I'm being mindful? Can I recognize when I'm not being mindful? So this is one of the reasons why getting clear on the basic concepts is important, because then I can actually start to tell what's going on. We spoke about the presence of mindfulness as being revealed by the felt continuity of awareness as being a key indicator. But if I'm working with presence and absence, it's like, well, I have to get to know it. How do I recognize it, whatever its characteristics?

And again, as with the hindrances, noticing its absence is harder than noticing its presence. But that too is part of the training. So, presence and absence.

And then, the arising of the unarisen mindfulness factor of awakening. This is "how can I encourage this?" So again, what feeds this? What can I do to encourage mindfulness? The two obvious ways that the tradition talks about, which we've mentioned, are first of all continuity. If I have a continuity of mindfulness, the mindfulness will tend to become stronger. And secondly, a clear perception. I look for something obvious and clear.

And then understanding how the arisen mindfulness factor of awakening matures by development. In other words, having found it, how do I cultivate it? How do I make it stronger? How can I learn to live in it and make it habitual? And this is cultivating the wholesome.

So these are two of the fundamental aspects or categories in this Satipatthana. You can sum them up by saying: learning how to abandon the unwholesome, learning how to cultivate the wholesome. First of all by recognizing them—when they're there, when they're not there. And then in the case of the unwholesome, learning how to let it go. In the case of the wholesome, learning how to cultivate it.

This perfectly aligns with the ethical sensitivity we explored yesterday evening. What this entire endeavor highlights is our fundamental need for a conceptual framework through which we can understand what's unfolding in our experience.

This is crucial. While I haven't heard it as much in recent years, I vividly remember in my early meditation days a common refrain from practitioners: "I'm just interested in the meditation, I'm not interested in the theory. Don't burden me with all this theoretical stuff—I just want to practice."

Of course, this attitude is complete nonsense, because there is no practice without theory.

"I just want to practice." Fine. Practice what, exactly? "Well, I want to sit down and follow my breathing." Why? Why not sit down at a sports ground and follow a game of football? You're sitting down. You're following something. So why follow this one and not that one? Because there's a theory that says this is beneficial and explains why it's beneficial.

There is no such thing as meditation practice without theory. There are meditators who are deeply confused about their theory. There are meditators who remain only dimly aware of what it is. There are meditators who grasp after any floating, fashionable notion and stick it onto their practice to frame it. But there is no such thing as a meditator who has a practice and does not have a theory. Such a person simply does not exist.

So if we're going to have a theory, let's have a good one—one that actually works.

I'll be controversial and say something that will please Mal. One of the most successful meditation and mindfulness interventions in the contemporary secular world is, of course, MBSR—Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. There, if you read Jon Kabat-Zinn, you encounter the practice package, the course structure they follow, and what he calls in his earlier writings "the paradigm"—the theoretical framework surrounding it.

The practice package is genuinely excellent, but the paradigm is rubbish. I shouldn't say this while being recorded, but frankly, it's completely confused and is causing all sorts of difficulties throughout the research world studying mindfulness. When con-

ducting scientific research, you need a crystal-clear conceptual framework. Yet there are endless fascinating debates and controversies precisely because his framework simply doesn't match up. Trying to found any kind of scientific endeavor on his theoretical framework is like marching into mud, marsh, and quicksand.

What's interesting is that it works—the practice package works remarkably well despite the inadequacies of the framework. But he does have a framework. You must have a framework.

The Dharma is the framework the Buddha provides. It's about how we can create meaning in our lives.

I might have a strange experience during a meditation retreat, but it doesn't necessarily mean anything at all. There was a time when I was teaching here—this must have been fashionable then—when every retreat included at least one person who had come explicitly to have a good catharsis. People would express disappointment at retreat's end that they hadn't had a proper weeping session, because they were there to undergo some kind of emotional catharsis. A friend of theirs had done a retreat here, experienced this incredible emotional catharsis, so naturally they wanted one too. Strangely, every retreat would include at least one person quite explicit about this motivation. For years I haven't encountered a single one, so it must have been a passing fashion. Perhaps they felt my disapproval radiating.

But one of the peculiar aspects of this practice is that sometimes people have spectacular experiences. That's lovely. Yet later they have very subtle experiences, and it turns out the subtle ones are far more important. It's not the power of the experience that matters—it's the meaning of the experience that matters. That's what transforms a life.

The purpose of practice is to change how we live. An experience accomplishes this through the meaning we assign to it.

Someone could have an intense experience of pain, distress, fear, panic—whatever—during meditation practice, decide they've uncovered some mental disorder, take themselves to the appropriate clinician, receive the appropriate medications, and stay away from meditation for the rest of their lives because it's obviously not beneficial for them. Given the meaning they've placed on that experience, life heads off in a particular direction.

Or they could have exactly the same experience, be told that what they're encountering is a particular glimpse into the emptiness of phenomena, the groundlessness of experience, and that yes, all this fear and horror they're experiencing is a completely appropriate response to the situation. However, it's only half the view. What they must do is continue forward to reach the other half.

But you've got to go through this one. Then you'll more fully understand what the Buddha is talking about. You're getting a very clear sense of dukkha. Congratulations, that's great progress. Now you need to move on to the next bit.

Is it the teacher's duty to translate that? Yes, that's part of the job of the teacher. And then, if the person takes that on board, life goes off in another direction. And I'm biased, but I would suggest that direction is a lot healthier than the first one.

It's all about the meaning of the experience—how it's read, how it's interpreted. And yes, it's the job of the teacher to do that interpretation for the student. You notice that in the interviews, that's a lot of what we're discussing. We're actually reading the experience. What does it mean? Where does it fit within the system? And of course these dharma talks, step by step, outline a conceptual framework within which we can place experiences. This is what it means.

One example that always occurs to me when I'm giving this talk involves a friend of mine when I was at Mahasi Center—a monk from the US, still quite a young man at the time. He had started meditation perhaps ten years or more earlier, quite young. He was attending a retreat in the US and threw himself into his first retreat with great intensity.

Somewhere during this retreat he had a quite profound experience in which basically everything crumbled. His whole sense of who he was just dissolved. Naturally, he was somewhat alarmed. So he went to the teacher and explained the experience. This is what I remember of what he was telling me, if my memory serves correctly.

He said it was like the teacher just did this quick double take and muttered something like, "No, it couldn't be." And then reassured him: "There, there, it's okay. Don't worry about it. It'll be all right." And sent him off.

It was fine as long as he was in that retreat. But when he left, he completely fell apart. Fortunately, he had the determination to keep going. Ten, twelve years later, he's telling me this story.

So I asked him, "Venerable Sir, why are you telling me this story now?"

And he said, "Because in the last sitting, it happened again. Only this time, my response was, 'Ah, that's where it fits. Tick that box. Time to move on.'"

The same experience, but different meanings. The first time, he had no framework to put it into. The second time—ah, of course, tick. He had the framework set up, he'd been doing the practice. It was less than a problem. It was another piece of the jigsaw puzzle, everything falling into place. This is what's going on.

So the framework is really important, and this fourth satipatthana is all about the dharma—the framework. This is what it means. This is how you read the experience.

And then we come to dharmas. Here I'm using these to illustrate this point. Actually, all of these lists can be read either as the dharma or the dharmas, but rather than go through all of them twice, I'm just picking the first two as illustrative of the dharma—the wholesome, the unwholesome, the kusala, the akusala—and I'm picking the next two as illustrative of the dharmas, plural.

Does this make it plural in Pali as well? It's long *a* in Pali. So if you have two words and you join them in a compound, let's say your first word ends in *a*, short *a*, and the second word ends in *a*, short *a*, then they join together and it becomes long *a*.

So Dhamma Anupasana becomes Dhamma Anupasana. If you have the first word ending in long A, and the second word beginning with short A, then long A plus short A equals long A: Dhamma Anupasana.

That's why it's ambiguous. The plural is the long A—Dhamma. In English it would be "dhammas." So it's plural.

Here the Buddha talks about the five aggregates and the six sense fields, which we'll be exploring more later. When the Buddha analyzes the nature of the human being, his two favorite frameworks are the five aggregates and the six sense fields.

The five aggregates, or five bundles, are body, feeling, perception, constructions, and awareness. You'll notice the first two of them are also the first two satipatthanas. The Buddha's instruction for practicing with these is beautifully simple: Such is body, such is arising, such is disappearance. Such is feeling, such is arising, such is disappearance, and so on.

It's this coming and going—the impermanence of the aggregates that he emphasizes. The job here is to directly experience the arising and disappearance of each aggregate, and therefore to perceive their emptiness, that there's no one there in the midst of them. We'll explore this more deeply in another dharma talk.

Then you have the six sense fields—the six sense sensitivities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding, along with their corresponding sense objects, which we've already discussed.

A practitioner lives tracking dharmas as dharmas in terms of the six subjective and objective sense fields. How? The Buddha goes through each one in the same way. We'll start with seeing.

A practitioner understands eye sensitivity, or seeing sensitivity. She understands forms. She understands the fetter that arises dependent on both. She understands the arising of the unarisen fetter. She understands the abandoning of the arisen fetter. And she understands the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter. And so on with the rest of them.

Here you have the sensitivity, the sense object, and the meeting of both, which is contact. This whole process must be understood. Then you have the fetter that arises dependent on both. "Fetter" here is samyojana—as in yoga, it's the same word. Yoga comes from the root yuj, meaning to yoke or bind. The English word "yoke" comes from the same root.

Yoga is a joining or binding. In the yoga traditions, yoga is seen as joining or binding with the divine, the unconstructed, or whatever. Sam indicates "with," so samyojana means to join with or be bound with—and here it's in a negative sense, something that ties us up to something. We're bound, we're fettered.

When the Buddha discusses sense perception, remember we talked about vedana. When he talks about contact—you have the sensitivity, the sense object, the corresponding awareness—the meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling, an affective response. Feeling conditions craving. Craving conditions clinging. That teaching is all about how we get entangled with sense objects.

The vedana gets out of whack and we find ourselves completely lost, being blown about by our relationship to sense objects. Here he's talking about the same process, but in terms of the samyojana, the fetters, the bonds. It's like we're bound to these sense objects—completely entangled with them. They're sticky and we can't get away from them. They dominate us.

Understanding this process—and the samyojanas, the binds and fetters—these are of course akusala. You get the same relationship as with the hindrances: She understands the arising of the unarisen, the abandoning of the arisen, and the non-arising in the future of the abandoned. It's the same process: What feeds it? How can I let it go? And how can I outgrow it, so this particular instance won't happen in the future?

But it's all about our relationship to sense objects—how the senses cling to their corresponding objects and how we get emotionally entangled with them in a very negative way.

Negative in the sense that it leads to pain for ourselves and for others.

Finally, at the end, you encounter the four truths. There are two versions of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—one in the Majjhima Nikāya and the other in the Dīgha Nikāya. The Dīgha Nikāya version is slightly longer and includes the four truths, which indicates the culmination of the practice. Understanding the four truths is code for awakening itself.

A practitioner lives tracking dhammas as dhammas in terms of the four truths of the Noble Ones. How? A practitioner understands realistically: this is dukkha. She understands realistically: this is the arising of dukkha. She understands realistically: this is the cessation of dukkha. She understands realistically: this is the way leading to the cessation of dukkha.

Seeing the four truths represents awakening. We'll probably talk about the four truths again in a separate talk later in the retreat.

Throughout this section, we're speaking of experience in terms of dhammas—learning to experience things in terms of dhammas and the interrelationships between dhammas. This takes us to emptiness and to not-self.

Our normal relationship to what we take to be real involves looking out at the world and seeing beings and things, then noticing what relationship we find ourselves in to these beings and things. I'm sitting here and I see beings and I see this room, and from that I work out my relationship to these beings and this place. These beings are meditators who have come to Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center to do a meditation retreat, and I'm the teacher. So first I have things and people, beings, and from that I work out the relationships.

The awakened one has the complete reverse relationship. An awakened one looks out at the world and sees a network of relationships, and from that infers beings and things. What's real for the noble ones are the relationships, not the beings and not the things. What's happening here is a network of relationships expressed as this particular group of beings and this particular series of things.

We have two different ways of relating to the world: one is what Buddha would call the world of self, and the other is the world of emptiness, of not-self, of dhammas.

The example I like to give, because I'm usually in this particular circumstance when talking about this: as the teacher, I not only get my own throne where I sit above you so you can look up at me—except those of you sitting on chairs, especially tall people on chairs—but I have my special equipment here, all of which indicates my status. One of them is this glass of water.

What is this glass of water? From the world of self, which we talked about before as the third-person world, this is a glass partially filled with water. What is water? H2O. Glass is a certain kind of substance. This glass of water can be studied; the physics of it can be studied and appreciated. But the thing about it that's most obvious to me is that it exists completely independently of me.

When I came in earlier, that glass of water was here. It was the same glass. I'm pretty sure it was the same glass that was here yesterday and the day before. I'm pretty sure nobody went out and washed it and got me a new one. When I leave at the end of the talk, it will remain here because it's a glass of water just sitting here. All of this is blindingly obvious, isn't it? Does it need to be explained to you? You already know this. This is the way we relate to the world in terms of self, not emptiness, not dhammas.

Or I could view this glass of water as dhammas. If it's dhammas—notice again, plural—then what is it? It's this. That's what it is. That's its nature. That's its very existence.

Wanting is a dharma. Turning is a dharma. Seeing is a dharma. Reaching is a dharma. Touching is a dharma. Lifting is a dharma. Tilting is a dharma. Tasting is a dharma. Wet is a dharma. Swallowing is a dharma. Satisfaction is a dharma. Placing is a dharma. Hearing is a dharma. All these are dharmas.

Does that sound familiar to you? Have you been doing something like this?

In this practice, what we're doing is training ourselves to live in this world of dharmas—to actually start to perceive the world as a whole series of dharmas. A dharma is an experienced event. It's the experience of something. It's not the something. It's the experience of something. It's first-person experience.

For example, some people have commented, "Yes, I've been doing this practice and now I step outside and it's like a whole different world." Has anybody had any experience like that? Do you seriously believe it's a different world? Should I call the mental health team? They're probably useless.

Objectively, it's the same world. But from the perspective of the dharmas, you're absolutely right—it's completely new. It's never been here before, and it never will be here again. This is the world of the dharmas, and this is the world that we're training ourselves to inhabit.

You notice that in this world, there's no room for me. There's no room for you. There's not even any room for the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre. There's just the dharmas coming and going according to conditions. Does that make sense?

This tracking of the dharmas indicates the maturity of satipaṭṭhāna—when we actually live in this world. When we abandon the world of self and what belongs to self, the world of beings and things, and we live in a world made up entirely of dharmas. This represents the maturity of the practice.

But you can see from the moment you begin the practice and learn to note rising, falling, in, out, lifting, pushing, placing, seeing, hearing, touching—from the moment we begin to do that, we are training ourselves to perceive ourselves and our world in terms of dharmas. This is the boot camp training that we're putting ourselves through.

Notice that what we're doing is deliberately changing our perceptions based on a theoretical framework—the Buddha-dharma, singular—which gives rise to a particular way of structuring attention, the meditation method, which is designed to lead perception in a certain direction, which is considered kusala, wholesome, in which we train ourselves to perceive the world as dharmas.

So you have the tracking of the dharma, and you have the tracking of the dharmas, and they intersect. They come together. This is the fourth satipaṭṭhāna.

If you think about a pie chart—draw a circle, and you've got four satipaṭṭhānas, and you wanted to illustrate this—you'd be tempted to draw a vertical line and a horizontal line, and you've got four slices. But that is not the way it's structured. Actually, it's three slices, which are the first three satipaṭṭhānas. The fourth satipaṭṭhāna is the whole cake experienced from a certain angle. This is why it doesn't quite fit neatly and tightly. It's just taking the whole thing from a completely different angle.

Any questions or comments?

"I'm not sure if it's confusion, but the suggested activities of the fourth section of the time—like the deliberate cultivating and abandoning—seems slightly different from and more than just noticing arising and ceasing in the first thing."

The first three? The first three satipaṭṭhānas you mean?

So far we've just been observing and letting things be, which is very pleasant and actually quite helpful. But what attracted me to Buddhism was reading about the Five Hindrances as a list, and that suggests action—abandonment and cultivation—which doesn't seem the same as simply noting.

Actually, it is the noting and noticing. The noting and noticing gets you into the game. Part of the game is indeed just noting and noticing, but there's more to it than that. You have to get into the game first. What you discover is that you're already playing the game before you even notice it.

For example, you might say, "I'm just going to note and notice for the next thirty minutes." But how do you actually do that? You find yourself massaging your experience in order to be able to do that. You're already working with the hindrances and cultivating the factors of awakening. So this takes the game to a different level, and it's kind of assumed.

Why do people take up meditation practice in the first place? Because they think their lives will become better. They might not follow that thought through to its logical conclusion—yes, that means abandoning the akusala and cultivating the kusala—but in fact, that's how it's done.

This is something we learn over time. It takes time because it takes time just to learn to recognize what is kusala and what is akusala. We're deluded, so we don't know. We're confused about it. So it's not contradictory so much as it's just another part of the complex. It's not as simple as simply being aware—there's more to it than that.

That aspect of practice is also present in sīla, isn't it? In the tradition, sīla is taken as a pre-given foundation. It's assumed you might not even start without it, but certainly you wouldn't get very far without cultivating sīla. If that doesn't develop, then the practice gets bogged down.

This is why doing nothing is so hard—because you start with a purpose. Doing nothing opens up different aspects of doing. For example, doing nothing is often abandoning because I'm not doing the akusala. But also, in order to do nothing, I have to really develop and cultivate mindfulness, concentration, and so forth, which means I'm cultivating the wholesome.

But you chose the example of the unwholesome...

Actually, doing nothing is wholesome. Then I suppose you'd have to make sure you didn't start cleaning something. The wholesome thing allows for that.

So it's a moving feast. If I cling to the wholesome, that's unwholesome. It can get very complicated. Let's just go to bed!

I think sometimes there's the marketing of it. Somewhere—I don't know why—in our culture, the marketing somehow got reduced to "all it is is just be aware." It must have been watered down to that point. I remember seeing a book by Sayadaw Tejaniya: "Mindfulness Is Not Enough." Because if you look at the Dharma, it was never just about bare attention. The fourth satipaṭṭhāna has been there the whole time, and yet somehow we think it doesn't count or something.

It seems to me a multi-layered and almost spiral practice. You go around and around and over and over again. But each time you go over the same ground, it's different.

And you've got another layer and another layer and another layer, and it opens up and opens up like an inverse onion or something—like you're in the middle of the onion and you get through another layer and it's bigger, and then you get through another layer and it's bigger and even more and more. It just opens up.

I think culturally what's happened is that what our culture has lacked for a long time—and some people say it used to exist long ago—is any practical understanding of how to pay attention to one's inner world in a systematic way. In other words, what in the Indian tradition is called meditation. It's just absent from our culture.

Partly, I think, this is because it was driven underground by various churches over the centuries, as they saw it as a threat. I can remember—I was raised Catholic—being very interested in contemplative prayer at a young age. I used to read these books about it, but I never found any book that actually said how to do it. It was all mystical theology, incredibly abstract, and I never found any clergy person who had anything useful to say about how to actually do it. No one knew.

And then along comes Buddhism, and suddenly these people know how to do it. What you find, for example, is a lot of Christians going to Buddhists to learn how to meditate. Then they bring it back to their own tradition, where it's immensely valuable.

In the secular world of psychology, you can look at the different psychological interventions that have taken up mindfulness. What each of them has is some kind of understanding of how the mind works and, using Buddha's language, what's kusala and what's akusala. But they have no way of getting people to actually look inside their own minds and figure this out. Then here comes Buddha's meditation. Bingo.

So it's all about the attention, the quality of attention, because that's the key—that's the missing link. That's what people have seized upon, including this term "bare attention." Now gradually there's a dawning understanding that actually more is required, that there actually is more to it than this.

And then you get the debate: should we figure it all out for ourselves because we're scientific and psychological, or should we go and maybe ask the Buddha? Oh no, we're being religious there. We don't want to do that.

There's also this need for technology in our society—to look at technique and technology, apply the technology to the problem, and solve the problem with the scientific method. Science questions religion. So all of this stuff has to be sifted through the scientific sieve to be measurable and objective. We can get an app, a meditation app.

I wish I could write one. It would make a fortune. Mine would have an angry voice saying to you, "Just sit down and don't move. And don't bother me again."

I notice, in terms of my own experience, what I feel very strongly when I have these experiences is a desire to understand the experience, rather than to simply think, "Why is this happening? Where does it come from? Why am I doing this?" I do think, in terms of my practice, if I can hold whatever arises in a sufficiently strong attention, then it will transform into something else.

That's the first two aspects—the presence and the absence. These are not static. For the Buddha, they're always dynamic. So there's the arising and the disappearance. Arising and disappearance always presuppose dependent arising, which means if an understanding opens up—I'm seeing, "Ah, this arises because of this, and this arises because of this, and this arises because of this"—so it is understanding. We study it.

The Buddha, in the Four Truths, says that with the first truth, dukkha—which is what we're talking about—the job is to understand it, to fully understand it. So it's not suppression. And understanding sometimes leads to a spontaneous abandonment—"I just don't want this anymore." But sometimes perhaps something stronger is required. It depends on circumstances.

The desire to understand can indeed be a skillful approach. There's wisdom in recognizing that sometimes understanding naturally leads to the abandonment of what causes suffering, while other circumstances may call for a more direct letting go.

Your inclination toward understanding reminds me of something from my time at a study monastery in northern Thailand. This particular monastery taught the traditional medieval Burmese curriculum, which included extensive study of the Vinaya—the

monastic rules. The abbot there had a fascinating perspective. He would say that it was absolutely crucial to understand the Vinaya thoroughly, but not necessarily so important to follow every detail precisely. His emphasis was always on understanding: What is this? What does it mean? Why does it exist?

As he would joke, "You've got to be a good lawyer if you're going to survive with all these rules!" But beneath his humor was a profound teaching principle—that genuine understanding often creates its own natural boundaries and appropriate responses.

This approach can be quite liberating when working with difficult mind states or patterns. Sometimes the very act of truly seeing and understanding what's happening is enough. The light of awareness itself becomes the agent of transformation, without the need for force or struggle.

Of course, we must be honest with ourselves about whether our interest in understanding is genuinely leading toward freedom, or whether we're sometimes using investigation as a subtle form of avoidance. Both the analytical mind and the surrendering heart have their place in practice, and wisdom lies in knowing when each is most skillful.

CHAPTER 19

Mindfulness Immersed in Body - Kāyagatā Sati

Patrick Kearney · 1h27

> *In this profound talk, Patrick Kearney addresses the foundational practice of kāyagatā sati —mindfulness immersed in body—drawing from the first satipaṭṭhāna of kāyānupassanā (tracking of body). He shares personal experiences from retreats in Sri Lanka and Burma to illustrate how meditators often struggle against their bodies rather than inhabiting them with awareness. A pivotal insight came from Venerable Vivekānanda, who pointed out that Patrick's meditation challenge wasn't samādhi (concentration) but passaddhi (tranquility) —the physical calm that supports mental stillness.*
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> *Kearney examines how our minds habitually separate us from bodily experience, creating conceptual worlds where we locate ourselves in past, future, or elsewhere rather than here and now. The body, he explains, speaks only in sensation—a language we've become deaf to, receiving messages only when they're loud and crude. He discusses how chronic tension arises as a defense mechanism to perceived threats, becoming habitual patterns that define our sense of physical limitation.*
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> *The talk features a beautiful teaching from the Cīvara Sutta about the Buddha's instruction to Mahākassapa: "I will not abandon mindfulness immersed in body, associated with joy." This instruction emphasizes not just body awareness, but cultivating a pleasurable relationship with embodied experience. Kearney stresses that bodywork is meditation itself—not preparation for it—and that establishing posture must happen from the inside out through feeling and relaxation, rather than forcing the body to conform to external images. The discussion includes practical guidance on distinguishing between productive discomfort and harmful pain, particularly regarding vulnerable areas like the knees.*

Tonight I want to speak about kāyagatā sati, mindfulness immersed in body. This obviously refers back to the first satipaṭṭhāna, the kāyānupassanā, the tracking of body. This is basically about the relationship with the body that we have as meditators, which I've come to realize is extremely important.

Actually, I realized it was important from the beginning. The first meditation retreat I went to was in Sri Lanka in 1977, sometime around then. It was at a place outside Colombo—I forget the name. We had these tiny little concrete cells to live in and a little bit of veranda. The bed was a cane mat on the concrete floor. Part of the concrete floor was raised up a bit, and they had a cane mat on it. That was pretty much it.

We were supposed to sit there for hours every day. I noticed a lot of people cheated and leaned against a wall. In fact, the wall was concrete and there was this black stain along it at about head height, if you leaned against it. So I did, of course. I had a little cushion, and I survived two weeks, and my knees hurt for two weeks thereafter. I spent most of the time wrestling and struggling with the body, and realized I had to take up yoga, get massaged, and so on.

Years later, I was at U Pandita's place in Rangoon, Panditarama. The interpreter was a relatively junior sayādaw named Vivekananda, and the teacher—the person who was giving the interviews—was not U Pandita but one of his underlings. He'd have to be in the running for the worst meditation teacher I've ever come across. He was just dreadful. He had no interest whatsoever in what was going on. I doubt that he really paid much attention to what anybody was saying to him, and he just kind of tossed off whatever standard response came to mind at the time.

So with me, I would go to an interview, and if something interesting was happening—and I had been doing the practice long enough to figure out what was interesting and what was not—then after the interviews, I'd go and see U Vivekananda, go to his hut, and we'd sit down and I'd say, "OK, what was that all about?" We'd have a discussion, we'd have a talk. He would be pulling down books and we'd be reading them and comparing notes and figuring it out. It was a very interesting process.

But in the course of this, one day I was complaining to him, as was my wont, about one of my major obsessions when I meditate, which is: I haven't got enough samādhi. My concentration is not good enough. So I was complaining about this, and he said, "There is nothing wrong with your samādhi. You would not be seeing the things you are seeing if you did not have samādhi. It's not samādhi you lack, it's passaddhi."

"It's what?"

"Passaddhi."

"What's passaddhi?"

And of course it's tranquility. It's one of the factors of awakening—does it come third? Is it number three? Four. Yes, it's four. And it's just next to samādhi, just next to concentration.

Passaddhi and samādhi—it's interesting, it's one of these pairs of terms that you come across in the Buddha's teaching where there's a body-mind connection built into them. That is, one term is predominantly physical but also influences mind; the other

term is predominantly mental but also influences body. In this case, passaddhi, tranquility, is predominantly physical, but it influences the mind, while samādhi, concentration, is predominantly mental, but it influences the body.

In other words, my body was agitated. I was carrying chronic tension within the body, and the body was always tight. And if the body is agitated, it's quite difficult for the mind to settle. Not impossible.

And people do it. But it's like running with a handicap.

So one way into samādhi, concentration, is via the body. Calm the body down, bring ease to the body, and then concentration will develop. On the other hand, if the body is agitated, it will be difficult to calm the mind. This is the mind-body relationship. The body is important as part of the instrument with which we practice meditation.

When we begin intensive meditation practice, it's been my observation—and it's not just me—that a lot of people spend a great deal of energy fighting their bodies, trying to make them do what they think they're supposed to do. For example, to sit in a particular approved posture.

I mentioned that I spent a number of years practicing Zen. My introduction to it came about, oddly enough, through a kind of half-hearted attempt to make a connection with Tibetan Buddhism. I had returned from my first trip to India in late 1977, looking for an opportunity to continue meditation practice in Sydney while also needing yoga, massage, and so on. There was an advertisement for a public talk to be given by a visiting Tibetan Lama at a hall within walking distance of my house, so I went. I think it was Lama Zopa—he would have been very young in those days.

So there was this young lama on the stage. A good crowd turned up, and he had these gorgeous robes. He sat down and gave one of the most boring Dharma talks I've ever heard. So you see, definitely, lamas can be boring too. At the end, they handed around a little pamphlet advertising a weekend retreat with this teacher at a house or centre in the upper North Shore, so I went along.

It was a weekend of meditation, very good. I went through the whole thing but didn't connect with the teacher. I was sitting in this hall with this really crappy little cushion, trying to sit properly, when I happened to glance to my right. Beside me was this magnificent Rolls Royce of a cushion. I looked at it and thought, "I've got to get a cushion like that." Then I looked at the man sitting on it—he had a perfect full lotus, a totally straight back, and a perfect mudrā. I thought, "I've got to get a posture like that." Can you get it at the same store?

I was too shy to actually go up and say hello to this fellow because he obviously knew what he was doing. But after that retreat, I put my name down on a mailing list, and the only thing that ever came was an advertisement for a yoga class run by a man called John Cooper. I went along, and there in the class, doing magnificent postures, was this same fellow with the cushion. I knew I had to pounce on him because my enlightenment depended upon it.

As it happened, at the end of the class he made an announcement saying he was running a little Zen group in Sydney and inviting people to come along. This was the Sydney Zen Group, so I joined up. The man was Lee Davidson, who currently lives on the North Coast and is the founder of Australian Zen.

I went along to Zen, attracted initially because they had the best cushions and only sat for thirty minutes. When Aitken Roshi came out later, he reduced it to twenty-five, and the Dharma has been declining ever since. But I only had to sit for thirty minutes, and the instructions were to follow the breathing down here in the belly, which was much better than what I had been doing up here in the head. I could sit facing a wall with the light blasting into my eyes, so I could keep awake.

I got into Zen. I used to read these Zen books—little "Zen for Beginners" books coming out of Japan—and they always talked about posture, the importance of posture. "Sit like Buddha and you will become Buddha." They always had photographs of these good-looking young Japanese men with shaved heads and black robes demonstrating perfect posture. Of course, I thought the job was to sit like them, and so that's what I tried to do. Years of struggle. And the struggle itself, of course, gets in the way of the meditation.

But the other strange thing is that the posture I was struggling to attain was nothing more than a product of my imagination. It existed only in this mental image I had of it. I was already alienated from the body. It was as if I was residing outside the body, and from there I was trying to make the body fit my image of what it was supposed to look like from the outside. Does that make sense? It's a completely alienated relationship. But I was so busy struggling to get the right posture that I never noticed.

At some point it occurred to me: how would the experience of sitting change if I abandoned this struggle and yet found ease in the posture? At the very least, it would improve samādhi, concentration. At the very least, it would do that. But it would also assist vipassanā, insight, because insight requires a subtlety and precision of awareness. If my relationship to the practice is so gross that what I'm trying to do is wrestle with the body to keep it still over the approved period of time, it's difficult for subtlety and precision to arise. Again, it's not impossible. With enough struggle, it can be done—slowly.

Painstakingly slowly—but it's not a very efficient way to practice.

So the simple fact, which we tend to lose sight of, is that we are bodies. That's what we are. But we need to be reminded of this from time to time because our minds have the capacity to separate us from our bodies. This is something about the human mind—perhaps no other species has this capacity. I don't know; we may be the only one. But certainly in our species, our minds can separate us almost entirely from our bodies. In the ordinary everyday experience of this, our mind manages to persuade us that our drives, our desires, our fears, our hatreds, our anxieties are actually more real than the body.

Now from the Buddha's point of view, each of us is a sentient body. He calls it *satvijñānakāya*. *Kāya* is body, *vijñāna* is awareness or consciousness, and *sat* means "with." So a body with awareness, an aware body, a sentient body. Notice that he's saying our fundamental nature is not some esoteric mind state or spirit or whatever—our fundamental nature is this, physical, the body. But the body is sentient, and it knows, it is aware of, a world external to itself, which appears to be inhabited by other sentient bodies, shared by others. And there's another world, which is internal, known only to ourselves. We call this the mind, or the Buddha would call it the *citta*.

Now this awareness of the sentient body, as we mentioned before, is located. It has location. It's located here. *Here*. I am aware of this room—from where? Here. Where are my thoughts happening? Well, they're not happening over there. They're happening here, somehow. Even if I can't pinpoint the location, still I have this sense that it's here.

The power of the inner world, of *citta*, of the mind, enables us to escape from this sense of being located here. Have you ever had the experience of sitting in a meditation hall—let's say this one—being lost in imagination and thinking yourself to be somewhere else? Or has that only happened to me? Have you ever had the experience of being lost in thought and thinking yourself to be in the past or in the future, rather than now? Constantly? And when you consider this, it's seriously weird. But it shows us how powerful the mind is in its capacity to separate us from the body.

I can project myself into past or future, and it's more real to me than this. The classic example in meditation retreats is when we first arrive, and the past, the world we just left, is actually more real to us than here. Then we go through a period of time when we're actually here. And then once the mind starts to think, "Hey, wait a minute, it's coming to the end"—whammo—the post-retreat world is more real than here. It's so routine we don't notice it, but it is seriously strange. And similarly, situations other than here, somewhere else in the present, are more real than this.

Now these worlds are purely conceptual. They're just made up of concept. And it's within these conceptual worlds that I create an identity. I create myself in these worlds. And perhaps that's the only place I can create an identity. Maybe that's why I need these worlds.

The self, the identity that I create, can never actually escape its physicality. It's always here, even if it doesn't want to be. It still lives in this body—even though it would much prefer another.

It makes no difference. Here it is. It's inescapable. Everything happens here, and yet we live as if we are separated from here.

Consider walking meditation. If I'm walking up and down a path fully engaged with the practice, the here-ness of this experience is quite clear. It's evident to me that this is happening here. But when I get lost in fantasy, while objectively I'm still here—people can see me—the felt sense of the here-ness of the experience is completely lost. And then I come back to here, I drop the world of fantasy, and I'm here again. So I find myself here, then somewhere else, then here again, then escaping somewhere else.

We get the same dynamic with emotion. When I'm sensitive to the feeling tone of the body, I find my emotion resides here as physicality, as body—basically as a set of physical sensations that might be quite disturbed, and they're here. The mind, from these sensations, creates a conceptual world. The body is disturbed, and the mind has to make sense of it. So it interprets it as a certain emotion: I'm grumpy, I'm upset. And then the mind, in that conceptual world, has to find reasons for being grumpy. There must be something happening in the conceptual world that's causing this.

So the mind goes through the files, picks out the appropriate one, makes that situation real—more real than this—and this confirms the disturbed sensations and feeds them. The sensations feed the emotion, and the whole thing perpetuates itself. The more I get lost in the immersion, the more my sense of reality drops away from this into the imagined conceptual world. Now this world may be located in the past, in the future, or in the present but away from me—triggered, for example, by other meditators. But the sense of the here-ness is gone.

When I'm intimate with the body, it's quite clear to me that this entire drama is occurring here. And when that perception is clear, I cannot sustain the emotion because I cannot sustain it without this imagined world being more real than this.

The mind is remarkably anxious to get away from the body. Sometimes because the physical world is painful. The body hurts. Everybody hurts. Sometimes you have just the normal physical pain of the body, but you can also have pain in the body that is ac-

tually created by the world of concepts. I think of something emotionally painful and I feel it in the body. The body then hurts. So of course I want to send the awareness away, perhaps to argue with that conceptual world. But again it's getting out from the body as much as possible.

So it's no wonder that we have a problematic relationship with the body. We get cut off from it, become strangers to our own body, and lose our sense of the body's language. We don't listen to it. We can't hear it. We can't understand what it's saying.

Most of the time we're in a world of language, of concept—what we normally call language, the blah blah blah. Language in this sense takes us into the world of concepts. The body also has a language, but its language is non-conceptual, restricted entirely to sensations. The body speaks in sensation. That's how it communicates.

We tend to be deaf to this language. We receive messages from the body only when these messages are very loud and very crude—such as, for example, that hurts. Or when we get sick, when we drive the body so much because we're so caught up in the world of concept that we push the body beyond its limit. It's interesting how many people, when they go on holiday, fall ill. The body doubtlessly has been complaining for some considerable time, but we're completely, totally oblivious to it. The world of concept overrides it. No, I have to do this. But when the pressure is released, the body shouts out its message, and the message comes in the form of sickness.

So the body is always communicating, but it can only communicate in sensation. On the basis of the sensations we create perceptions, and on the basis of the perceptions we then create thoughts and so on. These perceptions are often false. The sensations are always true. The body never lies. The mind lies all the time, but the body never lies. Everything that it says is true—although the perceptions and thoughts and concepts that we create about that language may well be false. But the sensations themselves are always true.

This is one reason why in our practice we are urged to slow down. Because if we slow down, we have the opportunity to tune into these sensations. We're in the habit of blocking them out, and speed is one way that we do it. It's not just speed in itself—it's the speed which is triggered by the attempt to make real an image of the future.

Now, this can be quite mundane. Let's say there's a particularly nice lunch, and mindful of the body I scoop up a spoonful of this particularly nice lunch. I have an image of the satisfaction of eating it, and so the movement from here to here is as fast as I can manage it without actually hurling the food across the dining hall, which would be

embarrassing. Basically what's going on is I've got an image of what I want within the body. The body is somewhere else, so I just have to move it as fast as possible from there to here.

Another example: if you're doing a strong stretch in the morning and you get the signal, "Okay, enough," how quickly do you back out of it? And why do you move that quickly? Isn't it because the mind rushes to the image—"this is over, so the body should no longer be like this, now it's supposed to be like that"—and it just goes, bang, there, as fast as possible? In that movement, what's real is not the body, in other words not the sensations, but the mental image. The body is racing to catch up with this. But we're not actually listening to the body; we're listening to the image, to the concept.

That's why we keep saying, when we go into a stretch and when we come out of a stretch, move slowly—to maximise the sensations, to listen to what the body is saying about this whole thing.

Similarly, the big mistake that we make when we're doing these stretches is to push too hard. When I'm pushing too hard, I'm trying to get the body from here to here. In that movement, what's the language I'm listening to? It's the concept. "The body's supposed to be there, so bloody well go there. And we'll talk about it afterwards." Scrunch. But if we're actually listening to the sensation, there's no way we're going to injure ourselves. Because the message will be loud and clear: "Stop here. This is far enough. Thank you very much."

So the whole business about slowing down is very largely to give us the opportunity to start tuning into the language of the body, which is the language of direct sensation.

When we do this, one thing we discover is the tension that we hold in the body. When the mind senses danger, the body defends itself. It defends itself by tightening, ready to ward off an attack or to launch into one. So tension always arises as a defense mechanism to a perceived threat, to a perception created by the mind.

Now, concept tends to last. I have a concept of something and that concept can last for a long time. I can make up my mind about something and ten years later I have exactly the same opinion. So the mind perceives a threat and then can believe that this threat remains, even when it's actually over. But the mind can be convinced that there's still a threat. This message is sent to the body, and so the body continues to hold the tension. These patterns of tension become habitual. They drop beneath awareness and we don't notice them anymore—except when we try to move the body and we discover that it won't move in the way that we wanted to, because suddenly it stops. I can't go any further.

Sometimes we sense these patterns of tension. Sometimes they're evident—we feel tightness in the shoulders, for example. Sometimes we experience them as areas of absence, the complete absence of sensation. In other words, the language here has been completely shut out. There's no sensation in this part of the body at all. And here, I suspect, is the deeper tension.

Sometimes, if you're doing a stretch, you start to move into an area, and it's not necessarily painful, but you get this message from the body: don't go there, back off. It's not necessarily a sensation—the sensation is still beneath awareness. But the message it's sending is so strong that even the mind can start to pick it up.

So we have these habits of tension held in the muscle and the fascia. These patterns of habitual tension create my sense of my body—my body that has these limitations, my body that can't sit comfortably. They condition the sense of reality, the sense of what's possible and what's not possible. All of this gets taken over by the world of concept and becomes absolutely fixed. And these concepts feed the body. And the body tenses because that's what it's told to do. So we find ourselves locked in.

This is the body that we struggle with when we try to do meditation practice. And of course this is why we do the body work as part of the meditation.

Now, if you're inclined to orthodoxy, you might be tempted to ask: did the Buddha and his students do body work? And if you're a learned scholar in these matters, you might say, "I've studied the suttas and I can find no reference to body work in there. So why are you doing it? This is heresy." Extending his arm, the monk extends his arm; bringing the arm back—it's certainly being mindful of the body, but is it doing body work as such? You could argue it is. You could certainly get a good lawyer and make a case for it.

But the Buddha didn't do body work, it seems—though he certainly walked a phenomenal amount of distance. Thousands of kilometers. And this is extremely relevant to what we're coming to here.

There's certainly no explicit reference to body work in the suttas that I've come across. Strictly speaking, the answer is we don't know if the Buddha and his students did body work or not. And we cannot know. But we have to consider the context.

First of all, traditions do not transmit the blindingly obvious. This is the first thing. If we're looking back into the past, trying to work out what was going on—back during the Howard years, we had the history wars. And during that time, I remember reading a book on this, and there was a quote from the famous Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey, who wrote *The Tyranny of Distance*. He made the comment that if you are a his-

torian, your job is to go back to the records left by people in the past and from those records work out what was going on for them in that world. And he said there is of course one thing that is never mentioned in historical records, and that is precisely that which for these people was blindingly obvious.

When we make a record, do we record the obvious? No. Why would we? It's obvious. So we don't make a record of it. In later times, when people are trying to work out what we were experiencing, what they will not have a record of is what we thought was completely obvious.

So the fact that the records don't mention certain things doesn't mean they weren't there.

They could mean that it's so obvious that there's no need to talk about them.

Was yoga being done at that time? Well, there's no reason to suppose it wasn't. The word was used. The kinds of practices we associate with yoga were being performed. So there's every reason to suppose that there would have been a yoga tradition there at the time.

The other thing, of course, is that the people of that time and place were far more physically relaxed, supple and robust than we are. Enormously so. They came from a non-mechanistic agricultural society where there were almost no machines. Everything was powered by human or animal muscle. They lived on the floor without furniture. In the case of the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, as Jane mentioned, they were used to walking long distances most days of their lives, in bare feet normally, in a very relaxed manner.

So these were people who were both extremely fit in our sense of the word, but also much more in their bodies than we are. Their relationship to the body would have been completely different from ours. Their bodies would have been much more open and relaxed than ours, and body awareness would have come much more easily and readily to them than it does for us.

Consider the contrast with how we treat our bodies. The body adapts to whatever posture it's forced to undergo over a period of time. And our basic posture is sitting in a chair—and if we're at work, hunched over, staring at a screen that's very close to us, maintaining that really artificial, out-of-balance posture for hours every day. And all the way through, it's associated with stress—in other words, threat. I'm at work. I've got to do this. Not much time. I have to be productive. My review is coming up in a couple of months' time. And if I'm not productive, they'll sack me. This is what we're telling our bodies for years, even decades at a time.

So it's pretty obvious what happens. I come to a meditation retreat, I sit down on the floor, and what do I discover? I'm incredibly stiff and it hurts. Hardly surprising. Plus the world we live in—our minds will be spinning around a lot faster than the minds of people in simple village pre-literate cultures. And of course in material capitalism we live in a society in which social isolation and competition between individuals is endemic.

So we have a completely different relationship to the body. We bring this completely different relationship with us when we start doing meditation practice, and it is a long way from being helpful—as well as totally different from what the Buddha and his students would have experienced.

If we look at how the body was related to back in those days, I'd like to refer to one story that we find in the Chīvarasutta, the Robe Sutta. This is about the Buddha's disciple Mahā Kassapa, or Big Kassapa. "Mahā" could be translated as big, so Big Kassapa. Maybe he was a big guy. In Sanskrit, Mahākāśyapa. He was a senior disciple of the Buddha and was well known as an ascetic—one of the major ascetics. He lived in the forest. He devoted himself to practice. He avoided the kinds of social entanglements that were part of the Buddha's life and part of any monk's or nun's life who spent time with lay people.

He had a reputation as a very fierce disciplinarian. There are these wonderful stories about him absolutely putting the boot into Venerable Ānanda for being slack. And in the tradition, he's come to represent tough, macho Dharma. He was a bloke's bloke when it came to the Dharma. He's also the one the Zen tradition regarded as the first ancestral teacher—he was the one who received the transmission, the mind-to-mind transmission, from the Buddha.

So in the Chīvarasutta, Big Kassapa is an old man, and he's recounting his memories of his first encounter with the Buddha. Now, before he ordained, Kassapa was a wealthy farmer. One day during the harvest, he was supervising the workers in the field and he suddenly saw that in the process of harvesting the crop, innumerable small creatures were being killed. He was overcome by remorse and horror at this and decided he had to renounce the world. Which was a bit of a worry because he was married, and the couple were very fond of each other.

So he went home wondering how this was going to pan out. But as it happened, his wife, who was at home supervising the winnowing of the grain, had the same realisation, and with it the same determination to renounce the world. She was worried about how she was going to explain it to her husband. So when they met and discovered that they were on the same page, they were very pleased.

They ordained themselves and walked off together. At some point they came to a crossroads, and Kassapa turned to his wife and said, "Look, we're ascetics now. It's inappropriate for a man to be walking with a woman, so we should go in separate directions." And she said, "That's a very good idea." And they separated. And Kassapa headed off in search of enlightenment.

Now, probably some of you would want to know what happened to his wife.

Her name was Bada Kapilani, and she went to Savatthi, which is the capital of the kingdom of Kosala, and she went to Jetavana monastery, which was the Buddha's headquarters. She hung out there and listened to the teachings. But this was quite early on, and there were no bhikkhunis in those days. So she actually joined a local nunnery of non-Buddhist female ascetics, because there were nuns in other traditions at the time. After five years, the bhikkhuni order was created and she was able to ordain as a bhikkhuni. Not long afterwards she became fully awakened, and thereafter she specialised in the education of younger bhikkhunis, particularly in Vinaya, the monastic discipline. The Buddha praised her as foremost among the bhikkhunis in her ability to remember previous lives. So presumably her mindfulness was pretty powerful to be able to do that. She was okay.

Kasapa, on the other hand, is walking down the road when he meets the Buddha. Actually, he doesn't quite meet him. The Buddha is coming down the road and decides it's time to sit down for a bit. So he leaves the road and sits underneath a tree, meditating. Kasapa comes down the opposite way and sees this ascetic sitting under a tree, and immediately knows: this is my teacher. He goes across and they have this encounter, and the Buddha promptly recognises him as a good quality student. So they get together and make a connection.

The Buddha gives him three practices that will define him the rest of his life. The first is all about the practice of ethics, sila. The second is his devotion to the study of Dharma. But it's the third one that I want to focus on here. The Buddha says, "Kasapa, you should train yourself in this way: I will not abandon mindfulness immersed in body, associated with joy."

The instruction here is first of all always be mindful of body, and secondly to do it in such a way that the pleasure of it is evident.

Whenever I've seen statues of Ananda, he looks quite calm and serene, but someone mentioned that every time they've seen a statue of Mahakasapa, he's grimacing—really, really grimacing. He's the fierce old forest ascetic, the tough guy. But apparently he was a very joyful tough guy.

That actually comes out in the Zen tradition, because when the transmission occurred, all the students were assembled for a Dharma talk. They're waiting for this learned Dharma talk, and the Buddha held up a flower. All the students are kind of staring at him, thinking, "What, has he found his inner hippie? I hope he didn't break Vinaya by picking that flower. When is he going to start talking?" And in the whole audience, only Mahakasapa—and the Chinese translates it as "cracked a smile"—it's like his whole face cracked open with a smile when he saw that flower. The Buddha saw the smile and said, "You're the only one who's recognised the Dharma." And Kasapa got the transmission.

So he's got both aspects. He's this fierce, uncompromising, macho ascetic, and he's got this joy about him. It's one of the things that makes him so interesting.

When you're speaking about joy here, are you meaning the same joy that you talked about with rapture as a factor of awakening? Isn't rapture what comes before joy, before passaddhi?

Passaddhi is the fifth factor. But the word used here is not rapture. The Pali word is sukha.

Sāta. S-long-A-T-A—pleasure, joy. This is apparently a standard word for joy. It's not a technical term like rapture; it's just joy, pleasure.

So always be mindful of the body in such a way that a pleasurable connection with it is evident. The verb translated here as "not abandoned" is *vijahati*, which can also mean "to give up"—in other words, to not give up. So even when you go through periods where you forget the body or you cannot feel any joy associated with it, still make this relationship central to your practice. Learn to recognize what disconnects you from the body and the joy associated with the body. What gets in the way of the pleasure? Learn to recognize that when it's not there.

Also, similarly, *vijahati* can be taken as "to dismiss." So do not dismiss the role of the body in your awakening. Do not think that you've somehow transcended it.

The Buddha gives Maha Kassapa this very brief teaching which contains an enormous amount, but he makes it clear: the role of the body is absolutely central, and within that, the role of pleasure is absolutely central.

I was reminded of this through my work with Kit Laughlin, who is my bodywork guru. When he's teaching, he demonstrates a posture, and as he does it, he makes these strange sounds. He goes, "Ah, that feels great!" He ties himself into some impossible knot. "Ah, fantastic, that feels fantastic!" I used to look at this and think, this guy, he's

just laying it on. He's trying to encourage us because when we try anything like that, it's excruciatingly painful. At some point I realized it's actually the truth—he genuinely does feel this pleasure. And as I've come to know him, I've realized this is a man who is constantly feeling pleasure from the body. It's just his normal state, because he fully inhabits it. And therefore, it's pleasurable.

We do that when we go to our cushions in the morning. Also, when we do a heavy massage, for example, it's sometimes quite painful, but it feels really pleasurable at the same time. It's physically painful, but it's pleasurable mentally somehow—it's very satisfying. It's like when you get a really deep massage and it really hurts because it's fantastic.

But to me, bodywork is very largely the task of finding pleasure and ease in the body. If I'm doing bodywork, that's what I'm trying to do. It has to do with the relationship with habitual tension and the relaxing into it. And that has to do with the quality of the awareness.

Take the example of massage. Getting a deep massage is painful but pleasurable. I find that as soon as I start to resist, it's just painful. But if I'm not resisting, if I'm surrendering to it—yes, there's a painful quality, but there's a deeper pleasure. I find the same thing in stretching, in bodywork. This is why the standard instruction you get from me is: find the tight line, breathe, and relax. It's about putting the body in a particular form and then relaxing the awareness into it.

If there's a relaxation and a sensitivity of the awareness, first of all the sensation becomes clear. We can actually hear what the body is saying and not get it mixed up with the perception. And by relaxing into it, the pleasure which is available emerges. With that, the body stretches out. It gives way, it surrenders, it lets go. It recognizes the absence of threat. And in that recognition, it relaxes.

The function of pain, of course, is to recognize threat. It's like when I was a chasseur, for example—there used to be a difference between playable pain and painful pain.

And I know I'd be going in somewhere and you could see from the response of the individual I was massaging, or just feel it, that it was painful pain. It wasn't right to go in there. And if you're feeling it, you're feeling the tension, the resistance. Well, I was feeling the tension, but I was also feeling resistance. But it was a healthy resistance. It was the body's response saying, this is painful because pain is the response of the body to danger. If you go in more, it's going to cause harm.

And for practical purposes you've always got to be able to distinguish between these two. Certainly sometimes people who are too keen in adopting the right posture don't recognise this. They have the underlying tension unconscious and so the body is tight. Pain comes up and people cause damage. So it's always about the quality of the awareness. And if you need to back off, you know you need to back off. And that's what you do. You back off, particularly in the stretching, when you recognise the danger signal. This, again, is the language the body is speaking. And so you just back off just a little bit. Just enough. And then relax.

Finding the right point at which to relax is absolutely central, and that requires the sensitivity of the awareness. If you find the right point, the relaxation will occur. The body will drop its defence mechanism and just do what it naturally can do. So Kassapa must have become an expert at that. Yes, I would say so. I suspect he would have been a good masseur.

There's also this quality of fierce joy. You can be fiercely joyful. In our current culture you might think of an evangelist—someone who is very evangelical about spreading the word can be very fiercely joyful, really having a good time whilst being extremely fierce. So fierceness doesn't necessarily have to be a negative thing or an unpleasant thing or a painful angry thing. Footy players—we need say no more.

So this work of tracking the body is foundational, not in the sense that we do it first and then move on to something more esoteric, but foundational in the sense that the floor is foundational. Here we are on the floor, and it's not that we're going to at some point start floating above it. Well, you might. But the rest of us, it's unlikely.

Actually I met a monk in Thailand who taught mettā meditation and he claimed that one day he was sitting with his eyes closed radiating mettā and he started to develop a headache. And the headache progressed. And he noticed that the headache was strangely located only at the top of the head. He opened his eyes and he realised he had floated up and was pressed against the ceiling, and the spell was broken and he fell to the floor. I have to admit I didn't believe a word that he said. I was a bit suspicious of this particular monk.

So I can be working with the citta, with the mind, in very subtle ways, but when I'm doing it—where am I doing it? Here. When am I doing it? Now, in this body. There's a groundedness to the relationship to the body.

Take for example thinking. There's a world of difference between thinking of the future knowing, sensing that I'm doing it here and now, versus thinking of the future when I'm actually doing it in the future. It's a world of difference between the two. The body provides this here-now groundedness to our experience, which is completely foundational.

Let's take the whole project of meditating. Let's say that I'm told what you have to do is sit down and watch the breathing—this being a not uncommon instruction. Now I hear this through and as concept. So I've got a concept of the job that I'm supposed to do.

First of all, I have to sit down and follow my breathing. That's the job. But notice: the "I" that has to sit down and follow the breathing is itself a product of concept. There's someone who inhabits this body, quite mysteriously, who now has to attend to some aspect of this body—the breathing.

So here I am, more or less floating around this body, reaching out for my familiar world, which is the world of concept, where breathing intrudes only as an occasional visitor. I speak from experience in this case. And from that world, I have to make contact with the breathing and then stay with it over a period of time. It's bloody hard work. I know from experience. It's quite difficult.

But what if I simply allow the body to be sensed? It's already speaking to me. There's already sensation. What if I simply allowed a sensing of myself to sense this body? And this sensing includes the movements within the body that we call breathing.

So this is a whole different project. This is the project of, first of all, blocking our conceptual preoccupations, dropping the preoccupations that block intimacy with body. It's the concepts that are getting in the way, including the concept of "I'm supposed to be sitting here meditating." That too gets in the way.

And it comes about through relaxing tension. Because tension represents the basic way of separating from the body. Or look at it from the other way: the body withdrawing, because it's closed in on itself. And the only messages coming out are danger, danger, danger—don't go there, don't go there, don't go there.

So the way in is through intimacy. Intimacy requires relaxation, and when there is intimacy, breathing appears. And so does everything else, for that matter. And intimacy cannot be forced. It comes about through relaxation into tension. Find the tension and relax into it. Tension is resistance, and resistance is fueled by fear and rejection. So the

practice of finding the clinging, finding the tension, the holding, and relaxing into it dissolves that sense of paranoia, essentially, and the clinging that's associated with it. And this leads to intimacy.

This whole relationship to body—for example, establishing a meditation posture—we have to learn to do it from the inside out. What we normally do is we do it from the outside in. I have a concept, an image of what the body should look like, and I then try to force the body into fitting that image, to conform to it.

So, for example, one obvious case: I'm told I should not move. So I force myself to be still. And this very force increases tension in the body and increases a sense of alienation from the body. I actually find myself complaining about it: "My body won't do what I want it to do." So here's me and there's the body. And they're obviously separated.

What we want is to create a posture from the inside out, feeling our way into sensation and the ease that's available, that's characteristic of the body that's fully inhabited by awareness. In other words, mindfulness immersed in body. So the way in is through feeling and relaxation, finding the sensation and a sense of ease and balance from inside, and then making adjustments from there—not thinking about what it looks like, not looking at it from the outside, but feeling it from the inside.

And the whole role of the bodywork that we've been playing with in the morning—it's not something that we do to aid the meditation. It is meditation. This is really a fundamental point. We bring the same sensitivity and the same awareness to these movements as we do to the formal sitting meditation practice. It's not something that we do before the first meditation period. It's something that we do before the first sitting period, yes, but it's not what we do before the first meditation period. It is a meditation.

And the more it becomes that—the more we feel it as a meditation—the more we find awareness starts to actually spread out and inhabit the body. And when that happens, the body relaxes, and everything flows from that.

Is that any different than what you mean when you say, when you sit, the first thing you do is establish a posture?

Yes, establishing the posture is part of this whole process. Sometimes I like to ask students: When does the sitting period begin? In my early days, when I did Zen, we had these elaborate rituals of the bells. And you could always time the exact moment that the sitting period began. It was like when that final bell hit.

Because the rule was, from that point you can't move. They'd have three bells to begin a period with a certain number of seconds between each bell. And the first two bells, that period, was the time you could kind of get yourself settled. The third one goes, that's it. No more movement. So I had this sense that that's when the sitting period begins.

These days, for me, the sitting period begins the moment I begin to sit down. Because from that moment onwards, I'm constructing a posture. By the time I've done it, I am already meditating. There's nothing to begin. I've already started. And it's quite a natural and seamless flow. Similarly, the moving meditation begins as soon as I start to move out of the posture. I'm already doing the moving meditation.

A student raised a dilemma about pain in meditation, particularly knee pain, and the question of whether to continue going into painful sensations with awareness—which can be very productive—or whether one might be causing damage.

This is the essential point: if there's injury or the threat of injury, then it's ludicrous to go through the pain. And that's why, as a practical matter, a meditator has to learn to distinguish between the two.

As a rough rule of thumb, be really careful about knees. They're easy to damage. The pain we feel in the knee in most cases, if we're sitting cross-legged, is because of inadequate flexibility in the pelvis, the hip, and the ankle. So if I'm sitting cross-legged and I've got pain in the knee, this is referred pain, and it may be that I'm not actually addressing where the stiffness actually is, that I can't feel it. It's vanished. It's so deep, it's completely absent.

So in practice you've got to be particularly careful about knees, and especially if there is in fact already an injury. I've got an injury in the left knee, and I'm very cautious with it. There's always got to be that care—if there's an injury you've got to be really careful. And in practical terms you've got to learn when the sensation is telling you to back off or when the sensation is an invitation to keep going. How to make that decision, you develop over a period of time.

The first lesson I got in this was when I was doing my first three-month retreat at the Mahasi Centre. We sat for an hour, which was hard for me, and it got to the point where the last ten minutes of every sitting was really painful in the knees—actually, mostly in the left knee. But I would religiously not move until the period ended and just note pain.

And then one day, instead of pain arising, bliss arose. The legs felt blissful. And I thought, that's it, I've got it. So I would just happily sit there. The retreat ended, and I was running around, organizing my way out of Burma, flying to Bangkok, finding a hotel. And the first time I sat down to meditate, as soon as I crossed my legs, it was excruciating. I had definitely damaged something. But it was covered over with the bliss of samādhi.

Someone asked if the damage might have come from all the running around rather than the sitting. But all I was doing was just normal movement, so I don't see why that would have caused damage. I suspect I just pushed it too far. But all the danger signals of the body had been obliterated by the power of the samādhi.

that convinced me there was no problem. A false message. So it can be really tricky. In practice, you've got to be very, very careful. You've got to pick your ground where you choose to stay. And also, the whole thing about backing off is important.

If the awareness is clear enough, you can move forward to a position where you're getting a sensation, and the language, what you're being told, is "back off." You back off just enough and then stay there. But how much is just enough? At what point do you hear that message correctly? It's not automatic. There's a sensitivity that you have to cultivate around this. I think there's an art to it.

I haven't sat cross-legged for years, but I've been sitting a lot in this retreat and getting a lot of the time without any pain at all—less pain than I've had for years, actually. And I think there's a reason why I developed a problem with my knees. In a way, those things are coming out in the meditation, often in relation to sensation. I think it's been a really productive process, and I think my knees are improving through this process of doing all this cross-legged sitting. But I'm doing it differently—I'm coming from a different place emotionally. So is the emotion attached to the sensation important?

Well, I think factoring the damage was all of this sort of over-determined, effortful approach and everything associated with that. So it's all part of the package.

I find—and we talked about this before—how the basic model is dependent arising, which is multi-dimensional. The thing is to find a way in. Once you're in, then everything starts to open up. Different people have different ways in, but once in, different people will find themselves heading along different trajectories.

And certainly in terms of body-mind connection, what we call the emotional aspect of sensation is really important. Because the body locks in certain patterns, and these can be associated with particularly held emotions. Plus, the quality of effort is always really important. Too much effort smothers the sensitivity that you need for this kind of work.

I have a question about body pleasure and finding a way in. It's probably conditioning, but most body pleasure that I can recall in my life has to do with things like massages or other activities I don't do anymore. It's hard to find a way in to pleasurable sensations in the body. Pain is really obvious, but can you suggest any ways to notice or find pleasurable sensation in the body?

Is there anything pleasant about sitting there now?

No.

Nothing at all?

No.

When you step out and look up at the night skies, is there anything pleasant there?

The seeing is pleasant.

And that's part of body?

Oh, okay.

So the pleasure of the environment can kind of filter into the body if we let it.

There's a very good book by Rick Hanson called "Hardwiring Happiness." It's all about noticing pleasure, noticing joy, how to cultivate that. We tend to—he's a neuropsychologist, and he's talking about how we have a mental filter. We tend to look for pain and fear, look for things that are dangerous. Instead of that, we need to look for things that are enjoyable. I remember hearing someone say that a key to jhāna, for example, was to notice something pleasant about your meditation sit. Like if you're breathing, to notice something pleasant about the breathing. And then as you notice that, it gets stronger and stronger, and it starts to develop your concentration. It's about taking in the good, focusing on the good, focusing on the pleasure, even if it's just a minimal thing in the distance. The more you focus on it, the more you can see. Rick Hanson talks about that. He's a Buddhist, and he's quite good.

Yes. But can I recommend you start enjoying the place, the environment and the situation of being here. No particular stress. Nothing particularly you have to do.

It's quite an interesting place. Quite beautiful. The weather is pleasant. Really good showers here—a nice warm shower is wonderful. And sitting in the same room as the Buddha is nice, isn't it? Yes, that's nice.

So basically, it's like learning to retune the radar. If the radar is habitually seeking out danger and pain, then you've got to redirect it toward pleasure. And this pleasure isn't necessarily in the fifth sense of touch. It could be more in seeing, hearing, smelling, or minding—overall vedanā. Not necessarily touch sensation, but it can start to filter into that domain as well.

I once was seeing quite deeply and I read Ajahn Sumedho's book, and he said something about welcoming dukkha, and something really clicked. It wasn't just understanding dukkha, but *welcoming* dukkha. That was pretty amazing for me.

You said something, Patrick, about letting go of resistance in relation to physical tension. But it applies to everything, doesn't it? The process works in the same way?

Yes, and letting go is interesting because it's not doing something—it's ceasing to do what we habitually do. I can't let go in the sense of "I'll just do letting go." It's actually a kind of waiting. There's a certain quality of waiting, and at some point I stop doing what I normally do. And that's the letting go.

Does it come back to not being afraid of pleasure?

Yes, we're going to get to that in the not too distant future. We're going to have a talk about that.

You mentioned it already, didn't you?

Yes, but I'm going to talk about it more.

Why is the sutta called "Jīvaka"?

Because Kassapa had a robe that he had brought from home—he had ordained himself. And the Buddha had this old rag robe that he'd sewn together from cloth found in a charnel ground. When the Buddha was giving Kassapa his ascetic practices, he said, "Take this robe. Use this robe." And Kassapa said, "Oh no, you need a robe, so take mine." So they swapped robes, and it's the only recorded instance of the Buddha giving his robe to someone.

This was taken up in the Zen tradition, where the reception of the robe became a sign of transmission. In Zen they have the story that he received the robe and the bowl, and of course in the Pāli tradition he did receive the bowl.

Do you remember when that was? When the Buddha died, word was sent to Mahākassapa, and he came as fast as he could from the forest, but the Buddha died before he arrived. All the lay people gathered to burn his body, but the devas wouldn't let the fire start because Kassapa hadn't turned up. So Kassapa arrives, circumambulates the pyre, bows to the Buddha, and it spontaneously bursts into flames. You can see the traditional paintings of Kassapa bowing to the recumbent Buddha with the pyre and flames.

Then Kassapa collected the ashes in the bowl, and he was the one who distributed the relics, but he kept the bowl. And of course, to complete the story, he didn't actually die as an old man when his life was naturally coming to an end. He entered a mountain —the mountain opened up and he walked inside, sat down, and the mountain closed. When the next Buddha comes, the mountain will open, he'll emerge with the bowl and the robe, and offer them to the next Buddha.

It would be good to witness that encounter and to question Kassapa about his experience.

Okay. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 20

The Middle Way

Patrick Kearney · 1h03

> *In this opening talk from a series on the Buddha's first three teachings, Patrick Kearney presents a fresh interpretation of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) and the middle way. Drawing on the Buddha's personal journey from extreme asceticism to awakening, Kearney explores how the middle way emerged not as mere moderation, but as a dynamic balance beyond all fixed positions and extremes.*
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> *The talk weaves together the Buddha's story with philosophical insight, examining his failed attempt to communicate awakening to Upaka, his eventual success with the five ascetics at Isipatana, and the crucial realization about different types of pleasure. Kearney explains how the Buddha discovered that both sensual indulgence and severe asceticism are driven by the same underlying taṇhā (thirst) and obsession, just pointing in opposite directions.*
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> *The middle way is revealed not as the opposite of extremes, but as their complete absence - a dynamic balance found only in present-moment awareness. Using the Noble Eightfold Path as example, Kearney illustrates how this middle way requires constant adjustment among interconnected factors, with no fixed ground to stand on. This accessible yet profound exploration offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners fresh insight into this foundational Buddhist teaching.*

We've been exploring sati and satipaṭṭhāna—mindfulness and the applications of mindfulness—in considerable detail over the previous days. Having exhausted that topic, we're going to move on and do something different.

We're going to go back to the beginning. We'll do a series of talks on the invention of Buddhism—how it all came about—and we'll do this by looking in particular at the first three teachings of the Buddha: Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, setting in motion the wheel of the dharma; Anattalakkhana, the not-self characteristic; and Āditta, burning. And we'll weave the Buddha's story into that.

So this will be partly esoteric Buddhist philosophy and partly bedtime story. The bedtime story you can regard as historical fiction, because I'm creating a character—the Buddha—and of course we have absolutely no idea about really what happened. We have the ancient texts that tell us a particular story, but there are different ways to interpret it. Usually it's interpreted with maximum reverence. I'm going to provide a

reading which has less reverence and which may or may not be more useful. Just keep in mind that this is my own reading and I'm not necessarily saying that it's the truth. Actually, the first time I gave these talks in Malaysia, apparently they created a bit of a stir among the faithful. And one of the meditators in the interviews was talking about this and she said, "But we know you don't really mean it." Well, what a relief.

The Buddha attained awakening on the full moon of Vesākha, which roughly corresponds to May. This, of course, is the lunar calendar, so it doesn't quite fit our solar calendar. And the first teaching was delivered two months later on the full moon of Āsāḷha in July. This was Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Turning the Dharma Wheel—or more accurately, setting the dharma wheel in motion, beginning to turn the dharma wheel, getting the dharma wheel started. In that discourse he taught the middle way and the four truths. Tonight we're going to have a look at the middle way in particular.

The Buddha wakes up, sitting under the tree, and becomes the Buddha. Until then, he was not the Buddha. Buddha is a title, not a name. It means awakened—someone who has woken up. His name that's given to us in the early teachings is Gotama, and Gotama was his family name. So in the suttas, there's no mention of his first name. Later tradition says it's Siddhattha—Siddhattha, one who has accomplished, or Siddha, one who is successful in his purpose. So one who has accomplished what he set out to accomplish. Now this may or may not have been his name. Maybe it was just given to him by the tradition as a way of historical boosting. But we'll take it as genuine, and we'll just call him Sid. It's kind of more friendly.

But we won't meet Sid first. We'll start with him as the Buddha. He's thirty-five years old. He's just woken up. He's decided to teach, and there's a whole story there.

When the Buddha woke up, he had no notion that he was going to become a great teacher. He just had a problem—dukkha—and he wanted to solve it. And he did. Then he spent six weeks under and around the Bodhi tree in what is now Bodh Gaya, enjoying the bliss of his awakening and basically probably just recovering. I mean, he must have had an enormous case of spiritual vertigo—this blast of awakening. Getting used to it must have been quite something. He had sitting periods that would last a week, just recovering, blissing out and coming back to planet Earth, as it were.

In the course of this period, the thought arose in his mind: maybe I should teach this. And this was quickly followed by another thought, which was: no. Because no one is going to understand this. There is no way I can ever communicate this.

Now fortunately for us, someone was eavesdropping, and this was Brahmā Sahampati, who was and indeed on good authority still is a god up in one of the Brahma realms. He actually was an old mate of Sid before he woke up—and this is a long, long time ago during the teaching of a previous Buddha when he and Sid were both students. So Brahmā Sahampati has been keeping an eye on Sid and he's been tracking this whole thing. He hears this thought and of course he's horrified. Because, I mean, the whole plan is Buddha, teaching, Buddhism. And suddenly it's all about to go belly up.

So Sahampati heads down to earth, appears before the Buddha and pleads with him to change his mind. The argument he gives is profound: "Look, there are just a few people who have only a little dust in their eyes. If you teach them, they will awaken. But if you don't, they will perish. You've got to do it."

So the Buddha says, "Okay, I'll do it. I'll take it on." But notice how, at the very beginning, the way the project is defined: just a few people. Clearly, the Buddha has no notion that he's going to create a world religion. That's not in his thinking. He might find a few people who might just possibly understand what just happened.

So he first thinks of his two previous meditation teachers. He had two meditation teachers when he was still Siddhartha, still a Bodhisattva, but they had both died—one a week before, the other the night before. Because they had accomplished serenity to a very great extent, they were reborn in a very exalted and subtle heaven where they are today. By the time the results of their good karma run out and they get reborn on earth, Buddhism will have been long since finished and they'll just have to wait for the next Buddha and start the whole thing all over again.

Imagine how you would feel if you missed it by one night. How pissed off would you be? But that's karma. The point of the story is, of course, that the opportunity to actually encounter the Dharma and benefit from it is extremely rare. So don't waste it. You don't know how long in one's wanderings in samsara one might go before one gets another opportunity.

So they're off the list, and then the Buddha thinks of his five former companions. We're going to look at them later on, but basically in his spiritual career he had tried first meditation, developing very deep absorption states. Having decided that was a dead end, he then tried ascetic practices, which he did without a teacher, but he attracted five equally fanatical men who were also committed to the practice of asceticism. They were very impressed by what he was doing and they decided to hang around and wait until he got enlightened.

But there was a bit of a kerfuffle, a bit of an argument, and the five companions set off in one direction and Siddhartha headed off in the other, so they hadn't seen each other for some time. The Buddha thinks of them: maybe they might possibly, conceivably, understand.

So he uses his psychic powers and discovers that they're staying at a place called Isipatana, north of Varanasi—or what is sometimes pronounced Benares. So he heads off.

As he's going down the road, he meets someone called Upaka, who is an Ajivaka. The Ajivakas were an early ascetic order. Upaka is coming one way, Buddha is going the other way, and they meet. Upaka is really impressed by this guy. The Buddha apparently was, by all reports, extremely good looking. Plus he is radiating the glow of his awakening.

So Upaka, very impressed, says, "Friend, your faculties are clear, your complexion is pure and bright. Under whom have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Whose dharma do you follow?"

So Upaka is clearly impressed. This guy has obviously realized something. So where does he belong? Where does he fit? Who is his teacher? What tradition does he belong to?

Now this is the first opportunity that the Buddha has to actually teach Dharma. He's spoken to people before now, but he has not spoken of his realization. He's spoken more in terms of faith, saddha, the heart connection. Here's someone who might possibly get it, and he actually wants to know. So the Buddha decides to just give him the full blast, and he bursts into spontaneous verse.

The Buddha says, "I am the one who has overcome everything, who understands everything, unstained among all phenomena, abandoning everything, freed by the exhausting of craving, having understood directly by myself—to whom should I point? For me there is no teacher, and one like me is unknown. In the world, with all its devas, there is no one equal to me. I am the Worthy One of the world. I am the supreme teacher."

Alone I am Sammasambuddha. I am cooled, extinguished. To set turning the wheel of Dharma, I am going to the city of Kasi. In a world gone blind, I go to beat the drum of the deathless.

So that's what he says. And clearly this is not a man with any sense of lack of self-worth. It's a complete confidence and just, as I said, full blast. This is what's called in the tradition a declaration of truth. It's just—okay, he wants to know, I'll hammer him with what's actually going on.

Upaka points out that this is a claim to enlightenment. And the Buddha says, that's correct. I think you understand what's going on. And Upaka shakes his head and says, which could be roughly translated in contemporary English as, "Yeah, whatever." And he leaves. It's more like, "Yeah, friend, maybe. Yeah, possibly. So you say. That's nice. I hope you enjoy it. Bye." And he continues on his journey, completely unimpressed. Totally not impressed.

So as he leaves, perhaps the Buddha was thinking to himself, "Well, that went well. Not." And it brings out the problem that he's got. The reason why he didn't want to teach in the first place is because it's impossible to communicate this. How is he going to do it? When he's marching off down the road, he has no idea how he's going to do it. It's not that he's got a plan. All he's got is possible contenders, possible students. He tries out Upaka because he thinks, "Okay, this guy's interested." And he says basically the first thing that comes to his mind, and it's a complete bust. So all he knows is that that's not going to work. So at least he's eliminated one wrong track. And off he goes, and he must be wondering, "So how am I going to do this? How many false starts can I go through before I realize I was right the first time? And it can't be taught."

Anyway, he continues his journey. He arrives at Isipatana. And the five companions don't want to listen. They see him coming and they kind of nudge each other and say, "There's Sid, bastard." And they say, "Just ignore him. He will go away." But he's coming straight for them.

And the thing is, he's radiating this awakening and they just cannot, despite themselves, they cannot ignore it. So they kind of grumpily stand aside and they prepare a seat, which probably just means a cloth thrown on the ground. "Okay, you can sit down."

So they're sitting down and there's this uneasy silence because they're wondering what the hell is he doing here. And he explains that what he's doing here is that he's enlightened. He says, "I'm the Buddha. I did it. You were hanging around waiting for me to do it. Well, I've done it."

And they are even less impressed than Upaka. And they just completely dismiss the whole thing. "We're not interested. Basically, go away." And so he tells them again, "Yes, I've done it."

I'm awakened. And I can teach you. And they're just not interested. Go away.

Now this is getting into dangerous territory because remember we talked about the significance of the number three. If you ask a question three times, it means you're serious, so the person has to respond. But equally, if you're offering a teaching and it's refused three times, that means it's serious—the teaching is rejected, go away.

Now he's come all this way because he thinks these five have the potential to awaken. And they will not listen to him. They've already knocked him back twice. He's got one more shot just to get them to listen. There's no guarantee that they're going to accept what he says, but even to get them to listen—one more shot. So everything is hanging by a thread.

Finally, he says to them, "Have you ever known me to speak like this before? Have I ever claimed any enlightenment whatsoever before?" And this gets them looking at each other and thinking, and they remember. They realize, well in fact he never has. They were very impressed by him back in the day and they thought, oh maybe he's enlightened, but he quickly hit that idea on the head. And they wanted to be students, but he hit that on the head too. "I'm not enlightened, I'm not a teacher. I'm just here doing my ascetic practices. Please don't take up that bit of nails. It's mine. Get out of my way." And they said, "Well, can we at least hang around? We'll do our own practices in your vicinity. Is that all right?" "Yeah, okay, you can do that."

So he's never made any claim like this before. And he's reminding them: have I ever done this before? And they say, well, no, you never have. And he says, "Well, I'm making it now." And this stops them. And they look at each other and they decide, well, we've known Sid for a while. We don't like him, which is why we left. But we know that he's not a liar. If he says something is so, then he believes that it is so. If he says he's enlightened, then he certainly believes that he's enlightened. Something must have happened.

So they say, "Okay, we'll listen to you." So the stage is set. The Buddha can start teaching.

It's interesting that again, the Buddha begins with a declaration of truth: I've done it. I'm awakened. The first time it didn't work. The second time it almost didn't work. But finally it does work.

And if we ask what's the difference between the two occasions, the difference is the social context. On the second occasion he was talking to people who knew him. Upaka didn't know him. He could have been looking like he's enlightened, but actually a refugee from the loony bin down the road. Well, they probably didn't have loony bins,

but this was the Gaya area. And Gaya at the time, and today, was notorious for being a highly charged, psychically highly charged area full of ghosts and spirits. And so he may well have been possessed. It's quite possible.

But the five companions—they know him. And so the declaration of truth has more power depending on the social context. When people know you and trust you, they're prepared to take what you say to be true.

So the first discourse begins, and the version which is handed down—again, the suttas are kind of executive summaries.

They're designed to be put into the memory banks and chanted. So they're not actually word for word what was said. They're a kind of summary of the key points.

And this is how the discourse begins:

"This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living at Benares in the deer park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five bhikkhus."

Now you can see that this is artificially forced into a template from the very beginning, because in fact there were no bhikkhus. These were ascetics—they hadn't been ordained, they were not bhikkhus. But they're called bhikkhus because that's the standard form, even though this is before the Sangha existed.

The Buddha says: "These two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone out into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness among sensual pleasures, which is inferior, normal, the way of ordinary people, lacking in refinement and useless, and the practice of self-exhaustion, which is painful, lacking in refinement and useless. Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way that gives rise to seeing and understanding and leads to calming, direct knowledge, full awakening, nibbana. And what is the middle way that gives rise to seeing and understanding and leads to calming, direct knowledge, full awakening, nibbana? This eightfold path of the noble ones, the cultivated ones: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness and right concentration. This is the middle way."

Notice what this is—it's a strategy. How is the Buddha going to present his awakening? He tried the full blast and that didn't work. So now he's coming at it indirectly, and he begins by introducing this notion of the middle way.

In the discourses there are different presentations of the middle way. The most common way is the middle way between existence and non-existence, between being and non-being, and between eternalism and annihilationism, sassatavada and ucchedavada. Here, it's taught as the middle way between the extremes of sensual happiness and the practice of self-exhaustion. This presentation of the middle way is actually, as far as I know, unique to this particular discourse. In every other discourse, it's presented differently—basically between existence, non-existence, eternalism, annihilationism. This presentation is unique.

In other words, the middle way is a general principle and it can be applied to different circumstances where it has a different appearance. Context is everything. The Buddha needs to get through to this particular group of people. It's no good giving them some general universally true principle if it just goes right over their heads. He's got to figure out a way to get through their defenses to get them to really open up to what he wants to tell them. Because there are defenses against hearing the Dharma. We all have layers of armor to prevent us from actually hearing the Dharma.

The Buddha may have reflected on the difficulty of communicating Dharma from his experience when he was a young man still at home and he had his first realization. It's been summarized as he suddenly saw immediately and directly aging, sickness and death and the universality of them. Plus in the stories he also saw a samana, someone who was practicing to overcome this pain.

At this time Siddhartha was a young man living a privileged life as an upper class lad in the Shakya Republic. We don't know how old he was. If the tradition is correct, he would have been probably mid-twenties. But I think this is more like something which would have happened to a teenager, personally. But basically, he suddenly realized that he's going to get old, get sick and die. And it's not just him, it's everyone. For some reason or other, one day he was open, he was vulnerable. Bang! It hits him, and he is profoundly shocked.

All his normal layers of defenses against understanding this for some mysterious reason dropped away and he just got hit with it. Now all of us have layers of defenses against this understanding because that's what enables us to live normally within the world. Otherwise we'd go crazy. To drop our armor could expose us to a reality that could send us mad. And it could have sent Siddhartha mad. Instead it catapulted him out of home, off onto the quest for enlightenment.

Not only is this realization profound and moving—which of course the companions know, his audience knows this—but what characterizes this is a complete inability to actually communicate it to anybody else. So he comes back home, sweating, shaking, in a state of shock. His parents say, "What happened, what's the matter?" And he says, "We're all going to die."

At first his father is worried. His father is president for life of the Shakya Republic.

He's already reaching for his sword and he says, "Which way did you see the army coming?"

And Sid says, "No, no, no, no, no, there's no invasion. I'm just saying, we're all going to die."

His father looks at him oddly, his attitude: "And?" Like, duh.

"No, you don't understand," Sid insists. "We're all going to get old, and we're all going to get sick, and then we're all going to die."

His parents look at each other and say, "Yeah, maybe you should wash up before dinner."

"No, you don't understand."

So he's seen something that, in a sense, everybody knows. Everyone has come to terms with it in their own way. But his understanding is so deep and so fresh, he cannot come to terms with it. From his parents' point of view, basically the kid's gone crazy. "Calm down. Cool it. You'll recover. Take a holiday for a while. Life isn't so bad."

But of course he can't hear any of this. And they can't hear what he's saying.

To have some kind of penetrating understanding is to put you in a very isolated position. Where can you go for anybody to actually get what you're talking about? He had to leave home. There was no one who could understand.

So he knows from his own experience, when he's faced with these five companions, how deep the layers of defenses go. He's got to find a way first of all to open up those defenses, expose the problem, and show the way out. That's his challenge.

To return to his audience—these are practitioners of the path of severe asceticism. What they were doing is very close to following Jain principles, and this tradition was quite strong in the Gaya area. When Sid left home, he was up in Nepal and would have gotten onto the main highway heading southeast. He would have crossed into what is now northern Bihar, where he practiced meditation—apparently an area very strong in

yoga practice. Dissatisfied with the results of meditation practices, he kept traveling south of the Ganga and ended up in the Gaya area, where shamanic powers were very strong, hauntings and spirits were very common—a very dangerous area where the most fanatical ascetics would come. This is where he started this practice, and where he meets these other ascetics.

Now, what everybody wants is sukha—pleasure, happiness, bliss, peace. This is what all practitioners are heading for. But how to get it?

The ascetics believe that the way to sukha is through dukkha. You face your pain directly and go straight through it to the other side. When you get there—bang—sukha, awakening, enlightenment. If you've trained in classical Mahasi, this is a tradition you're all very familiar with. If you say, "My body hurts intensely when I sit," you'd be told, "Just note it until it goes away. Endure. Sit through pain." You get the same flavors of practice. It's not just the specific ascetic tradition—this kind of attitude can permeate many different traditions.

The Buddha understands these five companions because he shared the same beliefs, practices, attitudes. Siddhartha believed that what holds us back from awakening is our attachment to pleasure. We're so attached to pleasure, to having a good time, that we can't unstick ourselves in order to proceed to awakening. So pleasure was the enemy.

What changed for him—and now we're backtracking to when he was an ascetic—he practiced this way of asceticism, and being a completely fanatical, macho young man, he practiced it close to the point of dying. One of the practices he specialized in was self-starvation. Many years later, he explained to his students that he was so skinny he could poke his finger into his belly and feel his backbone. This Sid was just totally macho, fanatical, a bulldozer kind of fellow. What he was bulldozing through was his attachment to pleasure.

But he came to realize that this asceticism wasn't the way.

He was closer to death and still no closer to awakening. And so he came to a crisis.

Later on he describes his practice, the kind of meditation he did at this point. Years later, he's explaining to his students what he was doing as an ascetic:

"I thought, suppose, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrain and crush mind with mind. So, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits."

It's pretty impressive. Think about it. If you're sitting there and sweat is not running from your armpits, are you really making enough effort? And is there a tightness in your jaw?

"Just as a strong man might seize a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beat him down, constrain and crush him, so too with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth I beat down, constrained and crushed mind with mind and sweat ran from my armpits. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unforgotten mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and agitated because I was exhausted by the painful striving."

So that's the practice he tried that did not work. He had tireless energy and unforgotten mindfulness. Sounds pretty good to me. But there was an immense strain in all of this. "My body was overwrought and agitated because I was exhausted by the painful striving." Notice the role of the body in all of this.

So then he reflects: "Whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion samanas or brahmanas have experienced in the past, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this. And whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion samanas or brahmanas will experience in the future, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this. And whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion samanas or brahmanas experience in the present, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this."

Whatever is humanly possible to do in terms of making heroic effort and just driving yourself, bulldozing your way to enlightenment—whatever anybody could have done in the past, whatever anybody could do in the future, what anybody is doing in the present—I've done it. It's like he's won the race, but no one's applauded him because it's completely useless. It's not working. All it's doing is killing you.

And he concludes: "But I have not attained any states surpassing the human by this racking practice of austerities, any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of cultivated ones." It's been a complete failure.

Now this is a man who walked out of a marriage, walked out from his family, including his newborn son, walked out from his career as a leader of his people. As I said, he had two teachers that we know about, meditation teachers: Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. With both teachers, he was a naturally gifted meditator. He mastered their meditation system. He's very bright. He learned the theoretical dharma that they taught. In both cases, he graduated. His first teacher says, "You've done it. Whatever I know, you know. The dharma needs teachers. There are people in this assembly. We can use your help. Could you teach?"

And Siddhartha looks at him with a glance of withering contempt and says, "And this is all there is to it? I'm out of here." And he walks off.

So he hasn't just abandoned his family, he's abandoned his dharma community. Goes to another teacher, the same thing happens, walks out on them. This is a serial walker-outer. He gets to the point where he's doing the austerities and he's completely alone. I mean, he's alienated everybody by this point, just this fanatic determination not to compromise until he's satisfied, regardless of the cost anybody else is paying for his lifestyle. And at the end it doesn't work, because basically he's wasted his life and it looks like he's going to die soon. And so the thought arises: could there be another way to awakening?

He's desperately trying to think of something. And suddenly, up pops a spontaneous memory from his childhood:

"I remember that when my father, the Shakyan, was working, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree, withdrawn from sensual pleasures and unwholesome states, I attained and lived in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion."

"Could this be the way to awakening?" Then, following on that memory came the awareness: "This is the way to awakening."

So he has a spontaneous memory of an equally spontaneous experience that happened in childhood. This story gets increasingly elaborated over the centuries, but this is the earliest version. It's very simple. He's young—we don't know how old. It's hot. He's sitting under the cool shade of a rose apple tree, watching his father work in the hot sun.

Now, I don't know about you, but sitting in the cool shade, preferably with a nice drink, watching other people work in the hot sun—this sort of thing gives me great pleasure and makes me feel particularly relaxed. So there he is, sitting, relaxed, not a care in the world, and he just slides into this spontaneous concentration state, which is characterized by pleasure.

And so he asks himself the thought: "Why am I afraid of pleasure?" I find this question fascinating. He's at a complete dead end. He's desperate to find out: what have I done wrong? And what he zeroes in on is the question: why am I afraid of pleasure? The full statement is: why am I afraid of pleasure that is unconnected to sensual stimulation and unwholesome states?

What he's talking about is non-addictive pleasure. The basic principle that he's been following at this point is: we're all stuck on pleasure, so we've got to get away from this. What he recognizes here is that there are different kinds of pleasure. There's what in the suttas is called sensual pleasure, and this is essentially pleasure that comes from and is dependent upon a sense stimulus. I get a certain stimulus—ooh, that feels good. And that pleasure is temporary. It arises only because of the stimulus. When the stimulus fades, the pleasure fades. And if I want more, I've got to renew the stimulus. In other words, it's what we would call addictive pleasure—pleasure which is based on a relationship of addictive return to the source of the pleasure.

In a broader sense, it's the pleasure of consumerism, what we're familiar with as consumerism. I shouldn't tell you this because this would disturb your meditations, but while you've been cloistered here, there's been some very significant news on a global scale: Apple have released a new iPhone! And it's got really interesting little gadgety things that the old iPhones don't have anymore. All over the planet, people are lining up, desperate, camping out. They've got to get these new iPhones. I mean, how can you live without another iPhone, the new one? And the old iPhone? I mean, bleh. How could I have thought that this is great? It's terrible. I've got to get another one.

This is the kind of pleasure that in the suttas is called sensual pleasure. Now that kind of pleasure—the pleasure often called the pleasure of the household life—is sticky. And at this point, Siddhartha realizes: okay, that's right, but what I need is pleasure, but I need a different kind of pleasure, a pleasure which is not sticky, which is not addictive.

And remember how he came across this—there was a memory from childhood. In other words, a pleasure that has a childlike quality of spontaneity to it. A pleasure that comes from a time when we are willing to accept whatever the world offers before disillusionment. So a pleasure in which not only is that grasping, addictive grasping unnecessary, but it's not even yet conceived of.

So he discovers the spontaneous pleasure that characterizes childhood—when it's a happy childhood, presumably. And his project becomes: how can I return to this pleasure today as an adult? I already had it when I was a child, but somewhere I lost it, and I didn't even notice that I lost it. Now I realize I've got to find it because this is the way I can unstick myself. This is the way to awaken.

And so, hence the displeasure of the companions, because the companions are having a normal day at the office—flogging themselves, starving themselves, beating themselves up. And they notice that Sid has disappeared. He's not in his usual part of the forest.

And then they see him walking towards them—there's a little smile on his face they haven't seen before, and he's also rubbing his stomach in a very contented way. They ask what happened, what changed, and he says, "I just had this fantastic lunch that was really good, and I think I'll have a nap now."

They're just horrified. Who does this guy think he is? A complete backslider, a total betrayer, a backstabber. They're so disgusted that they march off. Or alternatively, maybe he marched off from them. "What a bunch of killjoys. Why should I waste my time with them?"

In any event, that's when they split. Siddhartha goes off to generate pleasure. The principle that he discovers is that the path itself must be pleasurable. The path to sukha has to be sukha—pleasure in the sense of what we might call contentment.

When we're contented, we don't have any felt need to look further than what is happening now. We're not anxiously thinking about the future. We're no longer concerned with any result that may arise in the future. You might have had a sitting that's going quite well, but underlying it is this sense of anxiety and agitation: "Oh, this is going well so that then I can get what I want. I hope this keeps going for the rest of the retreat."

This mind state comes from a sense of anxiety and insecurity—I want something in the future. This pleasure now is useful to me insofar as it will get something for me in the future. That's not contentment.

In a state of contentment, I'm not even thinking of the result. It doesn't occur to me to think of a future result. What I've got is fine. Thank you very much.

When Siddhartha was practicing asceticism, he was crushing mind with mind. With that kind of practice, he must have been looking for a result. He must have been looking for what would happen next that would justify this effort he was making now.

But here he begins looking for a relationship to the practice in which nothing more needs to be grasped—in which the attention is so completely absorbed in what's happening in the present that any sense of a future result can be completely forgotten. A quality of absorption where there's no need to look to an imagined future to get something that's missing now.

This is where he's coming from when he teaches the middle way.

Is it possible that his sojourn with the two teachers of absorption could have been after his ascetic period?

Not according to the tradition. Just a curiosity.

I don't know where it... I've always read that he left home at the age of 29 and was awakened at 35. But I haven't seen that in the suttas. I can't recall a sutta where it actually gives his age. The problem we have is there's the legend in layers, and we get the completed legend and it's hard to sort out the earliest.

In the suttas it only talks about the ascetic period and the period with the teachers. It actually doesn't give any order to them. I think it's the order in which they're spoken of, but I have to check that. It would be interesting to see. I know the tradition puts them... Yeah, the tradition puts them that way.

But considering Hugh's question, you know, he comes out of the ascetic period thinking, "Well, maybe that pleasure of absorption is a useful path to follow." It would follow that he would then go and train in that. Yeah, could be. I have to look it up—that's an interesting point.

Now, so this is where his practice turned around and then it ended up with awakening. Now he's talking to the ascetics and he knows exactly where they're coming from because he was there. There's a sense in which he knows how tough his first audience is, because in a sense he's talking to his pre-enlightened self. "I was exactly like that." And he knows, he can remember what a tough nut he was to crack. How he wouldn't listen to anyone. So how can he get through to them?

And where he goes is this whole business about the relationship to pleasure and pain.

Most people think the way to happiness is through what we call consumerism. The vast majority of people believe that firmly. The ascetics belong to a tiny little minority who have decided that is a complete crock, that it's complete rubbish, it doesn't work, it's never going to work, we have to do something different. And so they practice asceticism. Now to do that you have to be particularly stubborn and fanatical, just even to begin to do this, much less to stick with it. So this is a hard audience to crack.

And the logic of the ascetics is that: "I pursued this path heading in this direction, which is the path of grabbing pleasure. It doesn't work. So the path this way is the wrong path in the wrong direction. What would be the path in the right direction? Where should I go?" Thinks. "Ah, got it, that way. The opposite way. If this way is the wrong way, then the opposite way must be the right way."

And that's the essential logic behind it. What the practitioners miss, what the Buddha has realized, is that the opposite way is also the wrong way, precisely because it's the opposite. That is what makes it the wrong way.

And he expresses this in terms of the anta, the extremes. An anta is a point beyond which you cannot go further. So the peak of a mountain is an anta. You can go that far, you can't go any further. So you can push in one direction, go as far as you can in the pursuit of pleasure—doesn't work. But if you then head with the same determination in the opposite direction, you just hit another anta. It doesn't work.

What characterizes the pursuit of pleasure in the ordinary consumerist addictive sense is obsession, drivenness, or what the Buddha came to call tanhā, literally thirst. The ascetics can see that and they've renounced it. What they haven't noticed is that what drives their practice is obsession, drivenness, tanhā. They think they're not in the same boat as all these tacky laypeople. They're in exactly the same boat. They're just heading in the opposite direction. But they are equally as driven as the laypeople.

The laypeople are stuck on pleasure, but they are stuck on pain. The point is not the pleasure or the pain. The point is the stuckness. That's what causes the problem.

And so the pleasure that the Buddha is talking about, real pleasure, the pleasure that he stumbled into under the rose apple tree is the pleasure that comes from the absence of drivenness. It's when drivenness, obsession, drops away that real pleasure emerges.

The Buddha is pointing out to them, you think you're heading in the right direction because it's the opposite way of the wrong direction, but you're wrong because it's the opposite. And it is equally driven. It's the drivenness which is the problem. And this is the middle way.

The middle way cannot be defined as the opposite of another way. Because that would just be another extreme. Sometimes you see the middle way, often you see the middle way presented as the middle way of moderation. So don't be extreme. Try the middle way. And if you think about that, what is it really saying? It's saying, OK, here is one extreme. Here's another extreme. Get out a ruler, measure it precisely. Dead in the middle, there's the middle way. But what's that? That's the opposite of the two ends. It's just another extreme.

The middle way can only be found where there are no extremes. In other words, where we are not stuck on anything at all.

So the middle way is a dynamic balance between opposites. It's characterized by no fixed position. As soon as we land somewhere and say, this is it, this is it, then that, its opposite, is not it, and we're in the extremes. As soon as we land anywhere and hold on, we're caught up in extremes.

The middle way can only be found where there is no fixed position and this dynamic balance can only be found in the present. Because any notion of past and future involves grasping and it involves opposite extremes. I'm doing this for that. I'm caught up in the extremes again.

And the Buddha then gives the example of the middle way as the eightfold path and you notice that this illustrates this basic principle. So you have the eightfold path. It's one thing, except it's not a thing, it's a complex system made up of eight parts. Right view, right aspiration, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness and right concentration.

So you have eight factors, each of which has to be balanced with the other. But to make it more complicated, it's divided into three subsystems. The wisdom group, the ethics group, and the meditation group.

So the wisdom group consists of right view, right aspiration. Both of these have to balance each other. Then you get the ethics group: right action, speech and livelihood. Each one of these has to balance each other. Then you get the meditation group: right effort or energy, mindfulness, concentration. These have to balance each other.

Each one of these in each group has to balance each other so that this particular group is balanced. Each one of the groups has to balance with each other. And every one of the eight factors has to be balanced with every other of the factors. If I was mathematically inclined I could work out how many possible relationships that would add up to. I've never attempted it because my mathematics is pathetic but I'm pretty sure it would be a large number.

So it's this enormously complex network of relationships all of which are dynamic. Because every aspect is influenced by the state of every other aspect, which is true of all of them, and they're all moving. So there is no place to stand still.

There is no ground upon which to fix a position. And this is the middle way.

You've noticed this in your own practice. Have you ever had the thought, after much struggle: "I've figured it out. This is it. This is what I do. It works perfectly"? Have you ever come to that position where you've thought, "Okay, that's it. It's been a while, but now I've got it down. All I've got to do is just do this"?

If you've had that experience, you know how disappointed you are the next time you apply this principle—because it doesn't work, because the whole thing has already changed. In other words, you've landed smack in the middle of an anta, of an extreme. And the first thing we have to do is unstick ourselves from that and re-enter the middle way, which is just dancing all the time. And there's nowhere that we can pin it down.

This is why, after forty years of meditation, you think to yourself, "I think I'm beginning to get the hang of it." Actually, I was talking recently to an old mate of mine, a long-time meditator, and he says, "Look, with meditation practice, you practice hard for twenty-five years, and then you begin to understand what you're doing." But you only begin to understand. It's an inherently dynamic and complex process.

This is what the Buddha was trying to communicate to the five ascetics. Basically, he was trying to unstick them from their fixed views about what was right and what was wrong and what you should do and what you shouldn't do. First, you have to open them up to recognize that they've been on the wrong path all this time—that's the bad news. The good news: they can do something about it. And they can do something about it now, because the only time that we can do something about it is now.

And so the five companions get it and suddenly they're open, and the Buddha can begin to convey what he's talking about. But we'll explore that tomorrow night, because I think we've gone for a long time already.

Thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 21

The Four Truths

Patrick Kearney · 1h16

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney provides an in-depth exploration of the Cattāri Ariyasaccāni (Four Noble Truths) as presented in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). He begins by examining the translation and meaning of "ariya" - suggesting "truths of the noble one" rather than simply "noble truths" - and explores how these represent the awakened perspective on reality.*
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> *Kearney offers a detailed analysis of dukkha, explaining it as "painful emptiness" at our core rather than simply "suffering." He describes three levels: dukkha-dukkha (ordinary physical and emotional pain), vipariṇāma-dukkha (the pain inherent in impermanence and lack of control), and saṅkhāra-dukkha (constructed dukkha, including the five upādānakkhandhā or clinging aggregates). The teaching emphasizes that dukkha becomes more refined and subtle as practice deepens.*
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> *The discussion then turns to tanhā (craving/thirst) as the cause of dukkha - not mere desire, but driven desire characterized by obsession (rāga) and delight (nandi) that leads to further becoming. Kearney explores the cessation of dukkha through the complete abandoning of craving, and concludes with the Eightfold Path as the way to this cessation. The talk includes the inspiring story of Koṇḍañña, the first to attain stream-entry upon hearing this teaching, illustrating the power of patient practice and faith.*

Last night we were looking at the middle way, opening the satchel of Dhammacakkha Pravartana Sutta—setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma. We explored the back story: how Siddhartha became the Buddha, and how he decided that he had to teach. He went looking for his five former companions, tracked them down, and first used the teaching of the middle way as a strategy to break open their resistance to hearing the Dharma—essentially breaking open their resistance to hearing something new. They assumed they already knew, but they were wrong, so he had to work his way through this resistance first, before he could then give them the basic teaching.

After accomplishing this, what he teaches them are the four truths. These are the *chattāro ariya-saccāni*, usually translated as the noble truths. Recent scholarship has cast doubt on that translation, so now you get different variations: "the four ennobling truths," or "the truths that have the function of making one an ārya." What I prefer is "the truths of the ārya."

An ārya is a mature student, someone who has had at least one glimpse of the unconstructed. You could say the bottom of the bucket has fallen out at least once. Such a person is ārya—cultivated, refined, noble. The word is actually cognate with aristocrat, aristocracy. So they form a kind of spiritual elite. In one sense you could say these are the Buddha's people, the ones who actually have some understanding of what he's about, regardless of nationality, gender, language, or ethnicity—all of that is irrelevant.

The four truths are what is true to such a person. What is true to most people is something quite different, but what is true to the mature practitioner is this basic framework. When the Buddha is speaking, of course, there's only one noble person, one ārya, and that's him. So these are his four truths.

Let me go through them.

This is the noble one's truth of dukkha. Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha. Association with the unloved is dukkha. Separation from the loved is dukkha. Not getting what one wants is dukkha. In brief, the five bundles associated with clinging are dukkha.

This is the noble one's truth of the arising of dukkha. It is craving, which leads to further becoming, is bound up with obsession and delight, and finds its delight now here, now there—specifically craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.

This is the noble one's truth of the cessation of dukkha. It is the complete cessation of that very craving: abandoning it, renouncing it, releasing it, letting it go.

This is the noble one's truth of the way leading to the cessation of dukkha—the noble eightfold path of right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

These are the four truths. They are the truths of the awakened ones, the noble ones. In other words, they show us the world from the perspective of someone who has awakened or is on the path to awakening. They provide the basic framework of the Buddha's teaching—more than a list, a kind of template, a structure being provided here.

The whole thing revolves around this concept of dukkha, so we have to examine it. This is a key technical term. Previously it was always translated as "suffering," but there's been some dissatisfaction with that translation, so people have tried other approaches.

Unsatisfactoriness. That's pretty wimpy. What about Thanissaro's "stress"? I don't think that works at all. The problem is that with many of these technical terms, there is no English equivalent. So every translation is wrong. I think it's better to simply say dukkha and get over it.

It's a compound word that comes from *ka*, which means space or empty space, and the prefix *du*, which conveys a sense of bad, unpleasant, painful, undesirable, imperfect—don't want it, get rid of it. So dukkha is a painful space. It refers to the painful emptiness that we feel at the center of our being, this sense that there's something missing. We feel we have to do something because there's something missing with the way things are—with who we am, with what our situation is. It's okay, but it could be better, and we need to make it better. This is the painful emptiness we feel at the center of our being.

Ka also refers to the space at the center of a wheel. The wheel, of course, is often the basic symbol of Buddhism, and there's always an empty space at the center—that's *ka*. The image here is of a wheeled vehicle where the axle goes through the empty space at the center of the wheel, but it doesn't fit properly. So the vehicle, if it moves at all, moves only slowly, grindingly, with incredible resistance. Grind, grind, grind. Has your practice ever felt like that? Has your life ever felt like that? This is dukkha.

Its meaning extends from the most gross forms of suffering and misery all the way through to the most subtle forms of discontent. Sometimes I try a little dukkha thought experiment. Think about your situation sitting here right now—is there anything about this situation that you would change if you could? If the answer is yes, then you have dukkha. You don't necessarily have suffering, but you certainly have dukkha. So dukkha can be quite subtle or extremely gross. It covers that entire range.

The Buddha begins with dukkha and analyzes it into three levels. But first, why does the Buddha begin with dukkha? Because he's talking to practitioners about their practice. Remember the context—he's got five companions who are extremely dedicated practitioners. The problem they have, from the Buddha's perspective, is that they've got the wrong practice, heading in the wrong direction, leading to the wrong result.

Why begin with dukkha? Because any kind of practice begins with dukkha. Why are we sitting in this hall? Because we have dukkha, we know we have dukkha, and we need to do something about it. That's why we're here. If we really didn't have dukkha, we would not be here. We would be at home or in the pub or at a party or doing something sensible—reading a book, maybe. But we're here because we've been moved to do something.

This takes us to the whole realm of affect, of feeling. There's some kind of pain, and we are moved to do something about it. This is the foundation of any meditation practice. The Buddha is addressing practitioners about their practice, so this is the beginning of it.

Notice also that in this framework of the Four Truths, there is no mention of *avijja*—ignorance or delusion.

Now if you're familiar with Mahayana Buddhism, this would quite possibly come as a surprise. My main exposure to Mahayana is through Zen, and in Zen they're always emphasizing ignorance or delusion. This is the fundamental problem—we don't see what's going on. So what we have to do is see properly what's happening. This is the fundamental issue, and enlightenment is the overcoming of delusion.

But here there's not a single mention of delusion. What the Buddha talks about is tanhā, classically translated as craving—literally it means thirst. Delusion is a cognitive term; it's about the head, about what we understand. Tanhā is an affective term; it's about the heart, about drivenness, about what we love and what we hate. Both are covered by tanhā, by craving.

And again, this practice is about action—about what one does. The source of action is the heart, driven to do something. So again, tanhā. You can see that the Four Noble Truths provide this universal framework, but it's specifically directed at these five people, at their particular context.

The Buddha then analyzes dukkha into three levels. He says birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha. This is the normal everyday physical and emotional pain—the dukkha that arises through ordinary suffering. The tradition calls it dukkha-dukkha.

Then he says association with the unloved is dukkha, separation from the loved is dukkha, not getting what one wants is dukkha. So this is a deeper level. The tradition calls it vipariṇāma-dukkha—the dukkha inherent in change. This is the pain in a life that is fundamentally out of control, and it points to impermanence, which is a major theme for the Buddha. Things change.

Now that's not necessarily a problem. But the problem is that things change regardless of what we want them to be. I want things to change. For example, I want to get thinner rather than fatter. But it doesn't seem to be happening that way—I seem to be getting fatter rather than thinner. The situation seems to be out of my control. I suppose

I could be relentless about it, but... that's another thing about change. I would like to be much more disciplined. I would like to change in that way. But I don't seem to be changing in that way. If anything, I'm getting lazier as I get older.

So it's not simply that things are changing. Things are changing in a way that I do not control. Change takes me to places that I don't want to go. It takes me to places where I'm separated from what I love and associated with what I don't love or in fact dislike. And there's not much I can do about it. And of course not getting what one wants is dukkha. Has anybody actually had that experience?

He's going deeper with this. One way of looking at the nature of dukkha is to say it's the gap between what is happening and what we want to be happening. And often when we look, there is that gap. It can get very subtle.

One of the things about dukkha that people don't necessarily get is that it can sound very gross, and it can sound very pessimistic. If you're an orthodox Theravadan, the way you show your orthodoxy is by saying, when anybody says anything about anything, you shake your head and say, "Oh, great holiday—ah, that's dukkha."

No, honestly it was fantastic. Dukkha.

So you're demonstrating this way that you have truly absorbed the Buddha's teaching. But dukkha is actually a refined taste that takes time to develop. The ability to perceive the dukkha in a situation requires a high degree of refinement in the senses and in the citta.

You know the old fairy tale about the princess and the pea? The princess visits some castle and the king is a bit suspicious about her identity. Is she really a princess? Is she just pretending to be a princess? So she's sent off to the guest bedroom. It's this magnificently comfortable bed, but the king has a single pea inserted under the mattress. And the next morning, he says to the princess, "So my dear, how did you sleep?" And she says, "It was terrible. That mattress was just awful. I couldn't get to sleep at all." You're a princess because of the delicacy and the refinement that she shows in her appreciation of dukkha. If she had said, "That was fantastic, that was the best bed I've ever slept in," out—you're obviously a fake.

Dukkha is like that. And this is part of the noble, the way that the arya sees things. What for the ordinary person is pleasurable, for the arya may well be painful. And you can see it in... I mean, it's a question of maturity. So it's possible that at the age of twenty your favorite music is rock and roll played to the nth level of volume. And it's possible that by the age of sixty you're listening to Mozart quietly. Now, one way of looking at

that progression is there's a refinement going on, a refinement of taste, a refinement of appreciation of the dukkha entering the ear. As that develops, so one's tastes become more refined. And this is part of the whole progression of practice.

So dukkha is not necessarily gross. And to get a sense of it, we have to be really sharp and very sensitive to find it, apart from the obvious stuff, of course.

The deepest layer of dukkha is sankhara dukkha, constructed dukkha, or the dukkha of constructions, where the Buddha says in brief, the five bundles associated with clinging are dukkha. Now the five bundles or the five aggregates—we'll look at those tomorrow night—but this is one of the basic ways in which the Buddha divides up the human being and their experience: body, feeling, perception, constructions and awareness. We'll talk about those tomorrow. But essentially it means human experience or the experiencing human being looked at from a certain angle. And the Buddha says in brief, the five bundles associated with clinging are dukkha.

Now this is constructed dukkha. This is all the ways in which we construct our dukkha. So, for example, if you go out for a good time and late next morning wake up in the gutter with vomit stains around your mouth, you are experiencing constructive dukkha. It is gross, but the point is it's constructive.

Or, let's say you're meditating and you've developed a goodly amount of concentration, mindfulness, etc. And you decide, okay, pretty much halfway through the retreat, I've got to go for it. And you sit there for an unusually long period of time and by the time you finish, there's a quality of strain, of tension in the body, strain in the mind. You're not quite satisfied with the result that you've got. You've got dukkha and it's being constructed. So that's more subtle.

More deeply is the recognition that all our efforts to escape from dukkha are in fact dukkha. I recognize that there's a problem, I'm doing something about it, and this very doing is painful because I'm manipulating my experience to make it suit me, and it never works. Whatever I do to make things better, it just becomes part of the problem.

And there is nothing I can do to make it better. This is one of the understandings of dukkha that develops in the course of meditation practice—this recognition that everything I do to avoid, escape, or overcome my problem is just part of the problem.

The Buddha expresses this as: clinging to the khandhas is dukkha. This is the third level. In brief, the five bundles associated with clinging are dukkha. In Pali, this is the *upadana-khandhas*—a compound where you have *upadana* and you have *khandhas*: *panch-upadana-khandhas*.

You might wonder: would you say that's clinging to the self? Clinging to these aggregates as the self? Clinging to constructions? Well, clinging to anything. These are the *upadana-khandhas*, the clinging bundles. You can translate that in various ways. "The bundles that cling" would be a valid translation, or "the bundles that are clung to," or "the bundles that are associated with clinging"—because it's a compound, you can have any relationship between the two parts, which is why you get different translations.

When we speak of *sankhara* in the context of the five khandhas, it specifically refers to the construction of volition—all the choices that we make. So there it has a narrow application. *Sankhara* more broadly means anything constructed, anything put together, and anything that in turn puts something together, that constructs something. That means everything except Nibbana. But in the context of the five aggregates, specifically it means the choices we make—what we do in order to construct our lives.

I remember when listening to Thai teachers, we'd often talk about *sankhara* as if it was thinking. Sayadaw U Pandita's explanation was quite brief. When asked what *sankhara* means, he simply clenched his fist and said, "When the mind does this." That's pretty much it.

Here we encounter the deepest level of dukkha. Notice that the Buddha does not say the five aggregates are dukkha, or the five bundles are dukkha. If he said that, there would be no way out. But he says the five bundles associated with clinging are dukkha—which means he's indicating that dukkha is an optional added extra.

So the deeper we go into our practice, the more refined we discover dukkha. There are times when its universality becomes apparent, and yet it's an optional added extra. We actually don't need it. Otherwise there would be no solution to the problem.

Then we encounter the arising of dukkha and the cessation of dukkha. This is the Noble Truth of the arising of dukkha: it is craving which leads to further becoming, is bound up with obsession and delight, and finds its delight now here, now there—specifically craving for sense pleasures, existence, and non-existence.

It's all about craving—*tanha*, literally "thirst." We've discussed how dukkha is this sense of an empty space, a painful emptiness at our core, and we're constantly trying to fill it in. There's this drive that emerges, this incredible energy that comes bursting out of this empty space, grasping for something to bring in and fill it up.

And this is tanha, this is thirst. This is the drivenness we find within us, the sense of urgent necessity: "I've got to do this." It ranges from the gross to the subtle.

The most obsessive addiction is craving. Have you ever had the experience of meditating and things are going okay except the mind won't completely shut up? It's like you've just got to chase this thought. "Okay, no I won't." But you've got to chase this one. "No, no, no." But you've got to chase this one. That sense of urgent necessity is tanha, is craving. It can be very subtle or incredibly gross and everything in between. But it's that sense of drivenness that we feel, that pushes us forward.

So it's a form of desire. Often people get this mixed up with desire. They think that the Buddha doesn't like desire, that you mustn't desire things, it's very naughty. If you want something, you'll be punished. But tanha is a particular kind of desire that the Buddha very carefully defines. Don't get it mixed up with all forms of desire. Without desire, we wouldn't be here. Without desire, we would not be doing this meditation practice. Desire is fundamentally necessary.

But tanha is a kind of drivenness—driven desire and aversion. The shadow of wanting is not wanting. This drivenness works both ways. It's like if I want the sunny side of the street, I don't want the shady side. If I want the shady side, I don't want the sunny side. If there's movement toward, there's movement away. If there's desire, there's aversion.

We saw it in the Satipatthana Sutta: "longing and sorrow for the world." If there's longing, there's sorrow. If there's sorrow, there's longing. Each is the shadow of the other.

So it's not simply desire. It's the whole sense of drivenness, either towards or away from. But a drivenness that has these particular characteristics: it leads to further becoming. We become someone. We want to become someone. We want to become real to ourselves and to others.

It's one of the attractions of thinking. I think myself into existence. I am who I think I am. I am who I think about. So I think about a world, and if that world is real, it means I'm real because it's my world. And we want to become someone—someone real to others. I want to be recognized as someone, a specific someone. I don't want to be recognized, for example, as a complete idiot. I'd much rather be recognized as a man of wisdom and distinction. You do that, don't you?

This leads to further becoming. We're always seeking to be someone.

Bound up with passion or obsession and delight. *Raga* translates here as obsession. Usually it translates as passion—that's the standard translation, but I think that's wrong. *Raga* literally means colour, and it's the colouring of the heart when it's caught

up in some kind of obsession. In English we have the expression, if someone's really angry, we say "he saw red." In other words, the *citta*, the heart, was coloured red and there was nothing else there.

So it has to do with drivenness, obsession, the inability to see beyond something and therefore to let it go. "I've got to get this. Or I've got to avoid this. I don't care what happens next. I just must have this." This is obsession.

And delight, *nandi*, is the gratification that comes from satisfying a desire. It's the payoff. So I want something, I get it, and there's a payoff. If there wasn't a payoff, I wouldn't bother. So *nandi* is the gratification that we get. But it has a quality of agitation to it, and it sets up another round of desire.

"That was good. I've got to do it again. That's good. One more time. That's good." And again, again, again, and again, and again, and again. So we find ourselves pursuing the same patterns of obsession, of desire, or aversion, as the case may be. It works equally well. And there's a repetitive quality to it. And so it becomes tedious, but still we've got to keep going with it because this is where my satisfaction comes from.

We can see this broadly in consumerism and the whole economic neoliberal project. On the broad scale of things, the fact that as a society we never have enough. So the little thought experiment that I like to provide is: imagine Prime Minister, Treasurer, Governor of the Reserve Bank, they have a press conference, they announce to the nation, "We've been studying the national accounts, productivity, national wealth—they've all increased greatly over the past fifty years. We've reached the point now that we've got enough. We can all stop now. Just chill. Let's take a break. We've got enough."

I mean, it's inconceivable, isn't it? Because it's impossible to have enough. It's just incoherent. Enough? What? It just makes no sense. If you spoke like that in serious company—not like dharma hippies, but serious people—they'd think you're a complete lunatic. "How can we have enough? We've got to grow the economy. We've just got to. True, we're destroying the environment, but we've got to grow the economy. The climate's getting a bit... but we've got to grow the economy." We've just got to, because it's impossible to have enough, and this is *tanha*.

And you can see it more subtly when we're in the grip of some thought, and we can't let it go. I'm thinking something, it causes me pain, I can see that it causes me pain, I can feel it causing me pain, but I've got to finish it off. I've got to keep thinking it. So I'm sure you've had the experience of meditating—a thought arises, you notice that the

thought has arisen, you know that you should drop it and head back to the meditation object, but you decide, "I'll just finish this one off, and then I'll go back." And "this, I'll just finish this one off." This is obsession and delight driving this.

And the Buddha says, "finding delight now here, now there." This is the restlessness implied in the endless search for satisfaction that never quite arrives—looking for a completion that never quite arrives.

He says specifically: craving for sense pleasures, existence, and non-existence. Notice that the latter two, two out of the three, are all about identity. The Buddha is very interested in how we construct an identity and what we do to sustain it.

Anyway, that's briefly the arising of dukkha.

Then we have the cessation of dukkha. This is the Noble One's truth of the cessation of dukkha: the complete cessation of that very craving—abandoning it, renouncing it, releasing it, letting it go.

In another discourse, the Buddha compares the cessation of dukkha to the ending of hunger. We've all experienced hunger, and when we're hungry, we have this growing drivenness: "I've got to eat." So we eat, and there's a great satisfaction when we eat, especially if it's a lunch like today's. There's a pleasure, a gratification that comes out of that. Several hours later, we're wondering, "What's for dinner?" So we go through the whole cycle again, and then again and again and again.

We never get to the end of it. But what would it be like if hunger itself ceased? Then there'd be no pleasure that comes from eating, but there'd be no distress that comes from not eating. The Buddha would say that—assuming this was physiologically possible, which of course it isn't; it's just an image—the pleasure that would come out of the cessation of hunger would actually be greater than any satisfaction we can find from eating.

You could look at it this way: let's say I'm a habitual smoker, and I have a desire for another cigarette. So I reach out and smoke it. There's a gratification, a satisfaction that comes with that—because otherwise I wouldn't bother. But that sets me up for the desire for the next one, and the next one, and the next one.

In contrast, let's say my desire is to give up smoking. If I satisfy that desire, then the satisfaction is very different. It's not driven, it's not restless. It's quite peaceful and still. It's more subtle but more profound, and ultimately more satisfying than the first one.

In a mundane sense, what we're talking about is what we've discussed before: contentment. Being so absorbed in the present experience that we're not ruthlessly reaching out for something else to add to it or to justify it. This has to do with a relationship to experience which is not driven and therefore is pleasurable.

We talked the other night about kaya-gata-sati, mindfulness immersed in body, being all about finding pleasure in the physical—the kinds of pleasure that we're talking about and the kind of pleasure that Siddhartha was referring to when he gave up his ascetic practices. This is the kind of pleasure being referred to here.

Now, just to backtrack: we've got a list of four truths. The first one is dukkha. The second and third are the arising and ceasing of dukkha. Notice with the second and third, there's a dynamism. Things arise and cease. And they don't arise and cease at random.

The arising of dukkha—if there's dukkha, there must be something feeding it. So what's feeding it? What's feeding it is craving. If you get craving, you get dukkha. If I want to get rid of the dukkha, what to do? I could hit the dukkha on the head with a hammer, or I could work out what's feeding it and let go of that.

When there's craving, there's dukkha. When craving is dropped, dukkha is dropped. Notice with these two truths, it expands out from one thing—dukkha—into two, and we've got a dynamic relationship. This relationship is all about cause and effect. In other words, it's about dependent arising. This is the basic framework of the Buddha's teaching, but it's applying dependent arising to a specific problem: dukkha.

So the Buddha is presenting these five companions with a very specific cause-and-effect relationship. He's telling them, "Look for the drivenness." Remember we talked yesterday about why people take up an intense ascetic practice—these men are completely full-on macho ascetics. There's a drivenness in this. That's why they're doing it. And so the Buddha is saying, "Look for the drivenness. Check that out. And is it really satisfactory? And if it's not, why don't you just let it go?"

He's presenting them with a universal principle, which is dependent arising, and he talks about dependent arising endlessly throughout his career in all sorts of different ways. But he's presenting it to them in a very specific example of it, in a particular relationship that is of relevance to them as they're sitting in front of him. So he's making something universal applicable to this situation right now. And that's very much his genius as a teacher—that he had the capacity to do that. And it's quite something.

When I started teaching retreats here, actually, I was doing a PhD in Buddhist studies at University of Queensland, and eventually I dropped out in order to become the resident teacher here. But what I was doing was studying dependent arising and esoteric Buddhist philosophy, and I'd be doing that for months at a time. Then I'd come down here and teach a retreat, and I had to say something that was actually relevant to the meditators sitting in front of me. And it wasn't easy.

Some people think my Dharma talks are abstract, dry and academic. Can you believe that? And if you think they're abstract, dry and academic now—you should have been here fifteen years ago. They were intensely academic. But, you know, that's the way I thought; that's what I was studying. And I knew this is something I need to communicate because this is what the Buddha was all about—so it actually is relevant to someone's experience when they're right in front of you.

If you ever become Dharma teachers, you'll discover it's not easy. So my heart goes out to poor old Buddha when he's faced with these ascetics and he's got to give them the whole lot in one hit. It's not so easy. But he was a genius at that. And this is one example of when he succeeded in doing it.

So you've got one thing, which opens up into dynamic relationship. When we are practicing meditation, what is it we're playing around with? We're playing with dynamic relationship. What is it when we're working with something—a distraction, say? What is it we're saying again and again and again? "What's feeding this? Something must be happening to make this happen. What is it?"

So we talked about structuring attention. I can focus in on one thing, but don't wear blinkers so you can't see what's around it. You can't see it in its context. Open up, and then you can say, "Well, when this moved, that moved as well. That's interesting. Is there a connection?" So it's this open investigation into the shifting patterns of experience, and the basic principle is: What's feeding this? And what does this feed?

And the Buddha is presenting this as a kind of template in the Four Truths. And the fourth truth is the path. And remember this is the second time he's mentioned the path. The path is also the middle way. And it's also the fourth truth. This is the Noble One's truth of the way leading to the cessation of dukkha: the Noble Eightfold Path of right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

We talked about the complexity of the path yesterday—the fact that it's a dynamic system. Again you get this dependent arising, these dynamic interrelationships. Here, let's have a look at some other aspects of path. For a start, the fact that a path always has a direction. A path is going somewhere. I'm going somewhere.

So I want the path that goes there in order to get to where I want. In other words, I have a goal. And I need the path that takes me to my goal. So I want to be enlightened, or I don't want to be grossly suffering—I want to be subtly suffering. I want a bit of this subtle spiritual suffering that you're banging on about. So I have some kind of goal, and I want the path that goes to that.

We've talked a lot about the nature of right effort. One of the problems with effort is that if I'm pushing what is my present experience aside in order to get to some imagined goal in the future, I'm not fully engaged with the present experience. And it's a barrier. It gets in my way. I overlook things that I shouldn't overlook. I strain, which just slows me up.

So how do goals fit into this way of looking at things? The Buddha doesn't talk—he does talk about goals, setting up goals—but he's more interested in directions. It's all about setting a direction. If I know that my goal is in this direction, if I've got the direction right, I can forget about the destination. I can forget about the goal because I know I'm going to get there. And instead, all I have to do is be fully committed to this step right now. This is part of the image of the path: being firmly grounded on just this step. This is the only step that counts. And if I'm satisfied about the direction, I don't need to worry about the goal. That will just happen. It may take a while, it may take longer than I want, but it will happen. I've just got to be completely engaged with this step right now.

Another aspect of path is that it implies that someone else has been here before. We've talked about this. In this path that we're on, people have been on this path for over 2,000 years. And we're just the latest bunch of travelers. There'll be other people after us. So we're part of something much bigger than what we might normally think of.

The Buddha also points out that the path is a lot more than just meditation. We spoke about how the path has three groups: there's view, which is wisdom; sīla, ethics; and then you have meditation. In one discourse, a non-Buddhist asked the Buddha what he taught, and the Buddha said, "I teach two things. I teach ethics and wisdom." Which is very interesting because he made no mention of meditation. And it's very odd from a Western perspective because what draws us into Buddhism is it's all about the medita-

tion. Then we discover the other things later. But when the Buddha was presenting his teaching to non-Buddhists, he didn't even mention meditation. He said, "I teach two things: ethics and wisdom."

And he compared them to two hands washing each other. I can't wash just one hand. I need two hands. Then I can clean the hands. Ethics is like one hand and wisdom is the other, and they wash each other—they support each other. I think what he was getting at was that if we're looking for meditation, it's here. It's in this action. It's the interface between ethics and wisdom. In particular, whatever we cultivate in meditation has to be expressed in action. In other words, the test for our practice is the way that we live, which is the whole realm of ethics.

Anyway, that's a quick tour of the Four Truths. And the Buddha goes on a bit further, talking about each of the activities or the duties associated with each of the truths. So the first truth, dukkha, is to be fully understood. And it's interesting that he doesn't say it is to be gotten rid of. He says it's to be understood. In other words, we study our dukkha.

The second truth, the arising of dukkha, is to be abandoned—the letting go of craving. The third truth, the cessation of dukkha, is to be realized. This is awakening itself. And the fourth truth, the path, is to be cultivated, developed.

Then we come to the end of the discourse. "This is what the Blessed One said, and the group of five bhikkhus rejoiced in his words. And as this teaching was being given, the perfect and stainless vision of Dharma arose in Venerable Kondanya: 'Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease.'"

This little verse is the standard verse which indicates the perfect and stainless vision of Dharma—in other words, attaining the first stage of awakening, the first glimpse of the unconstructed, the first falling into the black hole and never being seen again. And this happens to Kondanya, and the way he expresses it is: "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." Again, this is a model of dependent arising. He saw into dependent arising.

So whatever is of the nature to arise—what would that be? Basically everything, except nibbana, except the unconstructed. Whatever begins, ends. Everything that arises ceases. And the emphasis is on the everything. What we do is we kind of set aside something out of that which doesn't cease. Let's call it, for example, the self. This is the sense of the self—it's all happening to me, I'm the audience of this drama, without me there's

no drama. But the Buddha says all this is of the nature to cease. Or as John Hale once was heard to remark, "Nibbana is the ultimate paint stripper—it strips away everything."

So Kondanya was the first to get it.

Now, do we have time for his story? Yes. Kondanya was a brahmin who was very brilliant as a boy and was particularly specialized in the art of reading features, reading the body—physiognomy. He made a living along with others as a kind of soothsayer, examining newborn children to tell their doting parents, on the basis of his examination, what would happen to them. Astrology and the reading of features—these kinds of arts were highly developed in India, greatly respected. People who did this were highly respected and well-paid professionals.

When Siddhartha was born, his father brought in the local experts. Because his father was a wealthy and powerful man, he could afford five of these experts. So he brings them in to examine the boy and to explain what the boy's fate would be. Kondanya was the youngest of the five, therefore the most junior in the hierarchy.

They examine the boy, look at his horoscope, do their calculations, get together in a huddle. And the four senior ones said, "There's no question, this kid is going to be a universal monarch, an extremely successful political leader." They were happy with that because they'd doubtless get a big tip from his old man for telling them that.

But they couldn't come to consensus because Kondanya said, "No, no, no. He may do that. Or, if he leaves home, he will become a sammasambuddha, a supremely self-awakened one."

The other four said, "You don't want to tell the old man that. Believe me, he doesn't want to hear that."

Kondanya sticks to his guns. Then they explain, "Look, we've seen you do this. We've been doing this longer. All of us agree it's not going to happen. So just keep your mouth shut."

And Kondanya says, "I shall submit a minority report."

So he did. And the other four were correct—the old man didn't like it at all. So they walked away with less cash than they would have, except that Kondanya didn't walk away. He wanted to stick around this kid because he knew this kid was very special, and if he does something really special, "I want to be there when it happens."

So he sticks around, he lives in the neighborhood and he waits. And Siddhartha grows up and he's having a good time and being educated and doing all the things that young men do, and Kondanya's life is dribbling away, waiting. He must have got anxious every now and again, but he recalls his faith and he stays.

One morning he's in the market buying his chai or whatever he buys in the market, and the market is abuzz with gossip. He hears the word "Siddhartha" mentioned, so he goes up and says, "What's going on? What happened?"

And they say, "Didn't you hear?"

"No, I didn't hear. What happened?"

"Wow, you must be the only person who hasn't heard."

"Stop driving me crazy and just tell me what happened."

"He's gone."

Who's gone?

Siddhartha's gone.

What do you mean he's gone?

He's just gone. He just disappeared last night. Nobody can find him.

And so Kandanya is just absolutely horrified. He's been waiting for decades. It's like watching cricket—as soon as something happens, you've missed it because you've fallen asleep ten minutes ago.

So he goes racing off in pursuit, but nobody knows exactly where Siddhartha went because he slipped out at night. But Kandanya is no fool and he heads southeast along the same main road that Siddhartha is traveling. Eventually he catches up with him, though nobody really knows when, or how many years it took before he found him.

But he ends up as one of the five companions. So he's one of these ascetics. And this time he's absolutely determined he's not going to let this guy out of his sight because he knows his propensity for disappearing. So he's practicing asceticism, which is really, really not a good thing to do. It's very painful. So he's having a very difficult time. He's not a young man anymore. But he's got to wait. He's got to wait until something happens.

And finally, something happened. Siddhartha has lunch.

Well, he drops the whole thing. He decides, "Okay, it's not working. I'm out of here. I'm heading to the village down the road because I hear they serve really nice chapati."

And all of the five are just completely devastated by this betrayal of everything he stands for, Kandanya among them, and they walk off, they leave him.

Now if you put yourself in Kandanya's shoes, how would you have felt? You have invested virtually your entire life on hope and faith in one person, and eventually, after decades, he completely disappoints you. He disillusions you so much that not only are you not looking for him, you're making sure you're walking away in the opposite direction. So Kandanya must have gone through hell.

Anyway, sometime later—we don't know how long—Siddhartha returns, except he's not Siddhartha, he's the Buddha. He gives the first teaching, and Kandanya gets it. That's what he's talking about. And he's the first to attain a glimpse of awakening.

So if you ever feel discouraged in your practice, if you ever think it's taking too long and progress is too slow, just think of Kandanya. He's the patron saint of slow students.

"When the wheel of Dharma had been set in motion by the Blessed One, the earth-dwelling devas cried out: 'This unsurpassed wheel of Dharma has been set in motion by the Blessed One. It cannot be stopped by any samana or brahmana or deva or Mara or Brahma or by anyone in the world.'

"Hearing the cry of the earth-dwelling devas, the devas of the realm of the Four Great Kings cried out. The Tavatimsa devas, the Yama devas, the Tusita devas, the Nimmanarati devas, the Paranimmitavasavatti devas, the devas of Brahma's assembly cried out: 'At Baranasi, in the deer park at Isipatana, this unsurpassed wheel of Dharma has been set in motion by the Blessed One. It cannot be stopped by any samana or brahmana or deva or Mara or Brahma or by anyone in the world.'

"And so at that moment, at that instant, the cry spread as far as the Brahma world, and this ten-thousand-fold world system shook, quaked and trembled, and an immeasurable glorious radiance appeared in the world, surpassing the divine majesty of the devas."

I think this is code for "something very significant just happened."

And what happened was the wheel of Dharma was set in motion. When did that happen? When somebody understood. Yeah, when Kandanya got it.

And I find it really intriguing. When the Buddha was awakened, the wheel of Dharma was not set in motion. Only when Kandanya got it, then it started to move. In other words, the wheel of Dharma moves when the understanding spreads. Then things are starting to happen.

this realization, this awakening will not die with the Buddha. It will continue. And of course the wheel of Dharma has been turning ever since and continues to turn.

Then the Blessed One cried out in inspiration: "Kondañña understands! Kondañña understands!" This is how Venerable Kondañña acquired the name Añña Kondañña—Kondañña who understands.

You don't get it in English, but what the Buddha said was "Aññāsi Kondañño! Aññāsi Kondañño!" "He understands! He understands!" And I find this very intriguing.

I cannot think of any other time when the Buddha responds this way. Here he's given everything he's got, and as a result, one out of five has received the first glimpse of Nibbāna, of the unconstructed. Later in his career, he gets on stage, gives a Dharma talk, and five hundred people attain full awakening. He just got better. This is his practice run.

But this is the only time where he dances a jig for joy because someone got it. He's up there dancing: "Kondañña understands! Kondañña understands!" Abandoning all enlightened dignity. But he never does it again.

The traditional schools interpret this differently. Some say he was sitting there with a little smile on his face. Others say he cried out in inspiration—this is udāna, spontaneous poetry composed on the spot and presumably sung out in great joy, not mindfully mumbled but sung with delight.

The Buddha is absolutely delighted. He knows he can communicate this. Now he is a teacher—not just claiming to be one, but actually embodying what it means to teach. Now there is something happening. Now there can be a Buddhism. Now it's possible that things can start moving.

And this is where we'll leave it tonight. Tomorrow we'll start on the second discourse.

"If the wheel is set in motion and nothing can stop it, why is Mahākassapa waiting in a mountain until after it stops for it to start again?"

It just runs out of steam. No one can stop it, but somewhere in the future it will naturally cease. That's the nature of things—whatever has a beginning has an end. But then it can start again, given the right conditions.

"Did the Buddha say anything about Paccekabuddhas, explaining how many there might have been?"

No. In the early material there's very little mention of them.

Previous Buddhas at all, or I can't recall mention of Paccekabuddhas specifically, though they might be referenced somewhere. If it appears in the Tipitaka, my guess is it would be in the Khuddaka Nikaya—in the later material.

These are Buddhas who realized enlightenment but weren't able to teach. Is it a real phenomenon or not necessarily? I can't recall having read about it in the early texts. I've seen it mainly in the Jatakas—the story collections that come much later. I'm not certain whether it's part of the early tradition, although it's built into the logic of it, isn't it?

Had the Buddha not succeeded with those first five ascetics, presumably he would have thought, "I'll give up," gone back to his Bodhi tree, and remained a Paccekabuddha. I'd never realized what a close shave it was. I mean, I'd thought about how fortunate it was that Brahma Sahampati persuaded him to teach, but I'd never considered the next close call.

It sounds like a whole series of pretty close shaves. But the conditions came together and suddenly—there it is. That's the way things work. When conditions converge, something suddenly clicks.

"How soon after do they all become fully enlightened?"

That's for tomorrow night. Stay tuned for the next exciting episode.

"Is a glimpse—like you're describing—stream entry?"

"Can people still experience nibbana hearing a dharma talk? For the first time?"

Technically it's possible. I suspect all those who had the past-life karma and practice that would predispose them to such realization may have already encountered the Dhamma and awakened. Or perhaps they simply don't tell us about it, and it happens regularly without anyone hearing about it.

They speak of transmission in various traditions—not so much in Theravada teachings, but in Mahayana and Vajrayana they discuss transmission extensively. When the Buddha gives a talk and many people become enlightened, it's quite reminiscent of those later transmission-oriented contemplative traditions. It doesn't remind you of Theravada so much as the Tibetan and Zen approaches—it has more of that flavor.

"Patrick, you mentioned dukkha as this sort of painful emptiness. Do you think that's our intuitive understanding that the self isn't real?"

Yes, I think so. I believe fundamentally we all know that we're not real—that this sense of self is constructed. But we cover that up with all our desperate projects to be recognized and to recognize ourselves as substantial. Much of human endeavor is based on this deep but deeply suppressed intuition.

"Unknown thousands in therapy trying to find out, trying to be convinced that they are real."

The way of therapy is often the way of self—getting a healthy self, presumably.

I know that Stephen Batchelor discusses the Four Truths as being sequential, and I've found that whole discussion quite illuminating. It gives meaning to having dukkha in the first place.

It's almost like sequential in that you need to realize dukkha first, and that leads to the realization of the cause of dukkha, which leads to the realization of the cessation of dukkha, which leads to the realization of how to live that life of cessation. It's quite useful, I think.

I mean, this is a list. And like other lists, it can be read in different ways. It can be read in a linear form, and it can be read in a non-linear form. I think it's deliberately... I think it's meant to be like that. There are different ways of reading it. These lists are really sophisticated. I don't think there would be just simply one correct way to read it. If you point out a different way of reading it, it gives you a fresh viewpoint, which is very useful.

Question: Isn't there a certain amount of drivenness needed, more than just mere desire to actually stay on the path? It's not like it's super easy, after all, and you know, we can talk very well about desire for awakening and desire for the end of dukkha, but without a certain amount of clinging, thirst, drivenness, to keep on keeping on, you know. Otherwise, lots of people come to meditation once or twice, but don't stay on the path.

Response: Yeah. I was reminded of a conversation I had decades ago when I was in Hawaii. I was talking to a fellow Zen student about another Zen student who had been practicing for a number of years—I forget how many, but not inconsiderable. He suddenly dropped out. And everybody was wondering why. And my friend said, "Well, he obviously got what he came for." And I thought, yeah, that makes sense.

It's the people who don't drop out who are the people, in a sense, whose desire always outmatches, always goes beyond what they've attained. And the Buddha talks about this. He says, don't be satisfied with what you've attained. There's always something more. So the drivenness is part of nature.

So I think, yes, you're right, it's part of the whole path. But it's a question, I think, of using it skillfully. The quality of it. Because the quality of it is refined when you practice. But there is a quality of... a sense of, "I have to do this. I don't have a choice." In one sense I do, but in a deeper sense... I don't.

Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 22

The Not-Self Characteristic (Anattā) - Part 1

Patrick Kearney · 1h11

> *In this profound discourse, Patrick Kearney introduces the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the Buddha's second teaching delivered to the five ascetics at Isipatana. Kearney emphasizes a crucial point: the Buddha waited until all five companions had attained stream-entry before teaching anattā explicitly, suggesting this is an advanced teaching meant to be realized rather than merely understood intellectually. Like a joke that either lands or doesn't, anattā cannot be grasped through explanation alone.*
>
> *Kearney examines the Buddha's systematic deconstruction of self through the five khandhas (aggregates): body, feeling, perception, constructions, and awareness. He unpacks the three movements of self-construction—'this is mine' (taṇhā/craving), 'I am this' (māna/conceit), and 'this is myself' (diṭṭhi/view)—showing how we constantly construct identity through possession, measurement, and narrative. The teaching reveals that what we take to be a stable self is actually an ongoing process of construction, fueled by our drive for certainty and meaning.*
>
> *Particularly illuminating is Kearney's analysis of how the Pāli term 'anicca' means not just impermanent but unreliable, explaining why impermanence leads to dukkha. He invites practitioners to investigate directly: Can you find the one creating your thoughts? Can you locate the audience for your internal narratives? This empirical approach transforms anattā from abstract philosophy into living practice, pointing toward those moments of complete intimacy with experience where the sense of a separate self naturally falls away.*

Yesterday we finished off the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, setting in motion the Dharma wheel, or simply turning the Dharma wheel. This was taught on the full moon night of Āsāḷha in July, two months after the Buddha attained awakening. And there he taught the middle way and the four truths.

The middle way was the strategy he used to break open the resistance of the five companions. This is the idea of the middle way here in terms of practice—between indulgence and asceticism—where the middle way is not halfway in between, but it's the place of no fixed position. If it was halfway in between, that would simply be another extreme, a kind of triangular model. The middle way can only be found where there is no *anta*, no extreme. No pushing away, no pulling towards. This is the place where we are not stuck on anything. This is the place where we're not reaching out to hold some-

thing and we're not rejecting or resisting something. And this place is not any kind of fixed position. It's constantly moving and dancing, and we're constantly trying to keep up with it.

Then the Buddha taught the Four Truths, and Koṇḍañña understood. He had his first glimpse of awakening and attained the first stage of enlightenment, stream entry. He became Aññā Koṇḍañña, and his insight was expressed as: whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease. So this is all about dependent arising and, of course, impermanence.

The Buddha is very happy. Someone's actually understood, and he's very pleased with the whole situation. The five companions now become his students, so there's now a practice community. Then they begin the practice—the first Buddhist meditation retreat. The five students, with the Buddha as teacher, the retreat lasts I think five days. It's a long retreat because they took a while to get enlightened. There was Vappa and Bhaddiya, who got it within the first couple of days, and then Mahānāma, and finally Assaji, who was just incredibly thick. Five days together. Anyway, finally he did.

So at the end of this retreat, there are five aryas, five cultivated ones, refined ones—or six altogether, including the Buddha. And as each one attains the first stage of awakening, they request and are given ordination. So at this point there are five bhikkhus. It's interesting that you can see the standard is pretty high for becoming a bhikkhu. You have to be awakened first. Standards have slipped since.

When all of the five have attained the first stage of awakening—so they've all had a glimpse into the unconstructed—then he gives them the second discourse. And this is the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the not-self characteristic.

Now what this suggests, if you look at the context, is that he hasn't actually mentioned anattā, not-self. Of course it's obvious, it's implicit in everything that's gone before, but he's never actually mentioned it. And now for the first time he talks about it and gives a discourse explicitly on the subject of not-self. But he waits until his entire audience have attained the first stage of awakening. And he teaches it with the intention to bring them to full awakening.

What this suggests is, first of all, this is an advanced teaching. Anattā is an advanced teaching. And the other aspect about it is that anattā fundamentally is not a doctrine that can be understood—although lots of scholars and academics spend a lot of energy understanding it, writing about it, and so on. But fundamentally it's not a doctrine which is to be understood; it's an experience which is to be realized.

I see it as Buddha's joke. If you tell someone a joke, and having given them the punchline, they look at you blankly and say, "Could you explain that?"—you know you're wasting your time. Even if they understand it, quote unquote. "Oh, is that why it's funny? Oh." It hasn't worked. With a joke, you either get it or you don't get it. And that's it. And anattā has the same quality. You either get it or you don't get it. You either see it or you don't see it. And this can be shown by the endless academic arguments about it that have gone on through the centuries and continue to go on.

I put all this forward as a preliminary to my caveat: we're going to have two or possibly three talks about this, and I am not suggesting that at the end of them you will understand anattā.

I'm suggesting that at the end of them you will not. So don't blame me—I warned you in the beginning.

One time in Sydney, a fellow who was a long-term practitioner and very active in local Buddhist circles said to me, "You know, over the years I've heard a lot of Dharma talks from a lot of teachers about not-self, and no one's ever explained it satisfactorily." And he looked at me, and I thought, "I hope he's not going to ask me to explain it." Mercifully he didn't. But that's when it really struck me—you can't understand it. You either get it or you don't get it. And it's not easy to get. Well, it is easy to get. But it's not easy to be in the situation in which it's easy to get.

Now, these monks have all attained the first stage of awakening, so they've seen into it. But there's something missing—something still that they haven't got. Yet they've certainly got something. Or they haven't got something. And that means they're ready to receive the full teaching. At the end of the discourse, in fact, they're all Arahants. So this takes them from the first stage to the final stage.

"This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living at Bārānasī in the deer park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five bhikkhus.

'Bhikkhus?'

'Bhante,' they replied.

The Blessed One said, 'Body is not self. If this body was self, it would not tend to get sick, and I could make it become what I want. But because body is not self, it does tend to get sick, and I cannot make it become what I want.

'Feeling is not self. Perception is not self. Constructions are not self. Awareness is not self. If this awareness was self, it would not tend to get sick, and I could make it become what I want. But because awareness is not self, it does tend to get sick, and I cannot make it become what I want.'"

That's the opening line. The word translators render as "get sick"—*ābādha*—can be translated as affliction, illness, or disease. So it's a kind of "there wouldn't tend to be anything wrong with it." It wouldn't tend to be problematic, would be another way of looking at it.

Now, what I find interesting here: first of all, the Buddha goes through the five aggregates, and this is the first time he's laid them out. We've talked about these before. *Khandha*—usually translated as aggregate. I like Stephen Batchelor's translation of "bundle."

Whenever the Buddha talks about anattā, he will talk about it in terms of these five aggregates. But notice that the first time the Buddha mentions not-self, he presents it as bad news. "But because body is not-self, it does tend to get sick, and I cannot make it become what I want." I find this very interesting because certainly in Mahāyāna Buddhism—at least the Mahāyāna Buddhism I've been exposed to—not-self is always presented as "Hallelujah, brethren! This is fantastic!" Even in Theravāda it's got a kind of good news ring to it. But the first time the Buddha mentions it, it's clearly bad news.

Anyway, he's laying out the five aggregates. He mentioned them in the first discourse—*pañca upādāna khandhā*, the five aggregates associated with clinging. Now he lays them out. Body is all physical experience. Feeling, we've talked about—the hedonic or affective aspect of experience, that which moves me, that which provokes a response.

So I'm moved to hold on if it's pleasant, I'm moved to resist or reject if it's painful, and I'm moved to ignorance, doubt, confusion if it's not registered as being either painful or pleasant.

Then perception—saññā—which I think we mentioned. This is the recognition or interpretation of any experience. In other words, what makes something familiar? We live in a familiar world. I know what this place is, I know who you are, I can understand these words. This is all the realm of perception.

Then constructions—here it means all choices or decisions to act. I think we talked about this last night.

Finally, awareness—viññāṇa—the pure knowing or witnessing of any experience.

Now, these aggregates are associated with clinging. In other words, they constitute that which holds the potential for clinging, upādāna. That which we cling to. What we find irresistible, essentially. If they're associated with clinging, then they have to be attractive, because otherwise we wouldn't bother. Why would I cling to something that was not attractive to me?

But they're attractive not in a superficial sense of being nice-looking and pleasant, but in the deep sense of being what preoccupies us the most. So what most deeply preoccupies me—these are the five aggregates.

Consider, for example, our relationship to mirrors. Every day I look in the mirror. If there's a mirror around to look at, I will look at it. If it's not around, I won't. But if it's there, I'll have a look. Why? I know what I look like. But I just want to check one more time.

Or take the attractiveness of our deepest pain that can arise during meditation practice. It's incredibly attractive. Not in the sense that it's pleasant, but in the sense that it attracts our attention. Bam! The attention goes straight there and we hold on to it ferociously. So it's deeply attractive, and we cling to it.

Now, for the Buddha, clinging results in identity. This is why we hold on. And so the five aggregates are associated with the construction of an identity. When we cling, we know who we are and we know what we are. In that moment of holding on, that's when my identity is clearest. So that's who I am—the face in the mirror. This is who I am—the one who suffers this pain.

The aggregates provide identity, and the attractiveness is that identity provides certainty. In the moment that I know who I am, I also know what the world is and what's going on. That identity is deeply satisfying and reassuring, even if what I take to be me in the world is incredibly painful. Still, at least I know who I am and what's going on.

The Buddha's first argument about not-self has to do with this sense of certainty. He undermines it by looking at the issues of control, reliability, predictability.

Body, mind, all experience is not self. If it was self, it would not tend to be sick, oppressed, afflicted, and I could make it become what I want. It would be under my control. But because body and all the rest is not self, I cannot make it become what I want. It does tend to be spinning out of control and being oppressive.

When we actually examine the nature of experience, one thing that comes up—which is really quite obvious for the meditator—is that I am not actually in control of what happens to me. I spend a lot of time trying to assert my control. If I come to a retreat, I plan carefully. I bring all the right stuff, especially if I know the place. I come early so I get the good room. I get into the hall as soon as possible, get the best cushions, set myself up where I want to be. I'm trying to impose some degree of control and predictability and reliability into the experience.

The more familiar I am with the whole place, the more I can cultivate this notion that I can do this. The more familiar I am with the meditation practice, the more I can create fantasies that this time it'll be different. This time I'll be in charge.

But of course, it always fails.

It always falls apart. And the more we examine our experience, the more obvious it becomes that we're not in control. Nothing is entirely reliable, and I cannot predict the future. I do not know what's going to happen next. So the Buddha is undermining this assumption of self by undermining our sense of control and therefore reliability, predictability.

Now for the Buddha, first of all, he's looking at self—in Sanskrit *ātman*, in Pāli *attan*. *Ātman* is a technical term you find across traditions in India, and you've always got to be careful about the technical terms because what something means in one tradition isn't necessarily what it means in another tradition. Different traditions often share the same vocabulary, but they mean different things.

So *ātman*—when we talk about *ātman*, self, we think about Hindu traditions. But the Buddha's not using *ātman* in that sense. He's using it in a more psychological sense. If one was speaking to a Vedantan and asked, "How many *ātmans* are there in this room?" the answer is obviously one. In fact, there's only one *ātman* in the entire universe. But from a Buddhist perspective, how many *ātmans* in this room? Well, there's, I think, nineteen. Each person is an *ātman*. So the Buddha's using self in a psychological sense, which is good for us because it's more familiar to us.

What he's talking about now—to regard oneself as a self, what do we need? What's required? First of all, we have to be separate and distinct from other selves. I'm me, which means I'm not you. So I have to have that clear sense of separation and distinctness. This is me. I am an individual. I am unique. And I am certainly not you. So that's the first thing I need.

And I have to possess some unchanging characteristics that can provide me with some stable sense of identity through time. In my life I go through many ups and downs. I go through many changes. But I have a sense that underneath all that, it's me who's undergoing these changes. That twenty years ago, I and my life were quite different. Many things have happened in the past twenty years. Many changes. But at the end of it, it's me. So there have to be some characteristics of the self that do not change, that provide the sense of stability on which I can build an identity.

And finally, possession always entails some degree of control. Possession is in the normal everyday sense of the word. For example, take this watch. This watch is my watch, so I'm the one in charge. You can't tell the watch what to do. You can't tell me what to do with it, because it's my watch. Now as for your watch, it's up to you. I've got no argument with your watch—unless it ticks loudly when I'm trying to meditate—but basically it's all up to you. So if I had no control over this watch, how could it be mine? It just wouldn't make sense.

So a possession always implies some degree of control. Possession also includes aspects of myself to which it makes sense to describe as mine. When we were talking about mindfulness immersed in body, we talked about how we have this relationship to this body. This is my body. Now that makes perfect sense to me. That's your body. You do what you need to do with it. But this is mine. So I'm in charge of this body. I'll decide when this body leaves this room, not you. Are we clear on that?

So we have to have a sense of separation from other selves. We have to possess, have to have possessions, at least some of which are sufficiently stable that they can provide a sense of identity over a period of time. And whatever it is that we think we possess, we have to be able to have at least some degree of control over it.

The Buddha is in this opening section challenging these last two assumptions: possession and control. And he does it through the recognition of *dukkha*, which makes sense because he's just been talking about *dukkha*. So he now applies *dukkha* to the self. The fact is that there's *dukkha* in every experience that we depend upon, that we hold on to as constituting me. In every single one of those, somewhere in there is *dukkha*. There's an absence of control. I'm not in charge. And if I'm not in charge of it, it's not mine. So I don't own it.

The Buddha is undermining some of the basic assumptions that the ascetics hold in terms of their belief that they are someone. "I am an ascetic of some seniority, respected among my fellow ascetics. I'm someone." And he's starting to just tear this apart through his first argument.

And then the Buddha moves on to the issue of change, impermanence. "What do you think, bhikkhus, is body permanent or impermanent?" "Impermanent, Bhante." "And that which is impermanent, is it painful or pleasurable?"

Painful, Bhante. And that which is painful and subject to change, is it appropriate to regard it in terms of "this is mine, I am this, this is myself"? Certainly not, Bhante.

So here the Buddha shifts into impermanence and brings this out front and centre. Experience is impermanent, it is anicca, it changes.

Now when I first read this discourse, which was sometime in the mid-seventies, I found this dialogue very odd. Is body permanent or impermanent? Impermanent. Yes, okay, sounds reasonable. And that which is impermanent, is it painful or pleasurable? Painful. And I thought, what? Why? What's the problem? I just couldn't see the problem. I mean, if nothing changed, things would get pretty tedious pretty quickly. Don't they say a change is as good as a holiday?

So this really bothered me when I first read it. I just couldn't figure it out. I did not get the logic. Buddha, you said it, apparently you're wise, but let's just move on here.

It helps to actually look at the Pali word, anicca, or in Sanskrit, anitya. In Pali and Sanskrit, nicca or nitya means permanent, but it also means reliable. Let's say one is running a meditation centre and feels a certain insecurity about paying the bills. But then someone leaves a bucket full of money in some kind of trust account, and so there's a permanent income. Every year the centre is guaranteed this amount of money handed to it. It's permanent, it's reliable. Let's say you're looking for farmland and you're told this has a permanent water supply. It's permanent, it's reliable.

So when the Buddha says permanent, he's not just saying it doesn't change—he's saying this is reliable, I can depend upon this. When he says that which is impermanent is painful or pleasurable, the monks of course say painful because they know what this means. What the Buddha is saying is that all experience is impermanent, it changes, and therefore it is unreliable. Ultimately we will be disappointed with it, whatever it is. At some point we will be disappointed. We will be let down. And this is just part of the nature of the universe.

So whatever we experience, at some point, becomes a source of distress. And therefore it's not worthy of holding onto. In fact it's something to be let go of. Therefore it's not worthy to be considered self. Because to be considered self it has to be reliably available all the time. So for me to be Patrick, Patrick has to be available all the time.

Does that make any sense? No? Why not? Why does it have to be reliable to be self? It can be unreliable, provided that it's there to be unreliable—as long as it's reliably there. Like, "this is happening to me," I can count on that. Let's go on and see if it makes any sense later.

So the Buddha says that which is painful and subject to change, is it appropriate to regard it in terms of "this is mine, I am this, this is myself"? Now here the Buddha presents what he means by self. This is important because if he's going to deny self, then we've got to know what it is that he's denying. He's talking about identity, and we assume identity is something given.

So I am already Patrick. But the Buddha is saying identity is an ongoing construction. It's not something already given. It's something that we're constantly constructing. We don't notice ourselves doing it most of the time, but we are. This is in fact what we're doing.

And he says there are three movements in this construction: this is mine, I am this, this is myself. These three movements are craving, conceit, and view. So let's have a look at what the Buddha is getting at.

The first one is "this is mine." This represents taṇhā, which we talked about the last couple of nights—craving, drivenness. Here, it's the drive to possess. This is the raw energy. We talked about how dukkha represents this painful energy, empty space at the core of our being. From that painful emptiness we reach up and try to hold something, get something that we can draw into this space and fill it up and get rid of this sense of unease. We're constantly going out to hold onto something as a possession. This is taṇhā, or craving, and this is what drives consumerism and narcissism.

We talked about it in terms of consumerism—how we constantly want more stuff. The appeal to greed is usually pretty successful in terms of social movements. But more subtly, we can see it in our drive to possess experience. When you come to talk about meditation experience, say in the interview, whose experience do you come to talk about? "Let me tell you about *my* meditation experience." We talked about this basic attitude we have to experience: What is this to me? How does it fit into my plan? How does it function as my possession? So this is *my* meditation experience. And we just do that quite naturally. We don't even think about it. It's just obvious. Of course it's mine. It's certainly not yours. So it has to be mine. And if I feel I've had a very successful retreat, I might say something like, "I got a lot out of this retreat." We use that kind of expression quite naturally. It's totally meaningful.

So this is the drive to possess. And possession has to do with identity. Where is the boundary of the self? Where does the self end and the world begin? Most obviously the border would be here, at the edges of this body. But in fact, of course, the boundaries are wider than that. This recorder is outside the boundaries of this body, but because it's mine, it's inside myself. My sense of self as the teacher—by the way, these are *my* Dharma talks. Are you sure? I'm positive. No, no.

And this is another thing. This is the next thing. This is *my* meditation retreat. I'm the teacher. I'm in control. And I don't want you lot messing up my meditation retreat. I'll be clear about that.

So when we start to look at the self in terms of possession, the boundary of the self starts to go out and it gets bigger and bigger. You're not my teacher, I'm your student.

That's right. So you're all my students and I'm in charge. That's why I'm constantly frustrated and disappointed.

So if you're in charge, how come you haven't made us all be enlightened yet?

Well, I'm trying to persuade you, but you're just resisting me all the time. So on the one hand... stop mucking about. You've been too relaxed.

So "this is mine" is all about creating this sense of self and making it bigger, and the bigger the better.

Then we get conceit: "I am this."

The Pali term is *mana*, usually translated as conceit. It's not a very good translation, but there's no English equivalent. Literally, it's measuring. If you did a literal translation, it would be measuring. It is a measuring, from the root *ma*, to measure. So measurement, comparison.

I think I mentioned this before. Let's say I measure something. I take out of something—this pad—pull out the tape and measure it. Now in measuring it, what I've just done is define its boundaries. This is where it begins and this is where it ends. And that means I've created separation. This is pad and all of this is not pad. So you get a basic sense of boundary and separation.

Mana manifests as a fundamental sense of separation and therefore of comparison. First of all, there are borders: me, not me; this, not this, that. And also, part of this duality involves values—important, not important—and along with that, comparison between them.

So a lot of this has to do with a sense of location, location in relation to the self. "I" and "mine" are both here, and they're important. "You" and "yours" is a bit further away, so not quite so important. "Them" and "theirs" is even further away and even less important.

Now this distance can be physical, but it can also be—in fact largely it is—psychological. So let's say in the media if there's a disaster in India, it'll be on page five with half a column. If a corresponding disaster occurs in the US, it'll be on page one with several columns. It would be more important because the USA is closer to us than India. Now that distance is not geographical. It's in terms of our identification. We're much more likely to identify with people from North America than we are with people from India. So India is more distant.

For Australians, you can see it in the sense that Europe is much more close to us than Southeast Asia, for most people. Europe is far closer than Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia is the place you fly over to get to Europe. And again, this has got nothing to do with geography. This has to do with the sense of what's closest to me, what's me and not me.

So this has to do with *mana*, classically translated as conceit, but really measuring.

Now, craving and conceit come together. Craving energizes conceit. Conceit manifests in the basic sense of "I am" at the behind of experience. There's this sense that I have that there's someone here who is experiencing. So at the moment I'm experiencing giving a Dharma talk, and I have this sense that this is happening to someone, and the someone is here.

Now if as a meditator I was interested in finding out, well, who is that someone? And if I turned my awareness around and went into the *citta* to find that someone, whatever I found—that would be happening to someone. So whatever I found would not be "I am." Does that make sense?

So when you're practicing you can have a very deep *samādhi*, concentration. You can be very intimate with the experience. A sense of self and other, in a crude sense, has dropped away. But there's still this sense that all of this is happening to someone, but you can't put your finger on who that is, because it's always in the shadows.

Now you take this sense of "I am," add craving—and craving is this raw drive—

always in search of possession. So then it becomes "I am this." The mind reaches out to grab an experience, to identify with it. "Oh, this is what I am."

So we might be meditating, for example, and the mind is throwing up thoughts—they're just kind of bubbling up and disappearing, bubbling up and disappearing. But if we look at the process, suddenly the awareness reaches out and grabs onto one of those thoughts, bang, and turns it into something. What's happened is there's this kind of background sense of "I am," but there's an agitation in it. "I am, but what am I? I am, I am..." Bang. "I'm this. I'm this thought. This is what I am." And suddenly we're into creating an identity. So this is the movement: "I am this." Conceit.

And then finally we get view: "This is myself." This third one, view, is the most visible, the most surface of the three movements. And to a large extent, it's the culmination of the construction of a self into some kind of narrative—some kind of story that defines myself to me and to others.

I always like to quote Daniel Dennett, the American philosopher of mind. He's still going strong, very fashionable, a very good writer. Back in the nineties he wrote a book called *Consciousness Explained*, where he says that we do not tell our stories—our stories tell us. Which is a very nice way of putting it. And he says there are some stories that we keep coming back to again and again and again. These are foundational stories that he calls "the center of narrative gravity." So they all come back to these ones. And if we're looking for the self, that's where we find it. But I think from the Buddha's perspective, more accurately, this is where we find view: "This is myself." Craving and conceit, however, manifest at more basic levels beneath the narrative. In a sense, they fuel the narrative. But with view, the whole movement bursts up above the surface and becomes a coherent kind of story.

Someone asked whether, given Daniel Dennett's deep understanding of apparently no self, he would be enlightened. No, he's thinking about all this. He's got intellectual insight. He's also a committed materialist who clings ferociously to that view. There's another philosopher—I think Australian—who talks about the hard problem of consciousness. He talks about the two problems of consciousness, one hard and one easy. The easy problems are the sorts of problems that Daniel Dennett works on, like how does the mind work? How does it function? But the hard problem is essentially: what's the nature of the one who is aware of all this? I heard Dennett being interviewed about this fellow, and Dennett was just scathing, dumping on him. You could sense the outrage: "How dare you even go there? We've got to be scientific here, and therefore materialist."

But self-view is all about meaning. When I create a self, I create meaning. This is who I am.

This is what the world is. This is what it all means. In creating a self, I've created what all of this means. But I can't do that without some kind of story. The meaning is really important, and the stories that I tell myself that explain what this means are actually more real to me than the physical world that I inhabit.

An example I like to give is the activity of hanging out the clothes. Have you ever hung out the clothes? Let's say you're watching somebody hanging up clothes on the line over there. You're watching this and thinking to yourself, what is that person doing? Well, the answer is pretty obvious—they're hanging up the clothes. But if you were inside that person, if you were that person hanging up the clothes, and let's say you were not impeccably mindful (which of course all of you would be), then the activity would actually be thinking. The hanging out of the clothes would be on automatic pilot. The real activity would be creating a reality by telling a story to oneself. And that story would be more real and much more interesting than hanging out the clothes. The story would be what is actually happening from inside—the experience.

So the routine physical activity doesn't grab the attention. Why doesn't routine physical activity grab attention? Why is it so hard to stay with it? I think it's because its narrative power is weak, and therefore its capacity to give meaning is weak. Even if the direct, sensate feeling aspect is strong, its narrative power is weak. And we head towards the narrative power because that's where we find meaning. And in meaning we have a self—me—within a world—this world—of which you may not have noticed I am the centre.

So this is the self in the Buddha's teaching: this process of construction. Now you notice also what strikes in this—in each case it's "this is mine, I am this, this is myself." Very specific. This is mine. I am this. Very definite, very specific.

The Buddha is not saying that there's no self. Often people think that he is. People think that he's putting forth some kind of philosophical, ontological statement saying there is no such thing as a self. He doesn't say that. He says this is not self. He's not saying there is no self. He's saying this is not self. That's all. He's not making a grand philosophical statement. He's making a perfectly straightforward empirical statement: this is not self.

And when we construct a self, what we're doing is zeroing in on something specific. This is mine. This. I am this. This is myself.

So have you had the experience, for example, of sitting in the hall, perfectly still, perfect posture, completely absorbed in some narcissistic fantasy in which you're considering what a marvellous meditator you are? That you finally got it worked out. It's taken years, a lot of struggle, a lot of pain, a lot of difficulty, but now I've got it. I've arrived. I can afford now to feel compassionate for all these other jokers.

They try their best.

And then at some point you realize that you've been spending the last fifteen minutes in this self-congratulatory orgy because of a fleeting experience of samādhi that happened about fifteen minutes ago, and suddenly the story changes. *Oh God, I'm pathetic. I can't do this. It's impossible. I'm a terrible meditator. I'm probably the worst meditator in this room. Everybody else is doing well, but I'm doing really badly.*

And you notice that, well, first of all, the two stories can't both be true. They could both be false, but they cannot both be true. And yet, while we're in that one, *this* is me, and *this* is my world. And then, boom—no, *this* is me, and *this* is my world. And the identities completely clash with each other, but we don't even notice that. *This is mine. I am this.* No, no, no—*I'm this.* Now, come to think of it, *I'm this.* Now, I think I was wrong there, actually. Now that I'm enlightened, I realize *I'm this.*

So the Buddha, when he's talking about self, he's not talking about any kind of being or entity that either exists or doesn't exist. He's talking about a process—a process of constructing someone. And a process exists. It could be that dependent arising exists. This is one reason why becoming sensitive to the thought stream is so useful, because the thought stream represents a basic way in which we create a sense of self. Being sensitive to it and tracking it is extremely useful.

Now, the fact that we create a self through our narratives, through our thought stream, is not a problem. It's just part of nature. We're designed to do that. It's just how we are designed. Our problem is that our creation is an expression of our delusion, and as a result it ends up with suffering, with dukkha. We create ourselves, but because of our delusion and our drivenness, we end up with a poor product.

Our normal relationship to narratives keeps us locked into a very superficial dream world. When we look at the mind and how the mind behaves, we see that we create this dream world, and it's driven by these drifting desires and aversions which are constantly changing. Any real in-depth contact with reality is blocked by these dreams that keep swirling around, and we keep holding on. The mind works with all experience coming through all six senses—especially the mind itself—to create some stable reference point which is *me*.

What the mind does in particular is give a narrative unity. It gives us a stable point of reference for me and my world. *I know what it is. I know who I am. I know what this is.* And yet the stability of this is always threatened by change. And when I actually look at it, it's never anything more than a complex web of concepts and feelings, all swirling around, conditioning each other and chasing each other. But this is the self and world that we take to be real.

So we create a self which is real, but it's real only as a construct of the mind. It has no reality other than that. It's basically an organized network of concepts and associated feelings—a very complex, organized network. But we're convinced that there's more to it than that. We believe that the self creates concepts, and that our concepts point towards the self. For example, I believe that my fantasies of the future point to what will happen to me and what will be the world in which this happens. Yet when we look for who's creating these concepts, we can't find anyone. Or take it the other way—if we look for the person for whom these concepts are created. For example, I'm doing walking meditation, and I find my mind is creating a story, and it might occur to me to ask: who's the audience? Who's the intended audience of this story?

Who is this for? And again, I can't find anybody.

So we're convinced that there's someone here. This is the most fundamental reality of my life—that there's someone here. But this self which is so real, which seems so important that it dominates the way I live, is so ephemeral that I cannot pin it down in any experience. And the more I try to pin it down, the more I can't find it, which is very odd. It seems completely contradictory.

So if we can't pin down the self in our experience, then what is it? In the next talk we'll move on with the discourse and talk about the practice of not-self. But if you want to play with this beforehand, see if you can find the one who's creating the concepts. See if you can find the audience for whom the narrative is being told, and see what you come up with.

The Buddha is suggesting that you won't find anyone. Now, notice he's not making a philosophical statement that there is no one there. He's just basically, at most, placing a bet that if you look, you won't find one. And he's doing this because he looked and he couldn't find one. So he's suggesting, well, why don't you look and see if you can find one? The meditation practice is a way of looking. So is there one? Can I find one? Keep looking—it's quite an interesting project.

A participant shared: "I've been contemplating something about Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. I was reading Amitāyus, and he was talking about how when we take refuge in the Buddha, we're really taking refuge in our own Buddha nature, our own awareness, because the Buddha historically died 2,500 or 2,600 years ago. You can't take refuge in a being."

"You mean he didn't rise again?" I asked. "Sorry?" "He didn't rise again from the dead? Or am I getting that mixed up with something else?"

She continued: "Anyway, basically we take refuge in the quality of awakening within ourselves. And he said that ultimate subjectivity is the Buddha, and the Dharma is ultimate objectivity. I wonder about the difference between subjectivity and that sense of 'I am' that you're talking about. We feel like there's a subjective sense of something happening to us. But did the Buddha have subjectivity? He would have had a sense of subjectivity, wouldn't he? But he wouldn't have confused it with being who he was. He wouldn't have had that conceit—he wouldn't have had māna. What do you think about the sense of subjectivity and the difference between that and the sense of 'I am'?"

To me, the sense of "I am" is like cling wrap. It prevents me from being completely intimate with the experience. It's always associated with a sense of being one step back, not fully there. But there are moments, aren't there, where that's not there? We have that. And in that moment, I'm not thinking, "Oh gosh, this is me having this experience." There are times when we're just completely with the experience, so intimate there's no sense of any audience. So there's no self in that moment. And that's realization of not-self.

Sometimes what happens then is fear arises. Now, as soon as the fear arises, it means suddenly there's someone back here to whom this is happening—someone who's getting scared.

One time I was quite interested in this sense of the dropping away of the self. During one retreat I was working on it through meaning. If there's meaning, there's an audience who appreciates the meaning. Can I have an experience that doesn't mean anything? I was very interested in that. At times everything would drop away and there was just that intimacy. But I wanted to check something about the body, because I was interested in the body. I wondered, what is the body like when the mind recognizes this? And I kind of programmed myself to check that when it happens.

One night it happened. I was doing walking meditation on this veranda, and as soon as I noticed it, I immediately started stretching. I noticed that I could stretch further than I could a moment before. The body had just let go of a massive amount of tension. And then the thought arose in my mind, "I wonder how long this will last." And it was over. The body was back to its normal state.

It's quite interesting that even the body is changed.

But these glimpses come and go, and part of the whole process is allowing the glimpses to happen and noticing that they are there—because they're very subtle. It's largely an absence you're noticing. And then learning to become comfortable within that, and therefore extending them.

This is what the tradition calls *tadaṅga nibbāna*—nibbāna in its specific aspect of just walking, or just singing, or whatever. The English Romantics, Coleridge and Wordsworth, were into that same thing in their search for the sublime. That's exactly what they were interested in—that same feeling. It comes across in a lot of the Zen literature as well.

Thomas Metzinger, who's a philosopher of cognitive science I've been following, has a nice analogy related to what we've been exploring—where the selfing process is both the object and the subject. He uses the analogy of the selfing process giving us a user interface: a sense of a constant now, always happening in the present, a feeling of position. So it gives you a user interface to your external world. But even more profoundly, it gives you an avatar that can move around in this world. You're actually trapped in the idea that it is *you* moving around in this space.

He has some clever experiments where a person connected to an MRI in Tel Aviv is moving a robot in London. He's extended the sense of proprioception through computer science—the MRI extending from Tel Aviv to London. So the six senses that we've been talking about are extended across continents. It's a very interesting idea. His view is that we're in a cognitive arms race all the way through, from slime right through to where we are now. The organisms that could emulate themselves in the world best survived at an evolutionary level. We're really a product of that whole process.

Someone asked: "Can not-self only be recognized a nanosecond after it's happened? Because if you're completely intimate with an experience, it's not until you realize, 'Oh, I'm completely intimate with the experience,' that you know it."

Well, once you name it, something has shifted. At the time, one couldn't recognize it in the sense of saying what it is. So it's just happening. I think awe is wordless, isn't it? When you get to the top of the hill and see the tree up above against the sky—it's an awe-type wordless feeling. Basically it's just whatever is happening. But it's not *about* whatever is happening. There is no "about." It's just what's happening.

We've come back to *tathatā*, to suchness, just thisness. I think the constraining assumption is that something can only be experienced through the verbal storyline. But when the verbal storyline drops away, the suchness is still known, still experienced. When the self and the storyline drop away, that experience is known in and of itself, just in a non-verbal, non-conceptual manner—a bit like how we walk. Walking is a non-verbal experience, but it's still known. How to walk is known.

And I think over the years you get used to it, and that's fine. So the more often the self falls away, the more you get used to it—the more you get used to that non-verbal experience of being intimate with the present moment, not having to have a bunch of words to tell yourself the story of being intimate with the moment. It's still known, though. But as soon as you're telling yourself the story, then what you know is the story. You've just separated out.

Anyway, that's enough for tonight. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 23

The Not-Self Characteristic - Part 2

Patrick Kearney · 58 min

In this second part of his examination of the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), Patrick Kearney explores how the self is actively constructed through three movements: taṇhā (craving), māna (conceit), and diṭṭhi (view). He illustrates how modern advertising exploits these patterns, selling identities rather than products. The talk delves into the Buddha's systematic deconstruction practice of applying "This is not mine, I am not this, this is not myself" to all experiences across time, space, and quality.

Kearney explains how this cognitive wisdom practice leads to nibbidā (disenchantment) - a profound "finding out" that transforms both understanding and the heart. Through intimate examples from meditation practice, he shows how practitioners recognize the painful drivenness of self-construction and naturally move toward letting go. The discussion covers the gradual fading of obsession (virāga) and the sudden shock of liberation (vimutti), emphasizing that awakening always appears accidental though practice creates the conditions. The talk concludes with the profound silence that follows the complete abandonment of māna (the conceit "I am"), where all positions and dualities cease, leaving only action without an actor.

The other night we looked at the opening section of the Anattalakkhana Sutta, the discourse on the not-self characteristic. This is regarded as the second formal teaching of the Buddha, taught after a meditation retreat in which the five companions, now the five bhikkhus, had all attained to the first stage of awakening. He teaches this discourse to take them all the way to full enlightenment.

We covered the first section where the Buddha discusses the nature of self, particularly that self is something that is constructed. It's a project. It's not a thing and it's not a someone. The Buddha goes through the five aggregates with the same argument: "What do you think? Is body permanent or impermanent?" "Impermanent, Bhante." "And that which is impermanent, is it painful or pleasurable? Is it dukkha or sukha?" "Dukkha, Bhante." "And that which is dukkha and subject to change, is it appropriate to regard it in terms of 'this is mine, I am this, this is myself'?" And they say, "Certainly not, Bhante"—which you will be pleased to know is the correct answer. Think of what would have happened if they had said, "Yeah, sounds fair to me." The whole history of Buddhism could have come to a grinding halt.

There are three movements that construct the self: craving, conceit, and view—tanha, mana, and ditthi. Tanha literally means thirst; essentially it's drivenness. Here it's the urge to possess, and in this context this urge to possess has power because I find my reality in my possessions. So as the owner of this, I am. I am the one who owns this. What we possess reflects back on us as the owner, and if the possession is real, well the owner has to be real. This is of course the basic principle in advertising, where what's being sold often is an image of oneself. If I get this or that product, then I become this or that person.

I'm reminded of my last trip to India. I always fly Singapore Airlines, and they show ads repeatedly whenever you want to watch a movie. There were two ads shown again and again, both apparently about finance or some important international industry.

The first ad was for a Western hotel chain. The hero was this very young, good-looking man, nicely dressed, cruising from hotel to hotel where he would do these incredibly significant business deals that would make him lots of money. In between, he'd be leaping into hotel swimming pools and swimming vigorously. He's cruising the planet, going from hotel to hotel, looking incredibly good and making heaps of money. A couple of times in the ad, as he's walking one way through the lobby, walking the other way is this gorgeous young woman, and their eyes meet significantly. But they pass on, because both have money to make, presumably. The message apparently being conveyed is: if you stay in our hotel, you can be like this person, who represents some kind of ideal. He's global, young, good-looking, and rich. He floats above the rest of the planet.

The other ad was for a bank. There was another young man—not quite as good-looking, but pretty good-looking—working in this bank, in charge of a team. He's sitting in his office looking at his team members, who are all working really hard. He gazes at them with a certain sympathetic compassion, leaps up from his desk, and in the next scene he's handing out coffees to them. They gratefully receive them because their boss is obviously concerned for their welfare. In the final scene, he's signing a deal with an older man at the airport where the older man has his private jet. He's just made some incredible deal, helping the older man advance his fortune. Beside the older man is his son, gazing upon this whole sacred event, the signing of the contract. They disappear, and the young banker gazes after them with this benevolent smile on his face.

Again, you get this ideal. Both are variations of the contemporary capitalist ideal. What I found interesting was the two souls being portrayed. Each one was meant to be incredibly attractive. The Western one was utterly alone, totally alienated from every other human being on the planet, just passing through. This was apparently supposed to be really attractive. To me, he looked like a hungry ghost. At least the Chinese banker

was connected. He had people in his office who were like his family and he was looking after them. His client, who he was looking after, was definitely family, so he was connected to human families, interconnections, society.

So he was still completely driven by greed, but his self was much more grounded than the self of the Western figure. I found the Chinese one much more attractive than the Western one. But they're both selling selves. Both advertisements are doing exactly that—if you go for that self, maybe you'll buy that product, subconsciously becoming, at least in one's imagination, that person.

So you have the urge to possess. Then māna, which we said is measuring, and this is the sense of separation and identification. I measure something out, then I fix its borders, and I've turned the universe into two. There's this here and that there. Self, other, this, that. This is the fundamental sense of separation that is at the root of the self. I'm the one in here. You all are the ones out there.

And finally, view—diṭṭhi. This is the narrative, often comes out as the narrative of myself. The story that I tell myself, the stories that I tell myself that define me and define the world that I live in.

So the self is a project. It's something that we're doing. This is mine. I am this. This is myself. And it's always—again we mentioned last time—it's always specific for the Buddha. Like this is mine. This recorder. These glasses. These clothes, this position, this body, this, this, this, this. The Buddha's not saying that there's this something out there which is a self. He's saying that for each experience that arises, awareness lands on it and seizes it. This—this is my self.

But of course that project can't stop because this, whatever it is, turns into something else. It disappears. So what happens to me? Well, this is my self. But that disappears. So this is my self. So there's this quality of restless drivenness in the construction of a self. This of course is craving. Always there's this sense of, on the one hand, separation and the flip side of that is the sense of all this is happening to someone.

And view is the stories that we weave around this whole process. And out of these movements we create an identity.

So then the Buddha moves on from there. He says, therefore—and again he goes through each of the five aggregates—therefore for any kind of body, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, superior or inferior, near or far, all body should be regarded with penetrating understanding realistically in this way: This is not mine. I am not this. This is not myself.

For any kind of feeling, for any kind of perception, for any kind of construction, for any kind of awareness, past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, superior or inferior, near or far, all awareness should be regarded with penetrating understanding realistically in this way: This is not mine. I am not this. This is not myself.

So here we have the heart of the sutta. And what he's presenting is a practice. Again he's not presenting a doctrine. Self is a practice. It's a construction project. Not-self is a practice. It's taking apart.

It's deconstructing. We become intimate with this whole process of constructing a self and we learn to recognize the clinging inherent in this project, and therefore the pain and the unsatisfactoriness of it, and then we start letting it go.

So a lot of what we're doing when we meditate is actually seeing ourselves construct ourselves. This process begins in the very mundane experience of distraction. Once we become sensitive to the movements of the mind, we realize distraction has a tremendous amount to teach us because often what we're doing in it is busily creating someone. We're basically creating someone who's far away from here having a good time. Or, more frustratingly, we create someone who's far away from here having a bad time, having a worse time than the one who's actually sitting here. But we find this attractive because we keep doing it. There's something attractive about this self.

There's something attractive about being miserable. It gives a sense of certainty, a sense of stability, solidity. "This is me, I'm the most miserable person on the planet. Other people try for the title but they don't get there."

I remember many years ago when I started meditating, what I wanted was a bit of bliss. That's all. I didn't think it was a great deal to desire. I was miserable, I wanted some bliss, and I had read these books and apparently you meditate, you attain deep absorptions and you're blissful. So I thought this sounds fair enough. I started meditating and for some strange reason I never got to the bliss. My body hurt, my mind hurt, my mind was restless, it was a struggle, but I kept slogging away because I thought one day the bliss will come.

As I got to know people who were also doing meditation practice, I discovered, to my horror, that other people were getting the bliss. I remember one time I was going to this meditation retreat and I was being given a lift by this young woman who was also going. We were both quite new in meditation. I was shocked to discover that from the first time this woman sat down and meditated, she went into bliss. I was horrified. It was al-

most like a personal betrayal. But she was horrified to discover that every time I sat down there was just nothing but pain and anguish. We were horrified at each other. Some people have this karma. It's amazing.

I cultivated this whole situation into a particular bizarre form of identity. Years later I'm at Mahasi Centre doing relentless meditation practice week after week, month after month. Every now and again an experience which looked, smelled, tasted and felt suspiciously like bliss would arise. I would note it, secure in the knowledge that this won't last. And sure enough, it didn't. Then every now and again an experience would arise which looked, smelled, tasted and felt suspiciously like misery, pain and anguish and I thought, this will stick around. And it did. All of it showed my depth of understanding of the human citta until finally it dawned on me that I was making it happen.

My determination to identify with the misery was feeding it and extending it, and my determined belief that anything pleasant wasn't going to last because it wasn't me, it wasn't for me, it wasn't my possession, of course encouraged it to disappear. My identification completely influenced the whole experience that I was undergoing. But what I found the weirdest of all was my determination to identify with pain. Where did that come from? But I was constructing, I had constructed an identity out of it. And the thing is, I was familiar with it. It was comfortable. I knew who I was. I knew what was going on. I could understand the whole process.

The self is deeply attractive, even when it's painful. The job that we have is to deconstruct it.

And this is what the Buddha was talking about when he offers this formula: this is not mine, I am not this, this is not myself. The "not" is the center of this discourse. Essentially, what it's about is not-self, and the "not" starts to cut through what we take to be real, what we assume is real and me.

Notice that the Buddha, in his usual thorough way, tells us exactly what kind of experience should be subjected to this examination. What is it that we should look at in terms of "not mine," "not this," "not myself"? It's any kind of experience—past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, superior or inferior, near or far.

This covers a lot, obviously, but basically it's any experience that can be characterized by location in space, in time, or in quality. Internal, external, near or far—these are categories based on space: Where is it? Past, future, or present—this is based on time. Gross, subtle, superior, inferior—these are qualities. So any experience that can be characterized by being located in either space or time or quality is covered by this discourse.

This boils down to any experience subject to māna, to conceit. Because it's conceit that creates the fundamental sense of separation that enables an experience to be experienced as "this" rather than "that." It's māna which enables an event to be experienced as here rather than there, past rather than future, and so on—as important rather than trivial, or trivial rather than important.

These categories create meaning and significance. Every experience that provides me with some kind of meaning, some kind of significance, is raw material for creating a self. What this practice is all about is just tearing all that apart, deconstructing it, knocking it back: not, not, not. This is a very radical teaching. It's designed to cut away everything.

The Buddha goes on: "Seeing in this way, the trained, cultivated student is disenchanted with body, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with constructions, disenchanted with consciousness. With disenchantment, obsession fades, and from the fading of obsession comes liberation. With liberation comes the understanding of liberation, along with the knowledge: birth is exhausted, the highest life is fulfilled, what should be done is done, there is no more this." This describes the practice all the way to full awakening.

The practice of not-self is essentially cognitive. It's a wisdom practice, all about seeing and understanding. We investigate, we see what we normally don't look at because we take it for granted as obvious. In practice, as the practice develops, one of the challenges is that we are becoming increasingly intimate with the experience and going deeper and deeper into the citta. Things are becoming more subtle and more refined, and therefore they can be difficult to actually pinpoint. But also we're getting deeper into what we normally never see because we simply assume it. We take it for granted. It's so obvious we don't pay it any attention.

If I'm disturbed, for example—today I'm disturbed, today's a difficult day, I'm quite disturbed—here are the symptoms: boom, boom, boom, boom. This is what I'm thinking about it. These are the conclusions that I've drawn. That seems to be what's important. That's what's going on. But what we don't see, because it's so obvious, is that all of this is the product of the citta in a certain state—a certain sensitive, vulnerable, painful, disturbed state.

We don't actually examine that state, partly because it's so subtle that it's not immediately obvious, and it's not immediately obvious largely because we take it for granted: well, this is me, I am disturbed. So what's important when I am disturbed is my disturbance. That's where all the attention goes. This is what I want you to fix. I'm disturbed. Can't you do something about it?

So all of this is coming out of the self and it assumes the reality of the self and the world created by the self. But the practitioner's job is to recognize: ah, there's disturbance, then what's in here, what's happening in the citta, deep down, that's creating, that's feeding this sense of disturbance? And what that is actually has nothing to do with me. It's something much more elemental.

We emphasized in the beginning of the retreat the relationship to body. We talked about the elements. We practiced the elements. So there's hardness, softness, movement, hot, cold, and so forth. When we examine the experience of the body, it resolves into these elements. Now the thing about these elements is that none of them are me. I am not the hardness. I am not the softness. I am not the movement. So even then we're breaking apart the project of the self.

But as we go deeper into the citta this becomes more and more evident. And again, it's often through what we would normally call distraction, what we would normally dismiss as not worthy of our concern because I'm busy with my meditation and so the distraction is just trying to get in the way—it's that which actually reveals the project.

So the practice of not-self is cognitive, but the result is affective. The heart is transformed. The heart calms with the fading of obsession, and with that liberation becomes possible. So the Buddha presents first the cognitive: see what's going on in order to gain an entry into the heart, into the citta, so that the realm of what we've talked about as vedanā can start to transform. But that's the deeper realm and it's actually more difficult to get to and to transform.

And the turning point is nibbidā, disenchantment. So we're going to have a look at this term. Nibbidā comes from the root vid, to experience, to find, and the prefix nir, which means out. So nibbidā is a finding out, it's a discovery of something.

Enchantment always implies delusion. When we are enchanted by something, we are intoxicated by it. This happens only when we don't fully understand it. So we are enchanted with something, for example, when we feel that if only I get this, then all my problems will be solved. If only I do that, then I'll be okay.

So it might be a job. If only I get the job that I've always wanted, then everything will be all right. It might be the appropriate partner. If only I get him or her, then everything will be all right. It might be the latest computer or whatever. It can be anything from the most trivial to the most significant. But the basic relationship is: if I can only get this, then everything will be all right.

So this is enchantment. And it's based on delusion because in fact when we get whatever we get, it doesn't solve all the problems. Whatever it is turns out to be impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. So it's just part of this endless cycle.

So the experience of nibbidā, of disenchantment, reveals the disappointment in our expectations. Ultimately, compared to what I wanted, I find myself disappointed. So nibbidā, or disenchantment, is a finding out. It also implies an experiencing out, a moving out, away from our normal way of experiencing something to something quite new.

So we think something is going on, but we're wrong. And then at some point we suddenly realize: no, something else is going on. I've been completely mistaken about this all this time. Now I can see something else is going on.

It might be, for example, we're having problems with someone because this particular someone is a complete total bastard—not to put too fine a point on it—because they've done something which is totally unacceptable and they could have no motive other than the desire to cause me personally great distress. Otherwise they wouldn't have done this. What other possible motive would there be?

But then we might find out that what we thought was going on was not, that something completely different is going on and that we had no idea what this person's situation actually was. We had no idea what their motivations were or what they were trying to accomplish. And suddenly we realize this and the experience is: oh, that's what's happening. And immediately all that aversion and distress and so on—it's gone.

Because we can see that something else is going on. So the whole relationship changes. Nibbida, disenchantment, has this quality as well. We realize something else is going on, and then our whole relationship to it changes.

Some classical examples of nibbida: when Siddhartha was a young man and he had his famous experience when he realized the universality of aging, sickness, and death. So he's living his life and there's a certain reality that he takes for granted—his own reality, that of his family and that of his people. And suddenly, bang! He sees differently and everything has changed. The whole world within which he has lived disappears and he's in another world and he needs to be doing something completely different. This is nibbida, this is disenchantment. And in his case, that experience set him off on the search for awakening.

Then the second classic example, again with Siddhartha: his disillusionment with asceticism. Remember we talked about that. One day he realized this is a complete waste of time. This doesn't work. And again it would have been this profound shift, this moving out, finding out, where he suddenly realized that everything he took for granted in

terms of his whole spiritual identity—the great ascetic, champion ascetic—and it's clear from what he was telling his students years later that he really had built up his identity as the champion ascetic of all time. And he suddenly realized the whole thing is a crock. It doesn't work, and he's in this completely different world. And like the first time, he doesn't know what to do about it. All the rules have suddenly changed and he has to work out what he's doing within this new world. And so that propelled him off to the Bodhi tree and awakening.

So nibbida, disenchantment, has this quality. And it can be quite powerful, as in these two examples, but it can be very, very subtle as well. But it's both cognitive and affective. It's both head and heart.

So in terms of the heart, the affective, the heart is moved to say, "Enough." And this happens through cultivating an intimacy with the experience. People who are oppressed by particular obsessions, for example, when they meditate, sometimes it can become very distressing because it just goes on and on and on and on and on. And when will it end? And the answer simply is: it will end when we've had enough. It's that simple. Once I've had enough, I will stop. But until I've had enough, I'll keep going.

But how do I reach this point where the heart—not the head, but the heart—knows that's enough? It comes through this intimacy of experience with it. So not being separated from it by constructing yourself out of it, but again by this developing intimacy into the heart, into the citta, going deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper into it. And when we're intimate with it, then that move naturally occurs. At one point we realize that's enough. And at that point it simply stops. And sometimes that is very sudden.

So people report, for example, they have a particular obsession that arises in the mind. And sometimes a meditator will come into an interview kind of a bit spaced out because they've been harassed by this obsession for years, and they'll report: "It arose, I recognized it, and I just thought, 'No.' And it stopped. And I haven't seen it since."

And this is nibbida. This is disenchantment.

"Could that be applied to drugs and alcohol?"

Yeah. It's the same process. It's like, when do people stop? It's literally when they've had enough. Actually, there's one Sydney barrister, the guy who created the series about the... Rake? Rake, yeah. He's got a column in Fairfax. And in one of his columns he said, "I wish somebody had told me when I was young that the human body can only consume so much alcohol in one lifetime. Because if I had known, I would have paced myself. But as it is, by the time I was forty, I had already consumed it."

So that was nibbida. What he was describing was nibbida. It's like at forty he suddenly realized, "Oh, I've had enough now."

And at that point he stopped. And it's a completely natural development. That kind of insight lasts. He'll stay sober. If the disenchantment is deep enough, then he won't go back. There's no need to go back. Been there, done that. This is an expression of nibbida, of disenchantment.

So nibbida is affective—the heart is moved to say enough. It's also cognitive—a finding out, an understanding that arises through that response. Now I can see what's been going on. Now I understand it. It's affective because the heart changes. What previously seemed desirable now is not. I just don't want that anymore. Other things become desirable, and these are what I pursue. The heart changes.

One of the transitions that practitioners go through is when old pleasures drop away but new ones haven't yet taken their place. A kind of affective confusion can arise. I remember once when I was in Hawaii, one of my Zen friends who was a very interesting character—if you wanted a typical example of the Zen personality, or one particular kind of Zen personality, it was him. He embodied this total directness and almost fierceness of engagement with whatever was happening.

We were walking down this country road in Maui one day when he suddenly stopped. A look of complete confusion and bewilderment came over his face—totally uncharacteristic. I stopped and asked, "What's the matter? What's the problem?" And he said, "Suddenly I realize I don't know what I want." It really hit him.

It can be quite a profound experience when you actually realize that. Our whole life is geared around what we want. But what if we suddenly realize, "I don't know what I want"? Who am I then? Where do I go? Sometimes we find that what we used to want, what used to be pleasurable, is gone. Maybe we're not quite sure about what's replacing it.

When one set of desires drops away, along with it could well drop away a whole social network. Friends call asking, "Why don't you want to come out? You haven't come out with us for months. What's the problem?" Well, I just don't want to. And then the social network is gone. The person is left wondering, "Where is my social network? I haven't actually found other people who want what I want."

The heart changes, desire changes, and with it the world within which we live. When our heart is changed, the world that we live in is different. And this, again, is cognitive. The world is different. What previously was hidden is now obvious. What previously we could never have seen is now as clear as day.

This disenchantment has this transformative, turning-around effect. And again, with this discourse, if you read it superficially, you might get the impression that disenchantment happens just once. But it happens again and again at different levels.

One way of looking at it is as a process of simple maturity. I used to challenge my audiences by asking: "How many of you today follow or chase the same desires that you had when you were ten?" They've all changed now. We're all chasing different things because we've matured. What was desirable when we were ten is no longer desirable today.

There was one Englishman in the audience who immediately objected and said, "Except football." So maybe that's the exception to the Buddha's teaching—there's always an exception to something.

The Buddha says that with disenchantment, obsession fades. And from the fading of obsession comes liberation. This fading of obsession is *virāga*, which we've already discussed. *Rāga*, usually translated as lust or passion, literally means color. *Virāga* is literally the fading of color.

The image is of a dyed cloth. When you wash it, it looks the same. You wash it again—it looks the same. You wash it, wash it, wash it, and at some point you look at it and realize it's not the same anymore. It's faded. Then it progressively fades further. This is the fading of obsession.

Again, what we're talking about is a natural process of maturity. We're not so driven; we have some distance that we didn't have before. And it comes about gradually. Part of the gradual aspect is that we don't notice the step-by-step progression.

This is especially true when we're doing meditation—it's like we're at the coalface, looking at the details and specifics. It's a very in-your-face kind of relationship, which is characteristic of mindfulness. And we don't notice the changes happening because they're so slight day by day. It's like we don't notice ourselves growing up. We don't notice ourselves getting old until something happens—"Oh, I used to be able to do this but I can't do it now." We don't notice how that happens step by step by step.

It's the same with the fading of obsession. We don't notice every step of the way, but there are points when we realize, "Oh, things are different now. My relationship to the world is different from what it used to be. My relationship to others, to myself, has changed. It's different now." So this is a gradual process.

With disenchantment, obsession fades, and from the fading of obsession comes liberation. Liberation is *vimutti* in Pali or *vimokṣa* in Sanskrit. *Vimutti* comes from the verb *muñcati*—to release—and it's the same verb used in archery. If you imagine firing a bow, we pull it back to its maximum tension and then release. The arrow is released and goes away very suddenly.

So liberation has this implication of suddenness—a sudden shock of awareness. It's like suddenly, "It's different. I've never seen this before. This is new." We suddenly know something quite new. And again, it's unexpected. It always appears as if by accident.

My old Zen teacher, Robert Aitken Roshi, used to say that awakening always comes about by accident. The practice makes us accident-prone—and that's the causal relationship. Nothing that we do in the practice causes liberation, but it sets up the conditions in which the accident might occur. And of course the Zen stories are full of these accidents. They really like these accidents.

And unless you know the backstory, you get the impression that awakening just falls from heaven. But of course it doesn't just fall from heaven. It comes about through years of preparing the conditions.

So liberation implies this sudden shock. Again, it can be gross or very, very subtle. Suddenly something is new, perhaps undefinable, perhaps we can't even pinpoint what it is. But it's no longer normality. Something has changed.

With liberation comes the understanding of liberation. And here, I think this kind of move is typical of the Buddha. Liberation could be seen as affective, but also cognitive. But understanding definitely implies a reflexive distance and looking back on the situation. We know ourselves and we know ourselves to be different, so we have a sense of what happened or the significance of what happened.

We've been talking about this before in terms of the meaning of an experience. Something happens, and then we get a sense of what this means. So I might recognize, I might read the experience in some way: "Oh, I've just seen impermanence, or I've seen dukkha, or I've seen not-self." Now what we're doing is putting a meaning on the experience. And with that meaning comes a sense of, well, this is who I am, and this is the world.

So in a sense, we're creating a new self. But it's a different self. And it's a self held differently than before. But it's the meaning that gives the experience significance and therefore changes the way that we live.

So with liberation comes the understanding of liberation, along with the knowledge: "Birth is exhausted, the highest life is fulfilled, what should be done is done, there is no more of this."

Now this is—in a linear sense, this passage will be read as full awakening. In a non-linear sense, this is more like the experience of emptiness that can occur a number of times. But each time that it occurs, it has this quality of "there is no more of this." And the "this" indicates the place where we ground ourselves—the final layer of concept that tells us who we are and what this means.

So the "this" here indicates the "I am this." It's what the awareness lands upon to create something and someone out of. And it's taken away. There is no more "this." Pull out the rug. And there's nothing.

We've looked at the self as a process. The self is a project. A project never completed. So we define ourselves through story, and our story is never completed. It's never finished. How many people here have actually completed the last chapter? Or is there another one that's going to come? It's always another one that's going to come. There's always another episode in the drama of our lives.

And so part of the meaning of this experience right now is always the fact that it's the prelude to something else which is going to come next. And this is why death is such a challenge to the self. Because death represents a sudden cutting off of the story. Suddenly, chop—story's cut.

And it always arrives as a cheat. It's like following a TV drama which you're really invested in, and they suddenly stop it before the end. There are definitely several more episodes, at least, that could be squeezed out of this. And then suddenly it's all over. And you can't help but feel cheated before everything's wrapped up.

And death is like this. So we may be ready to die, but never today. Because we haven't wrapped up the loose ends yet. There's another episode that has to come first. But the final episode never does arrive. And so when it comes to an end, it's always a shock and it's always a cheat.

Have you seen people ready for death?

Like those who have come to a point of peace. They've been sick for a long time perhaps, and they are actually quite ready. I'm talking about the normal human condition rather than someone who's been practicing and preparing for it.

And this is the power of the "no more" - na param. In terms of the practice, in terms of realization, right now already in the middle of the drama where one day succeeds another, there is no more. This is the realization that there really is no next. That this is all that there is and this is all that there ever has been or ever will be. There never has been any past and there never has been any future.

This understanding can happen now. In fact, it can only happen right now. And when it happens, it's bleeding obvious that nothing is going to happen next because there is no next. Nothing ever did happen because there's no past.

The understanding of anatta always arrives with a sense of completion, that there's nothing further needed. There's nothing extra that has to be added. There's no possibility of anything extra. And this is the abandonment of the conceit "I am" - the abandonment of asmi mana.

Again, mana is measurement and comparison. Past and future depend on mana, because past and future can only exist when they're measured against the present. The present can only exist when it is measured against past and future. I can only exist measured against you, and you can only exist measured against me. Good can only exist measured against bad, and bad can only exist measured against good.

But when mana drops away, all positions cease. They're just gone. No past, no present, and no future. No duality. Mana is all about duality. The cessation of mana is all about non-duality. Duality and non-duality are terms that entered later, but the Buddha's talking about the same thing.

This is why the Anattalakkhana Sutta ends with silence. "This is not mine. I am not this. This is not my soul." The "not" is the most we can say, and even this is too much. As soon as we reach out and say, "this is what it is," then we're back in mana, in conceit, because "this" can only exist measured against "that." As soon as we move in to make something out of the experience, we're back in mana, we're back in conceit.

All we have is silence, or at least that's the culminating point of this discourse. It's not a passive silence. It's action in the world but without an actor. It's movement but without someone who moves. It's life but without someone who is living. A path without anybody walking it. But at that point, there is nothing to be said about it. Even "not" is too much.

"This is what the Blessed One said, and the group of five bhikkhus rejoiced in the Blessed One's words. And as he spoke, the hearts of the group of five bhikkhus were fully liberated from the taints. Then there were six arahants in the world."

Arahant - fully awakened. Now there are six people fully awakened: the Buddha and the five bhikkhus. The Dharma wheel is turning and Buddhism is taking shape. There's now a community of awakened ones that exists.

Then there were six Arahants in the world—the Buddha and the five bhikkhus, all fully awakened. The Dharma wheel was turning, and Buddhism was taking shape. There was now a community of awakened ones in existence.

The transformation was complete. What had begun with the Buddha's solitary awakening under the Bodhi tree had blossomed into a sangha of realized beings. The first disciples had received the teaching, practiced with dedication, and attained the same liberation their teacher had found. The three jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—were now established in the world.

This marks a pivotal moment in Buddhist history. No longer was the Buddha walking alone with his realization. The teaching had been transmitted, understood, and embodied by others. The possibility of awakening was proven not to be unique to one extraordinary individual, but accessible to sincere practitioners who followed the path with right effort and understanding.

From this humble beginning—one teacher and five students gathered in a deer park—the Dharma would spread across continents and through millennia, offering countless beings the same possibility of liberation that these first six awakened ones had realized.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 24

Anattā & the Problem of Life-After-Life

Patrick Kearney · 1h22

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney examines one of Buddhism's most misunderstood doctrines: life-after-life (rebirth). Through careful analysis of the Anattalakkhana Sutta and the Buddha's three knowledges on the night of his awakening, Kearney demonstrates how our conventional understanding of rebirth—based on the assumption that 'someone' dies and is reborn—fundamentally misses the Buddha's actual teaching.*
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> *The talk centers on māna (measuring/conceit), the deepest form of self-making that creates our sense of separation and identity. Kearney explains how the Buddha's teaching on paṭicca-samuppāda (dependent arising) reveals that what we take to be 'beings' are actually temporary patterns arising from networks of cause and effect (karma-vipāka). The Buddha tracks not the journey of individual beings through lifetimes, but the flowing trajectories of action and consequence.*
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> *Drawing from the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38), Kearney shows how mature practitioners lose interest in questions like 'Was I in the past?' or 'Will I be in the future?'—recognizing these as expressions of craving and delusion rather than genuine spiritual inquiry. He addresses common Western resistance to rebirth teachings, distinguishing between scientific materialism and dharma as different discourses, and concludes with reflections on how opening our imagination to the Buddha's infinite cosmology can transform our approach to practice and awakening.*

Over the past two nights we looked at the Anatta Lakkhana Sutta, the not-self characteristic, and one issue that has emerged in the interviews is where rebirth or reincarnation fits into all of this. So tonight we're going to examine this question.

The doctrine of what I call life-after-life is very important for the Buddha, yet in our culture it's widely rejected and widely misunderstood. This misunderstanding is part cultural and largely stems from the fact that the whole thing revolves around the issue of not-self, of anattā. So it fits as part of the teaching on this discourse, which is what we're going to explore tonight.

We'll start with māna—usually translated as conceit, though it literally means measuring. We spoke about this earlier: at the surface the self often appears as a series of narratives, but at the bottom of it is māna, which involves measurement and therefore

separation. If I take something and measure it, I establish its boundaries and so separate it from everything else. Māna always implies separation, and along with that comes comparison. If this is separate from that, then how does this stack up against that?

Māna goes very deep in the human mind, according to the Buddha. On the way to full awakening, māna is the last fetter to vanish—the final barrier. When this goes completely, that's full enlightenment. This demonstrates how deep it goes in the mind.

We can get a sense of it, particularly the conceit "I am" (asmi-māna), in our experience of something behind our awareness—something that looks out and is aware. If I'm aware, I'm aware of something, so there's something out there, and then there's the awareness itself. This is the basic dyad we're working with. But I have a sense that there's someone or something behind the awareness—in a sense, the audience of the show.

This something has no content because it's behind awareness. The content of awareness is what we are aware of, which is "out there." But to be aware of something, we have this sense that there's something or someone "back here" to whom this is happening. We could turn around and make that the object of awareness, but whatever we are aware of, still, behind that awareness, we have the sense that there's something or someone there who experiences all this.

So māna is always in the shadows. It has no content. It's not a specific something—just this vague sense. It cannot be pinned down to anything. So māna, "I am," has no content, but it's energized by craving (taṇhā) and searches for content. Awareness goes out, as does desire and aversion, looking for something. So "I am"—but exactly what am I? Exactly who am I?

We're constantly searching for some aspect of experience, something we are aware of that we can hold to ground our sense of separateness, to pin it down as something. "I am this." We can see how the mind searches for something to think about. When we observe how the mind throws up cognitions, there are plenty of them, but there's tremendous energy in the mind that sooner or later will cause awareness to move out, grab one of them, and turn it into a story: "That's who I am, I am this." Or with feelings that come up—some kind of feeling or sensation in the body—bang, "That's me." Awareness grounds itself on that and we construct an identity.

This is what we've been discussing over the past couple of nights, and it's what we're experiencing in our practice all the time.

Now, this whole movement creates a way of relating to the world that revolves around what the Buddha calls extremes (anta). Remember we talked about those in the middle way—the middle way rejects anta, it rejects extremes.

In the case of māna, the two extremes are sameness and difference. As soon as I make that move of separation, this is different from that because there's separation—this is not that. So there's a sense of difference. But to have a sense of difference, there has to be a background sense of sameness, because without a background sense of sameness it doesn't make any sense to talk about difference.

So these two moves that we make—these really fundamental moves—this is different from that, but this is the same as this. We make those moves all the time and construct a world and a self out of them.

If there's identity, if there's something I am—I am this—then there has to be something beyond, something outside of identity: I am not that. These are the basic movements that construct identity: sameness and difference. In terms of the middle way, both of these possibilities are extremes. They're both wrong.

These two movements construct the basic building blocks of identity. I am this, so I'm not that. I'm male, so I'm not female. I'm Patrick, so I'm not young. I'm good, so I'm not bad, and so on.

From the middle way—in other words, outside identity—both these moves are extremes and wrong. But from inside identity, this way of looking at the self and the world makes perfect sense, and it's the only sensible way to look at things. Either this is me or it isn't. If I look into a mirror, what are the choices? It's either me in that mirror or it's somebody else. Either this is mine or it belongs to somebody else. It's not complicated. Either I am Patrick, or I'm somebody else. Either this is right, or it's wrong.

From inside identity, all of that doesn't just make perfect sense—it's obviously the only way things can operate. From outside identity, from the context of the middle way, they're both wrong.

Now, Siddhartha, who became the Buddha, penetrated into all this. Before he became the Buddha, on the night that he sat down under the tree, what happened according to the early texts? There were two accounts of his awakening, and one tells about the three vedas that he went through throughout the night—throughout the three sections of the night.

These are the three knowledges. During the first third of the night he remembered his previous lives. During the second third he saw the falling and arising of other beings in the present. In the third of the night he attained awakening. Let's look at them, but especially the first one.

This is how the first one is described. For each life that he remembers, he says: "There I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my food"—my nutriment, which can be broader than food, everything that sustained life, but especially food—"such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life term, and passing away from there, I reappeared elsewhere."

He goes back lifetime after lifetime, and this is what he remembers for each one. All of these things that he mentions are identity markers. They constitute what creates a sense of identity within Indian society—how an identity is constructed.

The Bodhisattva is looking back through his memory and recognizing that at one time he held to a particular identity, but before that it was another one, and before that he had another identity, and before that he had another one—and another and another and another. He's doing something that we can do, except that he did it for multiple eons whereas we might only do it for twenty years, fifty years or whatever.

What this is about is that the Bodhisattva recognizes from his personal experience the contingency and the impermanence of identity, and how identity changes over time.

So bringing it more to our level, we could say when I was 10 I was this, when I was 20 I was that, when I was 30 I was something else, and so on. What's happening is his sense of identity is starting to be shaken up. His sense of personal identity is still there, but it's starting to be loosened. This is preparing him for enlightenment.

Then in the second knowledge, the Bodhisattva sees the same contingency of identity flowing from one existence to another—not in the past but in the present. The first knowledge is all about memory. The second extends universally outward, not just within his individual personal memory stream. So it's the same understanding, but going out in the present and universally. Not simply his identity being shaken up because it's impermanent and dependent upon conditions, but everybody's identity is caught up in the same way.

These two knowledges give the same message: identity is not fixed. It's not primary. There's something else going on which is deeper than identity. These knowledges prepared him for awakening, softened him up for the awakening.

If we look at ourselves, we take identity to be primary. For us, that's what's at the bottom. This assumption we have is fundamentally not empirical, because it's not that we can find this identity. The identity is the product of māna. Māna is always in the shadows and we can never pin it down. So we can't actually find this identity.

If you look at what you're doing when you're meditating, a lot of the time what you're doing is failing to find it. You're seeing a process of construction. You're seeing it go very deep. You're seeing it driven by craving. It's incredibly strong. But you're not actually landing on the fixed, permanent identity. So the assumption that there is this identity is not empirical. We assume it. We experience from it—we don't experience it, we experience from it.

But this assumption is what gives death its power, and why we're so preoccupied by death and by what happens afterward. Because with death, we are the ones who die. And with birth, we are the ones who are born. And in fact, that's what makes it interesting.

The Buddha rejects both of these assumptions. For him, identity is not primary. What is primary is paṭiccasamuppāda—dependent arising. Identity, self, emerges as a series of patterns swirling around in the matrix of dependent arising. It's rather like a stream where at the same place, at certain times of year, a whirlpool will appear. Then the conditions change and the whirlpool ceases. But next year, it's back. If we visit that stream, that particular part of the stream, at the same time each year, there it is—the whirlpool. It's been here for years. I used to visit this whirlpool when I was a child, and there it is.

We look at that whirlpool, and for us, identity is primary. That's what it is. But in fact, it isn't. It's just a temporary, contingent result of a complex process which comes and goes.

And what's primary is that process. Does that make sense?

So the Buddha definitely believed in life after life, and if we ask: when the Buddha sees beings move from one existence to another, what is it that he's tracing? What's he tracking? We naturally think what he's tracing is beings. Beings are born, they die, and then they're reborn, and he's following them life after life. We naturally think in that way because for us, identity is primary. We operate from within self.

But for the Buddha, what's primary is dependent arising. He's not tracking beings. What he's tracking are networks of cause and effect over time, and from these networks emerge the perception of beings. And then those perceptions cease. And other

perceptions arise, and they cease, and so on. In other words, he's tracing networks of karma vipaka—action and its ripening. He's not tracing networks of beings. You see the difference?

When the Buddha speaks of life after life, he's not saying "I am born here and then I'm born there and then I'm born over there." We tend to think that's what he's saying. We just assume that's what he's saying. He has to be saying that. But he's not saying that.

Even Buddhist intellectuals who argue against life after life—and the example I always give is Stephen Batchelor, because I was struck very much by his chapter on rebirth in his book Buddhism Without Beliefs. I think it was chapter two where he rejects rebirth, life after life. I read the chapter and I thought, "No, he can't be saying what I think he's saying." So I started at the beginning and read it again. But the more I read it, the more he was saying what I thought he was saying.

People who argue against the doctrine of rebirth are actually arguing against the idea that it's possible for any being to be somehow transported from one body to another. That's what they're arguing against. And so the question is: well, okay, what gets transported? Obviously not the body. So the mind, or some esoteric aspect of the mind. But this esoteric aspect of the mind has to contain all the data required to shape this person's life. And nothing they can do can make this make any sense. It just doesn't hold water. There's no convincing argument. So they reject the doctrine of life after life.

But the problem is that what they're rejecting has got absolutely nothing to do with what the Buddha is teaching. The Buddha is not teaching that beings die and are then reborn. He's not saying that. He's saying that there are flowing patterns of dependent arising. These operate through time and give rise to the appearances that we perceive as beings. And these flows of cause and effect flow through very particular trajectories, based on karma vipaka—action and its ripening.

So it's not that this being becomes that being, becomes this other being. It's this cause leads to that effect, which manifests as this cause leading to that effect, which manifests as this cause leading to that effect, and so on. That's what he's talking about.

The way we think is: we think there are beings, and if we're Buddhists and we're learned and spiritual, then we say, "Ah yes, these beings are caught up in this universal pattern of cause and effect." That's not what the Buddha is teaching. The Buddha is teaching there is a universal matrix of cause and effect, and from this emerges the appearance that we label as beings. It's quite different.

We think in this way because we assume that our fundamental situation is—and let's clear away all the bullshit and just get down to the basics—we think that our fundamental situation is that either I will survive death or I will not survive death. Really, that's it. If we toss out the spiritual mumbo jumbo, this is what we come down to. This is our natural way of relating to this situation.

And of course, if I am the one who survives death, who in some mysterious way is reborn somewhere else, then I'm interested. This is important. If it's somebody else who is reborn, maybe in some abstract cosmological way, I'm not really interested.

I mean, that's a nice kind of doctrine, but I'm not really interested. And if I don't survive death, I'm definitely not interested.

This is our natural way of relating to these questions, and you can see that all of it is based on "me." What happens to me? But the Buddha is not looking at this from inside any sense of me. He's speaking from beyond identity, from outside identity. And there it's a whole different matter.

If we start talking about life after life, then what we want to know about is who lives after death. That's important, isn't it? From the Buddha's perspective, if we ask the question, "Who will leave this hall after the talk?" and we answer that question, we have also answered the question, "Who lives after death?" Because it's the same question from his perspective. It's just a different way of asking exactly the same question. And if you can answer one, you can answer the other.

The Buddha has this sense of an enormous universe within which all of this takes place. He has a variety of terms to talk about what is usually translated as rebirth. One is *upapatti*, going up or reappearance. Another one is *punabhava*, further becoming, renewed existence. And there are other terms as well, but I haven't collected them. Basically what they refer to is the Buddha's sense of the infinite possibilities of existence that are inherent in the universe. Because for him the universe is infinite. Within the infinite universe there are infinite possibilities. And essentially I think this is what he's referring to.

They do not refer to the fate of persons as they travel from one life to the next. They're not talking about that—although of course we think they are. We assume they are.

From inside identity, if there's a new birth, this is either me or it's not me. That's it. But once we step outside of identity, that dichotomy simply does not apply. The question, "Who is reborn?" simply does not apply. It's an irrelevant question. It doesn't grapple with what the Buddha is talking about.

These questions only arise within identity. They make sense only inside identity because they assume the real existence of the "who"—who is the one who dies and is reborn, or not reborn. All of these questions are just variations on the fundamental question of the self, which is, of course, "But what about me?"

From the Buddhist perspective, there can be no answer to these questions because the questions themselves are the products of craving and delusions. Take away the craving and delusion and the questions don't even arise. Whatever answer we come up with to these questions are simply expressions of craving and delusion which in turn feed more craving and delusion. It's just cycling around.

As a local Zen teacher remarked, "You cannot give a straight answer to a crooked question."

For the Buddha, there's only one way in which these questions can be answered satisfactorily, and that comes from the dissolution of the question itself. When the question dissolves, that's the answer. In other words, in this life, the craving and the delusion that drives the question—the obsession with the fate of the self, myself, the self that survives through time—when that obsession drops away, the questions drop away, and that's the answer.

The questions and any answers that we come up with are just fictional narratives. They're just more stories. They're just more blah blah blah. This of course includes answers like, "Of course there's life after life. You cannot be a Buddhist unless you believe in life after life. Unless you think you're going to be reborn, then you can't be a proper Buddhist." That too is just another fictional narrative.

We've been talking about this quite abstractly. Let me give a more concrete example. The example that I always give is based on an event that happened to me years ago after my mother died, having lived in the same house for fifty years. The family had lived there for fifty years. My mother dies and we've got to clean the place up. So there's fifty years of life...

In the course of this excavation, I came across a whole bundle of photographs, and one in particular caught my eye. It showed a boy sitting under a tree wearing some kind of school uniform, looking to be about fifteen years old. I was looking at this black and white photo, and of course the thought that arose in me was: Is this me? Or is it not me?

Because those are the two possibilities, aren't they? I mean, if you come across such a photograph, you're looking at it and there are two possibilities. This is either a photo of me or it's a photo of somebody else—it's not me.

The problem is that although I could create some kind of satisfactory narrative based on either of those answers, neither position actually sheds any light on the nature of the person who's looking now at the image, at the photo, and asking that question. All they do is create stories.

So let's go through the two possibilities. The first answer: "Oh, this is me. This is a photo of me." It doesn't work. Because it's perfectly obvious I am not that boy. I mean, I look quite different now. And I have very different thoughts and feelings. And I would never have made the same mistakes that that fifteen-year-old boy made. There's no way I would be that stupid. You know, for a start, I am not nearly as driven and confused as that boy in that photograph is. So the answer "This is me" doesn't work.

So there's only one other possibility: "This is someone else." But if I say, "Well, this is someone else," that doesn't work either. Because if this photo is not of me, then how can I be so intimate with what that boy was going through? How can I know what his thoughts and feelings were? How can I understand the situation that he was living through? So that doesn't work either.

Then I could try the variation: "This was me." But all of those answers simply are narratives. It's a sense of identity that feeds a narrative. This was me, but now I've changed, because what happened after this was such and such, and I can track it through the years. So I've got an identity narrative over time. But that's all I've got—I've just got another story.

But if I answer based on paticcasamutpada, on dependent arising, then I can create an answer that sheds light on this situation right now, on how this situation right now is constructed right now.

So, for example, the decisions that that fifteen-year-old boy made continue to shape this situation now—this one that we're sitting in. If that fifteen-year-old boy had made different decisions, we would not be sitting in this hall undergoing this retreat. This retreat would not be happening, and whatever experiences you have had since the beginning of this retreat would never have occurred.

So it's basic to the Buddha's understanding that this experience, this situation right now, is shaped in large part by decisions made previously. And this is karma-vipaka—action and its ripening.

This is one reason why karma is so important. The Buddha sees every choice as being significant because it shapes the universe. And this is why he feels it's so important that we really get to understand that process and respect it. It's easy to have a sense of powerlessness and to forget the fact that we help shape this world.

And we're doing it all the time, whether we want to or not, whether we know it or not. It's just the nature of things.

So the Buddha sees no reason to believe that death would interrupt this process of cause and effect. Death is just another event that arises and ceases dependent upon conditions. And birth is just another event that arises and ceases dependent upon conditions.

Death and what happens after—these questions are central to our fears and our vulnerabilities because we think of them in terms of the duality of existence and non-existence. My death. My annihilation. The possibility of my resurrection. For us, death has become so enormous because we think of it in terms of "mine." When we add that possessive pronoun, then it becomes really huge.

But for the Buddha, any question or answer based on the assumption of self—any question based on the assumption of self—is the wrong question, because it makes sense only inside identity. Any answer we give to it is guaranteed to be wrong.

So the Buddha does not care about theories of post-mortem survival. He has absolutely no interest in them. And when you hear people arguing against life after life, or even for it, what they're arguing about are theories of post-mortem survival. The Buddha never presents a theory of post-mortem survival. He's just not interested in it. That's not what he's talking about. He has no interest in the fate of the self.

What he's interested in is how we live now. That's important. And it's important in part because how we live now will shape the future. So what we do now is important, is significant.

To give an example of how the Buddha addresses this particular issue, if you look at the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta, The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving—this is in the Majjhima Nikāya, number 38. In one part of it, he's examining his students on their practice. We see the Buddha operating as a meditation teacher.

He says to them: "Understanding and seeing in this way, would you run back to the past? Were we in the past? Were we not in the past? What were we in the past? How were we in the past? Having been what, what did we become in the past?"

And the students answer, "No, bhante, we wouldn't do that."

"Understanding and seeing in this way, would you run forward to the future? Shall we be in the future? Shall we not be in the future? What shall we be in the future? How shall we be in the future? Having been what, what shall we become in the future?"

"No, bhante."

Now, you notice that in these questions, the emphasis is not on past and future. The emphasis is on the "I" who runs back to the past or forward to the future. That's what he's talking about—the identity that runs back to the past to confirm its reality, or runs forward to the future to confirm its reality. And the mature students are saying frankly, "I can't be bothered. It's of absolutely no interest to me. It doesn't occur to me to think about it, much less get agitated about it."

"Understanding and seeing in this way, would you now be inwardly perplexed about the present? Am I? Am I not? What am I?"

How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go? No.

So not even the self in the present—the identity within the present—is of any interest. The self needs past and future because the self needs to be. Only past and future can give the stability through time that the self needs to actually set up camp in any convincing way. But the Buddha is saying that we can't even find it here and now, much less before and after. What we have is this, and that's all we have.

So all this is bound up with the realization of anatta, of not-self, and the middle way. Identity and difference. Me, not me. Alive, dead. For the Buddha these are extremes, aren't they? The question becomes: who are we between these two extremes? Can this question be answered in the language of identity? And if we're looking for an answer, when would such an answer be available? Well, I'll give you a hint—not in the past and not in the future.

So that's my exploration of life after life and its role in the Buddha's teaching.

There's another section which we have time to go through, along with a couple of questions.

"So you're saying the Buddha remembered his previous lives. Whose previous lives?"

No, the Buddha didn't remember his previous lives. The Bodhisattva did, before the awakening.

"Before the awakening?"

Yes.

"So his identity?"

He still had an identity.

"So previous identities?"

Yes, he remembered his own past and he remembered it in the framework of "this is who I was." So he still had a sense of identity.

"Previous lives?"

Yes, but he extended it back through previous lives, which you may choose to take as mythological rather than actual. But what he did was think back on previous identities that he had held.

"So now that's not true, you're saying?"

Right. At one point he held one identity, and then later he held another, and then later he held another, and later he held another. But each time he was holding one, his basic assumption was "this is who I am." And in that assumption is also the assumption "I've always been this, I always will be this." And each time it was wrong.

So he's shaking up his sense—the solidity, the fixedness—of his sense of identity. Because he can see that he's had lots of them. None of them have stuck around. So why should this one? None of them stuck around when identities come and go. It's the personalities.

So it's a shaking up of his sense of identity. There's still underlying—he's still not enlightened—so there's still this assumption that there has to be something there. But it's just shaking him up. So it's warming him up for the awakening.

"So that's its function in the meditation practice when it comes up?"

Yes, I think so.

If he's experiencing several different identities, that must mean—for me, at least—that something is moving from one identity to the next.

Which is probably what he assumed at that time. But you know, if he is seeing several identities, they're kind of connected. So what's connecting them?

That's the question, and he found out that they weren't connected—except in terms of cause and effect. Not identity, not something that travels through. But there's a cause here that gives rise to an effect. That in turn becomes a cause for something else to arise, which in turn becomes a cause for something else to arise.

So you don't have something fixed that travels through time. You have an event now. And that event is caused in part by something that happened before, and it will be in part the condition for something that will happen later. But this event is only now.

So the past lives the Buddha saw—they have no relationship to each other?

They have a cause-and-effect relationship to each other, a karmic relationship. But it's not the same person. Not on a personal level, not on any level except the patterns of cause and effect.

It's like the example of the whirlpool. What's the identity relationship of the whirlpool that appears in spring versus the whirlpool that appeared in the same place last year? Is it the same whirlpool? Is it a different whirlpool?

It's a different belief system, a completely different way of looking at the universe, which is alien to our normal way of seeing. We look at the universe from inside a sense of identity, and from there certain things make sense and others don't. But if you step outside that framework, it's a whole different world out there. And the Buddha is operating from outside that framework.

What about those children who claim to have experienced past lives and can do things like recite chunks of sacred Buddhist texts? Is that kind of like the Buddha before his enlightenment?

Memories arise, given appropriate conditions. And these trajectories of cause and effect go back eons. So yes, a memory arises. It fits within the same paradigm. It's no different in principle from remembering what you had for breakfast. What it is, is something being created in the present, but created dependent upon certain conditions. These conditions are immense, complex. So for some people, the conditions are such that what arises in the present—what is constructed in the present—is a memory of something that happened five hundred years ago.

I used to go to Buddha House in Adelaide, which is Tibetan, and they go on and on about doing this for your next life so you'll have a better next life. This is how the subsequent traditions worked out how to persuade people to be good—the equivalent of "if you're bad you'll go to hell, if you're good you'll go to heaven." It's at the same level.

You get literature with morality tales: someone is a thief in this life and they're reborn as a poor person, or someone is stingy in this life and reborn poor, or someone generous is reborn rich. Therefore you should be generous, not stingy.

But if you look at those stories from the perspective of dependent arising, the problem is you've got a single cause and a single effect. And the Buddha makes it perfectly clear there is no single cause and no single effect. It's an immense, infinitely complex network of causes giving rise to an immense, infinitely complex network of effects.

Now the problem is that this complexity—this immense web of interconnected causes and conditions—is too sophisticated to be boiled down to a simple morality tale. So these stories just push aside the nuanced reality and present simplified narratives. Hopefully they produce the right ethical result for their audience. This may explain why someone like Stephen Batchelor reacted so strongly to these teachings—coming from a tradition that placed enormous emphasis on believing these literal interpretations.

I mean, there's the whole concept of what's called the ālaya-vijñāna—the store consciousness or substrate consciousness in Tibetan Buddhism. I've even heard Ajahn Mahabua speak about this years ago, discussing the consciousness that transmigrates from one person to the next. Even among Buddhists, there's often strong belief in something substantial that actually moves from here to there.

But we can understand this more skillfully through simple cause-and-effect relationships. Picture a line of billiard balls—when one is struck, the energy appears to move through each ball in sequence. It looks like the same energy traveling through, like there's continuity of some thing, but it's actually just cause-and-effect relationships operating at each point of contact.

What we're talking about is causal continuity, rather than continuity of identity. Rather than some unchanging essence that remains the same throughout, we have causal continuity—a trajectory of cause and effect flowing forward through time.

Shall we explore the cultural dimensions of this teaching? I'd like to share some observations about why our particular culture has such difficulty coming to terms with the teaching of rebirth. It's really about our specific cultural conditioning.

Everyone raised in a culture—which means everyone—is conditioned to cling to certain beliefs as obviously true and right. We're often shocked when we encounter another culture that doesn't share these assumptions. We wonder why they haven't gotten their act together, not recognizing that they're simply clinging to different cultural certainties.

In our culture, we cling to science. Human beings crave certainty, and we've been trained to seek that certainty through science. Science, we believe, will tell us what's actually happening. For any belief to be worthy of acceptance, it must pass some kind of scientific test—which in practice means it must fit within standard materialist orthodoxy. Obviously, rebirth immediately gets eliminated by this filter.

When the Buddha's teachings differ from scientific materialism, we tend to frame this as a conflict—Dharma versus science. We see a battle requiring us to choose sides, forced to select either Dharma or science. This is exactly the same predicament that fundamentalist Christians face when they feel compelled to choose between Biblical literalism and scientific findings.

But Dharma is not science, nor is it contrary to science. It's simply a different discourse entirely. Dharma is teaching about the nature of human experience from the perspective of the experiencing subject—the one actually undergoing the experience.

Consider this example: It's commonly stated in Buddhist books and teachings that the Buddha taught the universe is beginningless. Have you encountered this claim? The Buddha never actually said this. What he said was: "A beginning to this saṃsāra cannot be discerned." There's a profound difference between these statements.

"The universe has no beginning" is an ontological statement about the nature of the world out there. "It is impossible to discern the beginning of saṃsāra" is not a statement about the universe itself—it's a statement about the nature of human experience and the limits of our perception.

This distinction is crucial. It's the difference between a third-person statement and a first-person statement. Science operates as third-person discourse, claiming to describe the objectively existing world out there. Dharma concerns itself with the nature of human experience itself.

Therefore, Dharma cannot actually conflict with science, because it addresses an entirely different domain of inquiry.

If we get the two of them mixed up, then if you bring in a doctrine or teaching like life after life, you've either got to believe it or take a scientific approach. In other words, if you want evidence for the teaching of life after life, where will we find it? Well, in our culture, we would think we find it in science.

And there are scientific studies about this. The famous one is University of Virginia collecting immense amounts of data about memories of previous lives of people who actually have, or claim, memories of previous lives. And some of these have been checked out and they appear to be valid. So you have sociological evidence that fits within science.

But from the perspective of Dharma, if we're looking for the evidence of the teaching of life after life, where would we find it? We would find it in the nature of our experience, right here and right now. This is where we would find it. Experience arises from a cause, and it ceases from a cause, and this process rolls on and on and on. And I've never experienced the beginning of it, and I've never experienced the end of it. All my experience tells me is that an event arises because of causes and conditions, it ceases because of causes and conditions, and another event arises because of causes and conditions, and it ceases because of causes and conditions, and so on.

So science tends to get in the way. And this is linked with our determination to cling to familiar cultural categories. Anything new in the Dharma that we come across, we force to fit into these preconceived categories. We don't generally consider the possibility of making the effort to view the world differently, the way the Buddha viewed the world.

Dharma is not a European cultural category—it does not appear in European culture. So what we tend to do when we come across Dharma is chop it up into categories that are familiar to us: science, for example, or religion. These are the two obvious ones. Science can be subdivided. Psychology—the Buddha taught psychology. Or philosophy—the Buddha taught philosophy. So we can divide it up.

We can even be more sophisticated. We can say some aspects of the Dharma are science, some aspects are psychology, some aspects are philosophy, some aspects are religion, like all this life after life business. So we'll just ditch the religion ones and keep the others. This is somehow purer.

But the problem we create there is that we necessarily misunderstand Dharma, because science, psychology, philosophy, but above all religion—these are European cultural categories. They are not Indian cultural categories. At least, Dharma does not fit into any of these categories. The Buddha did not teach psychology. He did not teach science. He did not teach philosophy. He taught Dharma. It's a different category.

If we try to take Dharma and make it conform to some European cultural category because it's familiar to us, we end up hobbling the Dharma because there will be aspects of it that simply do not fit there. So what do we do with them? Well, we chuck them out because it's not respectable. It's not scientific. It's not whatever.

So it's a question of us being willing to go to the Buddha. You're talking about Dharma. We don't know what Dharma is because we come from a European background. So you have to teach us. And we have to make an effort to actually try to figure it out. But generally, as a culture, we're not prepared to actually do that.

A student responds:

"It's true to me, not so much that it was a European thing, but it takes a lot of effort to keep on resisting, in my observation—keep on resisting the urge to either turn Buddha into an interventionist who will do something for us. And I have seen... not just Europeans do that, but I pray to Buddha to do something, which is not part of the plot. And the other thing, I think it takes a lot of effort to resist this self thing coming back after life. And that's not just the Europeans. I'll come back as well. So it's almost... it's so revolutionary that I think the human tendency is always to dilute..."

This Buddhism in those two directions, and it's not necessarily European. I agree with that—this is what the first part of the talk was all about. The commitment to self is so strong in everybody that it's very difficult to get a hold of this. So even in Asia you find people making exactly the same moves if they haven't actually got anatta. If you don't get anatta, you don't get life after life. I think it's almost unnatural to get it—you have to work at it.

Plus there's the extra stuff, the cultural stuff on top. So this is the extras that we're talking about here. So yes, I agree with you.

Then there's the issue of imagination, which I think is very important. Patrick, are you sort of arguing against the passing of Buddhism into parts so it can be digested by the West?

Oh no, that's... We're missing out on loads. Within itself it's fine. Take Buddhist psychology. You take aspects of the Buddha's teaching and meld it with Western psychology—the result is fantastic. A lot of dukkha is relieved. But to then make the move, "Well, it's just the psychology..." Okay, fine. You're a psychologist. You're out there doing mindfulness-based interventions. And someone says, "Well, wait a minute. Don't people worship the Buddha? Isn't Buddhism a religion? How can you advertise this workshop where it has Buddhist stuff when we're a secular organization? We don't do that. We don't do religion." Oh. Yeah. You're caught. You're in this fly trap.

It's kind of like a Trojan horse, I think, in some ways. Like psychology—Buddhism and psychology in the West at the moment, it can be used as a treasure, of course. Do you listen to Buddhist Geeks? They had one episode some time ago called "Stealth Buddhism"—the idea of infiltrating the secular mindfulness movement and converting people to Buddhism. Which, if you're a Christian or whatever and you heard that, you'd be given all the more reason to reject all these mindfulness movements. It's the same path. Instead of saying, "Well look, it's Dharma, it's not religion. But if there's something in Dharma that can be helpful, go ahead."

So this comes to a challenge of imagination. Part of any tradition is imagination—is how we imagine things to be. And that includes religion and it includes science. So science, we know, is based on empiricism. But there's a large body of scientific teaching that people subscribe to without any empirical foundation whatsoever. Take the whole field of quantum mechanics. How many people have empirically experienced quantum mechanics? Or the Big Bang. The number of people who confidently assert, "Yes, yes, the Big Bang. That's how the universe began." Really? Were you there? How do you know? They had formulas.

So basically scientists would take a series of equations that work and that provide an elegance of expression. When you hear the scientists talking, the elegance and the beauty of the equation is very important for them in terms of what they decide is true. So they have a certain set of equations which they take to be elegant. You can see Vedana—he's operational here. And then they imagine a universe based on those equations and then they write books and go on TV and say this is what the universe is. And we say, "Oh yeah, it must be so because it's scientific." But it's certainly an act of the imagination.

It doesn't matter though because it's not... If they say dinosaurs were on the earth, that doesn't affect how we live now.

In some ways it doesn't matter. But let me continue.

Where it matters is this: as a culture we are conditioned to imagine the world in certain ways—ways that strike us as being quite natural. And so we resist the idea of imagining the universe differently. Life after life, as a doctrine, is part of a broader package that imagines the universe very differently from the way we imagine the universe.

The Buddha imagines the universe as infinite in space, in time, and in possibilities. Infinite time, infinite space, infinite possibilities. This is an act of the imagination—a way of imagining the universe.

Consider how Western culture has imagined the universe. For thousands of years, the Western universe, largely defined by Aristotle, was imagined to be a flat earth with a dome above it, which was the sky. This dome had holes through which light shone, because above the dome was heaven, and the light from what we call stars was the light of heaven. The sun traveled across beneath the dome, and its brightness blotted out all of that heavenly light.

Today we imagine a much bigger universe. According to my Google search, the universe began 13.8 billion years ago. And if Google says it, it must be true. The Big Bang—there was this Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago. So it's a much bigger universe. But again, it's an act of the imagination. We do it quite naturally because of our cultural preconditionings.

Sometimes those who deny life after life do so on the grounds that we in the West are scientific. We cannot be expected to subscribe to non-scientific, even anti-scientific beliefs. We don't do non-science. We do science. That's what we do. But this is just another way of limiting our imaginations. Why not learn to imagine the universe differently if it's useful to us?

It's interesting that those who deny life after life also tend to deny the reality of awakening as a reality. This makes perfect sense because life after life gives the time and cosmological space to make the awakening project viable. If I've only got 80 to 100 years, I don't like my chances, frankly. But if I've got an infinite universe with infinite possibilities, with a trajectory that's rolling along, it's possible.

This particular act of imagination has a genuine impact on the way I live and approach practice. I don't shut down possibilities. I open up to them. What would it be like to imagine the universe as infinite and ourselves as part of a universal network that is not limited by any self-identity? What would it be like to inhabit such a universe? Perhaps it would encourage us to open up to possibilities that under conditions of normality we would never imagine, or would never accept, never consider. In part, this is an opening up of the imagination.

Other cultures have learned to imagine the universe differently. The Buddha and the traditions following him have learned different ways of imagining the universe. Why should we be so culturally insular that we simply refuse outright to make that adaptation?

Due to karmic whatevers, I have a connection with South Korea. I find South Korean culture to be incredibly interesting and dynamic. If you look at the history of Korea—much of it tragic—a couple of hundred years ago they imagined the universe in a way

they had imagined it for thousands of years: in a very straightforward East Asian, Buddhist, Confucian, shamanist, Taoist way. Then around the 18th century, books began to creep in from Beijing about this new Western belief system called Christianity. These people imagined the universe in a very different way—ways that, when studied by a few members of the Korean elite, overthrew much of their social and political certainties about how society should be operated.

Then came other things: modernity crashing in, revolution, war. The Koreans have gone through this incredible transformation in which now they imagine the universe in ways very, very different from the way their ancestors imagined the universe. And you have this dynamism within that culture.

I contrast this with people like, for example, a certain Pauline Hanson, who some years ago saw street signs in Sydney written in Chinese and said, "We don't do that. We're Australians."

I'm not sure. The word "secular" is actually problematic because what makes something secular versus what makes something religious? These are culturally determined categories that emerge from a particular cultural history. What we call "secular" is often simply the dominant worldview of our culture at a particular time.

I think the real question is not whether something is secular or religious, but whether it's helpful. Does understanding dependent arising through chaos theory help you to understand dependent arising? If it does, then use it. If it doesn't, then don't. The Buddha was completely pragmatic about this. He said, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." He wasn't interested in creating a religion or establishing secular versus religious categories. He was interested in what works.

The danger comes when we get too attached to our categories—when we say something must be secular or it's not valid, or something must be religious or it's not authentic. Both approaches can become forms of fundamentalism. The secular fundamentalist says, "If it's not scientifically proven, it's nonsense." The religious fundamentalist says, "If it's not in our tradition, it's heresy." Neither approach serves the goal of understanding reality more clearly.

What the Buddha is offering us is a way of investigating reality directly, through our own experience. Whether we use scientific metaphors or traditional Buddhist language, the important thing is that we're actually doing the investigation. The concepts are just tools. Don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

So if chaos theory helps you understand how everything is interconnected and nothing exists independently, wonderful. If it doesn't help you, then perhaps the traditional teachings about dependent arising will be more useful. The key is to remain flexible and experimental rather than getting locked into any particular conceptual framework.

The universe is far more mysterious and wonderful than any of our concepts can capture. Whether we call our approach to understanding it secular or religious is really beside the point.

I don't know. What does secular mean? It's a very vague, slippery term. The problem with words like secular is that they're often used in the context of some kind of competition for who's right and who's not right. So even to use the term means you're stepping into the contest.

But clearly there are aspects of Western culture which can be used as an entry point into understanding where the Buddha's coming from. And we would be wise to employ them if we're interested in coming to terms with the Buddha. But there's also coming from his side as well. Like your interest in the suttas—we go to him and try to work out on his own terms what he's talking about and where he's coming from.

It's easy to read. I don't know.

Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 25

Preparing the Fire

Patrick Kearney · 1h06

> *In this engaging dharma talk, Patrick Kearney delves into the remarkable events preceding the Buddha's third major discourse, the Ādittapariyāya Sutta or Fire Sermon. Following the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) and Anattalakkhana Sutta (SN 22.59), this teaching marks a pivotal moment in early Buddhist history.*
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> *Kearney masterfully narrates the conversion of Yasa, a wealthy banker's son who experienced profound dukkha-ñāṇa (knowledge of suffering) and became the first layperson to attain stream-entry and take refuge in the Triple Gem. The talk then follows the Buddha's strategic journey to Uruvelā, where he encounters the three Kassapa brothers - fire-worshipping ascetics leading 1,000 followers.*
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> *Through vivid storytelling, Kearney describes the Buddha's shamanic displays of power over 24 days, including his dramatic confrontation with the nāga-rāja in the fire chamber and various miraculous demonstrations. These events reveal the Buddha's skillful means in adapting his teaching methods to different audiences - from progressive instruction (ānupubbī-kathā) for laypeople to shamanic challenge for ascetic practitioners. The talk illuminates how Buddhism absorbs rather than rejects local spiritual traditions, setting the stage for the famous Fire Sermon that would complete this trilogy of foundational teachings.*

So next we're going to talk about the third discourse, burning. We've looked at the Buddha's first formal teaching, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma. Then we looked at Anattalakkhana, the not-self characteristic, which was taught five days later. And then we move on to what is regarded as the third discourse, although in fact he gave talks in between times.

For this, we have to have a bit of a backstory. This one is called preparing the fire because the third discourse is usually called the fire sermon or the fire discourse—you could translate it simply as burning.

The build-up to it I find very interesting because it's weird. First of all, we left the Buddha and his five disciples. They're now all Arahants and they're living at Isipatana. The job's done, they're all fully enlightened, so they're feeling pretty chilled and they're not rushing off anywhere—they're just living there. Isipatana is just north of Baranasi, which is a major merchant city.

Living in this city there is a setthi, usually translated as banker, but probably more like the head of the banker's guild—basically someone who works in high finance at the time. This banker had a son called Yassa, and he was brought up in great luxury, of course. He is a young man and he lives in this big room, attended by beautiful female attendants who basically look after him in all sorts of ways which we won't go into.

One night they're all sleeping in the same room and he wakes up in the middle of the night. He looks around and sees all these beautiful women sleeping there, and he's suddenly overcome by horror and dread. He has what in the later tradition would be called dukkha nana. Dukkha, of course, is suffering, unsatisfactoriness, pain. Nana is understanding or knowledge. It sounds like he had a very strong case of adinava nana and nibbida nana. Adinava is danger, disadvantage, downside—suddenly seeing the disadvantage or the downside of any situation. And nibbida is disenchantment. The discourse says that the downside, the adinava of what he saw became apparent, and his heart settled upon disenchantment, nibbida. And he says, "The terror, the horror."

Now what he saw was the human body. But he saw it without any filters of enchantment. So he's living in a world which is dominated by beauty—he's particularly fond of female beauty, and of course he's completely caught up in this world. Then quite unexpectedly, without any warning, no preparation, he just happens to wake up in the middle of the night. His eyes fall upon these bodies sleeping there, and all the illusions drop away, and all he sees is the human body, which is actually rather weird when you consider it. Basically he hasn't turned into a Puritan; it's just that he suddenly sees that a body is just blood, bones, flesh and mess, and that's all it is.

So he has this profound existential shock which is completely unprepared for. As a result, he's in a state of shock, both mental and physical, and he stumbles out of the house, into the city, through the streets, and then out of the city. According to the text—and the text is the Mahavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka, the first history of the Sangha, the earliest history, so these stories come from there—he leaves the city via the gate, aided by the non-humans, amanussā, according to the text, who help him out.

We kind of read this or listen to this and think, well, you walk through the gate and apparently somebody helped him. But the non-humans, the amanussā, are some kind of spirits. Keep in mind that this is an ancient Indian city. At night, the gates are closed and locked for security purposes. Outside every gate there would be a kind of basic motel for travelers who arrived after sunset when the gates were shut, so they could stay there overnight. There is no way those gates would be opened. It's just too dangerous. The gates are carefully guarded by the troops.

And each gate is also guarded by spirits. The way this was done, particularly for city gates which were very important, was that either a powerful local spirit would be captured in some way and trapped there with the use of an image, or if they couldn't manage that, they would execute criminals at the gate and bury them. Their vengeful ghosts would become guardians of the gate. So these spirits at the gates were not happy, friendly spirits at all. And yet they help him through, and he's getting through a locked gate with lots of human guards, but somehow he passes. You can see that we're in the realm of fairy story here.

So he stumbles out of the city. One would presume a banker's house would have a few guards and locks on it too, wouldn't it? And well-paid individuals guarding them.

Gates, of course, are important because they're liminal places—places of transition. To move through a gate is to move from one state to another. They're places of potentiality where what is normally taken for granted as real becomes unstuck and something else can emerge. I think this whole story of the gate emphasises this transformative process which is going on for Yasa.

So he wanders north mumbling "the terror, the horror" and happens to stumble into the Buddha, who is doing walking meditation. This is not long before dawn. The Buddha has gotten up early and is doing his walking meditation. He sees Yasa coming and hears him mumbling, and he says, "This is not terrible, not horrifying. Come, Yasa, and I will teach you Dharma."

The Buddha sees Yasa and immediately recognises someone whose mind is ripe as a result of this profound shock. Everything that he thinks is real turns out not to be. Everything that he thinks is worth holding on to turns out not to be. In this state of profound shock, the Buddha sees someone who's ready for the teaching.

So the Buddha gives progressive instruction: dana, sila, and then sagga, the heavens. Dana is generosity. Sila is ethics. The heavens mean if you are generous and ethical, you are doing good things. Your karma is good, so your vipāka—the ripening of these actions—is very positive, and these will give you noticeable benefits in recognisable form in terms of living a good life. Of course this gets extended beyond death, life after life—the heavens. Heaven is basically having a good time without any restriction. These are the mundane benefits of leading a good life.

Then he talks about the danger or disadvantage in sensual stimulation and the benefits of letting go or renunciation. Yasa is listening to this progressive instruction—first the basics. With progressive instruction you give a very basic teaching and then check:

have you got that? Have you connected with that? Maybe you stop there because that's as far as the person can go. But if they can go a step further, you take it the next step. If you think they've got that and they're ready to go further, you take it the next step.

This progressive instruction is a graded introduction into the Dharma, a basic template that many traditions use. Finally, when Yasa's heart was quite ready, receptive, free from hindrances, eager and trustful, then the Buddha hits him with the four truths: dukkha, its arising, its cessation and the path. The Buddha teaches him the same thing he taught the five ascetics after he had opened them up with the middle way. Here he teaches Yasa, who's a layman, after opening him up with this progressive instruction.

As a result, Yasa attains the first stage of awakening. He sees the Dharma. This is what's going on. He's enlightened, at least to the first stage.

This is the first time that this idea of progressive instruction is mentioned. But the Buddha uses it now again and again. It's like the Buddha is working out how to spread this further. He's got the five, but he has to teach other people as well. How is he going to do that? So he works out this template of progressive instruction, and Yasa is the guinea pig. There's a sense in which the Buddha has been waiting for him to turn up.

Of course, Yasa is a lay person. This is the first lay person who is being taught serious dharma. And when it's done—bang—the first lay person to attain the first stage of awakening.

So Yasa was taken care of. Meanwhile, time had passed. The household had awakened, and people realized that the young man of the house—the heir to the fortune—had vanished. Of course there was pandemonium. Chaos erupted as everyone desperately searched for him. Had he been killed? Had he been kidnapped? How could he have simply disappeared? What was happening?

Yasa's father, presumably at the head of something of a posse, went out in search of his son and also headed north, eventually meeting the Buddha. By this stage, there was daylight. They had eaten breakfast and were sitting around. So there was the Buddha sitting with the five companions plus Yasa, and then Yasa's father approaching with a posse from the distance.

The Buddha thought, "I should try to avoid distracting Yasa senior, the father." So what he did was exercise his shamanic power and cause Yasa, who was sitting right there, to disappear—to vanish. This is interesting because it shows the Buddha as shaman, a side of his character which tends to be written out but was very much part of his identity.

The Buddha then calmed down Yasa's father and gave him progressive instruction. Sure enough, the father also attained stream entry and became the first person to take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—which is what we chant each night. He was the first person to do that. You can see that the institution of Buddhism was beginning to take shape, along with lay practitioners.

During this talk, Yasa was listening and reviewing his understanding as it progressed. As a result, he attained full awakening as he sat there. The text says: "Then Yasa, son of a good family, as the Dharma was being taught, reviewed the degrees to which he had seen and experienced, and by not clinging, his heart was liberated from the taints."

"He reviewed the degrees which he had seen and experienced." Those familiar with the system of ñāṇas, of insight knowledges, know that there is one called review, and this is the first mention of it in the texts. It's interesting that awakening is something that can be thought about, considered, reviewed. There's a rationality within this understanding that we're developing. It's direct, it's intuitive, but there's also rationality in it. The two sides sometimes struggle—too much imposition of rationality kills the experience, while not enough rationality makes it meaningless and chaotic.

So Yasa ordained and became a bhikkhu. Word of this spread throughout the city. Four of Yasa's friends came out to visit him, and they converted, ordained, and became fully awakened. Others came, and basically the word was spreading—notice it was spreading throughout the merchants of Varanasi.

This is really important. The Buddha very early on realized that if he was going to make a go of it in terms of building something significant, he needed people with money. He targeted them immediately. The first lay people he approached were the commercial elite of a commercial city. It sounds like a Sayadaw's model.

Finally, when there were sixty arahants plus the Buddha—making sixty-one fully awakened ones—he sent them out into the world. There you get the famous passage: "Don't go two by two, but singly, and go off for the benefit of the many, the welfare of the many," and so on.

I find this very interesting because these people were very new. We don't know how long the Buddha spent there—weeks, maybe months—but they were very new. They were fully awakened, and many of them were very young. Yet he simply sent them out: "Just go off and do whatever you do." And not even in pairs within a system of control where "I'll watch you, you watch me. If he does anything bad, report back to headquarters." The Sayadaw would do that. But no—it was one by one.

In other words, he has complete confidence in these people, complete faith in them. "You just go and do it. Off you go."

The Buddha himself says, "I shall go to Uruvela, to Sena Nigama, to teach the Dharma." So he sends everybody else out to wander around the world, but the Buddha has a very specific place that he intends to go to.

It's interesting that although the Buddha is very successful in Varanasi, he doesn't stay there, nor apparently does he return. I don't know of any other stories about him which are set in Varanasi. He starts there, he has a spectacular success, but then he leaves and he doesn't come back.

So why not? Possibly because it just wasn't important enough. Varanasi was on the borderland between the two rival kingdoms of Magadha to the east and Kosala to the west. Wars were fought between them, and sometimes one side would grab it and sometimes the other. At this point it belongs to Magadha—it was the dowry of King Pasenadi of Kosala's sister, who had married King Bimbisara of Magadha. So at this point it belonged to Magadha, though later it would be fought over again.

The Buddha heads east toward Magadha, which is one of the two major kingdoms. It's also an area that he's familiar with. He's been there before and had apparently met King Bimbisara before, according to legend. So he's going to the big city in an area that he already knows, where people know him—not as the Buddha, but they know him because he's been there before when he was a wandering ascetic, possibly even before he began his ascetic practices, when he was on his way to find a place where he could undertake them.

Maybe what was happening was he wanted to go to the center of things. He was planning to build an empire. If you strike it big as a guru in, say, Australia, and you want to hit the big time, what do you do? Do you stay in Australia? No, you go to the US. Because if you make it big there, you can spread across the planet. I think the Buddha basically had the same business plan. In fact, later on, when he gets an offer to go to Kosala by a rich merchant from Shravasti, he quickly abandons Magadha and makes his headquarters in Kosala, which was the biggest kingdom.

So the Buddha is a man with a strategy. He's got a plan. He's picked up this idea of teaching. At first he thought, "I don't know if it's even possible." It works, at least for all these crazy ascetics. Then he's trying to work out, "But can I include lay people here?" And sure enough, it works. "Okay, now I've got a product, and I can market this. I'm ready now."

So off he goes to the big smoke. But before he goes, he's got an important errand to do. Because he doesn't go to Rajagaha, which is the capital—he goes to a small district called Sena Nigama at Uruvela. This is an area in the Gaya district on the banks of the Uruvela River, not far from where he was awakened, so he knows this area.

And he enters the territory of the three dreadlocks wearers, the jatila. These are ascetics who have dreadlocks, and they're brothers. Each of them is called Kashyapa, which probably means they were Brahmins. There was Kashyapa of Uruvela, who was head of 500 ascetics; Kashyapa of the river, Nadi Kashyapa, head of 300 ascetics; and Kashyapa of Gaya, Gaya Kashyapa, head of 200 ascetics. So these are three brothers, each of whom are major teachers in their own right.

And the Naga, whose residence this is—the Buddha has essentially walked uninvited and unannounced into the living room of a powerful and not particularly good-tempered spirit who doesn't appreciate this intrusion at all. The Naga becomes enraged and produces smoke and flame to indicate his irritation.

The Buddha sits there calmly and produces smoke and flame in response. "You can do it, I can do it."

This escalates into a full supernatural battle. The entire fire chamber fills with flames as these two beings engage in a contest of psychic powers. Through the night, smoke and fire pour from the building. Outside, Kasapa and his ascetics watch in amazement and growing concern as their sacred fire chamber appears to be burning down. They're convinced that this beautiful young samana, impressive though he seemed, is surely being incinerated by the terrible Naga.

But when dawn comes, the Buddha emerges from the fire chamber completely unharmed, carrying the Naga coiled peacefully in his alms bowl. The spirit has been completely subdued—not destroyed, but tamed and converted. This is a crucial detail: the Buddha doesn't kill or banish the Naga. He transforms their relationship from one of hostility to one of peace.

Kasapa is astounded. This is clearly no ordinary ascetic. But he's not quite ready to concede spiritual superiority. "Great indeed is the Samana," he admits, "great indeed is his psychic power. But he is not awakened like me."

This becomes the refrain throughout what follows. Each time the Buddha demonstrates miraculous powers, Kasapa acknowledges his greatness while maintaining that he himself is still the awakened one, the spiritual authority in this territory.

What unfolds next is an extraordinary series of supernatural demonstrations. The Buddha stays with Kasapa's community, and day after day performs miraculous feats. He appears to be playing a very deliberate game, systematically displaying different categories of psychic abilities.

When the ascetics need to gather wood for their fire sacrifices, the Buddha causes all the wood they need to appear magically, perfectly cut and ready. When they need to light their fires, he lights them with his mind. When they need their ritual implements —axes, hatchets, various tools—these appear spontaneously. He demonstrates mastery over the elements, over matter itself.

He shows that he can read minds by answering unspoken questions. He demonstrates clairvoyance by describing distant events as they happen. He multiplies himself, appearing in several places simultaneously. He walks through walls as if they were empty space. He rises into the air and moves through the sky like a bird.

Each miracle is precisely calculated to address the specific spiritual obsessions of these fire-worshipping ascetics. They spend their time gathering wood, lighting fires, performing ritual sacrifices. The Buddha shows that he can accomplish effortlessly what requires all their elaborate ceremonial effort.

But he does it carefully so that the Naga is not harmed.

The Naga angrily blazes up in fire, in flame. And so the Buddha enters into the fire element and he also blazes up in flame. The text says that with both of them ablaze, it was like the fire chamber itself was in flames, burning and blazing.

All of these ascetics—five hundred of them—are sitting around watching, because everybody wants to see this. Their whole fire chamber is just burning away with huge flames. They're looking at this thinking, "We haven't seen this before. This is interesting." And they say, "The great Samana, who is so beautiful"—and it's interesting, this is what people would say about the Buddha when they met him—"The great Samana, who is so beautiful, is being destroyed by the Naga."

In the morning, the flames have died down. Of course, the place is still there—these are shamanic, magical flames. Out of the door steps the Buddha, completely unharmed, totally cool. He's carrying his bowl, as usual, because he's a bhikkhu, a beggar. He walks up to Kasapa and stands in front of him.

Kasapa looks into the bowl, and there's the ferocious royal Naga—now a tiny little snake all curled up, completely harmless. The Buddha explains to Kasapa how the Naga's fire was exhausted by fire—fighting fire with fire.

Kasapa doesn't say anything, but he thinks to himself: "This guy is very powerful, but he's not an Arahant like I am. He's not fully awakened like I am."

What's happening, of course, is the Buddha is acting as a shaman. In entering into that fire chamber, he's deliberately challenging the Naga. It's no accident. This is quite deliberate and quite macho—come out and fight. In winning and showing his mastery over the fire element, he's also challenging Kasapa, but indirectly.

Kasapa's practice revolves around the fire element, and the Buddha is in effect saying—without actually saying the words—"I am much more powerful than you are and therefore superior." This is the challenge that Kasapa is receiving. The Buddha is showing himself to be a master of one-upmanship.

But Kasapa is impressed, but not converted. The reason is because he feels that power is one thing, but awakening is another. "Okay, this guy is incredibly powerful. In fact, he's so powerful, the sooner we get rid of him, the better. But so what? That doesn't mean he's awakened—like me."

He apparently welcomes the Buddha into the community as an honored guest, but he does not take the Buddha's superior power as evidence of awakening. That instinct is very good—people often confuse power with awakening. You can have a guru who can manifest all sorts of power, be incredibly charismatic, and people think, "Oh, he's got these powers, he must be awakened." But it's complete bullshit. Power is power. Awakening is awakening. They're not the same thing.

Kasapa knows that. He's a man of wisdom. You can see why the Buddha wants him, because what the Buddha is doing is trying to convert this guy. He really wants him in the company.

But Kasapa is also very stubborn, which reminds us, of course, of the Buddha before his awakening. He was very stubborn too. You can't help but feel that the Buddha knows exactly who he's dealing with. In a sense, it's like he's dealing with his pre-enlightenment self—what he was like, except this guy is in a different tradition.

The problem Kasapa has is he's deluded about the nature of awakening. He thinks he's awakened, but he's not.

And the Buddha needs to hammer this out, get this view out of his mind.

Now when the Buddha was dealing with the five ascetics, how he opened them up was by the middle way. Here he's got a different person in a different context and he's using a completely different method. And it's really interesting because it's not a method he uses again. These are very weird stories. But for Kasapa he thinks this is the way. I've got to hammer this guy. And so he does.

So the Buddha takes up residence in a jungle thicket near Kasapa's hermitage. You notice that Kasapa on the one hand treats him as an honored guest but on the other hand keeps him at arm's length. He doesn't want him too close. It's like there's a wariness in the relationship.

Anyway, that night the Buddha is meditating and the four divine kings come to the Buddha. Now these are gods—the god of the north, the south, the east and the west. And they're just above the earth realm. So they're quite junior. So they come and visit the Buddha and they light up his jungle thicket quite like pillars of fire. So again you have fire. And there are four pillars of fire in this little jungle clearing, blazing away all night. And if you imagine Kasapa and the ascetics are having a hard time getting to sleep because they look up, oh my God, those pillars of fire are still there.

Anyway, next morning, Kasapa turns up to tell the Buddha that the meal is ready. They're feeding him. He's a guest. And he says, so you had some visitors last night? And the Buddha says, yes, yes, the four divine kings, they came. And so Kasapa is impressed, but he continues to think, very powerful, that he's not enlightened like I am.

So then you get this bizarre relationship that develops. The Buddha sticks around. He's like the man who came to dinner. He won't leave. And they can't get rid of him because he's so powerful. So they keep him kind of tucked away and hope that this whole thing blows over before it gets weird.

Anyway, next two nights, the same events take place. The first night, Sakka, ruler of the gods, turns up, blazing fire. The next night, Brahma Sahampati, blazing fire. Remember him? He was the one who persuaded the Buddha to teach. Each morning, Kasapa turns up to invite the Buddha to the meal. I noticed you had a visitor last night. Yes, yes, Brahma Sahampati. He just came in for a chat. But again Kasapa responds in the same way.

Next Kasapa has a great sacrifice that has to be done. Now this is a big occasion. People are coming from all over Magadha and Anga. Anga is the territory to the east. So this is southeast Ganges Valley and it has its own particular regional kind of spirituality. Within this region Kasapa is a very important figure. He's known all over the region and when he has his annual great sacrifice people come from all over to attend.

Now he's worried because he hopes the Buddha doesn't actually show up and upstage him by displaying some showy miracle. So he's a bit agitated because if he did, Kasapa might lose his customers. They might all go over to this new guy. Now the Buddha of course knows what he's thinking and so he makes a point of quietly disappearing and not interfering.

So it doesn't say whether they were killing living beings or whether it was a sacrifice more symbolic like the Vedic sacrifice involved ghee and various other things put into fire. There are different forms of sacrifice. We don't know which kind. I suspect non-violent, these are ascetics, so I suspect symbolic things were tossed into the fire. There'd be chanting, ritual and so on.

Now that means the Buddha decides he's not going to get fed by the ascetics so he goes on alms round. And so he goes to Uttarakuru and gathers food there and then takes it to Lake Anottata in order to eat it.

Now you're probably wondering, where is Uttarakuru? Remember we talked about the four great continents. In the middle was Mount Meru. The Buddha lives on the southern continent, and Uttarakuru is the northern continent. So the Buddha flies over Mount Meru, goes on alms round, flies up to the lake which is in the Himalayas, and has his breakfast there.

Next morning Kasapa turns up and says, "So where were you yesterday?"

"Oh well, I just went to the northern continent for alms round and then I had my breakfast at this lake in the Himalayas. I wanted to avoid the rush hour."

So Kasapa is getting really stressed by this stage. This is getting weirder and weirder.

Anyway, that day the Buddha acquires a piece of discarded cloth. The way he makes his robe, he collects discarded cloth and he washes it and prepares it. He collects it so when he's got enough he can make a robe. He collects this bit of cloth and he wants to wash it, except that there's no suitable washing place in his jungle thicket. But no problem, because Sakka, king of the gods, rockets down and creates a pond so he can wash it.

But then he realizes that he can't wash it properly because he hasn't got a stone to beat it upon. But no problem—Sakka provides a stone for him. And then he's got to hang it to dry. And Sakka, who is still there... No, actually, this time it's not Sakka. There's a kadumba tree, and the spirit of that tree, the deva of that tree, bends a branch down so it can be used as a washing line to dry out his cloth.

Next morning, Kasapa turns up, invited for breakfast. "Hmm, that pond wasn't there before. I don't recall seeing that stone before. That branch wasn't there before. So okay, how did all this happen?"

"Well, I got this cloth and Sakka turned up, then the tree deity bent the branch."

"Okay, okay, very powerful, but you're not enlightened like I am."

And then on successive days, Kasapa comes to invite Buddha to the meal. The Buddha says, "Look, just go on without me." Now apparently the meal was actually taken at the fire chamber. So Kasapa walks back to the fire chamber, enters, and the Buddha's already sitting there. So he just kind of flew there. But not only that, he's sitting there with some fruit that he's just collected—except that the kind of fruit that he has is fruit that can't be found within five hundred kilometers.

On the last occasion, the Buddha's sitting there with a flower from the heaven of the Thirty-three Devas. So you get this sense of just escalation here.

Next day, the ascetics have to... they're fire ascetics. They worship the fire. So they use up a lot of wood. They're constantly chopping up logs for the fire. But suddenly they can't split logs. They just can't do it. And Kasapa suspects the Buddha's intervention here. The Buddha is interfering in some way. And sure enough, the Buddha turns up and says, "You blokes seem to have a problem."

"Yeah, we just can't split logs."

And then the Buddha goes, more or less, "Let the logs be split." And suddenly, all the logs are split. "Go ahead, no problem."

And then the next day, this time they can split the logs, but they can't light the fires. But the Buddha turns up—"Ah, okay"—and the fires are lit. And the next day they can split the logs, they can light the fires, but they can't put them out. So the Buddha turns up—"Oh, you've got a problem there"—and the fires go out.

So every day the Buddha's just chipping away at Kasapa. And every day Kasapa has the same response.

"Yeah, very impressive, but you're not enlightened like I am."

This continues for twenty-four days, until the eight mid-winter nights arrive. During these nights—the coldest of the year—the ascetics perform their ceremonial bathing in the river. The Buddha, in his compassion, creates five hundred braziers so they can

warm themselves when they emerge from the icy water. Here we see his metta and karuna, his loving-kindness and compassion flowing forth. Yet again, it's expressed through this showmanship, this extravagant display of magical powers.

Twenty-four days after all this begins, a flash flood strikes. The place where the Buddha is staying becomes completely inundated. The next day, Kasapo worries about him and comes in a boat—the only way to travel after such flooding. Sure enough, everywhere is covered by water except the Buddha's little jungle thicket, which remains completely dry. There sits the Buddha on the earth.

Seeing the boat above, the Buddha rises into the air and lands gracefully on Kasapo's vessel. And Kasapo responds exactly as before.

At this point, the Buddha recognizes it's time to change tactics. He thinks, "This foolish fellow will continue thinking like this for a long time." He decides he must put the boot in differently. So he says to Kasapo: "You are not an arahant, nor are you on the way to becoming one. There is nothing in your practice by which you might become an arahant or enter into the way of becoming one."

This time he verbally dismantles him. You're not an arahant—forget about it. And there's nothing you're doing that will ever get you there. You are wasting your time completely.

Now Kasapo finally cracks. He's convinced. Why does he break at this point? Because over the past twenty-four days, the Buddha has made it abundantly clear that he knows Kasapo's practice and can perform it much better than Kasapo himself can—effortlessly, in fact. If anyone knows where this practice leads, it would have to be the Buddha. Nobody could doubt that anymore.

Kasapo must have been deeply sincere in his spiritual aspiration, because he has much to lose. This man is a major spiritual leader with five hundred disciples, known throughout eastern India. Now someone is telling him that what he's doing is complete nonsense—that he's utterly deluded and will never reach enlightenment. But he's a genuine practitioner, and when he recognizes his error, he admits it. He surrenders and converts.

However, he must consult with his followers. He has students and feels responsible for them. So he approaches them: "This is the situation. I've decided I must convert. What do you think?"

They look at each other and respond: "We have long had faith in the great samana. If you lead the highest life under him, we will do likewise."

Of all five hundred ascetics, Kasapo was the last to understand what was happening. Isn't this typical of leaders? They're always the last to figure out what's going on.

The ascetics then took their hair, their dreadlocks, their belongings, and their implements for fire sacrifice, and dropped them all into the water to be carried away. They gathered everything from their ritual practice, shaved off their dreadlocks, and cast it all into the river.

The ascetics are abandoning a particular form of practice they now see as incompatible with the Buddha's way. But why put everything in the river? It's tempting to think they're simply throwing these things away—that this is all junk now, superstitious claptrap they once considered important but now chuck away in contempt for their past delusion as they march into the light of true faith.

But actually no, what they're doing is they're making an offering to the devas, quite respectfully. Remember the story about King Arthur and his sword Excalibur? Early in his career he received the sword from the Lady of the Lake, and that was the sacred sword he used throughout his career. When he was dying—I forget whether he threw the sword into the lake or ordered somebody else to throw it. Gawain, perhaps. So the sword is thrown. Gawain probably had no idea what was going on: "Why are you chucking away this sword?" It flies through the air, and before it hits the lake, an arm comes out, grabs it, and disappears. He's offering it back to where it came from. It's an act of respect, not contempt.

I think the ascetics are doing the same thing. They are not rejecting their gods. What they're doing is changing their practice. That's the big difference.

Buddhism absorbs. It does not simply reject. Classically, when Buddhism comes to a new culture, it doesn't say, "Right, you're all doing the wrong thing. Stop doing it right now. From now on, you do what we tell you to do." Rather, they look around: "Okay, these practices that you do—they're really good. Perhaps you could understand them in a slightly different way. These practices over there, they're not so good. They're akusala. They just lead to harm and suffering. You'd be better off without them. These gods you worship—keep worshiping them. Worship the same gods. There's no problem. These people you respect, you should continue to respect them."

So Buddhism absorbs. It doesn't fight against. It doesn't reject. And this is happening here.

You notice also how everyone takes for granted the existence of other worlds and that these worlds intersect with our world. The world of the Naga Raja, the world of the devas of the river and of the forests, the world of people—these are different worlds, and yet the worlds of the various gods, tree spirits, and so forth intersect. This is fundamental to the belief system at the time.

Anyway, all this equipment floats downstream and is seen by Nadi Kasapa, Kasapa of the river. When he sees this, he fears disaster has overtaken his brother. He and his students rush upstream to see what's going on, but everyone's there, everyone seems very happy—except they've shaved their heads and they're not doing what they used to do.

Kasapa of the river asks his brother, "Is this better, Kasapa?"

And Kasapa says, "It is."

So Nadi Kasapa converts along with his group. They do the same thing.

Meanwhile, the stuff is floating downstream. It turns up at the camping site of Gaya Kasapa and his followers. They go upstream. Same thing: "Is this better, Kasapa?"

"Yes, it is."

So they join as well.

Now there are—how many are we talking about? The numbers, of course, are symbolic. They're not literal. So five hundred is a very great number. Three hundred is a lot.

When you see these numbers in the Buddha's teachings, and this is typical of oral traditions, they're symbolic rather than literal. Two hundred is a lot, but not so much compared to three hundred or five hundred. But still, there must have been substantial gatherings.

Did the lay supporters come out and cook meals as they typically did for bhikkhus? We don't know the exact rules for these ascetics. It's possible they could cook for themselves, perhaps collecting uncooked grain to store and prepare when needed. One of the rules in the Vinaya stipulates that a bhikkhu cannot accept uncooked grain—it must already be cooked to prevent food storage. But we don't know precisely what rules these fire-worshippers followed.

What we do know is that India at this time was one of the wealthiest, most cosmopolitan, and sophisticated societies on earth. It could easily support large numbers of samaṇas and brāhmaṇas.

At this point, having converted them through his demonstration of power and superior shamanic abilities, the Buddha had not yet taught them anything at all. He takes them away from this area to Gayā-sīsa, a hill near Gayā. The surrounding area is flat plain, and in the middle rises this hill called Gayā-sīsa, the "Head of Gayā."

Taking them to the summit, he delivers the Ādittapariyāya Sutta—the Fire Sermon. This third discourse completes the trilogy. Notice the extraordinary preparation he undertook—softening them up for almost a month just so he could deliver the Dharma. And of course, being the Buddha, it would be Dharma perfectly suited for this particular audience.

Tomorrow night we'll examine that discourse—the third teaching. Tonight has been bedtime stories; tomorrow we delve into the profound teaching itself.

"You mentioned there was a famous passage about going forth singly, yet all the other accounts I've read show them always in groups. When did he change his approach?"

He might have changed it later when establishing formal rules. At this early time, there were virtually no rules. The regulations developed gradually over time—when someone did something inappropriate, they would establish a guideline against it. This was a period of minimum rules and maximum enlightenment.

There's another famous incident where, many years later, someone asked the Buddha: "When we started out, we had few rules and abundant enlightenment. Now we have countless rules and little enlightenment. What happened?" The Buddha essentially replied, "Yes, that's the way it is. That's how it's always been."

"Where does this fabulous story come from?"

The Mahāvagga, in the opening section of the Vinaya Piṭaka—I believe it's called the Mahākhandhaka. It begins with this history of the Saṅgha, containing the earliest layer of stories about how the monastic community began.

"There weren't many stories about the Buddha's magical powers, were there?"

No, in fact he later refuses to engage in such displays. From then on he was very discreet, but here he's wielding these powers freely. Again, it's this quality of shamanic power, that aspect of him emerging.

For example, when all this is finished, he goes to Rājagaha and establishes himself there. Then he receives an invitation from a wealthy supporter—Anāthapiṇḍika, the model of generosity—to come to Sāvatthī, where he would build a monastery. So the

Buddha moves to Sāvatthī, where he encounters King Pasenadi. To succeed in Kosala, he must establish good relations with Pasenadi, who was known as something of a volatile ruler.

And he has the first encounter and manages to convert him. But now the Buddha is quite young at this time and Pasenadi is also quite young. I think they're actually the same age. And Pasenadi arrives and says, "You know, so you claim to be fully enlightened. Well, a whole number of big time teachers have come through here because this is the most important part of the world, mate. And none of them—and these are old and venerable and respected teachers—none of them have claimed to be fully enlightened. Here you are, some young whippersnapper, nobody's heard of, just wandered into town and you claim to be fully enlightened. Why on earth should anyone take you seriously?"

And the subtext being: why shouldn't I just consider you a fraud, drag you off to prison and chop you in pieces?

And the Buddha replies something along the lines of: "There are four things that you must never underestimate because of their youth: a fire, a kṣatriya, a warrior, a snake, and a Buddha."

And so you've got Pasenadi who is not so subtly threatening him, and the Buddha comes back and threatens him even more. "Mess with me mate, and it will be a big mistake."

He's a mighty warrior himself and so he's sort of talking his language to him. He understands power. A bit of shirt fronting there. That's ritual shirt fronting. And the Buddha wins. And Pasenadi says, "Okay. I can see I've got a venomous young snake in my garden, and I will let him alone."

So this shamanic, powerful side of the Buddha—it's there, but it tends to be kind of not noticed so much. It's not exaggerated, but it's highlighted in Tibetan teachings, like the Mahayana teachings, the powers, the magical powers, the forces of floating gold and lotus and all that sort of stuff. Because they have a strong shamanic tradition. And again, Buddhism absorbs. It goes to a place with a strong shamanic tradition—it just buddhizes it.

Even in Zen, there's a shamanic tradition in Zen stories. It pops up there, but again, it's quite on the side. It tends not to be noticed.

"So Patrick, this term 'the Buddha'—that was an ideal before the Buddha was enlightened? They used that term?"

Yeah, they used the term *jina*. Mahavira, who was older than the Buddha, claimed to be fully enlightened. He was jina, the conqueror. But he was also buddha, awakened. But jina was the major title, buddha was a minor one. With the Buddha, buddha was his major title, but jina was a minor one. So he just took the same language. I think tathāgata would have been something he borrowed. So some of the basic terms he borrowed.

So this is part of the yoga tradition. You have shamans, you have yogis, you have ascetics. And you have whole groups of these people with this ideal of enlightenment. You have the Brahmin priests and they don't have an ideal of enlightenment. They just follow the law and control society as the way it should be.

So you have this tremendous multicultural variety at the time of the Buddha. All sorts of strange characters. And the Buddha kind of flowing among them and getting converts from all of these different parts of society and bringing them together under one roof.

CHAPTER 26

Burning - Ādittapariyāya Sutta

Patrick Kearney · 59 min

Patrick Kearney explores the Ādittapariyāya Sutta (SN 35.28), the Buddha's dramatic teaching on burning delivered to 1,000 fire-worshipping ascetics led by the Kassapa brothers. This discourse completes the trilogy that began Buddhism, following the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta and Anattālakkhana Sutta.

The teaching reveals how everything burns through the six sense fields - the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, along with their corresponding objects and consciousness. Each burns with the fires of lobha (greed), dosa (hatred), and moha (delusion), creating the dukkha of birth, aging, death, sorrow, and despair. The Buddha strategically reversed the fire imagery sacred to these ascetics, presenting nibbāna as the cooling and extinguishing of these fires.

Kearney examines the Buddha's radical empiricism - that everything knowable comes through the six senses, as outlined in the Sabba Sutta (SN 35.23). This embodied approach to practice emphasizes vedanā (feeling) and the immediate, physical experience of contact (phassa) between sense organs and their objects. The discourse demonstrates Buddhism's universality and portability compared to location-dependent ritual practices, marking it as potentially the first world religion. Through intimate awareness of the burning nature of sensory experience, practitioners develop disenchantment leading to liberation.

So tonight we arrive at the third formal teaching of the Buddha, the Ādittapariyāya Sutta, simply translated as "burning." This completes the trilogy. The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma, starts the whole thing off with the middle way and four truths. Then we have the Anattalakkhana Sutta, the not-self characteristic, and finally this one.

We gave the back story about how the Buddha had a particular audience in mind. There was a particular group of people he wanted to convert—the dreadlocks ascetics who lived and practiced on the banks of the Nerañjarā River, which also runs past the Bodhi tree. When the Buddha was practicing asceticism while still the Bodhisattva, they would have been neighbors, so doubtlessly they knew each other. The Buddha zeroed in on one person in particular, the elder Kassapa brother, spending almost a month hammering away at him with demonstrations of shamanic power. Finally breaking down the resistance, he converted, and all the followers converted, so they were ready to be taught. This is what they were taught.

This is the opening section of the sutta. "Bhikkhus," he says, "everything is burning. And what is this everything that is burning? The eye sensitivity is burning, visual forms are burning, visual awareness is burning, visual contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises dependent upon visual contact, whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant, that too is burning.

"Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion, burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

"The ear sensitivity is burning, the nose sensitivity is burning, the tongue sensitivity is burning, the body sensitivity is burning, the mind sensitivity is burning, phenomena are burning, mind awareness is burning, mind contact is burning. And whatever feeling arises dependent upon mind contact, whether pleasant or painful, or neither painful nor pleasant, that too is burning.

"Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. Burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair."

So this is the entry. Everything is burning, and the everything are the six sensitivities, corresponding sense objects, and the corresponding awareness, as well as the feeling—the vedanā—that arises dependent upon them.

At the Buddha's time, it's sometimes said that the Buddha was a Hindu. The Buddha lived at a time before Hinduism, before what we know as Hinduism. What we have at the time was a Vedic tradition which had begun in the northwest, in what is now Pakistan, and was moving southeast along the Ganges Valley. There was also a whole series of other movements—old indigenous movements, new reform movements. New ideas like karma in our sense of the word were beginning to develop, and there was this whole burgeoning variety of philosophies and practices going on, a mixture of all these influences.

The dreadlocks ascetics were focused on fire worship, shamanism, worship of particular spirits and devas, and sacrifice. The use of sacrifice makes them similar to the Vedic orthodoxy. But they were not orthodox because they clearly believed in some kind of enlightenment which was not part of the Vedic orthodoxy at the time. Like the Bodhisattva and his companions, they practiced a form of tapas, asceticism, generating heat. Tapas means essentially heat. But they did so in different ways than the Bodhisat-

tva and his companions did. This is a different tradition. The worship of the fire, the use of the nāga spirit, the entry into the river on the coldest nights of the year—all indicate a different style of practice.

You notice that for the Vedas that practiced sacrifice and for these people, fire is very important and fire is good. It's the fire of the sacrifice. The early miracles that the Buddha performed all involved fire, columns of light and fire. This is meant to impress these people. The use of tapas, which means heat—you generate heat through your practice—so heat and fire are very positive images in this tradition.

But what the Buddha did was reverse that imagery, and he said cooling is good. You have the word nibbāna, or in Sanskrit and English, nirvana. That's a word coming from the going out of a fire, the cooling of a fire. So the Buddha reverses the imagery of the time. At the time, it was probably quite startling. This is something new. Fire is not good, but cooling is. The going out of the fire is good.

Fire becomes the problem and the extinction of fire becomes the solution. When the Buddha gives this sermon, he's throwing at them an image that they're very familiar with, but he's spinning it around, he's reversing it.

We've spoken before about how the Buddha would focus his teaching or aim his teaching at a specific audience. You can see in this discourse that this is created for Kassapa and his followers. Given that the Buddha knew them beforehand, he may well have thought this whole thing out long beforehand.

where you get the feeling that he was flying by the seat of his pants. This time he seems to have a strategy in mind.

These ascetics practiced with a felt intimacy with the elements—a very elemental style of practice, powerful and direct, focused squarely on the body. There was the labor of preparing the fire sacrifice, the ritual bathing, the ordeal of midwinter in the river, and so on. But this practice was also limited by its dependence upon very specific conditions, without which it simply could not be performed.

They had to have certain possessions. Any ritual-based practice requires the ritual implements—certain things you must have in order to go through the rituals. If you don't have them, you can't do the rituals. Certain places were equally important. This practice was very much grounded in that area, on that river, in that particular place—the sacred places of river and forest, because these places were home to the specific spirits invoked in the rituals. If you went away from that place, you'd have to start again because you'd encounter different spirits. It's a very location-oriented practice,

similar to Australian Aboriginal religion, where the spirits and holy places are tied to specific locations, and certain people have their dreaming around particular areas. Very geographically specific.

Plus you need supplies—wood for the fire, so you must be in a forest; water for the ritual bathing, so you must be at a river. It's very place and possession oriented. You have to do it here. You can't do it anywhere else.

The Buddha's approach is completely different. First, no special equipment is needed. In those days they didn't need even the equipment we have today, and what we use is quite simple, not hugely complicated. Maximum simplicity. Second, the practice is not limited to any special place. Meditation can be done anywhere. One is free to move anywhere.

Notice how these ascetics do not wander—they're locked into this particular place. The Buddha's students wander. They're not confined to any particular location. This was very important for them. In wandering, they could take their entire tradition with them and set up camp and practice wherever they were. They did not need any of the elaborate requirements these ascetics needed.

In other words, his approach to practice is marked by universalism. If you look at Buddhism as a religion, it's an excellent candidate for being the first world religion. It spread outside of India and took root in very different cultures scattered over vast distances. It's transportable, portable, universal—in complete contrast to these fire-worshipping ascetics.

So the first thing the Buddha does with these dreadlocked ascetics—notice they don't simply convert. They say, "You are a teacher." Then instead of saying, "Sit down and I will teach you," as he did with the five companions, he says, "Let's go for a walk." He takes them away from their sacred places to a hill sticking up out of a flat plain, far from their sacred river—pretty much the opposite location from what they're used to. In other words, he's more than telling them, he's showing them

You don't need your sacred places, you don't need the intervention of these spirits that you've been cultivating a relationship with all these years. Completely unnecessary. We're going to do something totally different here. And then he teaches them a felt intimacy with the elements.

Now this is something in common with what they were doing before, but it's a whole different approach. Previously, it was their relationship with the spirits and with the particular place that they were in. Here, the Buddha is saying, you don't need any of that. All you need is what you have, which are the six sense fields. And you have the six sense fields wherever you are. That's all you need.

You don't need spirits, you don't need sacred places, you don't need particular seasons. All you need is to cultivate a felt intimacy with the elemental qualities of experience. In other words, what you need in particular is an intimacy with vedana, which we talked about before—the realm of affect. And this vedana is intimately connected with the senses.

The Buddha has the term contact—phassa or samphassa. Usually translated as contact, but it comes from the verb phusati, to touch. We are touched by sense objects. The eye is touched by light. The ear is touched by sound. The nose is touched by odors, and so on. With that touch, there is feeling. And they are, as we talked about, inextricably linked. It's this that is the way into the practice, particularly for these ascetics. And in particular, through the body.

When the Buddha analyzes the human being—the self within her world—we talked about how he has two basic ways of doing this. One is the five aggregates, and the other is the six sense fields. Whenever he's talking about anatta, he talks in terms of the five aggregates. When he talks about entanglement in the world of affect, of feeling, he talks about the six sense fields.

You notice that out of the five aggregates, four of them are mental and one is physical. So it's a predominantly mind-oriented way of looking at the human being. In the six sense fields, five of them are physical and one is mental. This is a predominantly physical way of looking at the nature of the human being. The emphasis is on embodiment. This intimacy with vedana, with feeling, is cultivated primarily through body. The role of body in this practice is extremely important.

So the Buddha began by saying everything is burning. Everything. Now this "everything"—sabba—turns up in other discourses. There's one discourse which is extremely useful, the Sabba Sutta, or simply "Everything." The Buddha begins by saying, "I will teach you everything." Now if I went to a dharma talk and the person got up and said, "I'm going to give you a dharma talk on everything," I'd start feeling anxious about whether I'd get home in time for dinner. But in fact, this is a really brief discourse, and we'll just go through the whole thing.

"And what is everything? Eye sensitivity and forms, ear sensitivity and sounds, nose sensitivity and odors, tongue sensitivity and tastes, body sensitivity and tangibles, mind sensitivity and phenomena." So everything is the six sensitivities and the corresponding sense objects.

"Whoever says, rejecting this everything, 'I shall declare another,' if questioned on the foundation of his words, would be unable to explain and would also become distressed."

So if someone says, "Look, yes, the realm of the six senses is very important, but there is something else that's even more important because it's transcendental, it's spiritual," if questioned on the foundation of his words, he'd be unable to explain. What do you base this belief on? What's the foundation? And if challenged on this, he'd become distressed.

If we have a view, and when challenged, we become distressed, why do we become distressed? Obviously we're clinging to the view. But what are the views that we would tend to cling to most ferociously? The ones for which we have no foundation. Which we accept purely on faith. Which we've never actually investigated. So when someone starts to probe and starts to investigate, we don't know what to say. "But that's what the Holy Book says." But...

What makes you sure that that really is the Holy Book? What makes you sure that this version you have, this book that was several thousand years old—how do you know that this translation is correct?

This is one thing that gets up my nostrils with fundamentalist Christians who believe that the Bible is the literal word of God. How many of them spend the necessary time studying classical Hebrew, ancient Greek, and Aramaic to actually read the word of God? Because those are the languages God spoke in. Usually they don't—they just have some translation. How on earth do they know?

When I was at UQ during my PhD in Buddhist studies, my associate supervisor was a professor in biblical studies. He specialized in the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible. He knew nothing about Buddhism, but he knew everything about studying ancient texts. So I used to hang out with the Old Testament crowd because they were really interesting. What they were doing was quite fascinating.

I remember one time he said, "There's one thing that every biblical fundamentalist has in common: they've never actually studied the Bible." Because, he says, if you read the Hebrew Bible, it's basically a massive storybook. And some of those stories are really, really weird. When you listen to the text being expounded by the fundamentalists, these are the stories they always avoid because they just don't fit the pattern.

So the Buddha is saying, "Well, let's go on. Why would the person become distressed?" Because it is beyond range, is what the Buddha says. But "beyond range" means beyond the range of the senses—in other words, beyond range of experience. So the Buddha is saying if you declare something else, whatever it is you're declaring is beyond experience, and there is no foundation for it except blah blah blah. It's only blah blah blah, and that's all it is, and that's all it ever can be.

The only firm ground to understand what's going on is experience. If there is something for us, if there is something beyond the range of human experience, we cannot know anything about it, and it is completely irrelevant to us. It's just meaningless. What we have is human experience, and human experience comes via the six senses. That's it. End of story.

This is the radical empiricism of the Buddha. So whenever the Buddha speaks about X, whatever it is, what he means is our experience of X. We touched on this when we were talking about life after life. He's more practitioner than philosopher. He does not get caught in metaphysical dead ends. He's just not interested in metaphysical questions. What he's interested in is the nature of experience. And given this, how should we live? That's it.

So this is empiricism, which of course in the European tradition we're quite familiar with—except that in the European tradition it only counts five senses, the physical senses. European philosophers don't see mind as a sense sensitivity or a sense organ. But for the Buddha, he does. He just sees it as obvious. It's a sensitivity to sense data. It's a sense, just like all the others. Well, it has its own peculiar characteristics, but it's just another sense sensitivity.

The Buddha's empiricism becomes radical when we give up any felt belief in that which is beyond experience. What would it be like to drop everything at all that was beyond experience? What would it be like to live like that?

Well, for example, do we experience our own past? We experience memories, which are creations of the mind, and these memories arise when? In the present. Now, do we experience the past? No. What do our memories tell us about the past?

What would it be like to give up any felt belief in the truth of our memories? That's an interesting question. We actually practice this when we do the meditation practice. If I'm distracted by memory, if I ask myself, "What is this memory telling me? Is it giving me information about the past?" Well, in practical terms, sometimes they say something useful, sometimes not. Memories can be useful. But what they certainly tell us is the state of the present. They tell us the present state of the citta which is producing them. That's what they tell us from the point of view of the practitioner.

So I might find myself obsessing about some painful traumatic event that occurred in the past. Now the power of the memory comes from the assumption that this is telling me something true about me and I am now. This memory is telling me something which is true about me now—my past. But when we become sensitive to the Buddha's radical empiricism, which we do when we do this practice relentlessly, just staying with present experience and seeing how it comes and goes, we learn to realize that actually what this memory is telling me is the current state of this citta right now. And that's all it's telling me. As such, it's very valuable.

So a painful memory comes back, I obsess about it. What this is telling me is that right now the citta is raw and vulnerable and being impacted by mental phenomena that's causing pain. And this whole event is being clothed in the story of my past. But all I can ever experience of my past are mental images that arise now. That's all. There is nothing else out there.

And similarly with the future. What would it be like to give up any felt belief in the future? To recognize in real time that the future does not exist. That all I have are images and associated sensations and feelings that occur now, and what they tell me is what's happening now. They don't tell me anything at all about what will happen.

So this is what the Buddha is getting at, particularly in this discourse where he's talking about the immediacy of the senses. This discourse, "Burning," is talking about the felt intimacy of experience, the touch of the world upon me. And this world is both external and internal. This intimacy of stimulus is always happening. There is never a moment that I'm free of it. It's always happening. This is not some kind of abstract third-person philosophy. This is a felt first-person teaching which is designed to bring the practitioner back to the feel of this right here and right now. What does this right now feel like?

So contact and feeling, touch and response—it's already happening. I don't have to do anything at all to make it happen. It's already happening. We are already responding. We don't have to do anything extra to respond. We're already doing it. So "Burning" points directly to that fact, with particular emphasis on its pain and drivenness.

Here the Buddha is really focusing on craving, tanha, the restless dissatisfaction that we experience at the heart of things—dis-ease. And this dis-ease is so subtle. When things are going well, we're having a good time, it's so subtle but so omnipresent that we've ceased noticing it. We notice our thoughts and our feelings blowing about in the wind, but we don't notice the restless, dissatisfied, vulnerable, sensitive quality deep within the citta itself at the point of impact—bang—when the object strikes the sensitivity.

So this teaching is all about a particular kind of practice, and the practice is all about intimacy with the immediacy of experience, the response to that, the vedana of it, whether pleasant, painful or otherwise, and the entanglement that occurs because of it. The way that we get entangled with whatever comes through the senses and get tied up with it. So it's about feeling our way into what's really going on.

So it's about sensitivity and receptivity. There's something going on beneath normal consciousness that is subtly coloring everything happening in consciousness. So what is it? What's going on down there?

Whatever it is, it's already here. And it's not a question of looking for it, as we mentioned with vedanā. If we look for it, if we have the idea, the concept, "Well, I have to look for this," that carries with it the assumption that it may not be here, it may not be discoverable. But it is already here. So it's not looking for it, but feeling, sensing what is already happening. And I think this attitude is quite important—this receptive openness to what we know is happening right now. But it's so immediate and so universal that we've stopped noticing it.

So as a practice style, I think this is—remember we did the exercises in "awareing," when we hold the meditation object very lightly, we become aware of the whole field. That's where we're practicing a more receptive quality of practice. And the next day we did restraining the senses, and there we practiced pure receptivity—just whatever comes. So the teaching on burning could be approached through that style of practice, and it can be particularly useful towards the end of a retreat.

So if we've been practicing, working very hard—note, note, note, note. And remember, noting is directed attention. I send the attention out, bang. I seek out the target, bang. Put the awareness on it. And it's an energetic, directed, kind of "out there" style of practice. Energy builds, concentration builds, mindfulness builds, everything becomes much more sensitive, the mind is much clearer.

Towards the end of the retreat, when it begins to register in the consciousness that it's not that far away until the end, then we begin to suspect that the Buddha's teaching on the non-existence of the future may well be false. *[Laughter]* Now he may have been right about the past, but I think he might have made a mistake about the future because it feels really, really real. Which of course is the imagery coming up fueled by the energy and the clarity and the power of the mind which has spent the past three weeks meditating. So the mind can create a sense of reality which is really strong, precisely because we've been practicing for so long. It's a very interesting phenomenon.

Often we might be tempted to think that the longer we go into the retreat, the fewer the distractions become. That is one trajectory, but you equally have the trajectory where it's not that the distractions disappear—it's that we get a much better quality of distraction. The mind is capable of just producing the most vivid imagery and realities because it's so much more powerful.

So to practice a receptivity—just to receive this—not to fight it, not to try to bury it. "I've got to note harder," or alternatively, "I'll just take a break, just forget about it." But rather start to open up and just receive, feel what's coming through all these senses. And in the case of our relationship to the future, of course it's the sixth sense—the mind.

In this scheme of the six senses, we pointed out the emphasis is clearly on body because it's five of them, and then you have mind as the sixth. Its role is twofold. One is—well, first of all, the five physical senses, I think we mentioned this before, they're like parallel channels that never intersect. So the eyes receive light and color; they do not receive sound. The ears receive sound; they do not receive light, and so on. So there's no intersection. There's five quite discrete channels of information.

And the mind also has its own discrete channel, that of what's called phenomena. This is a translation of dhammās. These are mental phenomena. Sometimes in the older translations you see it translated as mind objects or mental objects. So I can see the inside of this hall—that's physical, coming through the eyes. I close my eyes and I remember or imagine this hall—and that's purely mind, that's the mind channel.

So the mind has its own channel, plus it receives data from the five physical senses as well, and it brings them together in one place, as it were, and it creates a sensual unity. So it creates a felt sense of one place where everything is happening. So when we consider where is seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching taking place, they take place here. So this practice emphasizes the here-ness of experience—even the here-ness of mind. Where am I conceiving myself and my world? Where is that construction of a world taking place? It's taking place here.

When we're lost in narrative, we lose that sense of here-ness. But when we practice with the six senses, we reclaim that sense of here-ness. And here is always now. The two of them go together. It's very much part of working with the senses—the here-ness of experience.

We talked about and played with tracking not-self, anatta, through narrative. So the mind creates the story of myself and my life. Tracking the six sense fields centers on feeling, not narrative. What is the feel of being here now thinking about the future? What is that experience? What touches me with that? How do I respond to that here now?

This practice is concerned with the world defined by affect, by vedana. It's more intimate than the world defined by narrative and fundamentally more real. Yet, paradoxically, it can be more difficult to notice.

We talked about the power of the mind, its capacity to create an alternative reality. And we are in the habit of living in those alternative realities. The practice of the six senses is all about this reality, including the mental reality—but the mental reality experienced as here, as now. So I'm imagining the future, but I have a clear felt sense that this is happening here, and it's happening now. It's not happening there and in the future.

And this practice—the ground of it—is in our relationship to the body. And again we come back to the role of the body, how important it is.

We gave the example of hanging out the clothes. Hanging out the clothes is very routine physical activity whose narrative power is very weak. So what we find when we're hanging out the clothes is we'll start to spin fantasies and we project our sense of reality there into the fantasies.

The practice of the sense fields entails deliberately staying tuned to the direct sensate feeling aspect of the activity. Is it routine? Well, it's only routine if I think about it, if I compare it to past and future. Oh yes, I've done this before. And once it's over, then I can do something real. That relationship can only exist when past and future are felt to be real.

But what if there really isn't anything except this peg? Then we start to get this direct sensate feeling aspect of the activity. This is where the practice of the sense fields takes place.

This is staying with the body, and again, this is one reason why we do the body work in the morning. It's a way of deliberately entering into the direct, immediate feel of the body and exploring it, exploring what is the nature of the sensation. Because the whole exercise is: where is the sensation this morning? Find it, stay with it, relax into it.

But there's also the direct sensate feel of the mind itself, which is available but much more subtle. So for example, thinking and fantasy, thinking about the future. But what about the direct sensate experience of the drivenness to think? What does that feel like? And the feeling of the unsatisfactory nature, the dukkha nature of this particular thought that I've generated—which I can see because I immediately rush to create another one. If this first one was satisfactory I would have stayed with it. But apparently it isn't because there's this rush to create another one and another one and another one.

What's underneath that and what's the feel of the driven quality of the need to produce all these thoughts? The restlessness and the agitation—this is part of the Buddha's fire imagery. It's hot in the sense that first of all we get emotionally entangled with it. So I'm driven to think of the future. I take it to be real, and then I get tangled up. I better arrange it this way. Maybe that's not the best way. I'll arrange it that way. That'll be really, really good. Oh, Jesus, that's really going to be good. It's going to be fantastic. How many days? Oh, it's going to be great.

But someone might screw it up. Oh, those bastards. I'd better handle that. I've got to figure out some way to prevent that from happening. Fueling, agitation, burning.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, when the Buddha talks about the six senses, he talks about understanding the sensitivity, the sense object, and the fetter—the sannyojana—that arises dependent upon both. So here he's taking a slightly different approach with the senses, but it's the same thing: the sense of stuckness and drivenness found in our relationship with the senses, the way we get caught up in them, entangled, stuck, unable to move beyond them, driven by them. And so we have this image of fire.

The Buddha's use of fire conveys restlessness and dissatisfaction and a sense of fascination. Isn't it interesting to watch a fire? It really draws the eye in. And it's constantly shifting and moving and going somewhere else—there's no rest in it, there's no peace within it. For the Buddha, what bliss comes from is the cooling of the fire. But in order to find that cooling, we've got to go directly through the fire. That's the only way there.

Let's look at another way in which the Buddha talks about fire, in the Aggivaccha Gotta Sutta—the discourse to Vacchagotta on fire. This is another fire sermon, this one given to Vacchagotta. He was a non-Buddhist ascetic who used to hang around and ask the Buddha questions. He asked very good questions and inspired some very good discourses.

In this particular discourse, Vacchagotta is interested in the nature of the awakened citta. When someone's awakened, fully enlightened, what's the nature of the citta there?

The Buddha says to him, "What do you think, Vaccha? Suppose a fire was burning in front of you. Would you know it was burning in front of you?" So you get this picture—they're sitting around, and imagine this fire right in front of you. Do you know that fire is burning in front of you?

"I would, Mr. Gautama." Vaccha is not a bhikkhu, so he doesn't say *Bhante*. He says "Mr. Gautama."

"If somebody asked you, 'Dependent upon what does this fire burn?' what would you answer?"

"I would answer, 'This fire burns dependent upon grass and sticks.'"

"If this fire was extinguished, would you know that it was extinguished?"

"I would, Mr. Gautama."

"If someone was to ask you, 'When that fire in front of you was extinguished, where did it go? To the east, the west, the north, or the south?' what would you answer?"

"That does not apply, Mr. Gautama. Fire burns dependent upon its fuel of grass and sticks."

Remember, fuel is *upadana*—we talked about this before. The translation of *upadana* is clinging or attachment. So it's fuel and it's also clinging or attachment. "Fire burns dependent upon its fuel of grass and sticks. When that fuel is used up and it does not get any more—no longer fed—it is reckoned as cooled."

So for the Buddha, the goal is for the fire to burn itself out. Everything is burning. What we have to do is become intimate with that experience of burning, and in that intimacy, stop adding to it. When we do that, the fire goes out.

And what can we say about that experience? If the fire goes out, well, you know that the fire has gone out. But what can you say about it? Here the question is: where has it gone? You've said it's gone out, so where has it gone to?

You can see that language doesn't cope. "That does not apply, Mr. Gautama." Language is being directed at something which it cannot cope with. The cooling of the fire represents something which is experienced as obvious—as obvious as "here, there's the fire," but now it's gone out. Bleeding obvious. Yet at the same time, it's impossible to put a concept on it. Whatever concept we put upon it does not apply.

It doesn't fit.

Did that aesthetic ever convert?

Yes, eventually.

Did you know what happened to him?

No, I just know that that particular questioning was around the mind of the awakened one. Where does it go after death? So that was a question about life after life.

You notice how the Buddha brings it back to here and now? Right now, with the fire's gone out, where has it gone? Because there's no difference.

So this is a practice which is immediate, it's physical, five out of the six senses. It has to do with the immediacy of experience and the feeling that arises, the ocean of affect that we all live in, our responses, and seeing—really being clear about those responses and exactly what is going on with them, and going through that fire.

And the fire implies dukkha. This is an image which conveys what the later tradition calls the dukkha ñāṇas. I think maybe tomorrow we'll talk about dukkha since one or two individuals have experienced it during this retreat. Once or twice. Not very much. Mostly it's been bliss. So we'll talk about that.

But through the fire to the other side, which is the going out of the fire. And this is the basic theme of the practice that the Buddha is presenting to the dreadlocks, the ascetics—although now there's no more dreadlocks. They've abandoned those in the rivers.

So he presents all this material about burning, and then he introduces disenchantment. Seeing in this way, the trained, cultivated student is disenchanted with eye sensitivity, disenchanted with visual forms, disenchanted with visual awareness, disenchanted with visual contact, disenchanted with whatever feeling arises dependent upon visual contact, whether pleasant or painful, or neither painful nor pleasant, and so on through the other senses.

And of course we talked about disenchantment in the Anattalakkhana Sutta. So from here on in, it's exactly the same as Anattalakkhana, but it's a different entry point. With the second discourse on not-self, the entry point is via the five aggregates. Here the entry point is the six sense fields.

And this illustrates an aspect of the Buddha's teaching and practices: there's any number of entry points. And basically the entry point for each practitioner depends on where their sensitivities lie. That's the way in. And of course sensitivity can also be associated with pain. So often the pain is the way in. It's the meditator's friend.

Is it?

Who said that?

That's what I've heard.

She's quoting Upāndvā.

As this explanation was being given, the hearts of the thousand bhikkhus were liberated from the taints by not clinging. So one thousand arahants. Bang. So you can see how the whole thing is escalating. The last discourse was five arahants. Then he had various people around Bārāṇasī. By the time he leaves Bārāṇasī, he's got sixty arahants. And now, he's done a lot of legwork over the past month. But whammo, he's got a thousand.

Is this only a month later?

Well, he spent time at Bārāṇasī, so maybe six weeks, two months.

So what was the time scale of this? How long...

First two or three months.

After the awakening?

Well, the two months after the awakening was the first discourse. So let's say this is maybe a couple of months later. So within six months, within the first six months.

So Buddhism is getting bigger and bigger. The Buddha's got this large community.

This community of 1,000 represented something extraordinary—these were very well-known and respected ascetics. This was 1,000 celebrities gathered in one place. What the Buddha does next demonstrates his remarkable strategic understanding: he takes them to Rajagaha, the capital of Magadha.

The arrival creates an enormous sensation throughout the city. All of these famous ascetics, particularly the three Kassapa brothers who were household names, have come to town together. This is completely unprecedented—they normally never travel as a group. And something is clearly different: they've all shaved their heads, which is seriously unusual behavior for them. There's also this other figure—a young man who seems remarkably close to these established teachers.

The texts tell us that people were genuinely confused, asking each other: Who is the student and who is the teacher? The elder Kassapa, understanding the confusion and recognizing the situation, makes a decisive public gesture. He prostrates before the Buddha, declaring unmistakably: "He is the teacher. I am the student."

In that moment, the Buddha is rocketed to overnight stardom in Magadha. He becomes the number one spiritual teacher in the kingdom—an unprecedented achievement.

You can see the Buddha's brilliant strategic mind at work. Having made that crucial decision perhaps six months earlier—"I must teach, there will be a few people who can understand this"—he has gotten onto a trajectory and now realizes something much grander: I can build an international spiritual movement. And that's exactly what he sets out to accomplish.

From this point forward, everything grows exponentially. His influence expands across kingdoms and cultures. His training as a member of the aristocratic class would have given him that strategic political understanding—he knew how power worked, how to communicate with influential people, how systems of authority functioned.

This aristocratic background, his experience as part of a republican ruling structure rather than a monarchy, profoundly shapes how he organizes the Sangha. The Buddha understood community organizing, the dynamics of leadership, and the principles of effective governance. All of this wisdom flows directly into his creation of the Vinaya and the revolutionary democratic principles that govern monastic life.

The spiritual genius and the political strategist were one and the same person, working in perfect harmony to establish a teaching that would endure for millennia.

CHAPTER 27

The Sweet Essence - Part 1 (Madhupindika Sutta)

Patrick Kearney · 56 min

Patrick Kearney opens a two-part exploration of the Madhupindika Sutta (MN 18), often called "The Honey Ball" but translated here as "The Sweet Essence." The discourse begins with the Buddha's encounter with Dandapani, a wealthy merchant in Kapilavatthu who questions the Buddha's teaching with an arrogant demeanor. The Buddha responds by addressing both the ethical dimension of non-argument and the deeper psychology of underlying perceptions (anusettī) that drive our conflicts and suffering.

When the Buddha's initial response proves too condensed for his bhikkhus to understand, Venerable Mahākaccāna provides a detailed explanation of how experience unfolds through the six sense doors. Starting with the natural process of contact (phassa) and feeling (vedanā), Mahākaccāna traces how we move from direct experience to perception (saññā), then to thinking (vitakka), and finally to proliferation (papañca) - the mind's tendency to complicate and elaborate experience beyond what's necessary.

This teaching reveals how we construct our sense of self and world through layers of conceptualization, moving from the immediacy of contact to being "harassed by concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation." Kearney emphasizes how feeling precedes and conditions all subsequent mental activity, challenging our culture's overvaluation of reason by showing how emotion actually underlies our sense of reality. Part 1 establishes the problem of mental construction; Part 2 will address the path to freedom from these binding patterns.

Tonight and tomorrow night we're going to look at the Madhupindika Sutta. Madhupindika is usually translated as "the honey ball," though I translate it as "the sweet essence." This is a quite famous discourse, and we're going to take two nights to unpack it. The talk is going to be abstract, technical, intellectual, obscure, serious, mysterious, and difficult. So you can all start taking a nap right now and just tune out.

Madhupindika—M-A-D-H-U—means "the sweet essence," and Pindika is P-I-N-D-I-K-A. This is number 18 in the Majjhima Nikaya.

Our story begins with the Buddha visiting Kapilavatthu, staying in Nigrodha's park outside the city. He's in the park meditating when a wealthy man, probably a merchant, comes walking through. This man's nickname is Dandapani. Danda means stick, pani

means hand—"stick in hand"—and he was called this because he was famous for his walking stick, which was made of gold. So he was wealthy, ostentatious, and quite well known, with an image of himself as being very interested in Dharma.

He's wandering through the park on his constitutional when he sees the Buddha sitting under a tree. He thinks this is the opportunity to ask a question. So he walks up, stands leaning on his walking stick, and asks, "What does the Samana teach? What does he declare? Here you are sitting under this tree—what's your teaching?"

The Buddha replies: "Friend, I teach so one does not stand arguing with anyone in the world, with its devas, its maras and brahmanas, its samanas and brahmanas, its rulers and peoples. I teach so that no perceptions underlie a brahmana who lives detached from desires, without confusion, with worries cut off, free from craving for any kind of becoming."

The first part of his answer—"I teach so one does not stand arguing with anyone in the world"—represents a quite typical move of the Buddha. He's asked what we could call a philosophical question, and he responds with an answer that belongs in the realm of ethics: how one lives. Basically, he describes the ethical result or expression of the teaching—how one lives if one is free from compulsion, free from drivenness.

This is important because for the Buddha, the teaching is always about how we live. That's what the Buddha is always interested in: broadly speaking, ethics. He creates theory, which can be quite elaborate—and we're going to go into it tonight and tomorrow night—but it's all about shedding light on how we live and changing how we live. It's all about ethics.

His first response is about ethics and is directed precisely at the situation in which he finds himself. Dandapani is standing, leaning on his stick—not very respectful. Incredibly disrespectful. You can tell that he's not a Buddhist when he doesn't address the Buddha as Bhante or the Blessed One. He says, "What does the Samana teach?" Samana means the reverend, the philosopher, whatever. But his attitude is very aggressive. He's standing above the Buddha, leaning on his stick, as if to say: "So, you down there, what's your trip? What are you on about?"

We don't know whether he realized who he was talking to. Maybe he did.

I mean, the Buddha was quite famous. But if you hadn't met him before, how would you distinguish him from any other person in rags sitting under a tree? And so the Buddha was alone—no, he was alone. And this is his hometown? Yeah, he visited a number of times. We don't know. We never know. All we get is that he's living in Kapilavastu. So we never know which visit it was. We don't know. Can't tell.

So the Buddha's first response is to turn Dandapani's attention inwards to his own condition. You pretend or purport to be interested in Dharma, and yet the way you behave indicates you're completely alienated from that interest. So what drives you? Why are you acting in this way? What is the source of your arrogance?

It sounds to me like he's saying, why are you spoiling for an argument? Because the Buddha says, I don't argue. But why do people argue? What's underneath that? And so the first sentence is about ethics and the second one is what we might call depth psychology. Now the Buddha goes into the depths of the psyche—why it is that people live in conflict.

So he says, "I teach so that no perceptions underlie a Brahmana." This is a Brahman, but here it would mean practitioner, not a member of the Vedic priesthood. So no perceptions underlie a Brahmana living detached from desires, without confusion, with worries cut off, free from craving for any kind of becoming.

So the Buddha moves into the underlying source of what moves us, what shapes our chosen way of life. And here he's saying we are formed and moved by the underlying perceptions. I teach so that no perceptions underlie someone who lives appropriately.

So here we have the first technical term. There's a number of technical terms in this discourse: underlying perceptions. First of all, perception, which we've mentioned briefly. Perception is the recognition of a situation as being familiar. So perception gives us our familiar, meaningful world. It creates our sense of normality. And what we perceive, we take for granted as being real, what's really out there. And perception is habitual. It's a product of repetition from the past.

So, for example, if you hear someone speaking in your native language, you just hear them giving you a message. But actually what the ears hear are a whole series of sounds, and it's the perception that turns it into a message. We recognise those words as containing these meanings. But if it's our own language, it's so deeply habitual that we don't even recognise it happening. We just hear the meaning. So it's a shortcut.

If you ever try to learn a second language, you discover how much work and how much time and effort it takes to develop that perception. It's not to be taken for granted. But because perception is habitual, in fact we do take our perceptions for granted. We don't look further. We don't investigate what underlies our perceptions and above all we don't understand that our normal everyday perception is a product of drivenness and delusion and therefore cannot be trusted. So this is the Buddha's perspective.

Actually, one example about perception—how it works in a meditation retreat—it hasn't happened here but often if you're teaching Dharma to a group of meditators, sometimes you get the challenge that comes up which clearly in the mind of the challenger is a brilliant, profound and unassailable challenge, and they say: "Ha ha, but what about the real world? What about that? What about the real world?"

Well, this "real world" is the product of perception. What the person is talking about is their habitual perceptions. And that's what appears to us to be real.

And it's usually for most people not to be questioned. If you do challenge these habitual perceptions, often the response will be aversion.

Underlying perception, or anusetti, refers to the deepest and most habitual movements of what we would call the unconscious mind. The Buddha talks about the anusaya, the underlying tendencies. This is the closest that he gets to talking about what we would regard as the unconscious mind.

The underlying tendencies are the potentialities deep within the heart-mind. They represent a potential for something to happen, something to arise, given a suitable trigger. If you're a long-term meditator, you might have had the experience of feeling that you've definitely grown out of some particular obsession. Then years later you're meditating away and suddenly—bang! There it is. You think, "That has been skulking in the background for the last ten years, and now here it is. It hasn't disappeared."

This might be an example of the underlying tendencies. Actually, it hasn't been skulking down there. It's a potentiality, not a real thing. But there's this potential, this pattern, such that given the appropriate conditions coming together, this will arise, this will pop up. These are the anusaya, the underlying tendencies.

Here the Buddha is talking about the underlying perceptions—the deepest, most habitual, most unconscious way in which we perceive ourselves and our world. What he's drawing attention to is the fact that we do not see these underlying forces. These underlying tendencies dominate the way that we live. They dominate what we think is going on, who we think we are, who we think other people are, and what we do about it.

What gives them their power is the fact that we don't see them. They're invisible. We are like puppets on strings, and of course what makes a puppet a puppet is the fact that they don't know that they're puppets. They don't know that they're being manipulated by the strings. We are being manipulated by these underlying perceptions. They are the deep habits that create our sense of reality, of normality, and they're associated with craving, drivenness, and delusion.

That's clear enough, isn't it? Not too complicated?

So awakening is being spoken of as a life in which no perceptions underlie the practitioner. There are no perceptions, no underlying perceptions. Nothing underneath the surface that's skulking and ready to jump up and condition us. For the practitioner who is in that condition—for whom there are no underlying perceptions—lives detached from desires. This means a life that is no longer driven, no longer obsessed.

But to find this we have to penetrate beneath surface appearances. These are very deep, and to get to them, we've got to go very deep to expose them.

Basically, what the Buddha has just done—if you think about the situation—is this: he's minding his own business. This arrogant fellow comes up, stands over him, treats him disrespectfully, and asks him a question. The Buddha, as they say in the Zen world, opens his mouth and shows his liver. He just gives him the whole teaching all at once—hits him with the full blast of the Dharma.

This is very interesting because he would not have done this unless he had seen some potential in Dandapani. For all this surface arrogance, there was someone who had the potential to be moved by the teaching. Otherwise the Buddha wouldn't have bothered with him.

So Dandapani actually does have some potential, but he is not interested and he walks off. I have to look up the sutta again, but he kind of waggles his eyebrows and twirls his stick and strolls off. Basically, I think his response would have been, "I've got absolutely no idea what you're talking about and I'm out of here."

Dandapani blows it. He blows his chance to be transformed—not because of his initial arrogance. The Buddha accepted that and addressed it directly. But he blows it because of his failure to stay and ask a question. He didn't stay and say, "Okay, you've just taught me something and I have no idea what you're talking about. Could you explain it to me?" He responds to his own inability to understand what's going on by concluding this is not worth taking seriously and walking away.

This is quite a common reaction.

It's very easy when faced with a situation like this to walk away. It's the easiest thing to do.

So in the evening the Buddha comes back home. The way that they would live, they would camp out somewhere. In the morning after the alms round they have the meal and then they go out and scatter and people do their own practice. They come back in

the evening and they share stories, Dharma talks, questions and answers and so on, have a social time and then crash out for the night and get up early in the morning and head off to alms round and so on.

So the Buddha comes home in the evening and he tells the bhikkhus the story of this encounter and he repeats what he's told Dandapani: "Friend, I teach so one does not stand arguing with anyone in the world. I teach so that no perceptions underlie a practitioner who lives detached from desires, without confusion, with worries cut off, free from craving for any kind of becoming."

But it turns out that it's not just Dandapani who is confused. The bhikkhus have absolutely no idea what the Buddha is talking about. None. This goes straight over their heads. But their response is quite different. They actually ask for an explanation. Could you expand on this? Could you explain what's going on here? And so the Buddha does.

You get the second teaching: "As for the cause through which we are harassed by concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation, if there is nothing there to delight in, welcome and hold to, just this is the end of the underlying tendencies to obsession, aversion, views, doubt, conceit, desire for becoming and delusion. Just this is the end of turning to violence and weapons, to quarrels, fights, disputes, recriminations, malicious words and false speech. This is where these evil, unwholesome states cease entirely."

So this is the Buddha's expansion on his initial teaching. First of all, the idea of the underlying perceptions—these have been expanded into concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation. *Papañca saññā saṅkhā.*

So we've seen that perception is what gives us our normal everyday world. It gives us our sense of normality. Once we think we know what's happening in the world or in any given situation, at that point we stop paying attention because we already know. This is why it's so easy driving a car to space out. Because I know how to drive the car. Compared with my first driving lesson when push this, press that, turn this, look here—so I really have to pay attention. But once it's habitual, I can just turn off and think about something else and just do it.

So this is perception. Once we decide we know what's going on then we don't look again because we think we know.

Now this is where perceptions become concepts of perceptions. So perceptions already freeze the world but then they get doubly frozen through concepts of perceptions. And the concepts are even more frozen and more divorced from what's actually

happening than the perceptions. And these concepts are closely associated with *papañca*, usually translated proliferation, could also be translated as complication. And we're going to look at this later.

Now, the Buddha addresses the cause or condition. As for the cause or the condition through which we are harassed by concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation, the term he uses here is *nidāna*. And the bhikkhus would instantly recognize this term. This is a key technical term, and it's always used in the context of dependent arising.

Dependent arising is all about conditionality. If something is happening, something else is conditioning it. And we've been talking about this in the practice all the way through. So we've been saying if I'm investigating an experience, one way I can do it is I can ask the question, what's feeding this? So what's happening to cause this? Something is happening, or something else must be happening to stimulate this. Otherwise this would not be happening. And in turn, what does this feed? If I cultivate this, what's the result? There will be a result. So what is it?

So when we ask what feeds this, in technical terms, we're asking what is its *nidāna*?

When we ask what feeds this, in technical terms, we're asking what is its *nidana*. And when we ask what does this feed, we're asking what does this function as the *nidana* for.

So *nidana* introduces the idea of conditionality. A *nidana* is something which is caused by something else and in turn causes something else. A *nidana* is something which is caused by something and in turn causes something else. So it's part of this network of conditionality. And as soon as the Buddha drops in this term, everybody knows he's talking about dependent arising.

So as for the cause or the condition through which we are harassed by concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation—what's causing this? How does this flow?

"If there is nothing there to delight in, welcome and hold to, just this is the end of the underlying tendencies to obsession, aversion, views, doubt, conceit, desire for becoming and delusions."

If there is nothing there to delight in—remember we talked about delight before when we were talking about craving? *Nandi*. Delight is the gratification that comes from satisfying a desire, but it's always associated with agitation. It's like, "That was good, I've got to do it again." So it's stimulated, excited, agitated, and it seeks repetition. Once is not enough. Twice would be better. Twice was good, but another would be even

better. So seconds were very good, but I've got to go back for thirds. The thirds were great, except it's getting a bit heavy, but I'll try the fourths. Damn it, it's all gone. These greedy bastards were ahead of me.

So this is delight, and it's always associated with restlessness, agitation, and therefore repetition. So it's actually painful although it feels like it's good, but if we look at it closely, it's actually painful.

And holding—"If there is nothing there to delight in, welcome and hold to." Holding indicates the state of being stuck. Can't move on from it.

When the Buddha says, "if there is nothing there," the "nothing"—well, what he's talking about so far is the process of what we've called the constructed state, the flow of constructed and conditioned events, *samsara*. When he says, "if there is nothing there," that nothing indicates the unconstructed, the not-born, the not-become, *nibbana* itself.

So in this teaching, in this bit, he says: As for the cause through which we are harassed by concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation, if there is nothing there underneath it, then that's it. No more problem. Colored by what? Colored by proliferation or complication. We're going to get to proliferation later on.

Is this making any sense at all? If it's making sense, you're way ahead of the *bhikkhus*, because the *bhikkhus* are still completely confused and they still don't know what's going on, except that they're too embarrassed to say so because the teacher has just explained it to them and it's kind of disrespectful to say, "Mate, we've got no idea what you're talking about."

I find that a little bit strange. Some of them would be fully awakened. Maybe these were particularly dull because they get scalded later on. But not by the Buddha. It could be the newbies. He could have just ordained a new bunch. It's quite possible. Isn't it even possible though that *arahants* who aren't particularly intellectual wouldn't grasp it? Yes, that's quite possible too.

So the Buddha, having explained this, gets up and leaves. He goes into his hut, settles down for the night. But the *bhikkhus* are left with this problem that the Buddha has just given them a teaching and it sounds very profound, but they've got absolutely no idea what it's about. So they need someone to explain it to them.

"Who will expound this in detail?" they ask. And so they decide upon Venerable Mahakaccana, who is in part of this camp because of all the disciples, Mahakaccana was the most skilled in explaining in detail what has been taught in brief.

And this actually introduces us to a basic structure of the Buddhist teaching. Often you get teachings which are very brief and need to be unpacked, which is what we do in these dharma talks. So this is commentary. And the process of commentary would have begun in the Buddha's lifetime—here we see it. We see an initial teaching, very brief, condensed! Then we see it unpacked and expanded—commentary. And then we're going to see this one expanded and unpacked even more—commentary on the commentary. This is typical of the Buddhist traditions.

Much of the intellectual firepower over the past two and a half millennia has been devoted to unpacking these teachings and explaining in detail what has been said in brief. As you can already tell, the suttas are often very compressed. It's like they're composed in shorthand, meant to be unpacked. The Sanskrit term sutra (sutta is Pali), and later on, centuries after the Buddha, this system became highly developed among literate Indians. You would compose a sutra absolutely packed with meaning—in fact impossible to figure out without a commentary. The person who composed the sutra would also compose the commentary. A classic example is Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, if you've ever looked at them.

So the bhikkhus go up to Venerable Mahakachana, tell him the whole story, and ask him to explain what's going on. What's the first thing he does? He scolds them. "You had the Buddha sitting right in front of you. You could have asked him, but you've come to ask me? What is the problem with you people?" The bhikkhus are all embarrassed and shamefaced, but they say, "Well, what to do? He's gone and you're here, so could you just explain it?"

So Mahakachana says, "Okay, okay." And this passage is particularly famous, often commented upon. Mahakachana says, "Depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling." Have you heard this before? Yes, Monday. So we've gone through this before.

And then he adds: "What we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we proliferate. Because of what we have proliferated, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation, regarding past, future and present."

He continues: "Depending on ear sensitivity and sounds, depending on nose sensitivity and odors, depending on tongue sensitivity and tastes, depending on body sensitivity and tangibles, depending on mind sensitivity and phenomena, mind awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact, contact conditions feeling. What we feel, we

perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we proliferate. Because of what we have proliferated, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation regarding past, future and present."

So this is the teaching which we'll go through. Of course it goes through the six sense fields which we talked about last night—and the six sense fields are all about the immediacy of experience and the feeling that is always part of that immediacy. The realm of affect, of stimulus and response. We are touched by something and we respond. That's built in.

So depending on eye and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact, contact conditions feeling. We are moved to do something, to respond, before we make any kind of choice about it.

It's just automatic, it just happens. And so this is at the very basis, this is ground zero of experience. What Mahakachana is describing here is natural process. There's a sensitivity, there's a corresponding object, there's the corresponding awareness. They meet and feeling arises. This is just natural process.

It's not good, it's not bad, it's just nature. Today it's been raining. Previously it was sunny. It's not good, it's not bad, it's just nature. It's just what happens. That's it. There's no problem and there's no person who has a problem. It's just natural process.

Then the second sentence: "What we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we proliferate."

The first thing you notice is that here, someone has just appeared. There's no "us" in the first sentence. There's a sensitivity, a sense object, awareness—bang, they come together, feeling. But in the next sentence, there's someone there who is feeling. Someone has just appeared. This is the self. "What we feel, we perceive." So it's no longer physical and mental events arising and ceasing. It's someone who is feeling and perceiving.

From feeling comes agency. There's someone around. There's someone doing something. And from feeling comes perception. So our recognition of what's going on, of our familiar world, emerges out of our affective responses, or we could say, speaking broadly, our emotional responses. They are what create or condition the perceptions.

In other words, first comes the heart's response, then comes the head's understanding. First comes what we would, in our culture, normally call emotion. Then comes reality. I think this is a very important principle, particularly in a culture which overvalues reason. We're all supposed to be operating on reason. Fine. Except reason is based on emotion. So if we don't address that, the reason is skewed.

So what we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. We are presented with a world that we recognize, that is familiar, that makes sense. And then Mahakachana says this includes vedana, so we're already responding, we're already engaged, but we don't leave things there. We need this world to mean something, and so to create meaning, we start thinking about the world, about this world which is created by feeling and perception. So we start thinking about what we perceive, our normal perceptions.

Have you ever done that? Once or twice, perhaps? So what we perceive, we think about. Now we're creating this world of concepts that sits on top of the perceptions. We've got the contact, the feeling, the perception, and on top of that, the thinking.

What we think about, we proliferate. Or we complicate things. This is papañca.

And this is the mind going into hyperdrive in its determination to read more into the experience than is necessary or even useful. Have you ever thought about something much more than was necessary or useful? This is proliferation. This is papañca. Complication.

We do this because we're driven by affect, by feeling, and everything that comes with it. So this proliferation creates a world which is distorted, complicated, and a product of craving and delusion.

We've got two steps in. And then the third sentence: "Because of what we proliferate, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation regarding past, future and present."

Notice in the second one, we feel, we perceive, we think. There's someone there making choices. There's agency. We are doing something. But when the process matures in this third sentence—"because of what we proliferate we are harassed by"—we are no longer doing it. It's happening to us. We are now the victims of circumstances beyond our control.

Have you ever had that feeling, that sense, as thoughts are rampaging through the mind: "I'm not doing this. This is happening to me. If I had any choice in the matter I would stop, but I don't"? This is what Mahākaccāna is talking about. We're completely driven by forces out of our control in a world that seems separate and alien from us. This is our normal everyday world in which we live.

What dominates now are concepts—in Pali, saññā—and these are fixed ways of experiencing and labeling the world. What's happened is we've lost touch with the directness of experience and we're living in a world of shadows. Notice that we're no longer in a world of perceptions, but in a world of concepts of perceptions. There's an extra layer put on top of the perceptions.

The perceptions themselves are already the product of habit. But now on top of that there's an extra layer—concepts of them. So there's even more alienation. It's like a kind of cling wrap that covers everything.

Sometimes meditators will have the experience that they're trying to do something really simple, like follow the breathing, for example—directly experience the body and the mind—but we find ourselves somehow not connecting with it. It's like there seems to be some barrier. "I feel out of touch, separated somehow from the experience, isolated, not completely with it."

Sometimes we don't even notice this until somehow we stumble into an experience where we're genuinely intimate with the experience. We're simply with it. "Wow, this feels good." And then we lose it. And then we realize just how alienated and separated we normally are from simple experience.

So these are the concepts of perceptions, colored by proliferation. Does that make sense?

"What did you call it before? Did you call it saṅkhāra?"

Saññā. The concept is the translation of saññā, which is very similar to saṅkhāra. It's a different... S-A-N-K-H-A. From the same root, saṅ with khā.

This is an old Indian technical term that the Buddha would have inherited. It's an old term, a pre-Buddhist term. It basically means classification, enumeration, classifying, conceptualizing, analyzing—making sense out of something through some kind of system of classification. Here it's being used in a general sense of concept.

"Patrick, where do the unconscious potentialities sort of seep into that hierarchy of proliferation?"

They're way at the bottom. That's part of the dependent arising—that there are certain things operating so deep that they're generally invisible. In the standard formula of dependent arising, there's a standard twelve-fold formula, and the Buddha says delusion conditions constructions, constructions condition awareness.

So with awareness, we see what's going on. At the bottom is delusion. These conditioned constructions, and this process of the delusion conditioning the constructions—this will be down in that subconscious level. And what we get is the finished product. We get a sense of something happening at the level of awareness. But there's already something going on before we get to it, before we notice it.

You can tell that in your meditation practice. It's like there's something under there. We talk about going deeper in the meditation. It's like taking that awareness and going deeper down and then noticing things that previously we never saw, that were unconscious.

"Because of what we proliferate, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation regarding past, future and present." You notice that with concept we have a world of experienced time. Past, future and present appear now at this point with concepts. This is what the Buddha calls permanence, and only concepts provide permanence.

So let's take proliferation, papañca. Let's say I'm sitting meditating and my mind is in a spin. It's just pouring off thoughts. Now for this group, obviously you have to just imagine that there are some meditators who undergo this. Obviously you can't call upon direct experience, but just imagine that someone's going through this process.

This process is the manifestation of impermanence. It's a very good manifestation of it. It's constantly changing. It's constantly moving. It doesn't stay still for a second. So the proliferation is directly experienced as change.

But the concepts created by the proliferation are perceived as permanent and containing time. "It's always been like this for me. I always thought this was going to happen and now it's happened and it's going to be like this forever." So we have time—past, future and present—but it comes about through the concept.

The experience itself is just right now and it's changing all the time. But the concepts of the experience tell us, no, this is all about what's permanent. This is all about what happens, what survives from the past going through the present to the future.

So I'm lost in thought. The actual experience is constantly dancing and changing. What's permanent is the concept about it. "I always get lost in thought and it's always like this." Does that make sense? So where there's concept, there's time. Where there's no concept, there's no time.

What Mahakaccana is presenting here is how it happens that from the natural process of the immediacy of experience, the mind creates, gets into this process which ends up with our minds running completely riot. Our minds are totally out of control and therefore our lives are totally out of control. And we're lost in drivenness and delusion.

So what Mahakaccana has done is give a particular view of how the constructed world of the constructed is constructed—of how it works, how we built it. So we have built this world in which I'm here and I've got a problem and this is the real world and I'm stuck because this is reality, this is normal, this is me. He's laid out how we create the problem, and then he starts laying out how we create the solution to the problem. We'll look at that tomorrow.

"I've noticed in my environment that we spend so much time thinking that concept, when we skipped over perception and gave that just hardly any attention, jumped over it to then get lost in the thinking about what's not there."

Yes, because it's so familiar. We talked before about the power, the attraction of narrative—the narrative power of an experience. And we tend to go for the drama, basically. We like the drama. Something nice and juicy to chew on. Exactly. And especially when the result is so satisfactory. Viz me.

"Would it really be possible to exist and live just with pure perception? I mean, we kind of need procedural memory..."

We'll get to that tomorrow. So let's have those questions tomorrow, because this is Mahakaccana. He's laid out the problem. Tomorrow he'll lay out the other side.

So tonight he's been laying out the *sankhata*, the constructed, and tomorrow he'll lay out the unconstructed. So we get a sense there. So did they understand the six dimensions? Well it's not over yet. We'll find out tomorrow.

I think all the wisdom traditions have some story like this. This is interesting because of the psychological structure of it. It's very detailed.

You asked if from feeling comes agency—is that a kind of chicken and egg problem? Do you need agency to have feeling? Feeling precedes agency for sure. It precedes everything except the actual touch. And it precedes meaning as well.

The other question was about the unconscious—if it's what we don't know we don't know, is the process of meditation really just looking at the coloring? You mentioned perceptions having a coloring—coloured by perception, coloured by proliferation. So is it about becoming more sensitive to that coloring?

Yes, becoming more sensitive to what emerges out of the unconscious. As you say, if it's unconscious we don't know. But what the Buddha pays attention to—the Buddha does not pay attention to the unconscious because it's not part of empirical experience. He's only interested in empirical experience.

What we know is this arises and it ceases. We can expand that: this arises when that arises, and this ceases when that ceases. So remember the model of the four truths? There we had craving and *dukkha*. So what we have is what arises into view, into awareness and how that plays. That's all we've got. That's all we can ever have. If what's underneath is—who knows?

So he doesn't actually say there is an unconscious mind, because there's no empirical basis for it. What he says is you can experience the fact that there are these deep potentialities because sometimes, bang, something comes up and you realize, "Oh, I was caught in that fifty years ago." And it's happened in the same way.

And this is the Buddha's radical empiricism. If it's beyond experience it's just not going to go there. Whatever you say about it is just blah blah blah. So don't even waste your time.

I told you it would be abstract, technical and obscure and I was right. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 28

The Sweet Essence - Part 2

Patrick Kearney · 1h02

> *In this second part of exploring the Madhupindika Sutta (MN 18), Patrick Kearney examines Mahākaccāna's profound teaching on the process by which we create suffering through conceptual proliferation (papañca). The discourse reveals how we begin with immediate sense contact—the meeting of sensitivity, sense object, and awareness—but then layer on concepts, perceptions, and thinking that ultimately trap us in a prison of our own mental constructions.*
>
> *Kearney explores the technical terms ṭhāna (ground) and paññatti (concept), showing how every experience requires a foundation but how we mistakenly take these conceptual grounds as solid reality. Through examples from Zen stories and meditation practice, he illustrates what it means to experience without adding conceptual overlays—the "cleanness" of bare attention where concepts are used as tools rather than mistaken for reality.*
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> *The talk addresses practical questions about labeling in meditation, planning, and memory, demonstrating how awakened action can be spontaneous and effective without the burden of self-consciousness. This exploration of dependent arising (paṭicca samuppāda) and emptiness (suññatā) offers profound insights into the nature of liberation—the "sweet essence" that is paradoxically no essence at all.*

Last night we explored the first part of the Madhupindika Sutta, "The Sweet Essence"—one of the more challenging yet fascinating discourses. We began with the Buddha meditating when Dandapani approached him with arrogance and aggression, questioning his teaching. The Buddha responded with the full force of his wisdom, but Dandapani, not understanding, simply rejected what he couldn't comprehend and walked away. Rather than pausing to ask questions and seeking understanding, he chose dismissal.

The Buddha returned home and recounted this encounter, including the teaching he had given. The monks, unlike Dandapani, acknowledged their confusion and asked for clarification. When they still didn't grasp the meaning after his expansion, they approached Mahakaccana, who was foremost among the disciples in explaining in detail what had been given in brief. After gently scolding them for not pressing the Buddha further, Mahakaccana offered his famous exposition.

He systematically examined each of the six senses, but let us focus on the final one: mind. "Depending on mind sensitivity and phenomena, mind awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feelings. What we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we proliferate. Because of what we have proliferated, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation regarding past, future and present."

Essentially, Mahakaccana illuminated the process by which we begin with elemental experience—occurring right now through all six senses—and then follow a trajectory that creates a kind of prison through obsessive conceptualizing. We cling to these concepts and mistake our ideas about what's happening for what's actually happening. We construct a prison from our concepts, driven by completely uncontrolled proliferation—the mind simply spewing forth endless mental formations. We lose touch with the world of direct experience, living as though in a dream without recognizing we're dreaming.

After mapping this process of entrapment, Mahakaccana explained the path of awakening from this dream—which is our focus tonight.

This represents a central aspect of our practice. What we do is study our dreams and observe ourselves creating them, thereby constructing our prison—what we consider normal, what we take to be real, and the limitations each of us experiences within this supposed reality. Through becoming truly intimate with this entire process of creating a self—an imprisoned, suffering self—the very act of seeing clearly begins to dismantle it. Cracks appear in the edifice, and we can work with these openings, gradually teasing them apart until the whole structure begins to collapse.

The ultimate process, which we'll explore fully, doesn't eliminate concepts entirely, for they remain fundamental to navigating the world. The crucial difference lies in understanding that a concept is simply a concept. Think of a concept as a sign in front of a building. Outside this center stands a sign reading "Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center." Are those words themselves the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Center? Certainly not—they never could be; it's impossible. Yet does this render the sign useless? Not at all. The sign serves its purpose perfectly, especially for first-time visitors driving along the street who see it and think, "Ah, Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre—this is the place."

Concepts are both useful and necessary, but from the Buddha's perspective, to fulfill their true purpose, we must understand their real nature. We need to recognize that a concept is a concept, and what it points toward is something else entirely—something different.

Mahakaccana began this inquiry into what lies beneath what we think is really happening.

In other words, what do we find underneath the concept, underneath the dream?

Mahakassapa continues his analysis, and you'll notice that his entire inquiry in this sutta is based on the six sense fields. He's still using this fundamental template.

He says—and he does this for each of the sense fields—when there are eye sensitivity, forms, and visual awareness, we find a ground for conceptualizing contact. So if you have eye sensitivity, you have visual forms, you have visual awareness, that's where we find a ground for conceptualizing contact.

You notice he doesn't say the meeting of the three is contact. He's coming at it from a different angle. The standard teaching says the meeting of the three is contact. But here, Mahakassapa is saying where you have those three things, you find a ground for conceptualizing contact.

And then he goes on: where there is a ground for conceptualizing contact, we find a ground for conceptualizing feeling. Where there is a ground for conceptualizing feeling, we find a ground for conceptualizing perception. Where there is a ground for conceptualizing perception, we find a ground for conceptualizing thinking. Where there is a ground for conceptualizing thinking, we find a ground for conceptualizing concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation.

So you get this multi-layered cake, which he's gone through before, but now he's looking at it from a different angle. The first layer, the second, the third, the fourth—boom, boom, boom. Previously he was talking about it from the perspective of how we create a person who is a victim of circumstances beyond their control and is harassed, endlessly harassed by these proliferations, caught in self, caught in time.

Here he's going through the same multi-layered cake, but he's looking at it in terms of its radical simplicity of ground and concept. *Thana* and *paññatti*. And here we have two more technical terms.

What's ground? *Thana*. And *paññatti*—conceptualizing.

First of all, ground. Now, as soon as Mahakassapa says that, everybody in the audience knows he's talking about dependent arising. It always comes back to dependent arising.

Back in the eighties, I spent a fair bit of time at Wat Suan Mok, and was influenced by the teachings of Ajahn Buddhadasa. He really emphasized the centrality of dependent arising and he said: if you understand dependent arising you understand what the Buddha is talking about; if you do not understand dependent arising you do not understand what the Buddha is talking about. It's really that simple. And you can see that again and again—it all comes back to this.

We've talked about dependent arising. Its basic message is that experiences arise dependent upon other experiences. So if something happens, the arising of that something depends upon something else. And when it ceases, its cessation depends upon something else. So everything is embedded in this multi-dimensional network.

Now, for something to arise, for something to happen, it needs a base, a foundation, a ground. It has to be located somewhere. It has to be founded on something. Otherwise it could not manifest.

Let's take as an example this teaching of contact, the immediacy of experience. Contact is the coming together of sensitivity, sense object, and their corresponding awareness. We've spoken about this on a number of occasions.

Notice how this is structured. You have three elements, each one grounded on the other two. And together, when they come together and they ground each other, then—bang—something happens.

So you've got a network of events, and each event—sensitivity, awareness, sense object—is grounded on something else. Take for example awareness. We've been working with awareness all through the retreat. When I am aware, I am aware of something. It's not particularly controversial, is it?

So another way of looking at it is awareness is grounded on its object. It needs that object in order to exist. Awareness is grounded in the other direction.

For there to be awareness of an object, there has to be a corresponding sensitivity that can pick it up. Take, for example, hearing. There's awareness of sound, which has to be grounded on the sound itself. But equally on the other side, it has to be grounded on the hearing sensitivity.

Now let's say you change the hearing sensitivity. There are species, of course, that hear sounds that we do not, because their hearing sensitivity operates at a different frequency. So there are species that are hearing things that to us is silence. And maybe it's vice versa. Maybe we hear things that other species don't hear. Because for the experience to arise, it's got to be grounded.

So with awareness itself there are two sides. It's grounded on the object, but it's also grounded back on the sensitivity itself. And this sensitivity grounds the whole thing.

Now all of this is just natural process, and as we said, there's absolutely no problem with it—it's just nature. But what happens when we place too much importance on what grounds experience?

Let's look at, for example, the six sensitivities: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. Where are the first five? Well, they have specific location. Here. So seeing can only occur here. Hearing can only occur here. Touching can occur throughout the whole body, but it can only occur here. It cannot occur there. It's grounded here.

Mind is a bit trickier. Does mind actually have location? There's a sense in which it feels like it does, in that when I think, sometimes I have the sense of thinking here. But at other times, if I get lost in a fantasy, it separates from here. We've been talking about this—the role of mindfulness of body. Part of it is to keep the thinking process itself grounded on the five physical senses. So this experience is grounded. It's here.

But what if I take the ground too seriously? What if I take as real: "Well, if it's grounded here, there must be someone here who's doing all this. So here I am—this is me, this is the soul"? And if there are concepts going on, these concepts must be grounded on me. They must be about me. And if they're about past and future, they must be about my past and future. And so we become obsessed with our particular stories.

So that's ground. Then you get concept paññatti. When there is eye-sensitivity, forms, and visual awareness, we find a ground for conceptualizing contact. When there is a ground for conceptualizing contact, we find a ground for conceptualizing feeling.

Now concept here always has the implication of meaning. Concepts give meaning. They tell us what it means—what the experience actually means, what its significance is. And for there to be meaning, there has to be some degree of interpretation.

So let's say a thought. A thought pops up. I can conceptualize that as "this is a thought." Or I could conceptualize it as "this is just a thought." Now the meaning is different. And with that different meaning, there's a whole different relationship.

If I'm a meditator and I have this: "Oh, this is just a thought," I'm not putting anything extra on it. It's just a thought. It doesn't signify anything else. Or the thought arises and my concept might be "this is my thought and it's about me."

So the only difference is the meaning that I put on it, and the meaning is just a concept. So I change the concept and I change the significance of the experience, and everything that follows from that.

Concept is very important. The concept creates the world of meaning. What I think—even what I assume is going on—is all created by concept.

Now what Mahākaccāna is doing here, he's pointing out the ubiquity of concept.

It goes incredibly deep into the mind. Mahākāčana talks about contact, feeling, and perception—the really basic, fundamental movements of the mind that create an experienced world. But he's pointing out that when you look at what we actually do, we conceptualize contact, we conceptualize perception, we conceptualize feeling. We're adding something to it all the time because we're imposing an interpretation on it. It has to mean something. And that is the realm of concept.

But what this does is cut off the simple immediacy of contact, perception, and feeling. Yesterday we talked about how it's like cling wrap that's been wrapped over the experience. There's something getting in the way. It's not completely clean. There's a degree of alienation there. And this sense of alienation goes extremely deep.

How does labeling the experience fit with this when we're using the Mahasi method? If you identify with the labels or get stuck on them, you've got serious problems. The labels are meant to simply direct awareness, to aim the awareness. To do this kind of work, the awareness and attention have got to be very refined.

How do I develop a refined attention? I start by working with the obvious, but I learn to aim as precisely as possible the awareness through the act of attention. The name, the label, is all about the aim. At some point, it gets in the way, and then you drop it. If you need it again, you use it again. But if it gets in the way, you drop it.

The classic instance of getting in the way is if you're doing the standard Mahasi three-step—lifting, pushing, placing—and then at some point you realize you're going "lifting, pushing, placing, lifting, pushing, placing, lifting." What's happened is that you're using the concept to aim awareness, but instead of awareness going to the actual experience, it's gone to the concept, gone to the name. You've got a kind of bizarre mantra. The ease with which this happens demonstrates the ease with which we get lost in concept, how we mistake the concept of the event for the event itself. This is something that becomes clearer the more refined awareness becomes—you can see this process happening at deeper levels.

The actual label is part of perception, isn't it? Perception includes recognition, which is a kind of deeper, more unconscious labeling. But that's different from what we're talking about here—taking a name and consciously using it.

For example, do you think right now that you can see me? That's a concept. And yet it seems real, seems to be the actual thing. But it's a concept—hopefully a useful concept.

Mahākāčana points out that this whole process requires a ground, needs to be grounded on something. We assume that what we take to be real is solid, but we can't maintain that perception unless the ground on which it's based is also solid. But what is the ground? If we actually search for the ground, what do we find?

We looked at contact, the immediacy of experience. The ground there is a dynamic interrelationship between three phenomena: sensitivity, sense object, and awareness, each of them grounded upon the other two. In other words, it's like a house of cards with no table underneath it.

This is the very foundation. And all it is, is this little house of cards. Pull out one card, the whole thing collapses, and there's nothing underneath it. So where's the ground?

This is what Mahāpajjhāna then starts talking about. When there is no eye sensitivity, no form and no visual awareness, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing contact. When there is no ground for conceptualizing contact, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing feeling. When there is no ground for conceptualizing feeling, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing perception. When there is no ground for conceptualizing perception, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing thinking. When there is no ground for conceptualizing thinking, we do not find a ground for conceptualizing concepts of perceptions colored by proliferation.

Here he's pulling the rug out. This "no," this "not," tells us that we're in the area of anattā—not-self—and śūnyatā, emptiness. This is the realm of the not, the no. What he's specifically talking about here is the cessation of the sense fields, and therefore the cessation of everything else that is built up on top of them. No eye sensitivity, no form, no visual awareness. Cut, cut, cut.

Now if there is no eye sensitivity, no ear sensitivity, no nose sensitivity, no tongue sensitivity, no body sensitivity, and no mind sensitivity, what does that mean? Dead.

So is he saying, "Look, don't worry, I can solve all your problems. Line up here. Single bullet to the head. Guarantee no further problems"? No, he's not saying that. He's saying something quite different, but quite challenging.

To get a sense of what he's talking about, let's look at another discourse—a discussion between Mahākoṭṭhita and Sāriputta. They were friends, and there are a number of discourses where after a day's meditation they gather in the evening and have a little chat. Some of these chats became suttas. In this particular evening, what they're talking about is what happens—they're talking about the cessation of the six fields of contact. In other words, what Mahākaccāyana is talking about.

Specifically, what remains, what's left over after the six fields of contact fade away and finally cease? What's left? What is there?

Mahākoṭṭhita asks Sāriputta, "Is there something still left?" And Sāriputta replies, "Ma hevaṃ"—which could be translated as "Not that."

"Well then, is there nothing left?" "Not that."

"Is there both something and nothing left?" "Not that."

"Neither something nor nothing left?" "Not that."

What Mahākoṭṭhita is presenting are the four logical possibilities: A, not A, neither A nor not A, both A and not A. These are the four possibilities. There's nothing outside of that range of possibilities. Is there something left? Is there something not left? Is there something both left and not left behind? Is there something neither left nor not left? All possibilities are covered, and he gets the same answer each time: "Ma hevaṃ"—"Not that."

Now this answer is interesting. It's not simply "no." If you break it up, it becomes ma plus hi plus evaṃ. Evaṃ is emphatic, hi is emphatic, and ma is a prohibition. It's both a prohibitive denial and an emphatic denial. It's both "no" and "don't even go there."

Don't even go there. That does not apply when the Buddha was asked similar questions. It's a different response, coming at it from a different angle, but much more emphatic. It's just boom! That does not apply.

This is more like philosophical discussion elsewhere, but here it's not "don't do that"—it's like bang. Much more direct. It's got a certain Zen flavor to it. And Sariputta goes on to explain, which is not very Zen, because in Zen they would never explain.

He says: "To say that there is something left after the six fields of contact cease without remainder is to proliferate what should not be proliferated"—where you could say it's to complicate what should not be complicated. "To say that there is not some-

thing left, that there both is and is not something left, that there is neither something left nor nothing left after the six fields of contact cease without remainder is to proliferate what should not be proliferated, is to complicate what should not be complicated."

In other words, you're just adding another concept on top of it.

"As far as the six fields of contact extend, that is the range of proliferation. And as far as the range of proliferation extends, that is the range of the six fields of contact. From the fading away and cessation without remainder of the six fields of contact, there is the cessation of proliferation only"—the calming of proliferation.

These terms—cessation (nirodha) and calming (upasamati)—both indicate nibbana. They both indicate awakening.

What do they mean by the cessation of sense contact? I'm sure they don't mean that we should be blind and deaf. Well, let's have a little Zen story to try to explain this.

This is from Case 20 of the Book of Serenity. Lohan Kuichen asks Fayan Wenyi, "Where are you going?"

This is the context of the story. In China, in the Chan tradition, and even today in Korea in the Seon tradition, the basic rhythm of meditation monks and nuns is that each year they have a summer retreat and a winter retreat, each lasting three months. If you're a meditation monk or nun in these traditions, you spend six months of every year in intensive retreats—three months on, then a break for three months. Three-month retreat, break for three. Three-month retreat, break for three. And you do that for however many years you want to keep doing that.

At the end of each retreat, people scatter. They go on pilgrimage, quote-unquote. Now, pilgrimage could be anything. It could be "Let me out of here, I'm going to take a holiday." Or it could be "Now I've got to go to the study monastery and study sutras and Vinaya." Or it could be "Now I've got to go to the fields and put some work in." Or whatever. Or it could be "For the next retreat I want to go to another monastery where there's another teacher," and you could be doing the rounds. It could be anything.

Lohan is the teacher and Fayan is one of the students—a senior student. So at the end of the retreat, people are leaving, Fayan is leaving, and Lohan says, "Where are you going?"

It's an innocent question, which in Zen context is never innocent. Equally, the question "Where are you coming from?" is never an innocent question.

Fayan said, "I am on pilgrimage, following the wind." So he's got no specific plan. It's not that he's got a fixed idea of what he's going to do. He's following the wind.

Lohan said, "What are you on pilgrimage for?"

So what's your purpose in doing this?

Fa Yen said, "I don't know."

Lo Han said, "Not knowing is most intimate."

Fa Yan suddenly attained great awakening.

Do you get a sense of what's going on here? If there's no laying of any concept on it, that is complete intimacy. And with intimacy, awakening can come.

Of course, Fa Yen was ripe. He'd been doing a lot of meditation. And of course, Lo Han knew he was ripe. He knew Fa Yen just needed a shove.

It's very common, for example, that in the context of a retreat, people often say that when insight arises, it arises more often in walking and daily activity than in sitting—because the pressure's off. Equally, people will say that insight often arises after a retreat. Again, when the pressure's off.

So Fa Yen had been in a pressure cooker for three months. And just when he's leaving, that's when the teacher pounces. And because he's so ripe, Fa Yen gets it. Not knowing is most intimate. No concept added on top of it. Nothing getting in the way.

And this is what Sariputta is getting at. He says, to give any answer to that, to create any concept about it, you are just complicating what should not be complicated. You are proliferating what should not be proliferated. The question itself is just more proliferation, much less any answer.

Any concept or description that we produce as an answer has to be grounded on something. But Sariputta is speaking about a state in which there is no ground for anything at all.

This brings me back to the question from last night a little bit: Where does planning fit in with this? Or procedural memories like the memory of how to walk? Or like, say the Buddha wanted to go to a certain city so that he could go and spread the word there. He had to plan that in his mind.

That's right. And as he was planning it in his mind, he was quite clear it's just a plan in his mind. His self wasn't wrapped up in that. No, and he had no investment in the reality of that future event. He didn't mistake his concept of that possible future event to be real. It was just a thought, a plan coming up in the present. It was just mental activity happening now. That's it.

How does that fit with the cessation of all sense stuff?

That's actually what we're talking about. The conceptualization, the imposition of meaning that gets in the way—it gets in the way because we hold to the ground. We get ourselves mixed up in it. We think, "This is me. Ah, this is content." Bang. We've just put a concept on it. And we hold on to the concept and we believe the concept to be true. And all of our energy is going to the concept and not to the actual experience.

The experience is a sense of cleanness where you're not putting anything on it at all, where in that intimacy there is no felt sense of past, of future, of present, or even of purpose. It's just the activity itself. "I'm just doing it." Not even the "I"—that gets in the way. There's just the doing. There's just the activity.

The first time I got a sense of this was actually long before I got involved with Buddhism—back in my misspent youth, when I did acting classes. The classes were in what was called the Method, developed by the Russian Stanislavski, who I've recently discovered was actually influenced by yoga and Buddhism. Buddhism has been part of Russian culture for centuries, from Central Asia.

In these classes, we would do exercises in a theatre in the round, with students gathered around and the teachers observing. The teacher would give the class an exercise, and anybody could get up and have a go. It might be something like: look for something and then find it. So you're on this stage with everyone watching, and you simply look for something and then find it.

The highest praise you could receive was that it was "a clean action." In other words, you were not acting *as if* you were looking for something and finding it. As far as any external observer could see, you *were* looking for something and then you found it. There was nothing put on top. That putting on top—they called that acting. A layer on top of the action.

When you actually did it—when you were on stage doing this exercise—you always knew if you were clean or not clean. The difference was so obvious you didn't need to be told. But when you were clean, there was a smoothness and a beauty to it that was really quite extraordinary.

That was the first time I got a taste of this, and I was reminded of it years later when I was doing meditation and things began to come together. Just recently, when I was doing my own meditation retreat in Malaysia—I do these self-retreats in a hut—every day I clean the hut and the veranda. First I sweep, then I mop.

One day I was mopping, trying to be continuously mindful, and I was just doing the mopping. Suddenly I realized what the Zen expression meant when they said to do something "with your hands empty." There was no mop and there was no veranda and there was no one mopping the veranda. It was just so obvious. But of course, as soon as you put a concept on it, it starts to crumble.

So this is what's meant here by cessation. It's not cessation in the sense that you don't see, you don't hear, and so forth. It's cessation of any concept about seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and so on. You're not putting anything on it.

But here's the paradox: if you're not putting anything on it, it's not cessation—because if you say, "That's cessation," you've just added something. You've just stuck in a concept. If you say, "Oh, that's contact," bang—you've just put something on it. If you say, "It's not contact," bang—you've just put something on it. And so forth. It's the dropping of all that which is the cessation of everything.

A student asked: "What about perceptions? I was thinking, when you said you look at me, you're looking at Patrick as a concept. If I was to walk along a street and see you coming in the distance—seeing a person coming in the distance, and then I'm looking at this person, and suddenly I have recognition. That's perception. But then from that perception comes proliferation, conceptualizing—as you realize how lucky you are that you've bumped into him. But the perception... does that fall away as well?"

You know, perceptions aren't falling away. We have perceptions. I need to have a memory of you to recognize that it's Patrick. And I actually say, "Oh, it's Patrick." I can be aware of the perception. It's the same as when I'm in the dark looking at something and I can't quite make it out... "Oh, it's a cup."

What this is talking about is the cleanness of the experience of it. It's the dropping away of any barrier.

Well, you could say it's the dropping away, in this case, of perception-perception. The perception. It's like the extra bit added on. Oh, I'm perceiving. So it's taking everything away except the natural process. But the natural process includes everything that the mind-body does. So it includes walking down the street, recognizing someone, going up, having a chat, and so on.

In one of the emptiness suttas in Majjhima Nikaya, the Buddha talks about how it's in a state of emptiness that he can do things like the work involved in being a Buddha and talk to kings and to potentates and to businessmen and to followers and so on. When he does that, when he's being engaged in worldly activities, he enters into a state of emptiness in order to be able to do that most effectively. Which means that when it's happening, he's not getting in the way.

Does that make any sense?

Yeah, it makes sense. I'm just processing it in my mind, the cleanness of perceptions.

And along with that, the cleanness of action.

Yes.

Again, this comes out in the Zen stories, the way that they're structured. So you have a story in which a student goes to the teacher to find out what's going on, but doesn't understand the encounter, because it's really weird, gives up, decides he's going to leave, and he's advised, well, at least say goodbye to the teacher. So he goes in and he says goodbye to the teacher, and the teacher says, oh, you should go, well, then go and see so-and-so, and refers him to another teacher. And he goes to this other teacher, he has an encounter with the other teacher in which he realizes what's going on and he has his great awakening and he comes back to the first one.

Now in the midst of all this, you have that, when he goes to see the first teacher to say, I'm out of here, I'm going. And the teacher says, oh, well go and see someone else. Did that teacher plan that statement? Did he have this as a policy option in the file to deal with this particular student? No. It just came out. There was no planning. He didn't think about it. He says, well do this. And it turned out to be the thing which helped stimulate the awakening of that student.

Or let's say when I'm doing the interviews someone comes in and they present me with their story. And what I have to do is listen very carefully and try to say something useful. Before I say something, usually I've got no idea what I'm going to say. Zero. But while the person is speaking, I have a sense of, I have to try to sort this out so I can say something useful, then probably what I will say will not be particularly good. But if there's none of that, if I'm just listening and just seeing, and then I just say something, that's when I'm at my best. And often I surprise myself. Like, where did that come from? I don't know where that came from.

So this is... It's an action which is clean because it's not adding any conceptual overlay on the purity of the experience. This is what they're talking about when they talk about clear attention.

Is that sati? I think somebody said that that's what it is, bare attention, seeing things as they are. But that's always easy to understand and practice when there's the five senses, the five physical senses. When it comes to mind, bare attention on mental objects is one thing that I do with, what I intend to do with settling in with this mind, this natural state, where I just open my eyes and I watch my mind. And just let... concepts be concepts so I think that comes back to that bare attention with mental objects bare attention with like seeing you perceiving Patrick bare attention with that just to see it as Patrick just Patrick without adding further on to it without adding on oh here comes Patrick blah blah blah so then when you have an encounter with someone there's a spontaneity there which would otherwise not be there.

So could this be an example where in English there actually is already a translation? Because it sort of sounds like a lack of self-consciousness. And self-consciousness could be like a made-up Pali translation, only it's not. Self-consciousness in the sense of... Some of what you're talking about is when you're not suffering from self-consciousness it's a lot easier to do things. Self-consciousness can be seen as consciousness of oneself with paranoia added.

There's a quality of paranoia to it or even yes an imagined other maybe rather than necessarily paranoia yeah so what if you had could you have self consciousness without any imagined other would that be possible sometimes the imagined other is there laughing.

But could you have self-consciousness without any imagined other? Would it still be self-consciousness?

I'm thinking about the concept and the thing of being locked or freed from concept. So if I'm in a room and the door's locked and I can't get out, I'm a prisoner of that conceptual room. If the door is unlocked, it doesn't mean I can't use the room anymore. It just means I'm free to come and go.

I've just moved back to my old hometown and am meeting people who haven't seen me for ten, fifteen, and twenty years. I really see the difference between people who are locked into the concept of who I am versus those who are free from that conceptual prison. Some people respond to me because they're completely locked into their concept of who they think I am from twenty years ago. They're completely trapped in that framework, and I'm not that person anymore.

Other people recognize me—perception is there, they know me as a person they knew—but because they're not locked into the concept of who I was, they're open to experiencing who I am now. So it's: "You're the person I recognize, who are you?" There's that openness to the direct experience of what is, while still being able to use the conceptual framework of recognition.

So it's using concepts, not being used by them. That's essentially what we're talking about. Hence with the awakened ones—just because they're not locked into concepts doesn't mean they can't use them.

One of the implications of this is that you have two approaches. There's the "let's clean out the consciousness" approach—like dipping a bucket into the ocean and repeatedly throwing away our delusions and attachments, trying to get them all out. Or you can cut through the whole mass by not identifying. They're there, but by not identifying with any of them, you slice clean through. That's a whole different move.

But it requires—and this is why this practice is so central—that intimacy is something we start with by patiently cultivating over time. If you look at our story with Fa Yen, he had who knows how many years of hard work, but at some point, "Oh, got it." These moments meditators routinely report—suddenly this flash of seeing when things drop away and it's all clear. This is the insight side, but the serenity is the patient working away, being intimate.

So dropping away the proliferation—dropping it, recognizing it, dropping it, recognizing it, dropping it. This is the humdrum day-to-day work of meditation practice. But at some point the process ripens and then something falls away.

You mentioned that often the insight comes and the pressure is off, and you were wondering whether there's a link with effort. Often wrong effort comes from a concept—a concept of what it should be, what should be here, what should not be here. "This experience is not good enough, I've got to somehow push through it to get to..." Or "I should not be thinking this, so I've got to suppress it."

Underlying that is a concept of who the meditator should be, what the meditation practice should be, what the experience should be. But it's just a concept. Giving up those concepts, there's definitely a link with effort. When we're in a world of concepts, it's much harder, if not impossible, to find right effort.

Right effort in its purity is associated with the dropping away of these concepts. But it's a gradual process—you become more refined with it over time. This is the serenity aspect—working on it bit by bit, getting better and better and better at it. But then there's the insight side, where it ripens and suddenly—bang—"Ah, that's what it is."

So there are the two sides: the practice side and the realization side. The serenity and the insight. What we can do is the serenity.

So Mahākaccāna gives this teaching and the bhikkhus, if I recall correctly, are reasonably pleased.

And the next day they report all of this to the Buddha. The Buddha approves, saying, "Yes, I would have said the same thing except I just wanted to bugger off and watch some TV."

Then Ananda says to the Buddha—Bhante, Ananda was the Buddha's younger cousin, probably about twenty years younger than the Buddha, and he served as the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty years of his life—Ananda says, "Bhante, just as one exhausted by hunger and weakness coming upon a honey ball, a madhu pindika, would find a sweet, delectable flavor when he tasted it, so too, any practitioner with a good heart who investigates the meaning of this dharma discourse with wisdom would find joy and inspiration in his heart. Bhante, what is the name of this dharma discourse?"

"As to that, Ananda, you may remember this dharma discourse as the Honeyball Discourse, or the Discourse of the Sweet Essence, Madhu Pindika Sutta."

This again is interesting. These discourses were often named at the time. "Wow, that was interesting. What would we call this one?" Marketing. But in particular, the Buddha says, "You may remember this dharma discourse as..."—in other words, you're going to recite this. So they craft a form for recitation and now you can give it a name. What shall we call it? They're creating teaching as they go.

Now the sweet essence—what is this sweet essence? Well, of course it's the essence of absolutely no essence whatsoever. It's the unconditioned. It's the taste of nibbana itself. Nothing at all to write home about.

That's enough for tonight. Thank you.

CHAPTER 29

On Dukkha & Dukkha Ñāṇa

Patrick Kearney · 1h25

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Patrick Kearney explores the crucial distinction between ordinary dukkha (suffering) and dukkha-ñāṇa (understanding of dukkha) as it unfolds in insight meditation practice. Drawing from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) and the four noble truths, he examines how dukkha functions as both a fundamental teaching and one of the three universal characteristics (tilakkhana).

Kearney traces the historical development of the vipassana-ñāṇa system from the early Paṭisambhidāmagga through to Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga, explaining how the linear progression through sixteen stages of insight emerged in the Theravada tradition. He provides detailed analysis of the dukkha-ñāṇas: bhaṅga (dissolution), bhaya (fear), ādīnava (danger), nibbidā (disenchantment), muñcitukamyatā (desire for deliverance), and paṭisaṅkhā (review).

The talk emphasizes the critical importance of understanding anattā (not-self) when navigating these potentially dangerous territories of insight, distinguishing between psychological approaches that deal with 'people and their problems' versus dharma practice that reveals the emptiness of both self and suffering. Kearney warns of the risks inherent in commodified mindfulness approaches that lack proper grounding in the three characteristics, while celebrating the 'boundless joy' that emerges when dukkha is truly understood as universal rather than personal.

Tonight, by special request, we explore dukkha. We'll trace a journey from dukkha to dukkhañāṇa—the understanding of dukkha as understood in insight meditation—because it's centrally important, most difficult, and can be misunderstood. It's very easy to get stuck there, so let's survey the whole territory.

We've encountered dukkha before in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the first discourse. The Buddha begins with the middle way and goes straight into the four truths, which revolve around dukkha: dukkha itself, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. Notice that what's central is the dynamism of dukkha—it arises and ceases.

This occurs within the background of dependent arising: if something arises, it arises because of something else. If it ceases, it ceases because of something else. The practice is all about relationship. In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha points out that if you're concerned with dukkha, you must examine the relationship to drivenness—what he calls craving, literally thirst.

Dukkha is a compound word based on the root *kha*, meaning empty space, while the prefix *du* conveys the idea of bad, painful, unpleasant, or undesirable. We could understand dukkha as meaning the painful emptiness we find at the center of our being—what David Loy calls the sense of lack, something missing. The tradition also sees it as the empty space that is the hub of a wheel where the axle doesn't fit properly, so the vehicle moves slowly with great grinding, if it moves at all, or becomes completely bogged down.

Have you ever felt that your practice or your life has been completely bogged down and you can't get it to move? This is dukkha. It's always characterized by drivenness—this is craving—and you could say it's the gap between what is happening and what we want to be happening. As long as there's that gap, there's dukkha. The cessation of dukkha represents bodhi, awakening, or nibbāna—the going out and cooling of the fire.

Beyond dukkha as a key technical term—for which there's no English equivalent, making any translation necessarily inadequate—dukkha is treated by the later tradition as a universal characteristic, a sāmañña lakkhaṇa. This is one of the three characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anattā—impermanence or change, dukkha itself, and not-self.

These three characteristics are what insight meditation focuses on. Strictly speaking, insight meditation begins when the object of awareness is one or more of the three characteristics. Until then, we're doing preliminary serenity practice to reach that point.

We discussed this in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Remember when the Buddha talks about the nature of arising and ceasing? The practitioner lives observing body as body, but then he switches: the practitioner lives observing the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing. There's a shift where what's actually being observed is change itself—impermanence itself—rather than something which is changing.

Impermanence is always mentioned first, then comes dukkha, then not-self. Impermanence is extremely important. The Buddha told his son Rāhula: "Develop meditation on the perception of impermanence, for when you develop meditation on the percep-

tion of impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned." Abandoning the conceit "I am" is code for full awakening. We've discussed asmimāna, the conceit "I am," in terms of not-self.

The word translated as impermanence is *anicca*. *A* is the negative prefix meaning "not," and *nicca* means stable, constant, permanent—*nitya* in Sanskrit, *nicca* in Pali. In ordinary, everyday usage, *nicca* refers to what can be relied upon. In Pali you get the expression *niccadāna*—a perpetual gift. If some wealthy person makes suitable provision in their will and a meditation center receives a perpetual gift of thousands of dollars per annum, suddenly the committee is very happy and can make long-term plans confidently.

because they have a reliable source of income. So this is nicca. Nicca bhakta is a reliable food supply. And so on.

So to be anicca—impermanent—means to be unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable, not to be trusted. And if we rely on something which is unreliable, then sooner or later we are disappointed. It will happen. It's just built into the relationship.

So that which is anicca, impermanent, is also dukkha. Does that make sense? It's the unreliability inherent in change that means that which is anicca, impermanent, is also dukkha. But if you say it in English—that which is impermanent is painful—it's like scratching your head. Why? It doesn't make any particular sense, or at least it didn't to me when I first read it.

In the Buddha's time, the idea of the nicca, or the nitya in Sanskrit—the permanent—was very important because this is the ground of things. This is what gives everything its stability. So for example, in the Upanishads, the nitya, the permanent, the constant, is the Atman. This is the self—in English usually written with a big S—the Self that underlies everything.

In other traditions the nitya might be God. So the creation swells about, full of suffering, we are a pilgrimage people, but underneath all this is God, and that is permanent, and it holds everything together and it gives all this floating impermanence meaning and purpose because this is the ground.

But the Buddha is saying there is no such ground. It just doesn't exist. There's nothing that underlies and stabilizes what we experience as the world. And perceiving this fact—at least for him it's a fact—perceiving this creates anxiety.

So if we're tracking impermanence and change and we haven't yet felt anxious because of it, we haven't really perceived impermanence. If we really see it, then we're horrified. It's extremely anxiety-inducing.

It reminds me of the classic story—I looked it up in Wikipedia. There's some doubt whether it actually comes from Hinduism, but let's call it Hindu. The story goes about a learned Brahmin who had a bright young son, and the son was asking him about cosmology. Remember we said in ancient India that cosmology was you had the four great continents, Mount Meru in the center, surrounded by the great ocean, all held together by the great wind.

And the boy was very inquiring. He was told about this model. He was very impressed. And he said, "But what supports the great wind?" And his father says, "Oh, that's a very good question, my lad. I'm glad you're alert and paying attention. There are four enormous tigers—north, south, east and west. And the whole edifice sits on them."

So the boy thinks about it and he says, "What's underneath the tigers? What supports the tigers?" And the father is very impressed. He says, "That's an excellent question. Under each tiger there's a huge elephant. So everything's completely stable."

And the boy thinks about this and he says, "But what's underneath the elephants?" And the father says, "This is a superb question. You've got a very sharp and inquiring mind. Under each elephant there's a giant turtle."

And the boy thinks about this and he says, "But what's underneath the turtle?" And the father is really pleased because he says, "Not many people inquire this far, but the esoteric teaching is under each of these giant turtles is an even bigger turtle."

And the boy is really impressed. And he says, "So what's underneath that turtle?"

And at this point, his father gets a bit anxious and he says, "My boy, it's turtles all the way down."

This is pure Nietzsche. It's turtles all the way down. Fundamentally, there's nothing there. And to actually see this, to intuit it in some way, is to provoke anxiety.

Now, regarding the three characteristics, there's one famous text in which the Buddha presents what he thinks these are about. He says: "Whether Tathagatas appear or do not appear, this reality is constant—the stability of Dharma, the natural order. All

constructions are impermanent. This is what a Tathagata awakens to, this is what he realizes. After awakening to and realizing it, he explains, teaches, declares, lays it out, reveals, analyzes and clarifies it, saying: 'Look!'"

Whether Tathagatas appear or do not appear—a Tathagata is an awakened one, so the Buddha is a Tathagata—whether Buddhas appear or do not appear, this reality is constant, the stability of Dharma, the natural order. In other words, this is simply the way things are. Whether or not I'm here to tell you about it, it's just the way things are.

And he goes on to say: all constructions are dukkha, all phenomena are not-self. After awakening to and realizing—this is what a Tathagata awakens to, this is what he realizes. What is the content of a Buddha's awakening? It's this fact: all constructions are impermanent, all constructions are dukkha, and all phenomena are not-self. And this is what any Buddha teaches when he teaches.

What he's saying is that these characteristics—impermanence, dukkha, not-self—they are simply part of nature. They're what we might call the laws of nature. They're simply what is going on. We might know about it, we might not know about it, we might care about it, we might not care about it, but the fact is this is what's going on. Full stop. End of story.

So let's just briefly look at this teaching. You notice how the Buddha changes the language: all constructions are impermanent and dukkha, but all phenomena are not-self. Why does he change?

We talked about constructions before. Sankhara comes from the verb karoti—to build, to make, to produce, to act, to perform, to do. From karoti we also get karma. It's the same root. And karma, of course, is action. So karoti is the verb, and the prefix sam- means "with" or "together." So the verb sankharoti means to put together, to construct. A construction, a sankhara, is anything that is put together, constructed, made up out of parts.

This building is a sankhara, this body is a sankhara, this retreat is a sankhara. It's put together, constructed, made up out of parts. But further, sankhara means anything that in turn puts together, constructs, creates. So it's also active.

This hall is constructed, but it in turn constructs. It provides a suitable environment for meditation practice. There are people out there busily paying the bills for the heating and so on. There are people who clean it up so it doesn't get too dusty. And as a result, we can sit here for a month and develop a meditation practice, and this practice is constructed in part by this hall.

So anything that constructs, anything that is constructed, this is sankhata. And what is not constructed is the asankhata, otherwise known as the not-born, not-become, not-made. And this is the realm that we enter into with bodhi, awakening, and nibbana, the cooling of the fire.

And of course, we've touched on this before: what is it that we find in this realm of the not-constructed, the unconstructed? Sometimes people call it the unconditioned. I think it's more accurate to call it the unconstructed.

If we ask what we find in this realm, we discover nothing that can be adequately spoken about. And why not? Because speaking itself is a construction. Speaking is just another construction. And thinking about it—thinking too is just another construction. So there's nothing that can actually be said about it, because whatever we say is a construction and therefore is not the unconstructed. Does that make sense?

So all constructions are impermanent, all constructions are dukkha, and all phenomena are not-self. The term here is in Pali, dhamma—so all dhammas are not-self, or in Sanskrit and in English, dharmas. We've talked about dharmas already.

Again this comes back to dependent arising. The Buddha sees the world in terms of process rather than solid, independently existing things. So for the Buddha, reality is all about process and relationship, not things. And when we examine process, we don't find things that are hard, that are solid, that last unchanged over time. What we find are events. Something arises—bang. And again, it's the language the Buddha uses. He says something arises and then it ceases. The language is very dynamic. He's not talking about a solid something that's there and that lasts a certain period of time. He's talking about an event which arises and ceases.

So dharmas are these events, but in particular they are experienced events. This comes back to what we were talking about before—the Buddha as radical empiricist. The only thing he's interested in is the nature of human experience. In a sense, this makes him very secular because he doesn't make ontological commitments. He doesn't create fanciful belief structures about a transcendent God or whatever, or transcendent Atman, self, or Brahman, or whatever. He just doesn't go there. He's interested only in the nature of human experience. Anything beyond that, he just doesn't want to talk about it—complete waste of his time and everybody else's time.

He believes in devas, he believes in heavens and hells, but he believes in them on the basis of his own experience. He's experienced them. Now, it's difficult to argue with that. One might say, "Well, I haven't experienced it." Fine. But in saying what I've experienced, I'm not saying anything at all about what you have experienced. Or one might

start getting aggro about it, and one might say to him, "Buddha, mate, you know, with the greatest respect, if you have experienced heavens and hells, then you are a lunatic and you really need some help. I mean, you're a nice guy, you've said some really interesting things, but you are in serious need of professional assistance." Fine, one might have that opinion, but the thing is, again, it doesn't tell you anything about his experience. It tells you about your own experience and your own opinions, and the kind of cultural conditioning that results in having these opinions.

So the Buddha is only interested in the nature of experience. And what we find when we look closely are events that come and go. These are experienced events, and these are the dharmas, the phenomena.

So all constructions are impermanent, all constructions are dukkha, and all phenomena are not-self. Now phenomena include all of the constructions—all of the above—but it also includes the not-constructed. Because even though there's nothing we can say about the not-constructed, we cannot speak about it, we can experience it. And therefore it's a dharma. Does that make sense?

So these three—anicca, dukkha, anatta—these are universal. They cover the whole range of human experience. So these are the universal characteristics. And you notice that for the Buddha, this is not a doctrine that has been revealed from above. It's not a question of "the scripture says so." It's simply that if you look deeply enough at the nature of human experience, this is what happens. Whether there are people who wake up to it or not, this is what happens. So this is purely naturalistic teaching.

Anyway, this brings us to dukkha-nyana. Nyana essentially means understanding.

It's a word based on the root ñā, to know, to understand. With the addition of the action suffix ṇa, we get ñāṇa—the root plus ṇa. In Sanskrit and Pali, this creates what's called action nouns. So a ñāṇa is a knowing or an understanding.

This term appears often in the Buddha's teaching. For example, he frequently uses the compound ñāṇa-dassana—understanding and seeing, or knowing and seeing. In English you often see it the other way around: seeing and understanding, or seeing and knowing. I'm sure you've come across this compound before. It's very common. "Knowing and seeing in this way, would you go back to the past? Would you run forward to the future?" We talked about that before in a previous talk. And the same root gives us paññā—wisdom.

So ñāṇa is an understanding. But the Buddha's teaching is kind of all over the place in terms of the way that the suttas are laid out. Now, this is an oral tradition, but they're classified and grouped together in collections called nikāyas, and there are five of these

nikāyas. They're collected in a way which has caused great anguish and frustration to modern scholars because it seems to be just completely all over the place. If you line up the nikāyas on a bookshelf and start reading from page one and go through, you might be tempted to wonder what the hell is going on because it's just all over the place. This is typical of an oral tradition because these were never written.

But the way I like to look at it is if you imagine the Dhamma—both the way things are and the teaching of the way things are—as like an enormous relational database. Does anybody not know what a relational database is?

Many years ago when I was working temporary jobs in the public service, I got offered a job in the then Public Service Commission. This is in Canberra. I had done these really basic computer courses, including database. I was taken into this office by this senior executive, and she's interviewing me and looking at my documents. She seems to be pleased. She looks up at me and says, "We need someone to work on a relational database. Do you know what a relational database is?"

Now I had never heard of one. So my mind went into overdrive and I said, "Yes, a relational database is a database that relates one thing to another." And she smiled and accepted this answer. So I knew that she didn't know what a relational database was either.

But it all seemed to be going well, except that then we crossed to the other side of the office—the whole floor—and went to the big boss's office. It was a bit embarrassing because he was younger than I was. He studies my documents and looks at me and says, "Do you know what a relational database is?" And I looked at him and thought, "I'm not going to bluff him." And I said, "No." But he hired me anyway. It was a very good job—a great job. I quite enjoyed it.

A database is like a table. So you have a list of things. You might have several columns in the list. So you know what that is—a table with columns. Let's say you might have three columns: first name, middle name, last name. Then you get another table with several columns, and one of those columns is the same as one of the columns in the first table, which means you can relate that table to this table. And then you have another table with several columns, and one of the columns in the second table is the same as one of the columns in the third table, so you can relate this one to this one, which means you can relate this one to this one to this one. Is this beginning to make sense?

So you can have multiple tables, and each one of them is connected in some way with at least one other table. And the whole thing is the database. Imagine the Dhamma to be this huge relational database.

Now if you work with a database—which is what I was doing at the Public Service Commission—you put all the data in and then you ask a question of the database. You go do-do-do-do-do and then hit the button, and it churns out a report. And the report gives you

particular information about certain relationships among all this data. You've asked it a question, and you've got this report.

Now, having proudly produced this report on a sheet of paper, are you holding in your hand the database? No. You're holding one report from the database, particularly if it's a complex database. Let's say you work away at this job for a year or two, and you end up with this pile of reports that you've generated. If you pick up the whole pile, is this pile of reports the database? No.

If you look at the suttas, the Buddha or someone turns up, and some event takes place—an event which comes and goes according to conditions. Some particular person asks a particular question in a particular circumstance. Remember Dandapani, stick in hand, meets the Buddha. A particular person, arrogant, interested in Dharma, has potential. That event takes place. The Buddha wraps him with an answer. That answer, and in fact the whole sutta, is a report from the database.

Does that make sense? Is that sutta the Dharma? No. It's one report. The whole five collections of suttas, pile them on top of each other. Is this the Dharma? No. It's simply a whole series of reports generated from the Dharma.

If we're looking for the Dharma, where would we find it in the Buddha's time? We're talking about a computer database—you look for it in the server. Where do you find it in the Buddha's time? The entire community who have memorized all this and who have practiced it and realized it. It's like in Australian indigenous culture, the law. There's no one person who knows the law. It's the community who knows it. It can't be confined to one person. It doesn't matter if you can list all the songs. That's not the law. It's some of the law.

So the Dharma exists in the minds of the community, the Sangha, based on what they know intellectually and what they have realized intuitively. So this is the Dharma, and from this the different reports come up. The Buddha's teaching appears from our perspective—from the perspective of a literate society—to be completely disorganized, but it is organized, just in a very different way.

Now the early tradition decided they needed to organize jñāna understanding. It's quite clear that it's based on this essential framework: anicca, dukkha, anattā. That's the framework. It's quite clear that the job of the practitioner is to go from here at the beginning all the way to there, to awakening, and that this journey takes you through these three characteristics.

So, after the Buddha, presumably after the Buddha, comes the job of developing some kind of systematic way where you can organize all the teachings—the relevant ones for the purposes of the path—in a systematic, linear way that takes you from there to there. And the first attempt—what they did—was they developed a system of vipassanā jñānas. These are sometimes translated as insight knowledges or understandings of insight, which would be another way of translating it.

Now this is the heritage that frames what we are doing here. The first attempt to create a system of jñānas, of how this whole process of seeing and understanding actually unfolds, begins with a book called the Paṭisambhidāmagga, The Path of Discrimination. This is a very early text. It appears in Khuddaka Nikāya. Remember I said there are collections of the suttas? There are five of these collections, and the last one is Khuddaka. Khuddaka means miscellaneous. This is the glad bag. This is where everything's chucked in that didn't fit in the first four. And it's very miscellaneous. It includes stuff which, according to modern scholars, some stuff is very early, and there's some stuff which is very late.

And in here you get this book, The Path of Discrimination, and it's late. It's in the Sutta Pitaka, the basket of suttas, but in terms of its genre, it's an Abhidharma text. And Abhidharma came later. Abhidharma is the systematic philosophy and psychology, and it comes later—people trying to systematize all these reports from the database.

It probably dates from the third to second centuries BCE. It's so early, it's still oral. So it wasn't written down; it was chanted. But even the tradition says this does not come from the Buddha. It was attributed to Sariputta. Of course, Sariputta is foremost in wisdom. So even the tradition said, no, this isn't Buddha. This is after Buddha.

And this is a text found only in the Theravada. No other tradition of Buddhism has it. So this is a point where this particular stream is heading in its own direction and starting to form what we call the Theravada.

So Paṭisambhidāmagga, Path of Discrimination, is the first major path manual, the first attempt to systematize the teachings of the Buddha on the subject of liberation and bring them together into one orderly system. And it produces a system of eight vipassana ñāṇas, eight stages of insight understanding.

Those of you who are familiar with the ñāṇas—I'll just go through them quickly. These are comprehension, sammasana ñāṇa; arising and passing away, udayabbaya ñāṇa; dissolution, bhaṅga; fearfulness, bhaya, or bhayatupaṭṭhāna; misery, ādīnava; disgust, nibbidā; desire for deliverance, muñcitukamyatā; re-observation, paṭisaṅkhā; equanimity regarding constructions, saṅkhārupekkhā; adaptation, anuloma; change of lineage, gotra; path, magga; fruition, phala.

Centuries later, in Sri Lanka, a scholarly monk called Buddhaghosa wrote a bigger tome called Visuddhimagga, Path of Purification. He based it on the Path of Discrimination, which has eight vipassana ñāṇas, but he subdivided some and he ended up with sixteen. And it's this system of sixteen that Mahāsi Sayādaw inherited, and his system of meditation is based on these sixteen ñāṇas.

Any questions about that? Is that clear? The historical bit?

But you see, the basic point is this is an attempt to impose order on the process of liberation. And the first thing that strikes us about this system is its linear nature. You've got sixteen ñāṇas. Count them: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. And the practitioner starts at ñāṇa one, and then when they graduate they get a little tick, they get a gold star, they move to ñāṇa two, and when they've done that, another little gold star, ñāṇa three, four—tick, tick—five... sixteen. Bing! Jackpot! Then start again.

Why do some people go round systematically and some don't? This is exactly the question that we're going to look at, because it's a very interesting problem. Some people go round and round and round forever and ever. Oh, you don't go forever and ever—you go round once. You're not going to go round forever and ever. Seven lifetimes max. John Howell said it was more like snakes than ladders.

I used to refer to it as Buddha's greasy pole. You're either climbing up or you're sliding down. You can't stand still.

Patrick: Is there any mention of the... I know when I studied with Tom Wallace we talked about the stages of...

No, they're different. Let's get to this because first of all—we'll definitely get back to this, and remind me if I slide away from it.

First of all, this emphasis on a linear development over time is typical of the Theravada. Theravada is very much concerned with process over time. Other traditions, not so much. So in the Mahayana, for example, you get this debate that's been going on for centuries: sudden awakening versus gradual awakening. You see in the

Tibetan system, where by and large gradual awakening won, but there's still sudden awakening streams. In Zen, by and large sudden awakening won, but there are still gradual aspects to it.

So there are Buddhists who have never been convinced by this business of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, whatever it is. And they say, no, you either cut through or you don't cut through. And when you cut through, you cut through now. It's got nothing to do with any kind of linear movement over time. And you find teachings in the Buddha's teachings which would support both sides.

In terms of the order, how can you get a linear system? It's based on the order of the three universal characteristics. When they are mentioned by the Buddha, they are always mentioned in the same sequence: anicca first, dukkha second, anatta third. Always in that order. Why is this order important?

First of all, they're listed in order of subtlety. Anicca is the easiest characteristic to notice. Have you noticed over the past month that your experience has changed? Of course. It's easy. It's obvious. Anicca is the most accessible to observe. To go deep into it is another matter entirely. When we go deep into impermanence, as I said, it provokes anxiety.

Dukkha is more subtle and harder to see. That is to say, the universal characteristic of dukkha is harder to perceive than its obvious manifestations. You can easily see dukkha in its gross forms. Could I have a volunteer? *Bash!* Dukkha. Or, in a meditation context, you could generate it artificially—sit there for two hours, do not move. Then after two hours, ask: what did you experience? "It hurt!" Ah, very good. Dukkha.

So sure, dukkha is easy to experience in its obvious forms. But the universal characteristic of dukkha is very subtle. To actually find it, you've got to go quite deep.

Anatta is the most subtle characteristic and the most difficult to see, partly because it's so counter-intuitive. "Of course I exist, so what are you talking about—not self or no self or non-self? Philosophical claptrap!" So it's counter-intuitive, but it's also the most subtle because it's not a something—it's the absence of something. The absence of what we assume is here: the self. It's not a something in itself; it's the absence of something.

The factor that brings some order into this system is, I think, samadhi, or more broadly, the serenity aspect of the practice.

Nal, your question was about the linear path of jhana and the linear path of jnana, and what's the connection between them? When the Buddha talks about the meditation process, in some texts he'll track what happens in the citta as we develop the practice. He tracks out a linear path of development: first this happens, then this, then this, then this. This linear path of development comprises the four jhanas, the four absorptions.

For example, first you're sending your awareness again and again to the meditation object. This is initial application, vitakka. Then once you develop some momentum, it starts going bang, bang, bang, bang—sustained application, vicara. Later on, these two drop away and it feels like you're not doing it; the awareness is sustained with the object effortlessly. There's some excitement initially, and then later on that excitement drops away, and so on and so forth.

So he has this linear development of the changes that take place in the citta as we go deeper and deeper into samadhi. You always have the citta that's doing the practice, and then what it is that this citta knows and sees—jnana-dasana. What that citta will know and see will depend largely on how much samadhi there is.

For example, how much do you see and recognize of the nature of your own experience when the mind is roiling with the five hindrances, versus when the mind has no hindrances? Do you get a different view? Yes. It's very different.

So what brings order into this is the degree of concentration. The Buddha will lay out a system: this is what happens in the citta as the practice develops—this is serenity. This is what the citta will know and see as the practice develops—this is vipassana, this is insight. This first one has to do with the citta, the heart.

This other approach encompasses the whole world, including the heart. Does that make sense?

Regarding the status of the jhanas—I think there are nine stages, though I can't remember precisely which ones—but they are perhaps more well-known than the vipassana jhanas, aren't they? Yes, I think so overall. It's easier to find in the texts. There's not too much reference to the vipassana jhanas, but there's abundant reference to the samatha jhanas.

Certainly this system of vipassana jhanas seems to be peculiar to the Theravada tradition. Perhaps they don't even have it in Tibetan Buddhism—I'm not sure. But everybody recognizes the samatha jhanas. This particular system of vipassana jhanas appears to be a distinctly Theravadan way of understanding how the whole process unfolds.

So it's the samadhi side that is citta-specific—the concentration practices that work directly with the heart. And this brings some order into the practice.

As the mind, as the citta becomes stronger and more refined, there's meant to be a progression: first, "Ah yes, definitely anicca!"—going deep with impermanence. Then, "Ah, there's some dukkha underneath the anicca." And finally, "Ah, underneath that there's anatta." So you get this linear progression depending on how deeply you go with the samadhi.

I wonder about that framework, though, because it's not always the case. It's definitely not always the case. Some people have a different temperament and pick up dukkha more readily than anicca. Others have a temperament that's naturally attuned to anatta, even though it's considered the most subtle characteristic.

So there's some degree of order, but it never captures the reality completely. It's always untidy.

For a start, if you truly perceive any of these three characteristics—anicca, dukkha, anatta—you have all three. They come as a package. You can't have one without the other two. They're always present together.

All three are already there, plus individual students have vastly different sensitivities. Some people are naturally sensitive to one aspect but not to the others. We've discussed how some people are very sensitive to dukkha, while others are quite attuned to change, and still others are naturally sensitive to anatta. People have completely different ranges and degrees of sensitivity to these different patterns.

As a result, any given student's experience may not follow a tidy progression through the vipassana jhanas. If you ever teach meditation, you'll find students suddenly appearing in jhanas they have absolutely no business being in according to theory. You might want to tell them, "Just stop it, get out, go back to the beginning"—but it doesn't work that way.

Any given student could stumble into one of these jhanas when, according to any kind of linear system, they shouldn't be there. But they are there.

So this system is an attempt to impose order, but it's not entirely successful. For some people, they progress bang, bang, bang, bang—just like a textbook. But for others, it's all over the shop, and you get a whole range of responses.

This is one reason why in the Mahasi method, if you go to Burma and work with a sayadaw, they will usually insist—absolutely insist—that when you sit, you follow the rising and falling of the abdomen, and when you walk, you follow the lifting, pushing, dropping of the foot. They insist on these two particular meditation objects.

If you say, "Look, I really don't like this," they'll reply, "Your likes and dislikes are irrelevant—just note them." If you say, "It's not really working for me," they'll respond, "Make more effort, be more persistent, just do it."

The reason for this rigidity is that they have learned to read the experiences that arise dependent upon those particular meditation objects. With those specific objects, they can place you in the jhanas and track your progress. But if you have another meditation object—if you walk into an interview and say, "My mind itself is my meditation object"—then all bets are off in terms of trying to pinpoint what's actually happening.

So it's partly a control mechanism, but it's also a blueprint, isn't it? Though you need people who can actually read the blueprint—otherwise, why bother?

And you've got to have people doing that particular thing in order for the blueprint to be available. If you want to work with this person, they can't read you unless you do this. So you do this.

This shapes how you actually report your experience. It becomes standardized curricula, really. The great masters themselves—if you went to see Mahasi himself, he probably would be able to cope with a range of meditation objects because he's great enough to have that sort of flexibility. But his students aren't necessarily so flexible.

In Malaysia, there's been a lot of Mahasi teaching, and when I started teaching there, I had the feeling that the standard of Mahasi teaching most students had been exposed to was not very high. I actually spoke to Bhante Aggacita, who's the abbot and an old student of Sayadaw U Pandita. He confirmed this, saying that a number of people feel the standard of teaching is declining over time. The lineage is already in decline for that reason.

So you have this system of ñanas. There are the early ñanas—three of them. Just briefly, these are: discerning mind and body (nama-rupa-pariccheda-ñana), understanding conditionality, and finally, comprehension or mastery. These three ñanas basically constitute a general introduction to the three characteristics. They're like the beginner's introduction to anicca, dukkha, anatta.

They culminate in a deeper understanding, a perception of impermanence. So you get this spiral thing—a kind of introductory level of the three characteristics, and then you get a deeper level of impermanence. We go back to one characteristic.

The fourth ñana, udayabbaya-ñana, arising and ceasing, is all about impermanence. That's where the understanding of impermanence becomes predominant and the mind is very settled and stable. You need a certain amount of samadhi to be able to get there.

So the first three ñanas basically give a quick tour of the three characteristics. Subsequent ñanas deepen and extend that insight, opening it up wider, applying it to more realms of experience and going deeper with it. It's like a spreading out to every situation and a deepening down all the way to the unconstructed.

You have the first three as the introduction, and then from number four onwards, spreading out and going down. The fourth one is udayabbaya, understanding of arising and passing away, where impermanence is predominant. After that comes dukkha. This is what we're focusing on tonight.

Before we get into that, first of all, an essential aspect of ñana is its universality. Ñana is always universal. Insight is always generalized. What's the difference between dukkha and dukkha-ñana? It's the difference between the particular and the universal.

Ordinary, everyday dukkha is particular. This situation that I'm in right now—this is dukkha. I don't like this. But perhaps not that situation over there. So an escape from dukkha seems possible within the realm of the impermanent. This retreat is getting incredibly tedious, but an escape from this dukkha is possible because it's over soon. I can hang out, it'll be over, then no more dukkha. I'll go home and lead a civilized life.

Within this understanding we feel that there could be an alternative which could work. This is what we find when we're doing the practice. Has this ever happened to you, that you find yourselves living alternate lives? You find yourself, for example, reimagining the past. "If only I had done that instead of this, my life would have turned out much better." Have you ever done that? Has it ever seemed convincing at the time?

So here there's a recognition of dukkha, but not its universality. We imagine that just a slight change in circumstances could make everything completely different—then we would be okay.

You can also imagine an alternative future: "When I get out of here, things will be different. It will be much better when I get out of here." Or we can imagine an alternative present: "Right now I'll take a break and then things will be better."

All these fantasies seem real. All of them have power over us because our understanding of dukkha is still particular, not universal. We believe that if we could just change these circumstances, there would be no more dukkha. In that situation we have dukkha, but we do not have dukkha ñāṇa.

So let's get into the dukkha ñāṇas. The first one is bhaṅga, dissolution. This is also the maturity of the perception of impermanence. If something is impermanent, that means it has a beginning, it has an end, and it has something in between. The Buddha says there's an arising, there's ceasing, and in the middle there is change while enduring. So something endures, but it changes.

You find different views of impermanence depending on which angle you look at. Sayadaw Vivekananda gave the example: imagine you live in an apartment building overlooking a freeway or raised highway, and the traffic moves from your left to your right. If you look straight out the window, you have cars come and go—come, they're there, they go. They arise, they're there, they cease. Arise, they cease. Arise, they cease.

If you turn to the left, you have cars come, come, come, come—arise, arise, arise, arise. Turn to the right, you have cars go, go, go, go—disappear, cease, cease, cease, cease. So you get different views of impermanence depending on which angle the mind looks at it.

The maturity of impermanence is when the mind sees the cessation aspect. Every time it looks, it sees things disappear. This is dissolution, bhaṅga. It's still part of impermanence, but it's the border into dukkha. Because when we perceive the dissolution, this is where we perceive the groundlessness, the bottomlessness of experience. Everything's disappearing. There's no ground. If we ask what lies beneath, nothing at all. Just everything disappearing.

What determines the boundaries between the events? Each event could be broken up into smaller events. It depends on how strong your mindfulness is and how strong your samādhi is and what angle the mind is looking at. These are not absolutes. They're always appearances. They vary depending on circumstances.

In a weak aspect, sometimes this can take the form of a meditator apparently losing concentration and being unable to focus on anything at all. Things were going really well. Everything was clear. The mind was completely focused. Now you try to focus on an object and you can't find it. Sometimes it's like trying to hold onto something that slips out of your hand. As soon as you grab it, it slips away. You can't focus. The whole practice seems to have collapsed.

In its strong form it can be like falling into a black hole, this abyss, bottomless abyss. What the mind is intuiting at this point is the bottomlessness, the turtles all the way down. And this is horrifying. The groundless nature of experience is being exposed.

And so the next ñāṇa is bhaya ñāṇa, fear. Bhaya is fear. The understanding of fear or terror in a weak form, this might be just a sense of existential unease. I feel uneasy, I don't know why. I just feel very uneasy. Nothing's going right. I feel helpless. In a strong form, it could manifest as panic. But it always has this quality of a loss of control. I'm not in charge.

"Patrick, what kind of time frames are we talking about with these things?"

Anything from a nanosecond to a year, to ten years, to a lifetime. Time is completely irrelevant here. People can slip through these very quickly or they can come, rest into one ñāṇa and just be there for months, years at a time. Apparently stuck. Just, not necessarily stuck, just appreciated. Yes, when experiencing it.

In the Visuddhimagga, Buddhaghosa doesn't call it bhaya ñāṇa, he calls it bhayatupatthāna ñāṇa, which is understanding of appearance as fear. So not understanding fear, but appearance as fear. And he asks the question: Does the knowledge of appearance as fear itself fear, or does it not fear? In other words, what's the relationship between the appearance of fear and fear?

He gives a couple of similes. There's just one I want to mention. Imagine a person who sees three great charcoal pits burning. Now, the three indicate the three times: past, future, and present. Anybody who steps into any of those pits would suffer an excruciating death. So they generate fear. Now the person looking at the charcoal pits burning away does not personally feel afraid of them because she's not about to walk into them. But she understands that anyone who does fall into them would suffer enormous pain.

So this is Buddhaghosa's attempt to explain the difference between fear and appearance as fear. And this simile suggests detachment. So the universe is fearful and there's no hope in it at all. But if the mindfulness is strong and the concentration is strong, this prevents the practitioner from being emotionally entangled in it. So in other words, fear—real fear—suggests taking danger personally. I am in danger. But the ñāṇa, when it's mature, indicates there is danger, but there's no one who is in danger.

It could be roughly compared to watching a scary movie. So fear arises, but even as the fear is present, there's the understanding that the situation isn't real, and so the fear itself is not grounded. So this suggests, as Buddha goes through saying, there's a detach-

ment here involved. If we're in a world of appearances only, there's no need for actual fear. So this is a way of distinguishing between fear and fear as ñāṇa, as understanding, which always implies some degree of not-self.

"What if you had experiences like this one about fear, but you didn't have a clue what it was about, so it wouldn't actually be understanding?"

Then you'd be in trouble. And people can be in trouble. People can end up in the mental health system as a result of going through insight into the three characteristics. This is serious stuff. Either one. We'll talk about this a bit more at the end of this.

What Buddhaghosa's understanding presupposes is that there is a strong grounding of anattā and concentration in the meditator. But what if the practitioner does not have such a grounding? This is the question that's being raised here. If Yasa hadn't run into the Buddha...

He could have been in serious trouble.

So people can have psychological breakdowns as a result of either meditating or having an insight that a meditator would recognize as being on the curriculum. If it's personal, if it's about me, then you could go crazy.

Alternatively, fear could be turned into insight if the identification can be abandoned. So you might have someone in serious trouble recognizing the groundlessness of experience and the futility of life, but then be turned around if they can be persuaded this is not personal—it's about nature, not you.

This is the delicate balance, particularly important in Dukkha ñāṇa. Absolute centrality: do not take it personally. It's rule number one in this game. Do not take anything personally, because it is not personal. But if we take it personally, it can be dangerous, and it is dangerous, and people have serious problems.

This is the great risk of the commercial commodification of mindfulness. People are talking about mindfulness as if it's a way of developing a better self, as if it's all happy-clappy. And what happens is people start to develop insight into not-self—or maybe not even insight into not-self, but without any insight into not-self—and they're going crazy.

It happens to some people and it passes because everything passes, and they recover from it. But they're shaky. Maybe they'll just never go anywhere near this meditation spirituality again and stick to nice safe materialism. But there'll always be an edge.

There'll always be at the bottom this fear, because there'll always be the intuition that really there isn't anything down there. And it'll come out at the very latest—it'll come out at death. And they could well have a very terrifying death experience.

And then comes ādīnava ñāṇa. This is understanding of danger or disadvantage. This is essentially the recognition of the impossibility of the situation. There's no refuge. There's nowhere to escape. Any fantasy of escape is seen to be just that—a fantasy. It's just nonsense.

Then comes nibbidā ñāṇa. This is disenchantment. And disenchantment, of course—remember we talked about that in anattalakkhaṇa sutta. That's the turning point in anattalakkhaṇa sutta. And that anattalakkhaṇa sutta goes through impermanence, dukkha, not-self in a very compact way.

In nibbidā ñāṇa, disenchantment, the practitioner abandons the search for satisfaction. It's like, nothing's going to work. I can get out of this meditation center, I can go home—that's not going to work. I can quit my job, collect my accumulated savings and head off to a tropical paradise—that's not going to work. I can buy a nice new car—that's not going to work. So why not just give up? Why not just stop struggling and surrender?

The Buddha points out that these three ñāṇas—fear, danger or disadvantage, and disenchantment—are essentially the same. Rather, they're different stages of maturity in the same understanding. So in Paṭisambhidāmagga it doesn't differentiate between these three. But Buddhaghosa separates them out.

And there we get muñcitukamyatā ñāṇa—the desire for deliverance. This is also known as the "get me out of here" ñāṇa. And sometimes people do escape the meditation center at this point.

These could be the people who go rushing off into the night never to be seen again. You get different symptoms here—sometimes intense physical pain and restlessness, sometimes people who disappear into their room to sleep most of the day. "Get me out of here." It's just unbearable. "I can't stand this anymore." The mind's desperate to escape.

Notice how in these ñāṇas, affect is central. *Vedanā*—it's all heart stuff. What moves the heart is *sukha* or *dukkha*, pleasure or pain, and it's all about desire. So in this ñāṇa, desire for deliverance, the question of desire really comes down to it: What is it we want?

For the Buddha, the fundamental question is: Do we desire the constructed or the unconstructed? Our habit is to desire the constructed. This is the world we are familiar with—the real world, the world of normality. All our desires go into that world. In contrast, we don't know anything about the unconstructed. We can't, because anything we know about it is just more of the constructed. So we actually cannot know anything about it.

If we don't know about it, how can we desire it? We're caught in this catch-22. But if we become thoroughly disenchanted by the constructed—because we've learned to fully understand it—then we learn to desire something else. There must be something better than this. I don't know what it is, but there must be something better. This is the desire for deliverance.

But still, what is it that I desire?

This again brings up the question of secular mindfulness or mindfulness in the psychotherapeutic tradition. If I am in a particular practice tradition—let's say I'm working within the Theravada or some other established tradition—then I may have at least a theoretical sense of what it is that I'm desiring. What's the alternative to this construction? I can have at least some kind of theoretical understanding.

And so I can feel encouraged, even if whatever it is is completely mysterious, even if it can barely be perceived as an image in art—a thangka, a statue of the Buddha, a temple. But there's something that tells me there's something else that's better than the so-called real world. Then that desire for deliverance can have a direction, a target.

Also, if I have teachers or senior practitioners I can look up to as embodying some kind of understanding, then I can have a lived sense of what this might be. This is one of the things that John Hale gave to me as a teacher. I would look at him and I could see, "Oh, this is what the practice is about." He gave me a lived sense of what it is that I'm aiming for. And that's incredibly grounding and encouraging.

But if I'm living in an entirely secular context, then at this point I might be tempted to despair. I don't want all of this, which is familiar, which is normal, which is the real world. But what's the alternative? And I could be stuck.

So again, the dukkha ñāṇa brings up the dangers inherent in doing this practice. This practice is dangerous. We're messing with the mind.

What gets the practitioner through all this is basically *anattā*—a growing understanding of not-self, which is the understanding side, the *vipassanā* side. On the *citta* side, this is matched by a developing mindfulness and equanimity. As the mindfulness gets stronger, the equanimity gets stronger.

And of course, you've also got the concentration, so the heart is getting stronger, clearer and more settled and more balanced. So it can go through experiences which before would have completely flipped me out, but I can go through them now because the understanding of not-self is getting stronger and the heart is getting more balanced, more equanimous.

When the equanimity really starts to take off, then we move into *paṭisaṅkhā ñāṇa* or *paṭisaṅkhānupassanā ñāṇa*—review. In practice, these ñāṇas have all sorts of experiences that characterize them, but often what will happen is that the meditator will start going through all the previous experiences they've had of dukkha.

It's like marching. I remember when I went through this, one of the weirdest things was I'd sit there and it was like I was in the stands of a military parade ground, and marching in front of me was all the dukkha that I'd gone through.

Kind of marching past and saluting me as they went by. It was really weird.

But review also reviews the other characteristics as well. So it's like all the characteristics can be swimming in front at this point. But it can be like a guided tour of the nature of human suffering, but it's becoming increasingly refined. And the sense of not-self is getting stronger and stronger. So the sense of any personal threat is just fading away. And it becomes really interesting. "Wow, look at that. That's really weird. That bit of dukkha. Why is it so painful? Not enough anatta. Not enough equanimity." It gets very refined and very interesting.

I remember one time I was doing walking meditation and I suddenly realized, "Wow, even awareness hurts." That is really weird. That's fascinating.

And this ñana is rather similar to sammasana, the third ñana, except much deeper, much more refined. But again, mindfulness is developing. And mindfulness develops because it doesn't matter what it is—just be with it. Just be with it. Just be with it. Just note it. Look at it. Sometimes you can't note. It's impossible. But just be with it. Just accept it. Just face to face. This is what it is. Don't avoid it. If we're avoiding, face to face with the fact that I'm avoiding. Just face to face with it.

The mindfulness gets stronger and stronger. With the mindfulness comes the equanimity. This allows the concentration to develop. And this allows this very subtle sense of not-self to gradually come into prominence. And again, not-self is the most subtle because it's not a something. It's the absence of a something.

But when anatta becomes predominant, then the dukkha ñanas end and we move into sankharupekkha ñana—equanimity regarding all constructions. And at this point the mindfulness and equanimity dominate the heart. What's apparent is not-self, and everything's a lot smoother. And then this is where anatta is now predominant, and this is the one that just keeps rolling along.

The question of the distinction between dukkha and dukkha ñana—we could say more broadly, the distinction between psychology and Dharma. This is relevant for our culture.

Just very briefly, you could say that psychology deals with people and their problems. I would say, as a non-psychologist: Dharma does not. Dharma does not deal with people and their problems. Dharma practice cannot solve anyone's problems. If anybody comes to the Dharma to solve their problems, they're wasting their time.

What the practice can do is show us that we and our problems are empty and without self. That's Dharma's job.

In the First Truth, the Buddha is clear that the practitioner's job is not to solve their dukkha, but to understand it.

In the Four Noble Truths, the duty attached to the first truth, dukkha, is to understand—to fully understand dukkha—not to solve it, not to get rid of it. And when we understand our dukkha, we realize there is no "we" involved. That's what the Dharma offers.

As the Buddha says to Venerable Kaccāna Gotta, a mature practitioner "has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only dukkha arising, what ceases is only dukkha ceasing." So Dharma allows us to give up on the "me" and "my problem." And when that happens, my problem is not solved—it's dissolved. It's a whole different thing.

So Dharma and psychology are two different projects. But they are not in parallel universes that never intersect. Of course they intersect. For example, we can, from our practice, learn something about our psychological makeup. And this, in turn, can help us with our practice. They can help each other.

We learn from our story. When I do the practice, I learn from my story and I create a variation of the story. My story gets a new meaning, and this meaning can be very useful because meaning is powerful. It may even give me a different mode of attention. What I'm working with when I meditate is attention. We may learn from our story—which belongs to the realm of psychology—where the best place is to aim our attention, which is in the realm of practice. What are the conditional relationships most worth exploring to shed light on our situation?

So these two are separate, but they intersect. They're not completely cut off from each other. One can help the other. But they are two distinct projects—they're not the same project.

At a fundamental level, we learn we are never going to find the right story. It's just not going to happen. All stories are unsatisfactory.

At Wat Suan Mokkh in southern Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadāsa built what he called a spiritual theater and put all sorts of exhibits inside it. He had these little paintings along the wall, and one of them showed this fat Chinese monk doing the stretch that we do in the morning where we push the ceiling up with our hands. He's got this big belly and this big grin on his face. There's a verse underneath in Thai with an English translation, and the English translation goes: "O boundless joy, now I see there is no happiness in this world."

This is the essence of the dukkha ñāṇa—the joy that comes out of it. And it's boundless, because there's no one there. There's no self involved.

CHAPTER 30

On Effort

Patrick Kearney · 1h07

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Patrick Kearney examines the nature of right effort in Buddhist meditation practice. Drawing on his experiences in Thai and Burmese monasteries, he contrasts the "meditation as war" approach with a more balanced understanding of sammā vāyāma (right effort). Kearney explores how the Buddha's own journey from extreme asceticism to the middle way informs our understanding of skillful effort, referencing the Devadaha Sutta and the teaching given to Venerable Sona about tuning a vīṇā.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that right effort is not about striving for future attainments but rather making the present-moment choice for intimate presence with whatever is arising now. Kearney discusses two approaches: determined effort (direct engagement with specific mental states) and intimate witnessing (upekkhati - seeing with equanimity from very close proximity). He explores how our relationship to time, self, and the reality of kileśa (defilements as "stuckness") shapes our practice, ultimately pointing toward effort as a chosen intimacy with present experience rather than a battle against ourselves.*

Tonight, by special request, we're going to talk about effort.

I mentioned many years ago that in the 80s, I spent a lot of time in and out of Thailand—in the latter part of the 80s as a bhikkhu, before then as a layman. When I was still a layman, one place I always visited was Wat Suan Mok. They had this program going where they would teach retreats for lay people, usually spaced-out hippies from the nearby tourist islands. In one of these retreats, very unusually, Ajahn Po gave us a talk. The star of the monastery was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who gave these magnificent Dharma talks, but the abbot was Ajahn Po.

He ran the place, and I was very impressed by him. He's one of the best monks I've ever come across. If you were looking for him, you were just as likely to find him up on the roof hammering a nail for the repair of the buildings as to find him anywhere else. He was in many ways a model of how to be a bhikkhu. So I had a lot of time for him, but I had never heard him give a Dharma talk. His English wasn't that good and he was a man of action rather than of words. So when he turned up to give us a talk, I thought, this could be good.

He sat down, looked at us, and his opening line was: "Meditation is war." He glared at us and said, "War against what? Defilement. War against defilement. What is defilement? Lust. Lust is defilement." He proceeded from there, but from that point he completely lost his audience—which I'm certainly not interested in doing.

But this "meditation is war" is a traditional motif to describe what meditation practice is all about. Sayadaw U Pandita was very fond of the image. He described the relationship between serenity and insight meditation: insight meditation is like you're charging across no man's land with a fixed bayonet and the enemy are just blasting away at you, whereas every now and again it just gets too much so you dive behind a boulder—and that's serenity practice.

This way of looking at meditation, which again is very traditional, emphasizes the aspect of commitment, energy, effort, perseverance, self-reliance—all those qualities. Courage, determination. The image is based on a quite realistic appreciation of our situation.

The fact is that we are stuck in our suffering, and what we want is to move towards transformation. It's up to each one of us. No one else can do it for us. Buddha is not about to descend from his altar and give us a helping hand. No amount of praying will make the slightest difference whatsoever.

In embarking on this project, what it requires us to do is to go against a lifetime of habits. We have been carefully cultivating habits which the Buddha would call akusala—unwholesome. We have been vigorously doing this for our entire lives and then suddenly we are expected to go in the opposite direction. If I don't do it now, it won't be done. So you can see where they're coming from.

As Ajahn Po pointed out, meditation is war on kilesa—defilement. Defilement is the standard translation of the Pali word kilesa, and we've spoken about this earlier in the retreat. In the Pali tradition, kilesa is taken from the verb kilesati, to stick, to adhere. The image is: if you have a white cloth and you get some mud, you throw it at the cloth, the mud sticks to the cloth, the cloth is dirtied—it is defiled. So, defilement.

But what the image is presenting is an image of stuckness. The problem is the mud is stuck to the cloth. Now there's no problem with the cloth and there's no problem with the mud. The problem is the stuckness. This is the essence of kilesa. It's literally more stuckness than defilement, but we are defiled by this condition of stuckness. In other words, by what we cling to.

It's all about our clinging. When we take up a meditation practice, we're going against these deeply ingrained patterns of clinging, launching ourselves into a journey we have never attempted before. We're heading to a destination that we have no understanding of. So, not so easy.

What this practice will reveal to us very quickly and efficiently is exactly our obsessions—what we're stuck to, what we cling ferociously to. This is what will be revealed, again and again and again, most obviously in the experience that we call distraction. This past month we've spent a lot of time talking about distraction and how to work with it.

So this image of war has got something on its side. But it does have one disadvantage, because war always entails winning and losing. In this particular war, I'm battling against myself. This is a civil war—some parts of me want to get enlightened, versus other parts of me that say, "Nah, I just want to relax. I want to keep doing what I've been doing." If I'm in battle against myself, then ultimately I have to lose. I must be on the losing side.

What inspires my heroism in this war? It's my desire for a better self. I'm not really satisfied with the self that I've got. I wish I could trade it in and get an upgraded model, but it's not so easy. I come to the meditation practice hoping that I will be improved in some way by the experience.

Now, this is a war that I'm already familiar with in my ordinary everyday life. This is the war that we see in consumerism and ambition. I don't like what I've got. I want something better. So I'm going to struggle to get it in the belief that once I get it, then everything will be okay. There's a quality of drivenness in this project. This is what the Buddha calls taṇhā—literally thirst, but usually translated as craving.

When I come to the practice, I import this relationship into what I'm doing. But the weird thing is that what brought me here is the realization of the futility of living like that. I've been on the planet long enough to realize that it actually doesn't work. I'm always struggling for something or someone better to turn up in the future, and it never does. This is what brings me to meditation in the first place.

What I find is that I import into my meditation practice the very condition that I'm struggling to escape from. It's like I am charging into battle, but the enemy is the one who is charging into battle. So I end up going around in circles.

When I get into this struggle, into this war, it's easy to forget that the only strategy that can actually win this war is what we could call presence—being present. We could call this a chosen intimacy with whatever is happening. This is a strategy of play rather than of conflict.

Play is similar to war in that it requires energy and commitment, but unlike war, it does not look forward to a result, and in particular to the right result. It doesn't look forward to anything beyond itself. When we're playing, what we're doing is just playing. We're not trying to get something out of it. We're just playing.

When we look at the pain that drives the practice in the first place—why we come here, the pain that we're trying to escape from—we realize that this pain comes precisely from our failure to be intimate with the present. We have developed a habit of hurrying towards the future, and we do this because we imagine that it will bring us closer to what we actually want.

So we're always disconnecting from this, which is happening now, because we're busy grasping something else, something that will be realized only in the future. But it will never be found now. It's always in the future. We're moving towards a better future, and we're doing this all the time. Of course this has become a whole ideology—an ideology of progress.

But when we do this, we find that we're permanently disconnected with what's actually happening now. And this disconnection guarantees that our pain keeps going, continues.

So what we're looking for is a sense of play, which is the practice of this moment for its own sake.

When we're battling for something, what we are battling for is always something that will come in the future. And right now we can know it only in the form of an image that the mind throws up—an image. So we're disregarding the present in order to lean forward and hold onto an image which, when we look at it, has power over us precisely because it feeds our obsession with ourselves. Because the images that constitute our imagined victory are all characterized by a very strong sense of "me finally arrived at the place that I've always wanted to be"—because in that place I become the person that I've always wanted to become, no longer this person who isn't good enough, he's never good enough.

So this relationship to the practice is always looking forward, projecting forward, leaning forward, grasping forward. And that necessarily results in a disconnection with the actual experience that's happening now.

Now, before the Buddha became the Buddha, when he was still Siddhartha and a Bodhisattva, that was exactly the trap that he found himself in. And we talked about this earlier in the retreat when we were talking about the middle way. In his later years, he was reminiscing with his students about what he did in his ascetic practices before he attained awakening. And he described his practice, his approach to practice in this way:

"I thought, suppose with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth I beat down, constrain and crush mind with mind. So with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth I beat down, constrained and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits."

So we've already gone through this passage. Siddhartha was crushing mind with mind. He was definitely at war.

And to do this kind of practice, he must have been looking for a result. He must have been looking for something which would happen next—some reward for his effort. So he had an image of himself as being fully awakened, and he wasn't prepared to settle for anything less. That's why he walked out of his previous practice communities. And if only he could work hard enough, he could fulfill that ambition.

And the ascetic practice is the practice of the macho workaholic: "I've just got to work harder." And if he was not yet awakened, then obviously he wasn't working hard enough. So he had to work harder and harder and harder.

And it got to the point where, as he explained to his students many years later:

"I thought, whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion practitioners have experienced in the past, in the future, or in the present, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this."

It's like, what is humanly possible to do? I have done. I cannot work any harder. I can't even keep working this hard for very long because I'm going to die soon from my effort.

And he goes on to say: "Yet I have not attained any state surpassing the human by this racking practice of austerities, any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of cultivated ones."

So you could say that Siddhartha found himself in the situation in which he had won the race. No one was as hard working or as effortful in his practice as he was. He had succeeded all expectations in his performance review. And yet, still, it wasn't enough. He still hadn't attained what he was looking for. He still hadn't attained peace.

Now—and this is another issue that we've been talking about during this retreat—you notice that when Siddhartha was doing this kind of practice, he was caught up in the reality of time. Time, to him, was very real. Now I suffer. Later I'll get the payoff. And I'm putting up with this suffering now because of my belief in the future payoff.

Later on, in the Sweet Essence, which we also went through, we saw that if he's obsessed with time—with the reality of time, the belief in the future and in the past—then he was caught up in papañca, conceptual proliferation, as we translated it, or complication. In other words, his conceptual mind is in hyperdrive.

And when we're caught up in time like he was, then we're also caught up in self, because the self requires time. I can't believe myself to be me without a felt sense of the reality of the past and the future. It's incoherent for me to believe that I am Patrick who is the teacher without a sense that I came in here before and I will leave later. Without that, I can't sustain the identity.

And our relationship to time and to self is closely related to our relationship to effort. So we're striving to get something. This very project assumes the reality of the future. It assumes the reality of the image that I have in my mind of what it is that I'm striving to get. It assumes the reality of the one who is doing the striving and the one who will be finally triumphant over all difficulties and achieve whatever it is that I'm trying to achieve.

And we find it frustrating because no matter how hard we try, what we're looking for hasn't arrived yet. Sometimes it turns up briefly, but then it crumbles. So we've got to start again.

And since what we want isn't happening, we assume we must make more effort. Obviously we're not trying hard enough. So we push harder, or we collapse in exhaustion because it's all too difficult. We pick ourselves up off the floor and try again, only to collapse once more. Try, collapse, try, collapse. And we get caught up in that civil war we've been discussing.

I'm reminded here of my old teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, who tended to encourage this kind of relationship. His catchcry, at least what I remember from many years ago, was basically "more effort." Make more effort.

In the traditional Mahasi approach in Burma, people would undertake two or three month retreats. The bhikkhus traditionally observe vassa, a three-month retreat period each year, so a three-month retreat is very traditional. Lay people, who comprised most practitioners at these centers, settled on two or three months as an appropriate duration because they felt this gave enough time to develop the momentum required for meditators to attain the first stage of awakening. If they didn't achieve this in that period, they were much better off going home, taking a break, and returning the following year.

The government at the time—this was early independence, from the late 1940s into the 1950s—actually encouraged this kind of project. If you were a civil servant in Burma, you could take meditation leave, paid leave to go and meditate, because the government was very enthusiastic about supporting this practice.

When they began bringing in foreigners, however, a different dynamic emerged. You had people coming from the other side of the world who managed to land in Burma. Once they left, the teachers had no idea whether they would ever see them again. So if they were there, the teachers wanted to keep them there until they achieved results. The problem was that Westerners proved much slower than the Burmese in making progress. Burmese practitioners advanced much more quickly. Westerners were very slow.

So they needed more time. The attitude became: you just keep going until you crack it. Just keep going. People would stay six months, a year, two years, doing this very intensive practice—compared to which what we're doing is a holiday camp.

During my time there, the foreigners had their own meditation halls, basically because the Burmese were so fascinated by foreigners who came to meditate. They always divided by gender—men's meditation hall and women's meditation hall. There were more women's halls because many more women meditated than men—at least two women's halls and one men's hall.

Every single day in the men's hall, at least one Burmese lay meditator would approach me because he was so happy and pleased that a foreigner was coming to practice Buddhism. He simply had to talk to me and express what a wonderful thing it was. So every day you were being interrupted by these enthusiastic characters wanting to talk. Eventually, the teachers created a separate meditation hall for foreigners to protect them from the curiosity of the Burmese. We had the foreign meditators' men's hall where I used to sit.

There was a period when this hall became characterized by the greatest epidemic of sloth and torpor I have ever witnessed in my entire life. It was phenomenal. I used to meditate with my eyes open because of my early Zen training, so I could see all of this. It was a marvelous symphony of sloth and torpor going on all the time. And strangely enough, people were not making very good progress.

The atmosphere, the culture, was one of heroic effort. You would hear muttered conversations. According to the schedule, you were allowed to sleep four hours per night. If you wanted to know why, the answer was simple: Buddha slept four hours. If it's good enough for Buddha, it's good enough for you. So four hours of sleep per night was scheduled.

Sometimes you would hear these whispered exchanges: "How many hours are you sleeping?" "Four." "I'm sleeping three." There was this macho drive. And of course, everybody was completely exhausted and falling asleep all day in the hall, completely bogged down.

U Pandita felt he had to stimulate something, so he gave us a talk about effort—the three stages of right effort. He compared it to a three-stage rocket, being very scientific. The first stage has enormous engines and incredibly powerful thrust, and the rocket starts to rise, defying gravity.

Heroic effort, heroic effort.

And then finally you get some momentum and the first stage drops away—it's the second stage. And then you have to make more effort, more effort. And then finally you get into orbit and the second stage drops and you've only got the third stage. And what do you do? You make more effort.

He hammered on for about an hour. I don't know about anybody else, but I was utterly demoralized. One of the meditators went to see him later, privately—not even through the interpreter—and said, "Sayadaw, I can't even make it to the first stage of heroic effort. Am I just wasting my time here? Should I just go home?"

And he said very quietly, "Look, don't pay any attention to what I'm saying. I have to say these things. Just pay no attention. Just pay no attention. I have to say these things."

So it was very strange. We were caught up in this culture gap. The teachers had to say certain things, regardless of whether or not it was a good idea. That was their job. That was what was expected of them. Their job is very tightly controlled by the culture.

And I noticed one night, according to the schedule, the hall would close at 9 PM. There was an 8 to 9 sitting. From 9 to 10 PM there was walking meditation outside. From 10 to 11 was the final sitting period, which was done inside your room. Eleven o'clock, go to bed. Four AM, get up. Hall opens at 5 AM.

One night I came out of the hall for the 10 to 11 walking meditation. I was doing my walking meditation and I stopped and I looked around and I thought, "Where is everyone?" And I realized, of course, all the Burmese have gone to bed. Obviously. And they'll be in the hall at 5 AM the next morning.

In other words, in Burma, Burmese are quite relaxed. Now, if you want this much effort out of a Burmese audience, you demand this much. But if you've got fanatical foreigners who've gone all the way there to attain enlightenment and they hear the demand for this much, what they'll try to do is this much. So a lot of this was cultural confusion that was going on.

But this rhetoric of "more effort" is very characteristic of the Burmese, and frankly a lot of it is just kind of PR. It's not to be taken all that seriously. But people have got caught up in it.

If we're looking for what the Buddha calls right effort, samma vayama, it's found in the commitment to recognize what is already here. It's got nothing to do with what we imagine might happen in the future. This I think is really important.

Right effort has got nothing to do with what we imagine might happen in the future. I'm not striving for anything. What I'm striving to do is to recognize what is already here.

So let's look at how the Buddha speaks about effort. We'll go through a few texts. There's one discourse called "An Auspicious Night." And the center of it is this verse about the practitioner. Just a little bit that I want to present here.

The Buddha says: "Do not run after the past, nor long for the future. The past is left behind and the future not yet reached. Instead, see deeply into each presently arisen phenomenon while neither scattered nor disturbed."

So, first of all, the relationship to time. Do not run after the past nor long for the future. Time gets in the way. And time presents itself as mental images. That's all it presents itself as. And these images, of course, can be accompanied by a great deal of energy that we feel in the body and in the mind.

So coming to the end of a retreat, typically most people's mind thoughts are preoccupied by future rather than past. And images of the future have a very strong flavor of reality and they stimulate a lot of energy. We've built up a lot of energy in the retreat and now this energy is being harnessed by fantasies about the future.

The future comes to us only as a concept, only as an image. So do not run after the past nor long for the future. The past is left behind, the future not yet reached. In other words, they don't exist except as presently experienced phenomena.

Instead, see deeply. This "see deeply" - the verb in Pali is *vipassati*. The noun is *vipassana*. So we know vipassana as insight and we normally see it as a noun, but it's also a verb: the verb "to insight," and here translated as "to see deeply." But insighting is an activity; it's something we're meant to do.

Instead, see deeply into each presently arisen phenomenon. It can only be done in the present. The object of the investigation can only be the present, because that's all that exists. We cannot insight past or future. We cannot insight our past records of failures. We cannot insight our hopes and desires for the future. We can only insight this, now.

Now it's possible that right now is arising thoughts of the past or the future. We insight them as they arise. But you notice that the relationship to time is one of dismissing the reality of time and just staying with the present. The practice can only be done now, and the result of the practice can only be experienced now. We cannot experience a future result. It just cannot be done.

So what we're looking for is a sense of commitment and a relationship to the present which is characterized by a sense of harmony. And there's a pleasure in it, because with this relationship we no longer need to look to an imagined future for something we feel is missing now. That relationship is painful - it's *dukkha*. The sense that there's something missing and I've got to grab something in order to ease the present suffering. But when we don't have to look to an imagined future, there's a sense of ease, balance and harmony in that relationship.

And as we said, we find this relationship in play. When we play, we're doing... Well, the opposite of play, to me, is work. And when I'm working, I'm doing something now in order to gain something else later on. So when I had a day job, I would turn up at the office, not because I particularly wanted to turn up at the office, but because at the end of the week I wanted the cash. This is work.

Now, one could, of course, go to the office and play, which would be a much better relationship. I sometimes find that relationship in my work, and it's really nice when I find myself doing something and I forget about anything else - because I'm not looking for a future result, I'm just doing it for the sake of doing it. And there is an ease and a pleasure in that relationship. When we're playing, we have nothing to gain and so we have nothing to lose, and it's a whole different relationship.

And so in this practice we've been emphasising the play aspect. Don't stress out. Plenty of time. No set schedule. Explore. Be interested. Be curious. What's going on here? What's this all about? Try this. Try that. Experiment. See if this works. See if that works. If you're interested in it, go for it. All of these kinds of structures and instructions are designed to try to cultivate a sense of play, which has a lot to do with effort.

So in one discourse - and we've looked at this before - the Buddha compares right effort to music. And this is the famous story about Venerable Sona. Sona, as we said, was a rich young man who got religion and became a bhikkhu, and he was one of these young macho types who was determined to make it to full enlightenment as soon as possible. But he was becoming disheartened because no matter how hard he worked, he wasn't getting a good result. So he would work harder, but he still didn't get a result, so he worked harder.

And he was just getting completely fed up with the whole thing. And the Buddha was called in to talk to him, and of course the Buddha would have recognised exactly this pattern because that was what he did when he started out. So the Buddha spoke to him about his practice of music when he was a layman. Sona played the veena, which is an earlier version of the sitar - a stringed instrument. And the Buddha asked him to reflect on his experience as a musician: "When the strings on your veena were too tight, was it well tuned and easy to play?"

Well, no.

When its strings were too loose, was your Veena well tuned and easy to play?

No.

When its strings were neither too tight nor too loose, but adjusted to a balanced pitch, was your Veena well-tuned and easy to play?

Yes.

So too, Sona, if effort is too forceful, this leads to agitation, and if effort is too weak, this leads to stagnancy. Therefore, resolve on a calmness of effort, attain balance of the faculties, and there take up the meditation theme.

Avoid being too forceful, avoid being too weak. If there's too much force, there's some kind of agitation. If there's not enough effort, there's a sense of stagnancy. And so finding right effort is very largely a matter of recognising wrong effort and having recognised it, doing something about it.

So is there a sense of strain, of agitation within the citta, within the heart-mind? Maybe I'm trying too hard. And maybe that trying is a pushing away of something I don't want to see, or a desperate grabbing onto something in my obsessions.

Is there stagnancy? Is there a dullness in the mind? So what's happening there? And if I need to stimulate energy, how would I do it? It might be simply getting up and walking or moving in the open air. Or it might mean more effort in the sense of closely focusing on the meditation object.

But there's a continual tuning of the instrument that's required. And the tuning is effort. The effort factor is this process of tuning the instrument so it's just right, not too tight, not too slack. And we can tell that's the case when the music comes out satisfactory. So it's the quality of the music that tells us where we are.

In another discourse at Devadaha, the Buddha addressed this whole issue of too much effort. This discourse is quite interesting. It's very philosophical. And it's a debate that the Buddha has with Jain ascetics. And one of the reasons why it's interesting is because he's debating, as it were, with his former self. When the Buddha was practicing, he did this ascetic practice and he recognised what was wrong with it and its futility, and then he discovered what actually works. So now he's talking to other people who are caught up in that same ascetic practice and he's putting the boot into them and he knows exactly where to aim it because he was in that same boat.

But there are also some philosophical aspects as well which are quite interesting. The Buddha spends a fair bit of energy tearing apart the idea that everything that happens in the present is the result of past karma. And that view has crept into Buddhist traditions although he did his best to actually get rid of it.

But anyway, at one point, he gets onto the question of how action and effort can be fruitful. He often used agricultural metaphors. So I'm working in the fields. I want a fruit. I want a result. So how can I practice in such a way that I will get a result?

So he says, how is action fruitful? How is effort fruitful? Here a practitioner is not overwhelmed by dukkha and does not overwhelm himself with dukkha. He does not give up the pleasure of the dharma and is not infatuated with that pleasure.

So it's interesting that he starts with the question of pleasure and pain. If we have this habitual attitude of too much striving, practice becomes a bitter pill that we have to swallow if we are to get well. So we may be overwhelmed by dukkha or overwhelm ourselves by dukkha, bringing too much pain into the practice when it's actually, at best, not necessary. At worst, it just gets in the way.

So the first thing he does is draw attention to issues of pleasure. He does not give up the pleasure of the Dharma. Literally, it's dhammika sukha, dharmic pleasure. And this pleasure of the Dharma has a lot to do with again the relationship to time. So in that discourse on an auspicious night, the night is auspicious precisely because of the giving up of past and future. When we live in the present, there is a pleasure in that. So when I'm present...

This ordinary everyday experience can give us tremendous pleasure—the pleasure of the weather, the environment, the simple joy of walking along a veranda when we're truly present to the experience. So he does not give up the pleasure of the Dharma and is not infatuated with that pleasure. It's always a balance. Again, don't grasp onto it and try to make it into something more.

He understands: "When I make determined effort, this particular source of dukkha fades away in me because of that determined effort." And: "When I intimately witness, this particular source of dukkha fades away in me as I cultivate equanimity."

So he gets to what we actually do, and you notice how adaptable the model he's presenting is. First of all, the kind of practice varies depending on one's understanding of dependent arising. Throughout this retreat we've returned again and again to this basic principle of dependent arising. Whatever happens in experience happens because of something else. This arises because something else arose, and this ceases when that ceases.

In the Four Noble Truths, the basic model he presents examines the relationship between craving and dukkha. When craving arises, dukkha arises. When craving ceases, dukkha ceases. So the idea is looking beyond not just the meditation object itself, but beyond it to the network of relationships within which it's embedded.

The experience of practicing is changing. Why is it changing? Something is happening that feeds this. So this particular bit of dukkha, this particular unpleasant or painful situation, has a source, a cause, a condition. The word the Buddha uses here is nidana,

which we've referred to before when discussing the sweet essence. It's part of the basic language of dependent arising. As soon as someone hears this word, they know he's talking about dependent arising—the whole web of interrelationships.

Notice he's saying "this particular source of dukkha." He assumes we're paying close attention to experience, that we can distinguish this particular source of dukkha from that one. So there's a sensitivity, a refinement assumed in the practice. It's assumed that we're studying the flow of experience, interested in how one thing leads to another. Different situations require different responses.

This is the key point: it's not one-size-fits-all. It's not just "make more effort," nor is it just "make less effort." Sometimes you find fashions in meditation practice. The Burmese emphasize the "make more effort" model. When teachers came out of Burma and started teaching in the West, they tended toward making more effort. Then, when they noticed students tying themselves in knots, they said, "Well, maybe not." Then other forms of meditation practice emerged, very consciously saying, "Don't make more effort. Don't make too much effort at all. In fact, don't make any effort. Just sit there. Whatever happens is meditation, so don't worry about it. Just let the mind cruise along. You just be there for it. Don't make effort."

So you get shifts from one fashion to another. But what we see in the early teachings is that it's never one-size-fits-all. Sometimes, yes, more effort. Sometimes, definitely less effort. It's a question of being able to discern which is appropriate. This requires skill from the meditator.

The two forms of practice the Buddha describes are: first, determined effort. This is very familiar—this is the Burmese way. This involves directed attention, deliberately directing attention to something, possibly aimed at directly challenging a problem.

A problem has arisen, bang—just go for it. So for example, the mind is dull. I practice in such a way as to stimulate energy. The mind is dull, so I put more effort into directly confronting that dull state of mind. How do I know the mind is dull? What are the symptoms? Oh, well, there's heaviness. Is the heaviness in the mind, or is it in the body, or is it both? Pay attention. Really look at it. Go straight into the center of it. This is applying determined effort aimed directly at the problem.

Or the mind is restless. So I practice in such a way as to deliberately calm the flow of energy. Deliberately bring it down. I'm doing something to address this. In either case, I directly confront the situation and I do something about it, but it's something aimed at this particular situation. It's precisely aimed. And to accomplish this, I need what we talked about early in the retreat: sati sampajañña, mindfulness and clear understand-

ing. We talked about it as mindfulness being essentially presence, and clear understanding being the intelligence associated with that presence. So intelligent presence. We're bringing our intelligence to the project.

So sometimes determined effort. And sometimes intimate witnessing. When I make a determined effort, this particular source of dukkha fades away in me because of that determined effort. And when I intimately witness, this particular source of dukkha fades away in me as I cultivate equanimity.

Now this intimate witnessing is a compound verb based on the verb upekkhati, which is a verb we do not have in English, as far as I'm aware. It's "to equanimize." You know the noun equanimity. This is the verb "to equanimity." I don't think we have a verb for equanimity, do we? "Equanimize" is pretty good, though that's my invention. It's like two words, like "with equanimity"—doing something with equanimity added on, but "to equanimize" itself. It's a verb in Pali and Sanskrit. And again, it's an activity.

It's interesting that when you look at the basic terms that the Buddha uses, their nouns, they're all based on verbs. They're activities. This is typical of the Buddha's dynamic approach. A thing is its activity. Its identity is what it does.

Anyway, this verb, which we've already mentioned actually, comes from the root īkṣ, "to see." So this is seeing, and you get the prefix upa, which denotes nearness or close touch. So seeing. Now seeing implies a direct, present engagement, but it also implies distance. If I'm seeing something, I'm separate from it. And then you add upa, which denotes nearness or close touch, so I'm seeing it, but from very, very close by.

So this intimate witnessing—very, very close, but there's a detachment, so I'm not getting caught up in it. I'm separated out from it, but I'm very, very close to it. Have you ever had that kind of experience when you meditate? It's like really, really, really close, but it's not like boom, you're in it. You haven't fallen, haven't entangled yourself in it.

There's that sense of separation, but very close by. And this is equanimising. This is *upekkhatī*. So intimate witnessing. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as "looks on with equanimity."

In this state, there's no attempt to influence anything. They're not doing anything with the experience, just staying really, really close to it. Mindfulness becomes strong, it becomes continuous. Remember when we talked about the chorus in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—the Buddha was talking about *sati*, mindfulness, and then he talks about *paṭisati*. The *paṭi* denotes continuity and depth. So when the mindfulness becomes strong, clear, continuous, equanimity develops. And the mind comes into its own natural balance. The *citta* comes into harmony.

When the mind changes and it comes into harmony, then the object known by the mind changes. And again this is dependent arising. Change the mind which is experiencing something and the something changes. Change the something and the mind that knows it changes.

So this is a more hands-off approach than determined effort. This is not trying to do anything with it at all. It's just staying intimately present to it. And the Buddha says, "When I intimately witness this particular source of *dukkha*"—and again it's particular, it works with this source of pain, not with that one, but this one—"this particular source of *dukkha* fades away in me as I cultivate equanimity, as I develop equanimity."

The suttas are very compact, so you don't usually get much in the way of examples. When it comes down to it, for me, right effort is essentially a matter of choice. You could say that presence is a chosen intimacy with whatever is happening now. It's just what's happening now. It's got nothing to do with past or future. It's just now. And staying present to it, but that presence requires a choice.

This choice is unusual because, as we started off by saying, our obsessions are habitual. So we keep making the choice to pursue our obsessions, and we do it out of sheer habit, apart from anything else. Because we've been doing this for decades. So it seems hard to make the choice to be present to this now. Essentially it's just a choice.

One sign of wrong effort is when any hint of tension develops in the body, because it's not physical. It's a choice. And if there's any kind of striving towards past or future, then there's too much. There's something extra added to it. It's a choice now.

But the thing about this choice is that it has to be made now. This is something I realized in Burma many years ago. I discovered when I started practicing there—I discovered with some horror that the project was to stay continuously mindful all day. And when I thought about the enormity of this task, I realized I can't. It is absolutely impossible. I could never do this. But then it occurred to me that what I could do was be mindful now. And so it's this relationship to the present which is central to effort. It's not about doing it all day.

It's about doing it now. And this "it" is a choice—the choice now to be present to this which is already happening. It's the relationship between this not-past-and-not-future now, while still tracking the cause and effect of dependent origination. Because it's observable now.

This brings us back to something we touched upon at the very beginning when we talked about mindfulness as remembering the present. In modern dharma discourse, usually when people say "the present," they will add the word "moment"—the present moment. You'll notice I've been careful to avoid this language. The Buddha does not use the word "moment" when he talks about the present.

If you think about it, what is a moment? A moment is a very brief period of time which, if you blink, you'll miss it. It's merely the preliminary to what's going to happen next. We can think about the present as a moment partly because of our rushed relationship to time normally. For us, the present is rather like a transit lounge in a major airport—we land, restlessly hang out, and then dash off somewhere else. We're always going somewhere.

But this understanding has a lot to do with our technology. We can measure time in ways that in the time of the Buddha they couldn't even conceive of. They had a very different relationship to time. For them, I think, the present was not a moment—it was a space.

Remember at the very beginning of the retreat I suggested the meditation experiment: see if you can find the border between this present moment and the future. See if you can find the point where the present becomes the future. Because if it's a moment, a moment is very small and has very clear boundaries. So can you find the border where the present becomes the future? Can you find the border where the past becomes the present?

No. All we've got is the present. That's all we have.

So even when I'm tracking cause and effect relationships which are linear over time, when I'm tracking them they're all in the present. It's a big present. But it's present because it's what is being seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched, or minded now. It's the nowness which is crucial. And the nowness is not some tiny little moment.

What gets in the way of this practice is not distraction. Distraction is not the enemy of this practice—it's the content of the practice. What gets in the way is habit. Because when we get lost in habit, we go unconscious, we sleepwalk. And that is the opposite of mindfulness.

If you look at habit—the habit that gets in the way of our practice—how does it present itself to us? It presents as a choice made now, but unknowingly. I make the choice to drop into this thought stream, but I don't know that I've made the choice. I wake up to it later.

The practice presents as a choice made now, but knowingly. That's the difference. It's knowing that choice. But the effort, the work, is always to remain present to this now—not to get caught up in past and future.

Any questions or comments?

"You mentioned you know right effort when you do wrong effort. Do you think that's true of a lot of the right view, right intention, right speech, etc.?"

I think that's the way we learn things. It's like we learn by doing and we make lots of mistakes. So making mistakes is very important, if not essential. But of course, we get a feel for it at some point.

So we develop a feel for right effort, and again it has much to do with our relationship to time—when past and future are either not there at all or simply not pulling at us. They might remain in the background, but they're not exerting their usual gravitational force. There's a sense of flow and ease, an absence of strain, yet with clarity intact.

You can cultivate a taste for this quality. You can learn to recognize it. And in that recognition, there's pleasure—the pleasure associated with Dharma practice. Once you develop a sense of this pleasure, the mind will naturally incline toward returning there. It's like discovering a beautiful garden; you want to visit again and again.

Whereas when practice is strained and forced, the mind naturally resists returning. It has to be flogged back into that state, which creates aversion rather than attraction. The wise path cultivates the conditions that make the mind want to return to wholesome states, not because it's forced to, but because it recognizes the genuine satisfaction found there.

Thank you very much for listening.

CHAPTER 31

The Awareness Game (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · 1h03

> *In this opening workshop from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney presents a fresh approach to understanding awareness (viññāṇa) as the foundation of all meditation practice. Rather than using the philosophically loaded term 'consciousness,' he defines awareness simply as 'the presence of whatever is present' — comparing it to light that reveals objects without itself being seen.*
>
> *Kearney challenges the assumption that meditation requires heroic effort, contrasting the intensive approach of Sayadaw U Paṇḍita with the lighter touch of Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He emphasizes that awareness is already happening naturally — it is an elemental quality of nature that the Buddha classifies as a dhātu (element). The key insight is that we don't need to create awareness through effort; we simply need to remember it through choice. He introduces the verb 'to aware' (from the Pāli vijānāti), noting that Mahasi Sayadaw's instruction 'to note' was originally this same verb in Burmese.*
>
> *Through two practical exercises — the 'awareness game' — participants explore dropping in the mental reminder 'aware' and then naming what sense door is active (seeing, hearing, touching, minding). The discussion reveals how awareness presents as a dyad of subject and object, how different personality types (including those with ADHD) experience awareness differently, and why the Buddha placed mindfulness of body (kāyānupassanā) at the center of the Satipaṭṭhāna practice. This playful, curious approach sets the foundation for the intensive retreat ahead.*

This morning we're going to start the retreat by talking about awareness, because if we're doing a meditation practice, everything that we do revolves around awareness itself and our relationship with awareness. Getting this right is absolutely central. So we're going to begin with talking about what we mean by awareness.

The term the Buddha uses is *viññāṇa*. Classically you see it translated as consciousness. I prefer to avoid that translation because the English word "consciousness" has been used extensively in Western philosophy and it's acquired all sorts of technical connotations that don't really apply. So I prefer to use the word "awareness." It's more basic.

If we ask, "What is awareness?" we could say that awareness is the presence of whatever is present.

What does that mean? We could start with something quite basic, like seeing. For example, right now, are you seeing? Is that happening? If your eyes are open, then the answer is probably yes. And what does it mean to see? Doesn't that mean that there's a visual field in front of you? This room and the people in the room are present to you. Since they are present to you visually, you see. There is visual awareness. Awareness is the presence, the fact that something is present.

In the case of seeing, awareness is not the room. It's not the people in the room. It's the fact that the room and the people in the room are present.

Now, as a result of decades of intensive meditation practice, I've developed a supernormal power which enables me to make you completely disappear. I'll show you. You're gone. You are no longer present. Oh, you've come back. You are present. Absent, present. Awareness, visual awareness, no visual awareness.

You can see on the one hand how simple it is. But on the other hand, do you remember the discovery that you could make the world go away by shutting your eyes when you were little? Did you ever make that discovery? Was it an amazing discovery? It was quite mind-blowing. But now, of course, we just take it completely for granted because we take awareness for granted. We're never actually aware of it.

This is awareness, and as you can see, it's the most obvious thing in experience, because you cannot have an experience without awareness. If there's an experience, there's awareness. But it's also the most mysterious thing because we never pay any attention to it. In the case of seeing, we pay attention to what we are seeing. We assume that what we are seeing is what's important—that's what it's about. We never pay any attention to the fact of seeing, to the awareness itself.

So it's obvious, but it's mysterious, because awareness isn't a something. It's the presence of something. We tend to overlook it because it is so obvious that we just don't notice it anymore.

But when we take up a meditation practice, we become interested in awareness. This is the central fact that we begin to get interested in.

Awareness has been compared to light, and it's quite a good simile. We have the expression, "he saw the light." But do we actually see light? We can argue that no, we don't see light—we know there is light because we see things.

So is there light in this room? Yes. How do I know there's light? Because the room is present to me. But I don't actually see the light. I see you. Therefore, I know there's light.

Awareness is like light. We know that there is light because the world is present to us. We know there is awareness because the world is present to us.

Imagine stepping into a dark room at night, a room which is completely dark. We step into it. What is present to us? Only darkness. We switch on the light and suddenly the room and everything in it is present. The quality of presence is awareness. The room and everything in it is the object of awareness—it's what we are aware of.

This brings us to the object of awareness. If there is awareness, there is an object of awareness. In other words, there is something we are aware of. If I'm aware, I am aware of something. If I'm seeing, I'm seeing something. If I'm thinking, I'm thinking something. This something is the object of awareness.

Usually when we talk about meditation practice, we often discuss it in terms of the meditation object. The most popular meditation object is probably the breath. "I want you to sit there and for the next hour be aware of your breathing." In other words, the object of awareness is the breathing. But notice—that's not the awareness itself. The awareness is there as well.

So when we're working with awareness, we have the object of awareness—what we are aware of—and we have the awareness itself. They always go together.

Awareness is something which is already happening. It's part of nature. The Buddha classifies it as an element, an elemental quality of nature. It's already happening. We are already aware. We don't have to do anything to be aware.

In the Buddhist tradition they say it is the mind's nature to be aware of an object. That is what it does, and it does so regardless of whether or not we want it to. It just does it.

So for example, if I ask myself the question, "Am I aware now?" the answer is always yes. Always. One hundred percent. And if I ask myself the question, "Am I making any particular effort to be aware now?" the answer is no. It's just happening.

So awareness has this quality of being already here. There's nothing we have to do in order to be aware. And this can be interesting from a meditation perspective.

Years ago, when Sayadaw U Tejaniya first came to Australia, he opened up his retreat by asking the punters, "Are you aware now?" To which the answer, again, is obviously yes. Then he asked the question, "Are you making any particular effort to be aware

now?" And the answer to that question is again, obviously, no. But then he added, "That's all the effort you ever have to make in meditation practice. You never have to make any more effort than that."

I have to say that came as a bit of a shock, because I was trained in the U Pandita school of Mahasi meditation, which is all about more effort. So there was a bit of discombobulation there. And we are going to explore this whole issue of effort in the meditation practice. Of course it's particularly important if we're about to embark on meditation for a month.

Let me channel U Pandita: "Can you make heroic, unceasing, relentless, remorseless and heroic effort for a month without a break?" Nope. Maybe not. Or you could try the Tejaniya approach: "Can you manage to notice that you're already awake?" It's quite a different approach. So this is the sort of thing that we want to explore.

Let's look at it in this way. Let's try another question. Right now, are you sitting? Is there anyone in this room who's sitting? Yes? Very good. How do you know? How do you know you are sitting? Well, don't you just know? In other words, we are already aware of our posture. We already know we are sitting. It's already available. There is this basic awareness of, essentially, how the body occupies space, and it's already available.

But did you notice any difference between your awareness of the fact that you were sitting before I asked, and your awareness once I asked? Was there any change?

Now, the English word "awareness" is pretty much always presented as a noun. But awareness also indicates an action. Notice the difference between these two questions: "Are you aware you are sitting?" versus "Can you aware your sitting posture?"

The first question is asking you about your state of being. Are you aware or not? How are you now? The second question, "Can you aware your sitting posture," is asking you to do something. In English, we don't use awareness as a verb. But in fact, it does work as a verb—the verb "to aware." In Pali, there is such a verb, *vijānāti*, from which we get *viññāṇa*. In Burmese, there is also such a verb.

Those of you familiar with Mahasi's approach to meditation, have you heard the expression "to note"? You must note this, that, or the other. Now, the use of this verb is somewhat confusing. When Mahasi was teaching in Burmese, he used a standard Burmese verb which essentially would be translated as "to aware." But when his English-speaking Burmese students were translating him into English, they scratched their heads and said, "But English-speaking people don't say 'to aware.' So we have to use another verb."

So they came up with the verb "to note." But of course that creates all sorts of confusions, because for us "to note" means to make a note—so it's conceptual. But when Mahasi talks about his approach to meditation, he talks about noting, and what he means is to aware. This awaring is absolutely central to everything that he's talking about.

And if we ask, what is the source of awaring? Of awaring as an action? Where does it come from? What's its origin? What is its source? Is it effort? I would suggest no. Effort has got nothing to do with it. Effort comes later. Effort comes in the commitment to renew awaring. But what is the source of awaring? Where does it come from? Essentially it comes from choice—the choice made now to aware.

So this morning, as we play around with awareness, forget about effort and just choose. And you notice that with choice, we do not try to choose. That is complete nonsense. We just choose. Even if we refuse to choose, that's a choice. We don't try to choose. Trying, effort—these have got nothing to do with choice. We simply choose. And we do it now. It's really that simple.

So what we're going to do is play around with the choice to aware, just to get a sense of it. We want to develop the habit of choosing to aware. And to get a sense of it, we're going to play a game—the awareness game. It's important to emphasize that this is a game. In other words, do not try to play this game. If we try, if we're making effort, we're making something that is not heavy seem heavy. So don't make it heavy. Just play. Don't try. Do not make effort.

The game is this: we'll play it for about five minutes. Now, this is not meditation practice, so there's absolutely no need whatsoever to maintain any sort of meditation posture. There's absolutely no need whatsoever to stay in the hall. At the end of five minutes, I'm going to go outside and ring this bell, so if you're wandering about, just come back in after about five minutes. You can stay here if you want to. You can sit if you want to. You can wander around if you want to. You can lie down if you want to. You can go outside if you want to. Just do whatever you like—it doesn't matter.

But remember to mentally name "aware." In other words, every now and again, just drop in the word mentally: aware. Just doing whatever you're doing—aware.

Now, the idea is that when we drop in this word "aware," we are reminding ourselves that we are aware. We're not doing anything to be aware. We're just reminding ourselves: oh, that's right, I'm aware. And no effort is involved because mind is already aware. It's just a question of remembering—remembering to drop in the word "aware."

So do that, and just check to see what you are aware-ing. It can be anything. It doesn't matter what it is. Just notice the fact that you are aware-ing. And don't be concerned with how long this awareness lasts. It may not last very long at all. You may realize within seconds, whoops, I've completely forgotten. How long the awareness lasts is not the issue. The issue is to remember to drop in that word, "aware." And when you do it, see what happens.

Again, we're not concerned with what we are aware-ing. It can be anything. Just aware. That's all.

A student asked, "By dropping that word 'aware,' isn't it encouraging an effort?"

Find out. See if you're making effort when you do that. And if so, where is the effort? This is a game, an experiment. Let's see what happens. What we're trying to do is just become familiar with the territory. Now it's weird because we're already familiar with it, but we're so familiar with it we don't notice it anymore. So you just want to notice it. What does happen?

Beginner's mind. Don't take anything for granted. Just play with it and see what happens.

Another student raised the awkwardness of the expression: "Is there any reason it couldn't be 'to be aware,' which is more familiar?"

It's much more familiar because "to be aware" is the way we normally use it. And it turns awareness into a noun and describes our state: I am aware, I am not aware. But we are trying to get a sense of aware-ing as an action, as an activity. And it is unfamiliar. Even with consciousness—there is the verb "to cognize," but you don't see it used very much at all. In our culture, we simply do not treat awareness as an activity. It's alien to the way we use language.

But in the Buddha's language it isn't. He has a clear sense of the activity of minding, aware-ing, perceiving, and so on. So this is unfamiliar, but that very unfamiliarity may be advantageous. It may get you to notice something that otherwise you wouldn't notice. But again, it's just a game. Play with it, see what happens. If you don't like the game, you never have to play it again.

Remember, you're not meditating and you're not making any effort. Just play.

Okay, how did it go? What happened? And in particular, was there any effort involved? That would be a good place to start.

One participant shared: "To bring myself back when I got off..." So there was something, there was an activity. You had to do something. "I had to choose to."

Thank you. So there was a state of drift and then you made a choice? "Yes, and I guess because I'd gone out with the decision to do that, the choice, the kind of activity wasn't such a heavy thing, like 'okay, I'm going to choose.' It was more like 'oh.'"

So that was almost like when you're driving and you just go, "oh, I have to change gears." It wasn't really heavy or difficult, but it was something that had to be done. You just kind of do it—well, not quite automatically. You just do it.

Anyone else? How was it?

"I find as soon as that word 'aware' comes in, it's automatically in the body. It seems to have been patented, or maybe that's just the way it is. That 'aware' means, oh, what's happening in the body? And it will go to a specific place where there's stress or tension, if there is, or contact with something. So the mind seems pretty much conditioned that the first thing to be aware of is body."

I have the same sort of experience when I play this game. It's very physical. And it is interesting that the first satipaṭṭhāna is mindfulness of body—that the Buddha puts that at the center of the whole enterprise. To the point where... well, I like to say that meditation is not a spiritual activity. It's a physical activity. Because we do it with the body. And we do it not just with the body, but we do it *as* body.

"The other thing I noticed in retreat conditions is that it happens so frequently that I can't take it for granted."

So the difference in a retreat is that you're undertaking the project of noticing it. In my ordinary life, I'm busy doing something, so all my interest and concern is thrown into the something, and I tend to neglect the awaring of it. But in the retreat, we're interested in the awaring. What exactly happens isn't so important. We're creating a very boring environment, so it's the awaring itself which becomes interesting.

"For people that have ADHD, awareness is a very active thing. It's been called one of the advantages of having ADHD. I think that a lot of it depends on the kind of personality you have and how you experience it."

Yes, that's true. We each bring our own particular personality to the meditation practice, and that personality shapes the whole enterprise. And it's one of the dangers of a meditation technique which purports to be universal—"you must follow these instruc-

tions." But often that doesn't work because of the individual nature of the personality. The effect of those instructions can be radically different for two different people. So you really pay attention to, in this case, your particular relationship to awareness.

And that relationship sounds like it's quite active. So presumably you would be very careful about not adding too much activity.

Whereas somebody else might be really working on actively aware-ing. But it may be that for you, that's the last thing you want to do. You just want to step back and notice that activity is already going on and not add anything extra to it.

"I think I'm along the same lines. Every time I said the word 'aware,' I saw everything—things that I hadn't noticed at the beginning. So of course, you can't be aware all the time. Too much energy. Also, ADHD. And then I started getting anxious. I noticed my foot moving, and as I recognized that as anxiety, it moved faster. A very confusing, weird moment."

So it's like you're riding a high-energy horse, and the last thing you want to do is say, "Giddy up." But again, you're getting a sense of your relationship with awareness—how that relationship can work for you, how it can be effective for you. And how, if the meditation teacher emphasizes making more effort, you simply don't.

"Does that change when you're doing a meditation practice?"

No.

"But do the places where you stop change? Or is there a continuity between everyday awareness and meditation awareness?"

"Yeah, there is. It's recognizing that I'm no longer focusing on my breath, and then going back to it."

We shall explore that whole issue as we go through the retreat. It's a very interesting one.

"I thought it was a really pleasant exercise. It was nice not to use choice in the awareness. I just noticed where the awareness was. I didn't notice when I'd lost awareness, but I noticed the discontinuity of awareness and just enjoyed not forcing awareness on a particular object."

So it sounds like you enjoyed in particular not getting caught up in effort, not getting caught up in trying to do something.

"But it did involve remembering the awareness."

And did remembering the awareness feel active?

"It didn't. It just happens. But it was accompanied by a thought of, 'Where did that drop off? I didn't notice.'"

So the forgetting of awareness happened naturally, and the remembering of it happened naturally. And of course, the remembering of awareness is mindfulness, which we'll talk more about as we go through.

Let's play the game one more time, but we're going to change it slightly to get a different flavor—which I think you've already dabbled with, unless I misunderstood. Instead of saying "aware," we're going to name what we're aware of. As we've talked about, if I'm aware, I'm aware of something. One way of saying this is that awareness presents in the structure of a dyad: awareness and its object.

Awareness of X. And that's built in. If there's awareness, there's an object of awareness. If there's an object of awareness, there's awareness. It's always locked in.

Usually in our everyday life, what we're concerned with, what we're interested in, is the object. And we don't pay attention to the awareness itself. Whereas in this first game, we were persuading ourselves to get interested in the awareness itself. Now we're going to shift the focus to the other end of the dyad, to see the kind of awareness that we're doing.

For example, let's work with which of the six senses we're aware of: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. Minding includes thinking—most obviously it's thinking, but basically anything that's happening in the mind.

"In that exercise we just did, I found myself moving from noticing the sensations in my body, to seeing all the greenery, to hearing the rain. It bounced between all of those things. And then there was a thought, and I was lost in the thought for a minute, then I chose to come back. It just kept bouncing. But it was really nice, relatively relaxing."

"Yeah, it was lovely."

So this time, all that's different is instead of saying "aware," you just notice what it is. Seeing. Hearing. Touch. You just drop in what general kind of object is presenting itself to you at the moment. Does that make sense?

One would expect to be bouncing around. That would be perfectly normal. But every now and again, you just check: where is it now? Oh, that's where it is. Where's the awareness now? Oh, that's where it is. And again, you're not trying to make it go anywhere. You're not expecting it to behave in a certain way. You're just checking in. Oh, there you are. Oh, you're over here now. Oh, there you are. That's it.

"One of the reasons I like walking meditation is that if you lose your focus, you're very likely to stumble. And if you escalate from that to running a power tool, losing a finger—that's not paying attention."

Yeah, absolutely. You could say it's a basic human safety mechanism. We monitor what we're doing.

One thing I find interesting when I'm doing intensive meditation practice—well, one of the instructions I give at the beginning of a retreat, probably this afternoon, is: be graceful. As a meditation instruction, what this means in practice is be committed to noticing when you're clumsy. So if I stumble into something, trip over something, make a loud noise doing something—just pause. Oh, that's interesting. And check: what happened just then?

For me, usually it's because the awareness slipped away from the body into the mind, and I didn't notice it do so. That's when I stumbled.

Anyway, at this point we played another game. We actually did longer than five minutes, but the same principle: play, no effort.

Don't make effort. Don't meditate. Just drop it. Remember to simply drop in the word —seeing or hearing or smelling or tasting or touching or minding. And if minding is too abstract, thinking.

So how did it go? Is there a difference between dropping in the word "aware" versus dropping in where the awareness is going?

"Yes, definitely. I think we're more conditioned to focus on an object."

So it's easier?

"Yes, a lot easier because you're aware of an object, aware of a sensation, aware of a thought. It's just more what we're accustomed to doing. So that was almost natural."

Much more habitual, therefore easier.

"Still very fleeting. Because if you're aware, the next moment you have no idea what's happening."

One teacher uses the expression "to switch the awareness light on." It's like this image of stepping into a dark room and switching the light on. The problem is, the light then goes off by itself. So you switch it on again, but then it goes off. So you switch it on again. And what he points out is that it's not the meditator's business how long the light stays on. That's irrelevant. Just remember to switch it on. And that builds the habit. Don't be preoccupied by thinking, "Oh my God, it doesn't last very long."

"Well, that's the hard bit, because the controlling part wants to say, 'I need to be aware of that.'"

Yes.

"It's just not happening."

Yes. And that's where we get tangled up in too much effort and too much conceptualizing.

Anyone else? How did you find this second one?

"I agree it was easier to note the sensations and the different doors. I was aware that it was a multiple factor. There would be a strong physical sensation, and being with it, and then a bird would call. And the sensation in the body was still strong enough that I could feel it, be with it. And then going off to the bird, it was almost like they were intermingling a little bit, layering on top of each other. It happened also with any sounds that were happening, bodily sensations, and then visually, I would open my eyes and then the bird would call. So it was all coming together."

Yes. And was it coming together as the body or in the body?

"It was hard to stay with just noting 'sensation' because it would come up either as hardness or tingling or pressure or pain, rather than just a more neutral sensation. So it would move from one aspect to another, to another, to another."

Very quickly?

"Well, with regard to the sensation, it would stay. But to just say 'sensation,' it couldn't land there. It was more identifying what the sensation was."

Yes. And of course in this exercise, you don't have to.

You're just aware of it. We're keeping it very, quite deliberately, very simple.

"I was wondering if I was getting too involved," you might say. But actually, it sounds like the mind wanted to get involved, and you were being dragged along for the ride. In which case, you could have named it "involved" or "tangled." What's important is that you're opening up to seeing what the mind is doing. It can do whatever it likes, but awareness asks: well, what is it doing?

To sum up what we've been doing this morning: first of all, we've been emphasizing that awareness is part of nature. It's already here. It is already happening. It's just a matter of remembering it. And the remembering—that's the central bit the Buddha emphasizes. This is what in English is called mindfulness: remembering the awareness.

So the whole issue of effort becomes very interesting. How much effort do I have to make? What role does effort actually play? Do I have to make an effort to be aware? If so, what kind? What is it exactly?

When you take up the meditation practice, don't take up a heavy burden, something you've got to do. Rather, take it up lightly and play with it as a game. See what happens. How does it work? What does the mind do? Where does it go? There's more interest, more curiosity than effort.

Notice that awareness presents in the structure of a dyad: awareness and its object. If we name "aware," we're pointing towards awareness itself. If we name seeing, touching, and so forth, we're pointing towards the object. Either one includes the other. If there's one, the other has turned up for the dance. But our habit tends to be preoccupation with the object—that's usually the most obvious aspect for us.

So play around with awareness. Your mission, should you choose to accept, is to remember awareness. And do not take it seriously. Don't make an effort to be aware. Don't try to be aware. Just remember to play the game and be interested in the result.

That's enough for this morning. This afternoon we'll have a look at mindfulness itself, and then in the evening we'll talk more about the actual meditation method that Mahasi presents. We're taking it step by step.

If you feel the need, go and rest. If you've got the energy, go for it. Do whatever practice you find appropriate. But just be interested in awareness itself. Perhaps remember to drop in those little reminders: aware, seeing, thinking—whatever.

This is part of the process of settling in, settling down, and becoming familiar with awareness. We've entered a realm in which what we are doing is not all that important. What's central is the awaring.

So start to get interested in the awaring itself.

Any final questions or comments?

Good luck.

CHAPTER 32

On Mindfulness (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · 42 min

> *In this foundational workshop from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney offers a precise exploration of what the Buddha actually meant by mindfulness (sati). Drawing on the etymology of sati from the Pāli verb sarati (to remember), Patrick distinguishes between awareness—which is natural and always present—and mindfulness, which is the remembering of that awareness. Through simple experiential exercises like feeling the touch of one's hands, he demonstrates how awareness is inherently discontinuous, constantly being forgotten as we fall into habitual patterns and autopilot.*
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> *Patrick references Susan Blackmore's consciousness research and her two key questions: 'Am I aware now?' (always yes) and 'Was I aware before?' (often no)—illustrating how we can be aware moment to moment yet forget that awareness instantly. He explains that Satipaṭṭhāna practice is not about restricting awareness to one object, but about tracking where awareness moves and remembering it continuously. The four Satipaṭṭhānas—body, feeling, mind, and dhamma—represent the entirety of human experience as potential meditation objects.*
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> *The talk addresses the crucial question of effort (sammā vāyāma), drawing on Sayadaw U Tejaniya's teaching: 'Don't try to do anything. Don't try to prevent anything. But don't forget what is happening.' Patrick emphasizes that striving creates tension that obscures the fundamental fact that we are already aware. He recommends grounding practice in bodily awareness, particularly touch sensations, because physical experience is always present-moment and unmistakably clear—like 'an iron hammer hitting an anvil' compared to the subtler sense doors.*

This morning we were talking about awareness and getting a sense of what we mean by that. We spoke about it as the presence of whatever is present. Something is happening, and awareness is found in the fact that something is happening. Awareness is always linked to its object. If there's awareness, there's an object of awareness. If I'm thinking, I'm thinking something. If I'm seeing, I'm seeing something, and so on. Awareness comes to us through the six senses, which are six sensitivities: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. Awareness is the sense of presence, of something being present. If there is an experience, there is awareness. It's built in.

We talked about how awareness is just part of nature. We don't have to do anything to be aware. We are already aware. Which means we don't have to try to be aware. We are already aware.

So we played with the awareness game. There are different exercises that we can do to get a sense of awareness. The one that I've been doing for some time is this: Hold your hands together. Question: Can you feel your hands? Answer: Yes. Awareness. Question: Are you making any particular effort to feel your hands? Answer: No. Because it's just feeling the hands. That's it.

This brings in the whole question of effort that we talked about. U Tejaniya said that effort involved, for example, knowing that I'm touching my hands or knowing that I'm sitting is all the effort that I ever have to make in meditation practice, which is quite a radical thing to say. That's what he said.

So, we are already aware, but the question is, are we mindful? This brings us to this whole issue of mindfulness. The practice that we're doing, the Buddha calls satipaṭṭhāna, which can be translated as the establishing of mindfulness or the domains of mindfulness. You get different translations. It's the style of meditation practice that puts mindfulness right at the center. That's the key quality that we cultivate in this practice. So the question is, what does the Buddha mean by mindfulness?

Now mindfulness has become very fashionable, very popular, commercialized, corporatized, very much part of contemporary culture. But the way in which contemporary mindfulness is spoken of is not necessarily the same way that the Buddha himself speaks about mindfulness. What we're interested in doing this month is exploring the Buddha's understanding of mindfulness.

To get a sense of that we're going to do another meditation experiment, although this one is actually a genuine dead-set meditation experiment. We're not just going to wander about and be vaguely aware. We've got to start meditating now. What we're going to do is that exercise we were just speaking about. The meditation object is the touch of your hands. You sit and hold your hands, and that touch is your meditation object.

If you can settle into your meditation posture, sit comfortably, close your eyes, and ask yourself, holding your hands together: Can I feel my hands?

This is not a difficult esoteric meditation exercise that I might fail if I don't work hard enough. I'm just feeling my hands. And this experience of feeling my hands is awareness—the awareness of feeling my hands.

So keep feeling your hands. Is your awareness of your hands continuous? Or do you notice any breaks in your awareness of your hands? Is your awareness of your hands discontinuous? For example, you may notice thinking in the background of your mind and then suddenly realize thinking has taken over.

Did you lose the touch of your hand? Just feel your hands. Check to see if there are any gaps in your awareness of your hands. Are there any gaps? Or is your awareness of the touch of your hands continuous, with no break?

So was the awareness continuous or discontinuous? Discontinuous. That's a bit disappointing. Though I noticed during this exercise it's probably more continuous than it's been before.

This exercise actually originally came out of a book I read a few years ago called *Ten Zen Questions* by Susan Blackmore. She's an English researcher in consciousness and a Zen practitioner. The book has since come out with a second edition with a different title. She experimented with her Zen practice because in Zen sometimes you might use a question as your meditation object. So she invented ten koans, ten questions that she investigated sequentially.

I found the first two particularly interesting. The first question she investigated—and she would spend weeks meditating, trying to penetrate this—was: Am I aware now? After extensive practice, she came to the conclusion that the answer to that question in every single instance is yes. One hundred percent. The second question she worked with was: Was I aware before? And she said the weird thing was that the answer to that question was often no.

So how could the answer to the question "Am I aware now?" always be yes, but the answer to the question "Was I aware just then?" sometimes no? I forget exactly what she said about it, but what struck me was that she was pointing out the difference between awareness and mindfulness.

Awareness is natural; it's part of nature. It's already happening. But we easily forget it. We forget our awareness. The English word "mindfulness" is the translation of the Pali word *sati*, which comes from the verb *sarati*, to remember. So *sati* is actually memory. We won't be talking about mindfulness as far as the Buddha is concerned. What we're talking about is memory—but memory of the present, not of the past. This is what makes it different.

And of course, in railway stations you can see signs that urge the practice of mindfulness. You see those signs that say "Mind the gap." That's using mindfulness in exactly the way that the Buddha uses it. There's a gap between the train and the platform. Mind

the gap. Remember that there's a gap between the train and the platform. But it's not something that one remembers hours after the journey is over. The sign is asking us to remember it in the very act of stepping into or out of the train. In other words, it's asking us to remember the present. And the fact is, we often forget it.

The classic example I like to give is this: if you've ever been in a situation where you're driving down familiar streets and you realize you have no memory of the previous three blocks, you kind of wake up with "Oh my god, what's going on?" and start looking around. Now, if you think about that experience, if you ask yourself the question "During those three blocks, was I aware?"—my opinion is the answer would have to be yes. Because if it was no, I'd be dead. But if I ask the question "Was I mindful?" the answer is no, I was not. Because I forgot my awareness. And this, of course, is the experience of distraction.

So doing something like feeling your hands is easy. It doesn't require any particular effort. But doing something like feeling your hands for three minutes or five minutes—that turns into a job.

Awareness tends to be discontinuous. It moves. It seems to be broken up into fragments rather than being a single whole. And if we ask ourselves, when awareness moves, where does it move to? The answer in most cases is wherever habit takes it. Each of us has built up certain habits, certain long-term patterns of mind that simply take over if we're not doing something particular that we need to pay attention to. You could say that we fall into autopilot. And when this happens, we forget our awareness and we are prisoners of our past conditioning, because these habits are all expressions of past conditioning. This is the normal everyday experience of distraction when we meditate.

Mindfulness is characterized by a felt continuity of awareness. How do I know I'm being mindful? I know I'm being mindful if the awareness is continuous. And I put in that word "felt" because it's a discrete experience, a definite experience. Those of you who are experienced meditators, you know it. You know what it feels like. After some days of a retreat, you start to get into a groove and the awareness becomes continuous. It has a distinct flavor to it. This is the flavor of mindfulness.

So if we're developing a practice which centers on mindfulness, what we're interested in is remembering awareness. And this remembering actually has two flavors. Remember, we talked about how awareness always operates as a dyad—there's awareness of something. Awareness and its object. Sometimes mindfulness remembers the awareness, and sometimes mindfulness remembers the object.

For example, if you've had the experience of meditating, minding your own business, you slide off into thinking without knowing that you slid off into thinking, and then suddenly you realize, "Whoops, I'm thinking. I'm supposed to be meditating." Have you ever had that experience? Pretty common. At that point, you remember. What do you remember? You remember your awareness. "Well, that's right, I'm thinking. What am I doing thinking?"

But have you had the experience where the awareness slides off, you're lost in thinking, suddenly you know that there's thinking there, and the awareness goes bang, straight back to the meditation object? There you're remembering the object of awareness. So this remembering can have two aspects: I remember awareness itself, or I remember the object of awareness. These are the two flavors, as it were, of mindfulness.

So mindfulness remembers awareness, and it presents as the continuity of awareness. Awareness moves. And in this style of practice, we are not trying to prevent it from moving. Now, there are some meditation styles which do exactly that—styles that are more concentration or serenity oriented. If you're given the job to just focus on this particular meditation object and nothing else, what you're trying to do is stop awareness from moving. You're trying to keep it in one place.

But in Satipaṭṭhāna, that's not what we're trying to do. We're not trying to prevent awareness from moving. What we're doing is tracking how it moves and where it moves. We're following to see where it goes. And this is really important, because one thing that characterizes Satipaṭṭhāna as a style of meditation practice is that it is not restricted to any one particular object. It's not object-specific.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha talks about four Satipaṭṭhānas: body, feeling, mind, dharma. And basically this is technical code for everything. Every aspect of body and mind becomes a meditation object in this practice. This is what it's designed to do. It's not about restricting awareness, keeping it in one place. It's about tracking awareness, remembering awareness.

So if we ask in this practice, what is my meditation object in Satipaṭṭhāna? What is my meditation object in mindfulness meditation? The short answer is everything. Every aspect of human experience is a meditation object.

So it does not matter what the object of awareness is in this practice. That really, genuinely does not matter. What matters is that we remember our awareness. It does not matter what we are aware of—what matters is that we are aware.

Practice cannot be restricted to any one particular experience. And one of the implications of that is it cannot be restricted to any one particular technique, because there's no one technique which covers the entirety of human experience. So there's an element of creativity in this style of practice which is inescapable. We'll be talking about that later on.

A participant asks: "This morning you mentioned that you're using the term awareness as synonymous with consciousness. In the example of being aware of a sensory sensation and then starting to think and remembering—are you saying that in the process of thinking, maybe daydreaming or planning or something that isn't desirable, the awareness is not there when you go into thinking? Because you said that awareness is always there. So where is awareness when we're thinking or forgetting?"

What happens to awareness when you forget? Is it still there? Is it not there? It's a very interesting question to which I don't have a satisfactory answer.

There's a classical image: imagine you're on a beach near the water. You've got a stick and you draw a line in the sand, and the next wave comes up and obliterates it. You draw a line in the sand and the next wave comes up and obliterates it. This is an image of awareness without mindfulness. There's awareness, but we instantly forget it. It kind of flashes and it's gone. Flashes, gone. Flashes, gone. So we look back—was I awake? At the time, we were. But because it's weak, it doesn't last. It comes and then it disappears.

It's like when you're packing to go somewhere, like to a meditation center, and you're looking around the house and you think, "Oh yeah, that—I've definitely got to take that." In the meantime, your attention shifts. You saw it there and knew you had to pack it. Where is it? What happened? The awareness was there and then the eyes shifted and that awareness was forgotten. It was there but gone.

So awareness has depth. I can be very faintly aware of something and it's gone. I can be deeply, penetratingly aware of something and it stays—and can even be transformative. What we're doing in meditation practice is working with what's already available: awareness. But we're making it stronger. We're making it deeper. That makes a difference.

It's like waking up in the morning and knowing that you've been dreaming. You know it, but you couldn't say what you were dreaming about. You might have a vague sense of it, but it's forgotten. You were there, but then it's completely gone.

So in meditation practice, we're working with awareness.

We're making it stronger and deeper and clearer. Normal, everyday awareness can be very weak and very fleeting, but it's still there. Otherwise we couldn't function.

So as we've been playing around with awareness—am I aware? Yes, I'm aware. Am I making any particular effort? No, I'm not. So where does effort come in?

The effort comes in maintaining the felt sense of awareness over time. It comes in the commitment to remember. In other words, if we're going to do a meditation practice, we need to be engaged with it, with what's going on. There needs to be a certain sharpness of engagement rather than being completely dulled out.

It's like the fifth precept, the fifth way of training, which talks about refraining from the carelessness caused by intoxicants. If you come home from work stressed out and fling yourself in front of the TV, switch it on and just stare, the mind goes into drift mode. And that drift mode is a kind of intoxication. We don't really know what's going on. The mind is dull. It's being stimulated by the screen, by the sound, but nothing is really sticking. We enter into a kind of dull drift state of mind.

This is pretty much the opposite of what we're doing when we do a meditation practice. In a meditation practice, we're trying to be sharp and clear. This is what's going on now.

So we need this sharpness of engagement, but we also need to be relaxed. And this relaxation is quite important. If we're not relaxed, we are striving. And if we're striving, we become tense. And tension gets in the way of awareness.

One practitioner summed up the entire practice to his own satisfaction as "relax and be aware." Basically, that's it. Sometimes he would scold meditators: "Relax more!" Oh my God, I'm not relaxed enough—I've got to work harder! I'm not sure that admixture really worked.

Anyway, why is relaxation important? Because when we strive, we lose sight of the obvious fact that we are already aware. We don't have to try to be aware. We are already aware.

Now, if we're making too much effort in the meditation practice, what happens? We get lost in our concepts about the experience. We get lost in concepts about the meditation practice, and we lose touch with the actual experience.

Let's say we're doing something like staying with the touch of our hands—a simple exercise like that—and we notice that we tend to forget. We slide off and come back, slide off and come back. And let's say we make more effort to stay with the touch of the

hands. If we try too hard, then what happens is we get lost in concepts about what this meditation exercise is supposed to be. What I am supposed to be aware of. What this is supposed to feel like. What a meditation experience is supposed to be. We get lost in concepts of right and wrong, passing and failing, winning and losing. And all of these concepts distract me from the obvious fact that this is what's happening right now.

So this is a major problem with effort. The Buddha includes what he calls *sammā vāyāma* as one of the path factors. Classically translated as "right effort," I'm not sure that's really particularly accurate. It could be translated as right energy, right commitment. But the thing about that path factor—because it is called an effort—is that it is possible to make not enough effort.

In other words, for the mind just to go dull and not be engaged. And if there's not enough effort, it's not going to work. But it's equally possible to make too much effort, and if we make too much effort, we just tie ourselves up in knots and the whole process is slowed down. So it's about finding a balance, and it can be quite difficult to find that balance. We'll talk about it later in the retreat.

In the beginning of the retreat, I think it's important to learn to recognize and rest in the natural state of awareness. To recognize that I'm already aware—it's already happening—and to rest in that state. To learn to recognize awareness and not fight it. And in particular, not to fight ourselves.

We fight awareness when we try to make something happen. We have a view, an image of what should be happening, what is supposed to happen: I should be concentrated, I should be staying with my breath, I should not be thinking. We have this image, and this image defines the whole experience for us. We struggle to realize this view, to make it real, to make this image the felt reality. And this struggle creates tension and conflict. This very struggle hides from us the fundamental fact that we are already aware.

I like Sayadaw Tejaniya's description of right effort. It comes from his book, *When Awareness Becomes Natural*, and here he's quoting from his teacher, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw. Tejaniya says: "Don't try to do anything. Don't try to prevent anything. But don't forget what is happening."

I think this pretty much sums it up. Don't try to do anything, to accomplish anything. Don't try to prevent anything. But don't forget what is happening.

We need commitment. When we allow habitual forgetfulness to take over, at that moment we have lost our commitment—not enough effort. But when we try to do something or try to prevent something, we make too much effort. We can find right ef-

fort when we are committed to reminding ourselves that right now, something is happening. So what is it? What's happening now? It's the commitment to remembering where we find the effort. But notice it's all focused on what's happening now—not focused on what I think should or should not be happening.

Does that make sense?

So in this practice, anything at all can be a meditation object. But for practical purposes, it can be very useful to have the body as the center of our focus, our anchor. Usually when we begin, we start with awareness of body. That's a very normal, everyday place to begin—being sensitive to physical experience. This means the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching.

One thing about this place is that the physical world is very in your face. Apparently this is summer, according to the locals anyway. It was summer in Brisbane, I can tell you that. But according to the weather reports, in a few days' time it'll be hot and dry.

And a day or two after that it could be cold and wet. This is the Blue Mountains. So there's a lot happening in the physical world, which is very good from a meditator's point of view, because it's obvious, it's clear.

The five physical senses are very important, but in particular, sensitivity to touch—the fifth of the five senses. This is very important because according to the later tradition (this is not the Buddha, this is the later tradition), in the Buddha's understanding of experience, experience is always an impact. There's a sensitivity, and there's something out there in the world that strikes that sensitivity.

So there's light and form, and there are two parts of my body, one here and one here, which are sensitive to light. Now this part of my body is not—my hand doesn't know whether it's night or day. But these two parts of my body are sensitive to light. Light streams in and strikes the body, touches the eye, and something happens. It strikes the sensitivity and something happens. These two parts of my body are sensitive to sound. Sound strikes that sensitivity, something happens. So there's an impact between sense object and sense sensitivity. Bang.

When that impact occurs—and this is what the Buddha calls *phassa*, usually translated as contact—something happens. According to the later tradition, when you're dealing with seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, the impact of the object on the sensitivity is like cotton wool striking cotton wool. It's very soft. But the impact of a touch sensation striking the body is like an iron hammer hitting an anvil. It's very strong. It's very clear.

This makes touch very, very good as a meditation object. It's easy to find and easy to stick with. That's why you have things like breathing and body scan as meditation objects—they all involve touch. So in the beginning, be open to whatever is happening, but be particularly interested in the experience of touch. It's one of the reasons why we emphasize posture, because that opens up that whole field of touch.

The other thing about the physical world, especially clear in relation to touch, is that a physical experience is always in the present. Mind time travels. Mind can convince us that past is more real than present, or that future is more real than present. But body can't do that. Whatever the body feels, whatever it impacts, is always in the present.

Now, the job of this meditation practice is done in the present. We can't do it in the past, we can't do it in the future. If we're going to ground ourselves in the present, the most obvious way to do it is to ground ourselves in body. Again, in body, the most obvious is touch.

So if you're still settling in, basically just hold your awareness in your ordinary everyday activity. This is everyday mindfulness, where the meditation object is the normal flow of experience—wherever your awareness naturally goes, just track it. This is where the awareness is. But give priority to the body, because this helps to ground awareness in the present rather than allow us to drift off into past and future.

A few things to try. One is to feel your posture. Get a sense of what the body is doing now. How does the body occupy space now? What does the body feel like now, in a general sense? Feel your posture, and then ask yourself: what am I aware of now? It doesn't matter what we are aware of, but am I clear about what I am aware of? You might try the question: what is clear now? Or what is obvious now? Something is clear.

Something is obvious. What is it?

So becoming interested in what is happening now, rather than trying to make something happen. And remembering to drop in those questions. This is like switching on a light—we are switching on our awareness. And it doesn't matter how quickly the light goes off again. When you realise the light's gone off, just turn it on again. Switch it on again. Which means, switch it on now.

Tonight we'll talk about the actual meditation method taught by Mahāsī Sayādaw. So we're gradually getting into it. But just for today, perhaps in general, some basic tips.

Firstly, do not be in a hurry. Often the instruction is to slow down, and often that means really slow down. But don't try to slow down, because again, that's too much stress, too much concept getting in the way. Just don't be in a hurry. And notice when you find yourself hurrying, because you may find underneath the hurry is some tension. Feel the tension and relax. And how is your posture when you relax?

So don't be in a hurry. Be graceful. I think we've already mentioned this. Which in practice means be committed to noticing those moments when you realise you are clumsy. When you drop something, or bump into something, or trip over something, or make a loud noise doing something—be interested in those moments. You may notice that a moment of clumsiness is conditioned by a momentary loss of mindfulness, a moment when we lost awareness of the body and dropped into a habitual concept.

Don't be in a hurry. Be graceful. Recognise awareness. When you're meditating, do not try to be aware—just notice that you are already aware. Just switch on the light.

And finally, to help this whole process, every now and again you might drop in a question like: What is clear now? What is happening now? What is obvious now? And just see what it is.

Any questions? Is this all too basic for you? You're experienced meditators, you're thinking, "This is kindergarten playtime—when are we going to get stuck into it?" That's probably what you're thinking.

But meditation is really, really simple.

Now, some of you are not familiar with the great game of rugby league. This is a game in which big blokes get a footy, divide into two teams, and assault each other vigorously in an effort to get the ball across the line. Rugby league and meditation as activities have an enormous amount in common—very, very similar. Meditation, like rugby league, is a simple game with simple rules for simple people.

So don't make it complicated. Something is happening. What is it?

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 33

On Method

Patrick Kearney · 47 min

> *In this foundational talk from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney offers a detailed exploration of the Mahāsī Sayādaw meditation method. Building on an earlier discussion of awareness as "the presence of that which is present," he introduces the practical framework that Mahāsī developed in mid-20th century Burma to make serious insight meditation accessible to lay practitioners—a radical democratization of practice previously reserved for monastic elites.*
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> *Kearney presents the "three N's" central to this approach: noting (directed awareness actively reaching toward an object), noticing (receptive awareness receiving whatever arises), and naming (the optional practice of labeling experiences to sharpen accuracy). He explains how different practitioners naturally gravitate toward more directed or undirected styles, and how this preference often shifts with age and experience. The talk also clarifies the concept of the mūla ārammaṇa (grounding object)—traditionally the rising and falling of the abdomen, though Kearney emphasizes finding whatever grounds awareness most readily for each individual.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is his teaching on secondary objects: when the mind is "conscripted" by distraction, that very distraction becomes the meditation object, effectively dissolving the concept of distraction altogether. Over time, he explains, the distinction between grounding and secondary objects evaporates, leaving simply the flow of experience itself—whatever is happening now becomes the object. This progression from structured technique to natural awareness illustrates how method serves as scaffolding for beginners that gradually falls away as practice matures.*

So tonight we're talking about method, the meditation method that we're doing in this retreat. This morning we looked at awareness. We started with awareness, and we emphasized, first of all, the elemental simplicity of awareness. Awareness is the presence of that which is present. If something is present, well, that's awareness. That quality of presence is awareness.

We talked about noticing awareness. Normally—well, first of all, we said if there's awareness, there's something we are aware of, there's the object. Awareness and its object always come together as a partnership, as a dyad. Usually, we put all of our atten-

tion and concern on the object of awareness. We think that's what's important, and we tend to miss the aware-ing itself. But in meditation practice, the aware-ing itself, the experiencing itself, becomes significant.

In any event, we started with noticing awareness, and we can use questions to remind us of this: What am I aware of now? What is clear now? What is obvious now? What's happening now?

Then we looked at mindfulness, which is essentially awareness extended through time—awareness made continuous over a period of time. This is mindfulness.

Tonight we're moving on to the particular style of meditation practice that was developed by Mahasi Sayadaw. He lived from 1904 to 1982 and was part of a major revival of meditation, especially meditation for insight, vipassanā—meditation aimed at bringing the practitioner to some degree of awakening, and in particular, getting lay people involved in serious practice.

In 1945, Mahasi published a book called *Manual of Insight*—in Pali, *Vipassanā Dīpanī*. The English translation was only produced not long ago, certainly this century. For decades it wasn't available in English; now it is. If you want a difficult, technical, and complex read in which you enter into a medieval mindscape, it's a page turner.

That book made his reputation throughout Burma, and it earned him an invitation, I think around 1947, to move to Rangoon and become the head teacher of a new centre being developed by a group of people closely associated with the first government of independent Burma. This was part of the overall Burmese effort to revive Buddhism, to allow the whole nation, if not the whole world, to face the challenge of modernity. As part of this movement, in 1956 they held a Buddhist council and got together—mostly Burmese, though they invited people from overseas—to recite and edit the Buddhist texts. The emphasis on meditation was really important.

The motive, or part of it, was this: the Buddha teaches impermanence. Everything is impermanent, including Buddhism. In the Theravāda, the belief is that Buddhism will last 5,000 years. Under the traditional dating of the Buddha, the 2,500-year halfway point was reached in 1956. From 1956 onwards, it's guaranteed all the way down—which means there is not a moment to be lost. Don't stick around until the next life; it may not be available. This would be Mahasi's advice.

Somewhere in one of his books—most are sermons that have been transcribed—he was urging his audience in Burma to take up meditation practice. One of his arguments I found very interesting. He said, "Look, you're very lucky you've been born in Burma. You've been raised Buddhist, you're full of faith, and because you're faithful Buddhists

making merit, you're making so much merit that you are in serious danger. In your next life, you might end up being born in the USA. Once you're there, you're going to be comfortable, but are you going to have an opportunity to practice Dharma? Probably not. So do it now. Get enlightened now, and then be reborn in the US." I don't know how effective this argument actually was.

Traditionally, meditation practice—but especially serious meditation practice, designed to take the practitioner from here to awakening—was assumed to be the business of an elite of full-time professionals: a minority of monks and nuns, and a tiny, tiny minority of lay people.

What Mahasi and others in this reform movement were doing was creating, crafting an approach to meditation that any lay person of reasonable health and a goodly amount of dedication could learn—and which would take that person to awakening. This was a very radical project.

So let's get into the details. First of all, we start again with awareness, as we've talked about. Awareness is the presence of that which is present. Awareness is happening already. I don't have to make any effort to be aware—I'm already aware. It's already happening.

But when we look closely, we can see that awareness has depth. I can be faintly aware, like a dream that I forget within seconds of waking up. Or I could be very clearly and penetratingly aware, such that this event I will remember for decades to come. Or anywhere in between. There's a whole spectrum of the depth of awareness. This suggests that awareness can be developed, deepened, strengthened.

So how do I deepen awareness? How do I make it stronger? I do this by practicing attention. Attention—what the Buddha calls manasikāra—is the act of directing awareness. It could be compared to the difference between seeing and looking. I don't have to do anything to see. If my eyes are open, I see—maybe not very well, but I can see. But if I'm looking for someone or looking for something, then I'm doing something. I'm directing visual awareness in a particular direction or towards a particular object.

Attention is the act of directing awareness. And you notice that it is active. We could say that attention is awareness as a verb.

In English we tend to treat awareness only as a noun. But in the language of the Buddha, it's clearly also very closely connected to a verb. Awareness would be vijñāna, and this noun comes from the verb vijānāti—to aware. In one discourse, the Buddha is going through some key technical terms, and he plays with the sounds, plays with the words as he does this. In English, you might say something like, "Why do we say aware-

ness? We are aware, therefore we say awareness." But in Pali, it's, "Why do we say vijñāna? Vijānāti, therefore vijñāna." And in the Pali, you can see the very close connection between the verb and the noun. Why did we say perception? We perceive, so we say perception. Why do you say saññā? Sañjānāti, therefore saññā.

There's a very close connection in the language and in the way of conceiving how the world works between verbs and nouns in classical Indian languages that you don't necessarily get in English.

So attention is awareness as a verb. It necessarily involves some degree of engagement or effort. When we are aware, the tradition says, mind moves towards its object to engage with it. Awareness is active. It's more process than thing. More activity than thing.

This brings us to how we work with awareness in meditation practice. In the Mahasi lineage, we speak of three basic activities involved in awareing an object. These can be conveniently called, in English, the three N's: noting, noticing, and naming.

Now the first two are the most important—noting and noticing. These could also be called directed awareness and undirected awareness. Let's start with noting.

This is the word probably most associated with Mahasi's approach. Noting is directing awareness towards an object. You notice that it is essentially active in its nature—it's a reaching out. The mind reaches out to something in the world, either in the physical world or the psychological world. So we could call it directed awareness.

For example, let's say I'm going to meditate, and I've chosen breathing as my meditation object. I'm actively directing awareness to this breath, now. And then I'm actively directing awareness to this breath, now. And then again to this breath, now. I'm actively engaged, now. And again, now. And again, now. This is noting, or directed awareness.

The flip side is noticing, or undirected awareness. Noticing is awareness receiving an object. It's not active; it's receptive. I am awaring, but I'm not deliberately aiming at any specific object or in any specific direction.

For example, let's say I'm doing breathing meditation. I'm actively awaring the breath, but at the same time I can hear the sounds around me. Now I'm not interested in the sounds and I'm not actively listening to them because all my energy is taken up with the relationship with the breathing. But the sounds are coming to me. I am receiving the sounds. I am aware of them. To some degree I'm actively engaged with them, but it's very slight, and certainly I'm not deliberately directing awareness towards them instead of actively directing awareness towards the breathing.

So: directed awareness, undirected awareness. Noting, noticing. Active, receptive. In directed awareness we aim awareness at an object; in undirected awareness, the object of awareness comes to us.

These represent two ends of a spectrum. One end directed, the other undirected. Active, receptive. And these two ends of the spectrum point to different relationships that we can have to the meditation practice.

Some meditation styles emphasize directed awareness, so they're primarily concerned with focusing awareness on a specific object—breathing, for example. Other meditation styles emphasize undirected awareness, and they are primarily concerned with simply receiving whatever is coming through the senses.

Again, it's a spectrum, and you find different approaches to meditation plotted somewhere along it. It's unusual to find one at the very end; you usually get some kind of mixture. But in the Mahasi lineage, Sayadaw U Pandita, for example, was very much into the directed approach and really emphasized that. Sayadaw U Tejaniya emphasizes the undirected approach.

In terms of which one to do, it's very much up to the individual. It's not that one is right and the other wrong, or one is better and the other worse. A lot depends on the practitioner, on their particular sensitivities.

In my experience, most new practitioners—and most practitioners beginning a meditation retreat, at least in the early stages—prefer directed awareness because it quite literally gives them something to do. It gives them an object to ground awareness on. Whereas if they just do undirected awareness, they could very easily get lost and spend days mind-wandering in a vaguely spiritual, Buddhist-y way.

Other people find that when they engage with directed awareness, it creates strain and tension—strain in the mind and tension in the body. They much prefer the sense of ease they find in undirected awareness. They find that if they simply remember—which is mindfulness—if they simply remember to recognize that mind is already aware, along with what mind is already aware of, then that's enough.

The practice gains its own momentum—it can develop without any sense of having to do something special. It just rolls along in a very natural way.

So it's not that one approach is right and the other wrong. It's not that one is better and the other worse. But what you might find is that what suits your particular circumstances is one or the other. And that can change over time.

For example, in my experience, meditators who are getting older—let's say someone who started meditation when they were quite young, quite energetic, going through enlightenment and not mucking about—they can have a very directed, energetic, active, engaged relationship with the meditation practice. An approach like Sayadaw U Pandita's really appeals to them, and they can go a long way with it.

But the decades roll on. They start to get old. They start to lose the kind of energy they used to have. Sometimes the earliest signs of this appear in retreat. Someone will come to an interview and I'll ask, "How's it going?" "Oh, not so well this year." "Why not?" "I just can't really focus the way I used to focus. By this stage in the retreat, I should be sitting three hours. It doesn't seem to quite work."

What sometimes emerges is that with age they simply don't have the energy for directed awareness anymore—because directed awareness takes a lot of energy, and when you get old you lose energy, so you can't sustain it the same way. I've found that older meditators tend to naturally segue into a more undirected style of practice, partly because of the energy issue but also partly because, if you're an experienced meditator, it's as though you've explored a landscape through directed awareness over a long period of time. Basically the mind is saying, "Been there, done that. I don't need to do it again. So why are you trying to push me into it?"

Because so much has been learned, so much absorbed, there's no need to do, quote unquote, anything in particular. It'll just happen, given the chance, given the opportunity. So that can occur as well. Circumstances change, and the practice changes with them.

Some people find that this whole distinction between noting and noticing, directed and undirected, dissolves entirely. What emerges is simply awareness itself—awareness awareing, and that's it. Classifications like directed and undirected, noting and noticing, become meaningless. It's just: whatever arises, I'm aware of.

So although we're laying out Mahasi Sayadaw's basic approach, one isn't stuck in it. Any kind of meditation technique, essentially, is for beginners. It's to get us going, to give us a structure, to give us something to do, and to shape the whole enterprise. But as the practice develops, all of that drops away. We find our own way of doing things, and that way will naturally emerge.

So we have active and receptive, directed and undirected, noting and noticing. And finally we come to naming.

Now, the first two distinctions are built in, as it were—this is the way awareness works, the way the mind works. This third one is an optional added extra. It's not as central as the first two.

Naming places a concept, a name, or a label onto the object of awareness. Let's say I'm tracking the breathing—breathing is my meditation object. I can name it: "In... out... in... out." And then suddenly I realize I'm distracted by thinking. I can name that too: "Thinking... thinking."

And then come back.

Now, the purpose of the naming is to stimulate aim or accuracy. It's to remind me: that's where I'm sending the awareness. I'm sending it there, not here. There, in-breath, not the up-breath—in-breath. And now it's up-breath, not the in-breath—up-breath. Now it's a thought. Now it's the breath. So it's solidifying the whole thing, reminding me: this is where I'm aiming the awareness. And it helps develop accuracy and aim. We're going to play around with this tomorrow morning, so we'll talk about it then.

So this is naming. Again, naming is an optional added extra. Some meditators use it a lot. Some meditators never use it. Many meditators fall somewhere in between. The people I know, long-time meditators, have a whole range of different relationships to naming.

I don't use it very often. I use it in the beginning, often as questions, like "What's clear now?"—just to get me started, rev the engine up, as it were. And then it falls away. And it comes back if the experience changes and I'm in unfamiliar territory, so I'm not 100 percent sure what's going on. Then if I drop in a name, and if it's the right name—click, that's what it is. This is what's going on. And then once it's clarified, I can drop it again. So different people develop different relationships with naming.

So these are the three N's. Is that making sense? This is looking at Mahasi's approach to meditation practice in terms of what we do with the mind: direct awareness, receive, name.

But we can also look at meditation from the point of view of the meditation object—what we are aware of when we practice. So we've got the awaring and we've got the object of awareness. Noticing and naming are all about how the awaring is structured. But we can also look at how the object is structured.

Now, we've seen this morning how awareness tends to move. The mind tends to wander from one object to another, to another, to another. And especially, it's very easy for the mind to slide into habitual thinking. What we want to do is train attention so we can maintain a felt continuity of awareness over time. And the longer the time, the better.

Now, if we're going to do that, we need to learn how to stabilize the mind. And if we're going to do that, we need to be able to ground awareness. This grounding of awareness develops what the Buddha calls samādhi—classically translated as concentration, but perhaps more accurately, unification or integration.

So if awareness is awareness of something, if awareness always has its object, and if we want to stabilize the mind, we need to be able to settle awareness somewhere in such a way that the awareness is encouraged to rest and become still.

Mahasi Sayadaw spoke of this place as, in Pāli, the *mūla ārammaṇa*. Literally this means "root object"—*ārammaṇa* is object, *mūla* is root, like the root of a tree. Now, this root represents our foundation, our ground. So I translate *mūla ārammaṇa* as "grounding object," because this is where we ground our awareness. This is where awareness makes its home.

In standard translations of Mahasi's work, this is rendered as "primary object"—the prime, the first, the most important.

Normally, the mind chases after one thing, then another, then another, restlessly in search of a satisfaction that never quite arrives. But if we want to cultivate mindfulness and samadhi, we need to stabilize the mind, which in practical terms means we need to learn how to keep our awareness in one place over a period of time. This is the function of the grounding object. This is what it is for. This is its job: it gives us a place where our awareness can settle and stabilize over a period of time.

One way of looking at it is that our grounding object is where our awareness remains unless it has a specific reason to go somewhere else.

Probably the most common grounding object in the world of Buddhist meditation is breathing. Mahasi Sayadaw recommends placing awareness in the movements of the breathing sensed in the abdomen. When he first taught this, back in the 1940s, it was highly controversial. Burmese Buddhism is very orthodox Theravada Buddhism, and in Theravada Buddhism, if you say "breathing meditation," everybody knows that what you mean is keeping your awareness at the nasal passage—where the breath enters and leaves the body.

Anyone who has done Goenka retreats will know this approach. Burmese Buddhism is, to put it not so politely, a touch fanatical—very orderly, very organized. You do three days of anapanasati, mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, which means you keep your awareness here at the nose, nowhere else.

So in Theravada Buddhism, if a practitioner says "I do breathing meditation," what they're telling you is that when they meditate, they keep awareness at the nasal passage. The Buddha himself never mentions this specific location—it's not in the suttas at all. It first appears in the Patisambhidamagga, which is an explicitly Theravada text and the first path manual in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. A path manual is a book that tells you how to get from here to enlightenment. The Patisambhidamagga is very early—so early that the book itself is classified as part of the Sutta Pitaka, though it was developed after the Buddha's lifetime. But this is where they established: breathing meditation means awareness at the nose. And from there on, Theravada followed this instruction.

Then Mahasi comes along and says: follow the rising and falling of the abdomen. He caught a great deal of criticism, both in Burma and elsewhere.

So why did he do it? Why open himself up to such criticism? It seems he was approaching this problem of the grounding object with fresh eyes. We need something clear, obvious, and available. He felt that the breathing sensed in the abdomen fulfilled these criteria—that most people, most of the time, would find these movements clear, obvious, and relatively easy to follow. So he was prepared to accept considerable criticism.

He called these movements the rising and the falling of the abdomen. He said it's as if, when you breathe in, the abdomen rises; when you breathe out, it falls. You can note it as "rising, falling, rising, falling." Mahasi's approach became famous for this.

But notice what it's for. He recommends it for the very pragmatic reason that in his experience, this is where most people can most readily ground their awareness during sitting meditation.

The fact is, however, that no single technique actually works for everybody. Mahasi's approach was developed by a mid-twentieth century Burmese teacher for mid-twentieth century Burmese practitioners. In my experience in twenty-first century Australia, many meditators have difficulty finding the rising and falling of the abdomen. For them, it is not obvious at all, and they struggle with it. Then they're told, "Look, what

you've got to do is follow the instructions of our great teacher Mahasi Sayadaw. He says note rising and falling of the abdomen. Just do it." And they struggle to find it and hold on to it.

But this completely defeats the purpose of the grounding object. The grounding object is meant to be something clear, available, easy to find. The reality is that rising and falling of the abdomen is not necessarily a good grounding object for everybody.

It certainly is not a good grounding object for everybody.

Another reason, by the way, why I think Mahasi liked or used this is because you're keeping awareness inside the sentient body, which means you're keeping the awareness inside the emotional body. I think this is one of the reasons why he chose this. If you do meditate here at the nostril, and if you succeed with it, it can catapult you into a deep concentration state which is entirely disembodied. But for insight meditation, you want to be embodied. You do it in the body. So following the breathing inside the body makes a lot of sense.

It's important that we return to basic principles. We want to ground our awareness. The easiest way to do this is through some aspect of body or mind which we can easily find and then stabilize our awareness on. It also helps if this object of awareness is itself stable—either relatively still, or if it is moving, moving rhythmically.

So it could be the breathing. But where? When you sit, you can ask yourself the question: Am I breathing? You probably are. And then you might ask yourself: How do I know? What's the experience that tells me this is breathing? And you may find movement in the abdomen. You may find movement in the midriff. You may find movement in the chest. You may find movement further up. But basically you go for where it's clearest and most obvious, because that's where you can ground the awareness.

Other things could serve as the grounding object, like the touch sensations of the body where the body is pressed against the cushion, the bench, the chair. It could be posture. The posture itself is a very good grounding object—the Buddha himself mentions it in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. It could be the breathing, it could be something else. For most people it will be something physical, not in the mind. But again, there are some unusual meditators out there, and for some people mind is actually the best grounding object.

This is what we need to establish as we develop our own practice: Where can I most readily rest my awareness so it will remain relatively still over time? This is my grounding object. This is what my awareness will learn to call home. And you will find, over a meditation career, that this will change. So the grounding object is not so much a specific part of the anatomy—it's a function. The function of where can I stabilize awareness.

So, grounding object. We're stabilizing awareness, we're stabilizing the mind, but the fact is, mind moves. And so every practitioner discovers that restlessness is one of the most obvious characteristics of the mind. I'm thinking, and then I'm looking, and then I'm wanting, and then I'm moving, and so on and so forth.

Now, this realization of how restless the mind is, and how little control we have over these movements—often it comes as a shock to the new meditator. One of the classic complaints of the new meditator is they're doing, say, their first retreat. And after some days in the interview, I'll say, "How's it going?" They say, "Oh, it's awful. It's going really badly." I say, "Why? What's happening?" And the person will say something like, "Look, when I came here to do this retreat, I knew that I think a lot. I mean, that's one of the reasons why I came here, to get away from it. Now I'm thinking ten times more. So it ain't working."

And in all probability, they're not actually thinking ten times more. They're just ten times more sensitive to what the mind is doing. That's usually the story.

So it comes as a shock to recognize how little control we have over our minds.

That's fine, because it's important to realize that if we're cultivating mindfulness, we're not trying to stop our minds from moving. We're learning to understand that the mind moves and to understand how the mind moves. And we can't do that if the mind doesn't move—we can only do it if it moves. Recognizing and understanding these movements is the gateway into insight.

There are some meditators, very unfortunate ones, who will come into the hall after breakfast, check the time, note that lunch is in three hours, and just sit there in deep samādhi for three hours without the slightest movement in the mind. Then, at precisely the right time, they emerge from samādhi, shake off the bliss, and go to lunch. I mean, how appalling is that? Because what have they actually learned about the nature of mind over those three hours? Pretty much nothing. If we want insight, it's about movement. It's about what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence. So the fact that the mind moves is not a problem—it's the content of the practice.

This brings us to what we call the secondary object. The grounding object is our home base, where we train our mind to stabilize. But the mind is extremely difficult to stabilize, and it dashes off to visit different places. These different places are our secondary objects, and usually they are revealed by our distractions. We're minding our own business, meditating away, and then suddenly we find we're caught up in thinking or physical pain or something of this nature. We recognize that we were brought there to this new experience by force. We were conscripted. We had no choice in it—we were just dragged there. But once we realize that we've arrived, then we volunteer for the experience and we note the distraction. We're directly aware of the distraction, and the distraction becomes our meditation object.

I think this is probably the central characteristic of Mahasi Sayadaw's approach to meditation practice. As soon as our mind rebels and we realize that our awareness has been taken somewhere else, that we have been distracted, quote unquote, that new object of awareness becomes the meditation object—which means that distraction disappears. Because what we previously used to call distraction simply becomes a secondary object. So we note, we actively aware the secondary object, and then we come back to the grounding object. And again we're distracted. As soon as we know we're distracted—so what is it? What's going on?—we actively aware the experience, and then we come back. And then we're grabbed again. We actively aware the experience, and then we come back. So we're moving from grounding to secondary to grounding to secondary to grounding to secondary. And these movements reveal the habitual journeys that our mind undertakes, journeys that normally we don't really notice.

Now the question always comes up: how long do we stay with our secondary object? In the early stages of the practice, the answer to that question would be not long at all, because we need to stabilize the mind. In the early stages, this is the major job. So we acknowledge the distraction, we note it, we are actively aware of it, but not for very long, and then we come back. Basically, we favor the grounding object. We give it preference. And that relationship with the grounding object is what builds the samādhi over a period of time.

Now sometimes our secondary object will not let us go—for example, pain, physical pain, or obsessive thinking. If that's the case, we stay with the secondary object longer. How we stay with the secondary object—that is a question of skill. That's the craft of the meditation: how to do it, how to work with this particular object.

And this is what we'll be exploring during this retreat. We'll talk more about it as we go through.

Over time, the practice develops. It matures. And the method that Mahasi lays down is for beginners. So over time, the distinction between grounding object and secondary object evaporates, and the meditation object simply becomes the flow of experience itself. Conceptual distinctions between grounding and secondary object cease to be relevant. All we've got is the flow of experience.

In one place, Mahasi says the meditator's job is to note, to be actively aware or directly aware of whatever arises in any of the six senses as it arises. No primary, no grounding object, no secondary object. If it's happening now, it's the object. But this is something that naturally develops over a period of time. Sometimes people make the mistake of hanging on to that initial structure for too long. But basically, at some point, you start to let it go and realize: what is my meditation object? It's whatever is happening now. That's the meditation object.

I think that's pretty much it. Any questions?

Someone shared a story: "I needed a tool from the tool room once. I knew it was in a green box, and I went in looking for it. There was attention, but I couldn't find it. I looked again with directed attention, but still couldn't find it. The third time, I decided maybe it's not in a green box—and I found it, by the way."

I don't quite understand it, but it sounds very profound! You can miss things very easily because that quality of directing—where is it coming from? It's coming from a mind that has certain expectations.

How do you work with that? If you don't know whether you had an expectation—well, did you? Perhaps it wasn't a very strong one. But that kind of experience illustrates the importance of not taking anything for granted. I think this is one of the great challenges of meditation practice. We tend to take experience for granted. We tend to assume we know what's going on, or we assume we know what will happen. And that blinds us to what's actually occurring.

Sometimes you can see this attitude emerge in experienced meditators who say, "Oh yes, well, today's day three, so such and such will happen. Today's day four, then this will happen." They've already written the script. But how do they know?

This willingness to be—what I would call it is the willingness to be taken by surprise—is important in this practice. For me, it's part of the creativity of the practice. You don't get locked into a technique. There's that degree of creativity always involved in it, which I think your little story illustrates.

Another question: "What's the role, if any, of visual overlay—maybe imagination—onto direct sensation? You're directly sensing something, but on top of that there's a visual overlay. Does that develop as the practice develops? Does it get stronger?"

I'm not sure. For some people it does. What appears to happen is that as the mind becomes stronger and clearer, the conceptual world that it throws up becomes ever more vivid, more real.

So you can, one form that this takes is that people—not so much in Australia, but certainly in Asia—will talk about having visions. In Thailand, for example, it used to be quite common for meditators doing this style of practice, after some days of sitting, to freak out because they start to see ghosts. In different cultures, people have different kinds of visionary experiences. Sometimes it's clear that it's not something external appearing, but rather that the visual world is suddenly thrown up by the mind, quite clear and strong.

So these sorts of things happen. The mind will play, you could say, all sorts of tricks as it gets clearer and stronger. And the response is always the same. You just note it. Seeing, for example. The visual overlay—that's just seeing. But you're seeing with the mind rather than with the eyes. It's just another experience. But it's probably an indication that the samādhi is getting stronger.

CHAPTER 34

Tracking the Elements (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · 53 min

> *In this experiential workshop from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney introduces the practice of tracking the four great elements (mahābhūta) as part of mindfulness of body (kāyānupassanā). He emphasizes that the Buddha's teaching is fundamentally a first-person discourse concerned with direct experience rather than objective scientific explanation—we're not learning geography or cosmology, but investigating experience as it actually unfolds.*
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> *Kearney explains that body in Buddhist practice means our direct experience of physical sensation, not our concepts about the body. When sustained awareness is applied to what we assume is solid and unified—like a hand or painful knee—it breaks apart into discrete elemental qualities: earth element (hardness/softness), fire element (heat/cold), water element (wetness/dryness, stickiness/slipperiness), and air element (movement/stillness). These elements survive sustained awareness; our concepts do not.*
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> *The workshop includes guided meditation exploring each element, followed by discussion about individual sensitivities and practical application. Kearney connects this precision practice to vipassanā—literally 'seeing separately'—explaining how breaking apart seemingly solid experiences into their component processes is essential for insight. When we examine pain closely, for instance, we find not one thing but a collection of sensations and psychological responses. This analytical capacity, balanced with periods of open awareness, develops the mental clarity and malleability needed for deeper practice.*

This morning we're going to play around with tracking the elements. This is part of the first Satipaṭṭhāna, mindfulness of body, and the role of the body is extremely important in this practice. I'd like to say that this is not a spiritual practice—it's a physical practice, because it's done within the body. In fact, I can't think of any Pali word which would actually translate as "spiritual." I think it's an alien concept for the Buddha.

When we start talking about this, we're reminded that the Buddha's Dharma, his teaching, is a first-person discourse. What he's interested in is the nature of human experience from the perspective of the one undergoing the experience. He's not looking at things from an objective third-person viewpoint—broadly speaking, what we might call the scientific viewpoint. He's looking at things from the first-person experiential viewpoint.

For example, we understand—if I remember my high school science correctly, and it was a long time ago so things could have changed—but in those days it was considered that the center of the solar system was the Sun, and the Earth orbited around it and rotated on its axis as it did so. Hence you have the illusion that the Sun rises in the east and sets in the west. That's from a third-person objective viewpoint. From a first-person subjective viewpoint, mate, the sun rises in the east and it sets in the west. It goes around us. Now, to say that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west is not to contradict the scientific third-person objective explanation. It's just a different perspective. The Buddha's not offering scientific explanations about what's going on. He's talking about how experience itself unfolds.

Sometimes I like to point out that you would not go to the Buddha to learn geography. I mean, he thought the world was flat. He thought there were four continents: one to the north, one to the south, one to the east, one to the west. A great mountain in the middle, and on top of the mountain are the gods. He lived in the southern continent, the rose apple continent. Surrounding the four continents is the great ocean, and holding the great ocean together is the great wind. As I say, you would not go to him for geographical advice.

This actually reminds me of when I was a monk in Thailand. I spent some time at a study monastery up north. This was essentially a school for novices, a seminary. What they were studying was the kind of monastic high school curriculum for Burmese monasteries—this was a monastery in Thailand that actually taught the Burmese curriculum. It was all based on memorization and it was all very traditional. I spent a bit of time there learning Thai and Pali.

One day we were out doing chores, sweeping the yard, and one of the monks who spoke some English came up to me with one of the student novices, a teenage boy. He said, "This seminarian has got a question for you." I said, "Oh, sure. What's the question?" The question was: "Is the earth flat?" I was a bit taken aback. I thought about it and said, "No, not really. It's round." This was explained to the boy. He looked a bit agitated and spoke rapidly in Thai. My Thai friend turned to me and said, "Prove it."

I thought about that one. Photographs. I've seen photographs. People have been up there, they've gone around it, they've taken photographs, and the photographs have been published. It's round. This was explained to the boy, and he looked very agitated and stomped off. The curriculum he was studying is medieval.

He's studying the classic Buddhist cosmology, and obviously he had heard rumors that his cosmology wasn't exactly correct. I confirmed it for him. I hope this did not affect his faith in the Buddha.

But we're not doing science here. We're doing something different. We're doing something experiential. So for the Buddha, when he talks about body, he's not talking about body the way a doctor would talk about body. He's talking about body from the perspective of *being* a body. He's talking about our experience of body.

And body for the Buddha has two meanings, a broad meaning and a narrow meaning. In the broad sense, body refers to all five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. In other words, the entire experienced physical universe is body. In the narrow sense, body is the fifth of these five physical senses, and it refers to sensitivity to touch. That touch can be internal or external. External touch would include the touch of the body against the cushion or the bench or the chair that you're sitting on. Internal touch would include any aches and pains within the body. All of these we refer to as touching.

But the key point is that body does not mean our concepts about body. Normally we do not directly experience the body. We experience body through a filter of concepts about the body. For example, we are obsessed about how our body appears to others and even to ourselves. Anybody got a mirror? How many times per day would you look at it? Well, Royal doesn't look at it at all—he's transcended that. Others would gaze at it with great interest. And what we're looking at is our concept of ourselves.

We also find ourselves lost in concept about the body when we come to do the meditation practice. We're given something basic and physical to be aware of—be aware of breathing, be aware of movement as you walk. And we find very easily that we're not really aware of the body, we're not really mindful of body, but we're mindful of our concepts about the body. For example, what we are supposed to feel in this practice, what is supposed to happen, what I am supposed to look like when I'm meditating. That's a big one.

Have you ever—here we've got individual rooms, so you've got privacy—but have you ever gone really mindfully towards the dormitory, mindfully gone down the corridors, mindfully opened up the door, stepped inside, closed it, and gone... "Thank God I'm out of view"? You can see how much the concept of body, what I'm supposed to look like, filters through.

If you ever do a self-retreat where you are completely alone, it's really interesting. The first time I did it, it took about two or three days for it to finally really click: no one can see me. There is no audience. And when it happened, it was like a real shocker. The way that I practiced just changed once that inner audience had disappeared.

So all of this is concept. It isn't the direct experience of body. What we're interested in with mindfulness of the body is what is really going on in the body, as distinct from any concept we have about the body. We'll talk more about this tonight, I think.

But for the Buddha, if we look beneath the concept—what's really going on underneath?

Well, Sayadaw U Pandita used to have this little parlor trick. He would raise his hand and say, "What's this?" When people recovered from the discombobulation, someone might be bold enough to say, "That's a hand." "Yep, very good, big tick." And then he'd go, "What's this?"

A fist. Yes, very good. And then he would open his hand and very slowly close it again, wanting to know: when is the moment when the hand became a fist? Because whatever moment you pick turns out to be the wrong one. Hand and fist are just concepts.

So what do we actually experience in the hand? If I have a meditation exercise in which I simply hold my hand out, close my eyes, and actually feel what the sensation is, then slowly start to close it—what I will get isn't hand and fist. It will be a whole series of discrete, separate sensations: hardness, movement, sharpness, heat, stickiness, stiffness, and so on. In other words, the concept "this is my hand" does not survive sustained awareness. What survives sustained awareness are the directly experienced qualities of the body.

These directly experienced qualities are what the Buddha calls *dhātu*, or elements. They're considered elements because when we start to cut through the concept about a direct experience until we finally come to the actual experience itself, we arrive at these individual sensations, individual phenomena. They are elements because after the concept breaks down, what we're left with are these. They are what survives sustained awareness.

For example, let's say I'm meditating on breathing, and suddenly I get lost in my thoughts. What I'm doing is living in a world created by these thoughts. During that time, this world seems real, although it's far away from here and now. Then suddenly I know that I'm thinking, and the world created by these thoughts vanishes instantly. This world did not survive awareness. It's not real—it's a concept, a fantasy.

So I come back to another world, and this is a world in which my left knee hurts and I really don't want to be sitting here any longer. But I'm following the meditation instructions, so I decide to note the distraction. I'm noting my painful left knee, and I discover that this painful left knee is actually made up of a whole series of sensations that

are coming and going and which actually hold my attention. After some time I realize that my world of "I don't want to be sitting here" has dissolved. It has not survived sustained awareness. Even my left knee dissolves, because all I know is a flow of sensations. The left knee has not survived sustained awareness.

So you can see it's a breaking down of the world of concept, progressively letting go and discovering a world made up of discrete, directly experienced phenomena. For the Buddha, this is the realm of the elements. This is the world that, when we do this practice, we're trying to enter and stay in.

Is any of this making sense?

So let's have a look at the world of touch sensation, the fifth physical sensitivity. This is body in the narrow sense. The Buddha says that these sensations break down into what he calls the four great appearances, the *mahābhūta*: earth element, fire element, water element, and air element. These are the elemental qualities of experience.

Earth element is the experience of resistance, from soft through to hard. Air element is the experience of all forms of movement—pressure, vibration, expansion, contraction, and so on. Fire element is the experience of temperature, from cold through to hot. And water element, which is the most obscure, is the experience of liquidity and cohesion. Liquidity is wetness and dryness; cohesion is stickiness and slipperiness.

Let's say I hold my hands up and start to bring them together. I'm experiencing movement, and in the hand itself there's a certain amount of hardness, stiffness. At some point the fingers touch, and at that point there's no resistance to further movement. That resistance at first is soft. If I keep moving the hands in the same direction, it gets harder and harder. This resistance is earth element. With that contact, there's also a spike in temperature—fire element. And of course there's movement—air element. These are the elements, and they are elemental qualities of experience.

You find the same four elements in the European tradition, but there they're felt to be objective aspects of the universe. The Buddha is saying something different: he's seeing them simply as aspects of experience.

So what we're going to do is have a brief tour of the elements as a meditation exercise.

Start to construct your meditation posture, working on it from the ground up. Begin with the contact at the base of the body, feeling those sensations, feeling the balance. From there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact on the ground. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel hardness. Where can you find hardness? Look for hardness. And when you find it, focus on it and name it: *hard*.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel softness. Where can you find softness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *soft*.

Once more, open your awareness to your whole body, experiencing your whole body.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel heat or warmth. Look for heat, warmth. And when you find it, focus on it and name it: *hot*, *warm*.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel cold or coolness. Look for cold, coolness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *cold*, *cool*.

Again, open your awareness so you're feeling your whole body.

Now direct your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel wetness. Where can you find wetness? Look for it, and if you find it, focus on it and name it: *wet*.

Now focus on those parts of your body where you feel dryness. Look for dryness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *dry*.

Once more, open your awareness to your whole body, feeling your whole body.

Now turn your awareness to those parts of your body where you feel movement. Look for movement. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *moving*.

Moving.

And now focus on those parts of your body where you feel stillness. Look for stillness. And if you can find it, focus on it. Name it.

Still.

Still.

Now once more open your awareness to include your whole body and open up to the flow of all the elements. Don't try to hold on to any one sensation. Don't focus in on any one sensation. But allow all of the sensations to flow naturally. Don't try to find anything in particular. Just be aware of whatever is happening within your body without trying to control it.

Coming out of that meditation, that was a quick tour of the elements. Of those different elements and their various aspects, which did you find easiest to locate, and once you found it, easiest to hold on to? Which were the most obvious ones?

Movement was mentioned. Did you find stillness? Some did, some didn't. One person found stillness and hardness in the same areas. So movement, pretty easy, straightforward. Hardness? What about softness? Did you find softness? A bit harder, not so obvious.

So our two candidates for easiest to find are hardness and movement. But interestingly, movement was experienced not as a discrete, separate element, but rather as part of the whole package.

What was the most difficult one to find? Stillness. Even what seemed to be still had a kind of tingling or buzzing. So even stillness was moving.

The stillness one is actually a relatively new addition to my teaching, because our element is the experience of movement. So I just had movement for years. And then one of the meditators objected. He said, "Look, for hardness you also include softness. For wetness you also include dryness. If you've got movement, you should include stillness." I thought, I can't argue with that. So I've included it. But it's a tricky one. Some people find it and some people don't.

Of course—and this is really basic—whatever you find is correct. You are never wrong. Your experience is your experience. Full stop.

One person mentioned they hadn't ever noticed the amount of movement everywhere. Good. Of course, according to the Buddha, these being elements, they're everywhere.

So if we talk about movement, the obvious place is in breathing. And breathing is geographically located in a particular part of the body. But air element is everywhere—everywhere in the body, and everywhere throughout the universe. The same is true for hearing and seeing, tasting. And I'm trying to think about it as I'm speaking—I suppose there is, you know, like the sound of rain, wetness. You might find those elements in the other senses as well.

One thing I always point out, and what I find very useful about this kind of exercise, is that you can find these elements in the mind. As far as I know, the Buddha never talks about them in the mind—he always just talks about them in terms of the body. But you can find them in the mind as well. Sometimes the heart is hard. Sometimes the heart is soft. Sometimes the emotion is wet. Sometimes it's dry. And so on.

I find it very useful that once you get a sense of these elemental qualities somewhere, which is simply in the body, you can start to open it up and recognise them everywhere. Which is very useful.

In our culture we throw around terms like "mind-body" as if they're separate. But as you point out, for the Buddha, they're interconnected. They're not separate. So he doesn't really talk about mind-body. He talks about nama-rupa, which we're going to be discussing more. That's the movement of mind to be aware of something, and that which is aware—they come together. So that which is aware could be what we would call body. There's a movement of the mind. And if you have one, you have the other. But that which is aware could also be mind—mind entangling with mind. Yes, interconnection, relationship—that's how the Buddha looks at things. But in the way we use language, we assume these are two separate realms, and sometimes they send ambassadors to each other.

Did anybody find that looking for these elemental qualities was hard work? Like you had to really focus to find it?

Some are harder than others.

Some are harder than others, for sure. One thing you notice here is your own sensitivity. For example, hardness and movement—earth element, air element. These generally are the two that most people find easiest to discover. And if you look at most of the meditation objects, they're earth and air. Breathing is air element. Sweeping the body, touch sensation—mostly earth element. And so on.

So one thing you're doing is mapping your particular set of sensitivities as it presents now. If you're looking for something to ground the awareness, you go for the obvious. If you can't find something, you never worry about it. You never concern yourself with what you cannot find. You just focus on what you do find, because that gives you awareness of something to hold on to. You can stay with it over a period of time. And as the mind becomes stronger and more sensitive, things which before were hidden will begin to come out. You begin to see them.

So it's a mixed package, and you're working with your sensitivities—you always favour what you're sensitive to.

Certainly these exercises are exercises in aim. Look for hard, not soft—hard. Now switch to soft, not hard—soft. We're learning to aim awareness precisely. And this is important for insight meditation.

For serenity practice, this kind of precision is not so important—you probably wouldn't bother with it. But for insight, it's essential. Insight meditation, as we'll explore more as we continue, is based on the perception of impermanence, the perception of change, of universal movement. And that means being able to distinguish between one thing and another—to see that this has changed into that. To perceive this clearly, the mind needs to be quite sharp, quite clear. So in this style of practice, developing that sharpness, that clarity, is really important. Working with the elements is an excellent exercise for cultivating that precision, because it opens up the perception of impermanence.

Take, for example, the word *vipassanā*, which is translated as insight. It's a compound word. *Passanā* is seeing, and the prefix *vi-* denotes separately, distinctly. So seeing separately, seeing distinctly. This is different from that. That is not this. This kind of perception is crucial for developing insight.

But as we said, to stimulate the mindfulness, always go for what is clearest and most obvious. Notice the difference between opening the awareness out to cover the whole field of the body, and focusing in, zeroing in on one particular aspect. Both approaches are good, both work, both are satisfactory—but you may find that one works better than the other for you.

Did anybody find a sense of relief when you opened up to the whole, to all of the elements? Yes? Like, "Ah, now I don't have to work so hard." So sometimes it's appropriate to go in for the detail, but if you find that stress or strain is being caused by this effort, then it can be good to drop it and simply open up. And to learn to move between one and the other. The Buddha talks about malleability, or the pliability of the mind, as something we cultivate in meditation practice. If I want the mind to go here, I can send it here. If I want it to go there, I can send it there. This is part of the craft we're learning.

A participant asks: When you talk about focusing and being able to name hard, soft, cold, hot—and that naming has the capacity to resolve discomfort—what's happening there?

The naming was very much part of this exercise. And the naming is part of clarification, precision. What exactly am I aware of? So that helps to clarify the experience, and you get a sense of what the naming is for. But basically, when you zero in on something, it starts to break up into its component parts. We take something to be one, but when we examine it closely, it turns out to be more than one.

The classic example is the self. I take myself to be one—that's me. But if I'm actually looking at the flow of experience, I realize that what I consider "me" is actually a whole bundle of experiences, reactions, and sensations. The Buddha talks about—I forget the exact terms—a perception that sees things in bundles and the perception that sees them as separate. It's teasing things apart. And this teasing things apart is very much part of the insight process.

What we take to be a solid something, which we can identify with—"this is me" or "this is mine"—when we start to really examine it, we see that actually it isn't solid. It's broken up into all sorts of different processes. These processes are in relationship with one another. They move according to different relationships. And "I" disappear in the midst of them.

The classic example with painful sensation: "I am hurting." We start off with that. Okay, well, what is hurting? So I'm interested. I send the awareness to the sensation. And I find that there are different sensations coming and going. Then I notice that it's not just the sensations—there's also what the mind is doing.

And the mind has aversion. I really don't want this. I want it to end. So I can switch to there—I can just see the aversion itself. Again, the elements can be useful. I find aversion is often hard. There's a hardness in the heart, as it were.

And then I can say, well, actually, what I'm taking to be one solid thing—"it hurts"—is actually a collection of sensations and a collection of psychological responses that come together and produce this. But you challenge any one of these, and the whole thing collapses. So if I've got the sensation but I don't have the aversion, it's not pain. It's something else.

So it's a breaking apart. You could say insight involves two basic movements: analysis and synthesis. Not analysis in the intellectual sense, but analysis in the sense of breaking things apart. And then we bring them together again in a different way. And for the Buddha, it's bringing them together again in a way that does not involve a self. That is what opens up the world of insight.

So you can see that what we're doing in this exercise is starting the breaking-apart process and getting used to that. And it comes from the habit of, first of all, not taking anything for granted, not assuming that we already know, and being precise with the actual direct experience. What is this? What is this? What is that? And if we practice accordingly, things start to break up.

Any questions or comments? Clear as mud?

Alright, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is when you can, be more precise with your awareness. Now you might have noticed that being precise takes a lot of energy. And what you'll find is you can't do it all the time. The mind becomes tired. So fine—sometimes you're quite general with the awareness, and sometimes you zero in and you're quite precise. Learn to move between one and the other.

And you might find that those parts of the day when you're most wide awake are the parts where it's most appropriate to go in for the detail, to really see what exactly is going on here. At the Mahasi Centre, the way Sayadaw U Pandita taught, we used to have interviews six days a week, and he would want you to report what you thought was your best sitting and your best walking session—detailed analysis. So you had to be really precise in order to satisfy his demands. And what I found, and what a lot of people found, was that each day when you went in, you would report the sitting and the walking at the same time of day. There would be a time of day when you would peak, when you were at your sharpest, and that would be the sitting and the walking that you would tell him about. Regular as clockwork, it could be. It's quite remarkable.

So you do find that there are certain times of day when the mind is clearest and sharpest. That's when you do this kind of work with the elements. There are other times of day when the mind is much more dull, or at least not energetic. Then you open up and do a more general awareness. You work according to your rhythm. Biorhythm has a lot to do with it.

Okay, thank you very much.

CHAPTER 35

What Is Real

Patrick Kearney · 50 min

> *In this profound teaching from a month-long Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney investigates the fundamental question at the heart of insight meditation: what is actually real? Drawing from the Dvayatānupassanā Sutta, he presents the Buddha's radical claim that 'whatever is regarded by the world as true, cultivated practitioners have clearly seen as false' — suggesting that our ordinary perception is fundamentally mistaken.*
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> *Kearney explains that our view of reality is deeply conditioned by avijjā (delusion), which is not merely ignorance but actively holding false views we believe utterly. This delusion operates through habit, which contains the assumed conviction that we already know what's happening. The practice reveals how we spend most of our time absent rather than present, caught in fantasies that seem real — especially when charged with emotion, which provides present-moment power to our mental constructions.*
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> *The teaching offers a practical criterion for discerning reality: what is real survives the practice of presence. Random thoughts evaporate instantly upon recognition; emotionally-charged fantasies persist longer but eventually dissolve. Through the spectrum of directed and undirected awareness, practitioners learn to recognize presence itself rather than struggling against distraction. Referencing his early training with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita at the Mahāsī Centre, Kearney emphasizes that while being aware of everything throughout the day seems impossible, being aware of what is happening now is always possible. Ultimately, even dukkha dissolves under sustained presence, revealing that our deepest problems are not as real as they appear.*

So tonight we're going to talk about what is real. This is something of a follow-on from what we were doing this morning when we looked at the elements.

If we're practicing insight meditation—what the Buddha calls vipassanā bhāvanā, the cultivation of insight—this is what we're practicing, which means, surely, that we want to know what's really going on. The project assumes that we accept that right now, as we get started, we do not know what is going on. We realize that we don't really know what's going on. In other words, we assume that we are mistaken in how we see ourselves and how we see our world.

For the Buddha, this is a reasonable assumption. He points out that our view of ourselves and of the world is conditioned. It's conditioned, for example, by events completely out of our control—the circumstances within which we were born, over which we had no say, along with the particular collection of sensitivities and capabilities that we were born with. Our view is also conditioned by the decades of choices that we've made throughout our life and the kind of life that we've led. This second aspect involves the teaching of karma, our kamma-vipāka, action and its ripening.

We are conditioned beings. For the Buddha, one of the major conditioning forces that shapes our lives is what he calls delusion—avijjā, or sometimes moha. In other words, we tend to believe things that are not true. Most people, I suspect, are conditioned to believe that our happiness and welfare is based on our income. But is it, really? Or does the dedicated pursuit of consumerism lead in a different direction?

If we are deluded, which is what the Buddha thinks, this means that we think we know what's going on, but we don't. The Pali word avijjā—vijjā is knowledge or knowing, a is the negative—so avijjā can be translated as "not knowing," ignorance. But the negative can be stronger than a simple "not." It can mean the opposite, like our English "anti." This is where you see translations like delusion. We are ignorant of what's going on, but for the Buddha, we're more than not knowing. We positively have views which are completely mistaken, and we believe in these views utterly.

We think we know what's going on, but we don't. As a result, we chase after what is not real, thinking that it is real, and we chase after what does not satisfy, thinking that it does satisfy.

This is one way that the Buddha expresses this. It comes from a sutta called the Two-Fold Consideration, the Dvayatānupassanā Sutta. He says: "Whatever is regarded by the world as 'this is true,' cultivated practitioners have clearly seen, realistically and with complete understanding, as 'this is false.' This is the first consideration."

"The world" means most of us, ordinary people, versus cultivated practitioners—mature practitioners who have developed insight.

"Whatever is regarded by the world as 'this is false,' cultivated practitioners have clearly seen, realistically and with complete understanding, as 'this is true.' This is the second consideration."

It's quite a powerful statement. Basically he's saying most of us have no idea what's going on. One thing implied by this is that what is really happening may be what we least expect. This further implies that if we want to discover what's really happening, we have to be very wary of our assumption that we know what's going to happen next. Because what we think will happen, won't. In fact, what we think is happening, isn't.

This comes up in our practice again and again. As the practice matures, we realize we will be taken by surprise—that this is built in. A willingness to be surprised, I think, is essential for this practice.

So we don't know what's going on. We tend to assume that we do know. As a result, we make all sorts of mistakes. How do we find out what's going on? For the Buddha, you do this by practicing presence—cultivating mindfulness, what the Buddha calls sati, which is recognized as the felt continuity of awareness. By "felt" I mean it's a discrete experience, and by "continuity," I mean awareness sustained over a period of time.

Or we could simply say the cultivation of sustained presence. We learn to be present to whatever is happening—to be deeply, intimately present with what's happening—without being led astray by our assumptions that we already know what's going on. We train ourselves to be alert only to the present, only to what is actually happening now. And we train to stay with this which is present now and to track it over time, to see what it does.

When we do this, some things become pretty obvious pretty quickly. For starters, we learn that staying present is very difficult. And in fact, if we're clear about it and honest about it, we have to admit that most of the time we are absent. We try to do something very simple, like following the breath, and we very quickly find ourselves caught up in a fantasy. Gradually we come to realize that most of the time we are not actually present. We were talking about the secondary object yesterday—an important part of the job of the secondary object is to show us vividly and clearly how most of the time we are absent, not present. And if that's the case, then it's no wonder that we actually don't know what's going on.

When we practice, we begin to realize that most of the time we're caught in fantasy. What we take to be real now, we later realize was fantasy, was not real. But it can take us a long time to accept that our fantasies are not real. When we state it like that, it seems pretty obvious that our fantasies are not real. But it's in the nature of fantasy that when we're caught in them, they seem real.

For example, we may be filled with anticipation about what will happen in the future. We may be caught up in our hopes, our fears, our expectations. And when we are clear, we can see that none of this is real. It's obvious that this is today—it's not sometime in the future. Sometime in the future doesn't actually exist. But when we're lost in a fantasy about next week, we are convinced in that moment of complete absence that next week is real. It's even more real than today. And then at some point we realize, oh, it's just fantasy. We realize that it really is today, not next week. But for some time we were fooled.

This is particularly the case when our fantasies are fed by the power of emotion. That's when the fantasies seem particularly real. I might be thinking about the future and I can see that the stories I'm telling myself about the future are not real. But if these stories are fed by strong emotion, then it's a whole different situation. Because the emotion is real—it's happening right now. The fantasy is about the future, but the emotion is happening in the present, in the sentient body. And the fantasy gets its power from the strength of the presently experienced emotion. That's when fantasy really seems real.

Even when we snap out of the fantasy, we may find that the emotion itself sticks around for a while, that it only gradually fades. But once it ceases, we can look back and we can appreciate that it too was not real. So we're fooled again, but this time for longer.

We do have this tendency to fall into delusion, to imagine that what is not real is real. So how do we know what is real? How do we stay grounded in what is real? The basic principle that this practice is working with is that what is real is what survives the practice of presence.

We played around with this this morning, with the elements. What is real now in the body? Is there hardness? Is there softness? Is there movement? Is there stillness? What we're doing in these exercises is getting beneath the surface appearances, getting beneath what we assume is real, and having a close look at what's actually happening. When we do that, the experience starts to change.

Take, for example, the distraction of random thoughts. We're caught up in thinking, but the thinking is quite random. The moment that we realize we're caught in these thoughts, in that moment they disappear. They evaporate immediately. In other words, they cannot survive presence, even for a moment. As soon as I know that they're there—bang—they're gone. So they're definitely not real. But if we have a fantasy that's charged with emotions...

it survives longer. But even emotion cannot survive presence for long, because when we are present, what is false evaporates. What survives presence is real.

And this uncovering is a gradual process because our delusion has depth. We snap out of one fantasy only to find ourselves in another. Essentially this is because we are in the habit of being absent most of the time.

This brings us to the problem of distraction. We've already given the example looking at the nature of mindfulness. Have you ever had an experience like you're driving down familiar streets and you suddenly realize you have no memory of the previous three blocks because you were caught up in thinking? So what happened in that kind of experience? We were driving and we were present to our driving, and then suddenly we were absent. We were out to lunch, as they say. We continue driving in that state of absence when suddenly, again without warning, bang—we're present. And we know we are present in part because we can look back and realize that in the past we were absent from the scene. In other words, we are now present to our previous absence. This is an experience of what we normally call distraction.

So why are we so easily distracted? Let's go back to our driving example. If the streets that you were driving down were entirely unfamiliar to you, if you were carefully navigating your way and anxious to avoid being lost, would you be distracted so easily? Probably not. The key to the example is that when we lose it, when we fall into habitual absence, the streets we are driving down are familiar. We might say we know them like the back of our hand. So we don't need to make any effort to navigate. We already know where we are and where we're going. At that point, habit snaps in and we drift off into thought. In that moment, we are distracted but we don't even know that we are distracted. We are absent. We are not present.

When we look at what most often destroys the quality of our engagement with what is really present, what is really going on, we find it's habit. This is because habit contains the assumed conviction that we know what is going on, along with the responses that come from that assumption. Habit is central to our delusion, because when we are lost in habit, we react without awareness, because we assume we already know what is happening. So we go to sleep, and we act out of that state of oblivion.

In this practice it's important that we stop assuming that we know what's going on—that we actually start to pay attention. It's vital that we refuse to take anything for granted, especially what we take to be real, what we take to be normal. Because where does our sense of normality come from? It's a product of our blindness and a product of our habitual deluded responses.

As the practice deepens, we uncover what is conditioning us and what is conditioning our reality, our sense of reality. These are our buried assumptions, our unconscious drives and needs. This is what the Buddha calls the āsavas. He translates them as influences. The old translation is cankers—I don't know if you've ever come across that. The Buddha doesn't like cankers.

But the challenge in the practice is: do not take anything for granted. Remain radically present to what is happening now.

When we try to do this, again, we get tripped up by distraction. The result is we cultivate a certain relationship with distraction. We often dismiss distraction as an interruption to our meditation practice. Have you ever had that response, that feeling?

The distraction is an interruption, it's just getting in the way. In other words, we think that our experience can be cleanly divided into two aspects: meditation object, which is good, and distraction, which is bad. But when we have that attitude, we're completely missing the point. The point is to find out what's really going on, including what's really going on with distraction.

So it's important not to dismiss distraction, but simply return to presence. And of course, returning to presence embraces distraction, because sometimes what is present *is* distraction. Do not try to avoid distraction—for a start, it's impossible. Instead of trying to avoid distraction, cultivate presence. Learn to be present to distraction by recognizing now what is happening now.

Let's look at how we might play with that in the meditation practice. We've talked about directed awareness and undirected awareness, what Mahasi calls noting and noticing. When we direct awareness, we make a choice to turn towards and aware something, and of course that something becomes our meditation object. But our mind fights us. It wants to roam wherever it decides. We do not decide to slide off into distraction—our mind decides. And it follows the well-worn tracks of habit that have been cultivated over decades. So we find ourselves in a struggle between meditation on one side and distraction on the other, and often we can't help but notice that we are on the losing side.

So what's the alternative? One alternative is to play with the spectrum of directed and undirected awareness. When we become sensitive to the movement between these two, what we find is a flow between presence and absence, and back to presence again. This flow is just part of nature, to be accepted as what is really going on—and therefore worthy of study.

When we are not sensitive to this spectrum, when we're trying to hold onto directed awareness exclusively because this is our meditation, then we find ourselves living in a hierarchy of meditation object versus distraction. The meditation object is good and distraction is bad, so we try to avoid distraction. And when we realize we are distracted, we run away from that experience to something more acceptable. We create a situation where meditation becomes work, from which we want to take regular holidays. Have you ever had that relationship in a meditation retreat? Worse, meditation can become a war where the enemy is ourselves, and so we are bound to lose—whoever wins.

Instead, what we might try to do is cultivate recognition of what we already know. We played with this before in the recognition of posture. So right now, are you sitting? Do you know you are sitting? Maybe you forgot. Maybe you were so caught up in this fantastic Dharma talk that you completely forgot your posture. But how difficult is it to remember? Right now, I am sitting. And once we remember, do we have to deliberately direct awareness toward sitting? Or do we simply recognize what we already know? Do we have to get back from somewhere, or have we already arrived?

Learning to recognize what we already know—this happens when we remember awareness itself. If we discover this, we may find ourselves in a situation where we do not have to struggle to maintain a practice. We're not struggling to be present. We simply recognize that we are already present.

Presence itself involves both directed and undirected awareness. If we place too much emphasis on directed awareness, we find ourselves bouncing between meditation object and distraction, accompanied by all the attitudes and judgment that go along with this. When we're present to the whole spectrum—a flow between directed and undirected awareness—what we find is a continuity between presence and absence.

They're no longer opposites. They're more like different sides of the same coin. Because absence is inevitable. The real issue becomes: how do we transition between presence and absence and back again? There's no need for any hierarchy of superior or inferior. And there's no need for any judgment of ourselves or of our experience. There's just the flow of awareness. Present, absent, present, absent.

And one thing we might begin to realize is that fundamentally, presence is more important than what is present. Our obsession with distraction is one aspect of our obsession with the content of our experience. We think certain things should be happening, and certain other things should not be happening. But in mindfulness practice, what's important is presence itself, not what we are present to. That we are distracted does not matter. What matters is that we learn to become present—for example, to our distraction.

The one key point is this: we can only be present to what is happening now. Presence involves intimacy. And intimacy does not care what is present. It does not care whether we think of what is present as being a distraction or whether we think of it as a meditation object.

Now, I'm not simply dismissing meditation objects. Meditation objects can be useful because they provide a stable point from which we can look out at what's going on. We've been talking about this in terms of a grounding object. The meditation object gives us something to do while we wait for something to happen. But of course, what are we waiting for? We're waiting for what is already happening, but which we might be too busy to notice.

Immediacy is only concerned with now and what is happening now. So don't get caught up in progress. Don't get so caught up in progress that you miss what is happening now because you're busy waiting for the meditation to come good sometime in the future. Don't get trapped in images of what should be happening or what should not be happening. The only interesting question is: what is happening? Because what is happening is what is real.

Which brings us back to where we began. In the lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw, the basic practice is described as noting, which means being directly aware of whatever is happening now. We begin with the body, with physical experience. And we do this for purely pragmatic reasons: for most people, the body is easy to be aware of and relatively easy to stay with over a period of time.

As we're directly aware, we notice that whatever we are aware of changes. Nothing is stable. Nothing stays still. Experience is dynamic. And where does this dynamism come from?

Let's look at what the Buddha says in Dhammapada, verses one and two. The Dhammapada is a classic collection of verses, each with stories attached to it. In the Theravada tradition, it's a real classic. But there are Dhammapadas in other Buddhist traditions as well—each tradition created its own collection of verses. The Theravada Dhammapada begins with these two verses:

Mind shapes experiences. Mind is first. Experiences are made by mind. If we speak or act with corrupt mind, pain follows us like a wheel follows the ox's foot.

Mind shapes experiences. Mind is first. Experiences are made by mind. If we speak or act with pure mind, happiness follows us like a shadow that never leaves.

These are very famous opening verses. Notice the image: if we speak or act with corrupt mind, pain follows us like a wheel follows the ox's foot. The ox is pulling a heavily laden cart.

And it's really working. It's really slogging away. The cart is full. There's somebody sitting on the cart giving the occasional biff to the ox to get it moving. Slog, slog, slog, slog. That's if we speak or act with corrupt mind. But if we speak or act with pure mind, happiness follows us like a shadow that never leaves. If you're walking along on a sunny day, have you ever felt that your shadow is holding you back? That you're dragging this heavy weight of the shadow? You don't even notice it.

What we want to focus on in these two verses is the mind itself, talked about in terms of its activity. "Mind shapes experiences. Mind is first. Experiences are made by mind." The Buddha is directing us to look at what the mind does—to look at its activity, its dynamism. When we note something, when we are directly aware of something, we feel the mind moving toward that object. Breathing, physical sensation, whatever. Mind is active. Mind is doing. Body, as a meditation object, is not doing. It is done. It is shaped by mind. It is targeted by mind. But the dynamism is in the movement of awareness itself. And this movement of the mind towards an object comes from a choice made now to be aware. This is the work we're undertaking: now, make the choice to be aware.

Decades ago, in 1984, when I first started practicing in this lineage, I spent a week at Mahasi Centre in Rangoon. In those days, you could only get a one-week tourist visa. There were no meditation visas. You could only get into Burma for one week. So I popped in there, travelling between India and Thailand, and walked through the front gate. They admitted me, which was nice of them, and I was instructed to turn up from eight to eight-thirty every morning for instruction by the monk whose job it was to teach the foreigners.

At the time, that monk was Sayadaw U Pandita, who was also the head monk of the place. He'd just taken on the job of teaching the foreigners, and because he was very busy, he only had thirty minutes a day in which to do it. But when I turned up, I was the only foreigner. So I had thirty minutes a day with him, which was a very good introduction.

At some point during that week, U Pandita gave me a very clear instruction. He said, "Look, what this practice is all about, what you're here to do, is this: be aware of everything that happens throughout the day, from the moment you wake up in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night, right down to the blinking of your eyes. That's your job."

When he told me that, my response in my mind was, "That is impossible." But I had been there long enough to know that the correct response was, "Yes, Sayadaw." That's what I said, and I went off and gave it a go. I have to admit that after a day or so, I decided it really is impossible. I was right. It just can't be done.

But what I realised was that what is possible is to be aware of what is happening now. It's impossible to be aware of everything throughout the entire day. But it's always possible to be aware of what's happening now. And that is the key: the choice made now to be aware.

So the mind's distinguishing characteristic is movement.

Movement toward its object. And the movement of awaring is clearest, according to Mahasi Sayadaw, when the object we are awaring is clearest. If that object is clear, the movement towards it is clear. So look for what is clear and obvious, and aware it now.

As we were discussing, we start with the obvious. We use questions like: What is obvious now? What is clear now? Or we could give ourselves something specific to aware, something which is clear and easily found. It could be the breathing—what is my experience of breathing now? It could be physical sensations—what is the clearest sensation in my body now? It could be my posture—how is my body arranged now? We start now with that which is clear, that which is obvious.

If we maintain awareness over a period of time, if we're committed to this job, this involves effort. And effort is found in the commitment to renew the choice to aware again and again. In other words, to renew it now. Because once we make the choice, it's already over—it's a new now, and it's time to make the choice again. The commitment is to do this despite all the obstacles that the mind throws up to persuade us to postpone this choice. For example, to postpone the choice to aware until circumstances are better: "After a day or two when I've settled down, it would be much easier."

So what to do if obstacles come up? When do the obstacles come up? Now. Choose to aware the obstacle. Actively aware whatever seems to get in the way. This is what we've been calling the secondary object.

The traditional aim of the practice is the experience of Nibbāna—in English, nirvana. Nibbāna is the complete cessation of dukkha, the complete cessation of pain. And why do we come to meditate? Let's face it—why would otherwise sensible people spend their month's holiday at a meditation centre instead of going to a resort where they can enjoy themselves? What are you doing here? Why do we come? It's because we have dukkha, and we know we have dukkha, and we want to do something about it. That's why we're here.

So we are driven by our dukkha, which means that dukkha sets our agenda. But the Buddha is saying that dukkha is not real. Dukkha also does not survive presence. Continual presence dissolves pain. Our problems feed on our absences, and the more continually and radically present we are, the more our problems dissolve. Because ultimately, as far as the Buddha is concerned, our problem is not real. It's a fantasy.

What's real is this—what's happening now. Just immediate intimacy, about which fundamentally nothing can be said, because any words that we weave around it are just words woven around. And this now is always available. It's available right now. When we learn to take refuge in the present, what we find is that our suffering will dissolve.

And keep in mind that presence cannot be postponed. The choice is made now or it's not made. Presence is not something that is going to happen tomorrow or next week. Presence is happening now, or not at all. So please use this retreat as an opportunity to cultivate presence.

A question arose: "In the beginning you said that fantasy is charged by emotion for survival. But the emotion itself—does that survive?"

No. The stronger the emotion, the sooner it departs, because it requires so much energy to maintain it. But when a fantasy is fueled by emotion, it seems much more real, because the emotion is real in the present.

"But emotion itself—is it real?"

The emotion itself is real because it's powerful. We feel it in the body. But does it survive the present? Have you ever had an emotion that never goes away?

"No, but it sometimes lingers for a while."

It lingers for a while. And so that makes it more real than, for example, a fantasy about some random subject. A random thought that has no emotional charge—you realize, "Oh, I'm thinking," and then it's over. But a story I'm telling myself which is fueled by emotion could last for hours, could last for days. Yet sooner or later, it ends. What gives it that sense of reality is the emotion itself. And the emotion is felt very intensely because it's in the body. So it carries much more charge and it lasts longer. But it too ends. It too dissolves. And then I look back and realize, "No, that was a fantasy. I was caught up in something that actually, right now, doesn't exist."

"And emotion is something you don't have control over."

That's right. Again, it's conditioning. We are conditioned. Our experience is deeply conditioned. This is part of the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising. And this is why his teaching of karma is so central. Karma literally means action—but it's action that comes from choice. And again, it comes back to choice.

Classically, let's say I'm meditating and I slide off into a fantasy. I don't know that I've slid off into a fantasy—it's conditioned by the past. Then suddenly I know I'm thinking. And as soon as I know that I'm thinking, I'm faced with a choice. Well, I could just finish this story off. Or I could simply drop it now. That's the karma. That's the choice. And that choice conditions my future experience.

So if I make the choice to simply be present—right now it's just "I'm thinking," that's it—then the habit of being lost in thinking weakens. The choices that we make are really, really central for the Buddha. This is the whole teaching of karma. Becoming sensitive to the choices that we're making right now is an important part of the practice—and also recognizing how much of my experience I can't do anything about.

It's conditioned by the past. But there's always one bit of my experience where I have a choice. And the Buddha says, this is really, really important. Pay attention to it and see if you can make a good choice.

This is the balance between samadhi and sati, between concentration and mindfulness. Part of the role of the grounding object is to develop samadhi, concentration or unification. This is the stability of the mind, and this gives depth to the experience. The job of the grounding object is to provide that stability and stillness and depth.

If we spend too much time on secondary objects, particularly in the early stages when we're getting started, many people will find that they just fluff about. They're just drifting from one thing to another. So they feel that they need to really stay with the grounding object.

Now again, we talked about this very early on. A lot depends on the individual. For some people, they really need something to hold on to. They really need a clear grounding object to stabilize the mind enough so they can begin to see the movements of the mind and the body without getting swept away. So, grounding object, grounding object, grounding object, stick with the walking. Other people find that just ties them up in knots, and it doesn't really work for them. They find that they can settle much more easily if they open up, and they're more oriented towards what we call the secondary object.

So it does depend on individuals. It's not that one single technique fits everybody. Part of your job as a meditator is to find out what works for you, what strategy works best for you.

The basic principle of this style of practice is that mindfulness leads concentration. The emphasis is on developing mindfulness. If the mindfulness gets stronger and stronger, the concentration will follow. Other forms of meditation lead with the concentration. First develop the concentration, and the mindfulness will come along in its wake. So you can go in different directions. In a general sense, this style of practice emphasizes mindfulness. But even then, some people, and it's partly an expression of their personality, really emphasize the concentration aspect of it.

For example, in the formal sitting and walking, they're really going for slow, deliberate movement. In the sitting, really staying with the grounding object. And in the ordinary daily activity, that's when the mindfulness comes in. But other people find that doesn't work for them. So they have a different relationship. It's up to you to decide what relationship suits you best.

I remember one student who used to practice here. There was one retreat that she did, a nine-day retreat, and she was really going for the concentration. She was not mucking around. And she was moving so slowly that when the bell went for lunch and she was in the hall, it took her an hour to get to the dining hall. I'm not exaggerating. The staff would keep the food warm for her. And it would take another hour to get back down. It was really slow walking, and she went really, really deep. But what she was doing was quite deliberately doing a samadhi or concentration-oriented style of practice. Other people, if they tried to do that, their heads would explode and they wouldn't get very far. So they do something else.

It's very much like you use the basic structure and work out what's my relationship to it, what works for me. But the general principle is stay present to whatever is happening. Does that make sense?

If you're forcing it, then the best thing to do is to speed up. Because what we want to do is to be mindful, to be aware the whole day. If I'm forcing something, I cannot do it the whole day. I just fall over in a heap at some point. So with right effort, sustainability is really important. What relationship can you have to experience that you can maintain over the entire day?

That's the key point. Now sometimes in a day, you'll be really focused and high energy. At other times of the day, you won't be, because you simply don't have the energy. So again, you adapt to individual circumstances.

The term that the Buddha uses is *manu*, which is one of the terms for mind. But I think what he's getting at by mind is the whole process of knowing, of awareing. So both the kind of elemental quality—I know that this is the in-breath, I know that this is the out-breath—but it's also perception, feeling, the judgments about it, the whole bundle of relationships that I project onto the experience. I think that's what he's talking about there.

Tonight was very technical, but not to worry. As the month goes on, we'll get even more technical.

CHAPTER 36

Tracking Breathing (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · 45 min

> *In this practical workshop from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney leads participants through a series of experiments designed to investigate the breath as a meditation object. Rather than prescribing a single correct approach, he invites meditators to discover how breathing actually presents itself to them—exploring where sensations are clearest, the directions movements travel, relative lengths of in-breath and out-breath, and even the space within which breathing occurs.*
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> *The discussion that follows reveals the remarkable variety of experiences among practitioners. Some find clarity in the abdomen, others at the nostrils or ribcage. For one student, focusing on direction transformed a typically stressful relationship with breath meditation into something workable. Kearney shares how another long-time practitioner finally connected with the breath by attending to the space around it rather than the movements themselves. This illustrates a core principle: there is no single correct experience, only what is actually presenting now.*
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> *Kearney addresses common difficulties with breath meditation, including its unsuitability as a grounding object for those with respiratory conditions or anxiety. He explains how the precision required in noting details serves the larger purpose of perceiving impermanence (aniccā)—if meditation feels boring and repetitive, one simply isn't paying close enough attention to see change. The workshop emphasizes a playful, experimental approach while cautioning against the common tendency to interfere with or control the breath, which can create a fabricated 'meditation breath' that takes years to undo.*

This morning we're going to look at breathing as meditation object. Breathing is probably the most common meditation object in the world of Buddhist meditation. It's practiced by the Buddha, taught by the Buddha, recommended by the Buddha, so it comes highly credentialed. Although, as I think we mentioned, it's not necessarily the best grounding object for everybody. For some people it's quite a difficult meditation object. But what we'll do is a series of experiments in breathing meditation, and then we'll see what happens as a result.

Settle into your meditation posture, constructing the posture from the ground up. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body, and from there lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact with the ground. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Are you breathing? How do you know you are breathing? Isn't it the experience of movement within your body—movements of breathing in and breathing out? Bring your awareness to these movements of in-breath and out-breath. Where are these movements clearest and most obvious to you? In your belly? In your midriff? In your chest, in your throat, shoulders, or head? Focus wherever these movements are clearest and most obvious to you.

If there are movements, these movements must be going somewhere. In what directions do these movements of your in-breath and out-breath travel? Are they vertical, moving up and down? Are they horizontal, moving in and out? Are they curved or curly? Do they expand and contract? Focus on directions. In which directions are these movements going?

Let's assume there are two movements, one for your in-breath and one for your out-breath. Is the movement of your in-breath longer or shorter than the movement of your out-breath? Is the movement of your out-breath longer or shorter than the movement of your in-breath? Which one is longest? Which one is shortest? Or are they of equal length? Focus on length.

Is the movement of your in-breath clearer or less clear than the movement of your out-breath? Is the movement of your out-breath clearer or less clear than the movement of your in-breath? Or are they both equally clear, or both equally obscure? Focus on clarity. Which one is clearest? Which one is least clear?

Can you see the beginning and the end of the movement of your in-breath? Can you see the beginning and the end of the movement of your out-breath? Or are you missing parts? If you are missing parts, which parts are you missing? Focus on beginnings and ends.

Movement happens within space. Can you find the space within which your breathing moves? For this one, do not focus on the movements, but open your awareness to the space through which these movements travel. Can you find it? Don't worry if you cannot. Do not strain to find it.

Just notice the movements and feel the space around them. You need to be precise and detailed in your awareness to do these exercises.

As you do them, do you feel any sense of strain in your mind? Do you feel any tension in your body? Do you find yourself interfering in any way with the movements of your breathing? If any of this is happening, step back from the details of the movements and relax. Be aware of the movements. Don't do the movements. Be aware. Don't do.

So where were they? Where were they clearest and most obvious?

In the abdomen. And entrance at the nostrils. Simultaneously? Yes. So simultaneously up here and down here. And that was consistent? Pretty much. Sometimes it was just the nostrils, sometimes it was just there.

Anyone else? Where were they clearest? Belly? Ribcage. Is that normal, finding it in the ribcage? Not abnormal. So just today, that's where it happened to be. And for you? Beginning with the solar plexus, but gradually it dropped down as the whole thing progressed.

You notice that we start with what is clear, what is obvious. That's the basic place to start. If you're practising mindfulness—and we're talking more about mindfulness here—but in the tradition, when they ask the question, "What gives rise to mindfulness?" one of the answers is a clear perception. So if something is clear, you can cultivate a continuity of awareness on it. Look for what is clear.

In the different mindfulness techniques that come down to us, when we're presented with the recommended primary object or grounding object, the reason why that was selected was because the people who created the method thought this would be clear. So go for what is clear. If we settle awareness on what is clear, what is obvious, and stay with it, the mind will become stronger, clearer, more subtle, and what is originally hidden will emerge quite naturally.

What directions were they travelling in?

I think direction was the easiest to stay with. Initially, lying down, there's the expansion and contraction—the change in the horizontal direction. Through the nose, I thought it was kind of in and out, but then at some point I realised it was actually more curving around.

So you found direction really useful? Yes. Normally I find focusing on the breath quite traumatic. I find it activating and a bit stressful.

Keep playing around with the direction. But the more general principle is—well, first of all, breathing can be problematic. For a lot of people it's problematic. It's problematic for me because I've got lifelong asthma, bronchitis, and so on and so forth. So when I started meditation back in the day, and there were these books that

went on and on about the glories of breathing meditation—how mystical it is, how you become one with the universe, how the universe breathes through you, and so on and so forth. And I thought, "I have no idea what they're talking about." Breathing is a struggle to survive as far as I'm concerned.

So if breathing is problematic, first of all, you don't treat it as a grounding object. It's simply not suitable. Secondly, you treat it as a secondary object. Basically, when it swims into view, you acknowledge it—okay, here it is—but you go for something that is clear and obvious to you and not upsetting. And in this case, it was the direction.

One student shared: "For the last four months, I've had this chronic nasal congestion, and I'm asthmatic as well. So at one point, after the direction exercise, doing whatever came next, I got this wave of emotion and tears started coming. And then, of course, the nose got more blocked. And so breathing through the mouth and being self-conscious that I'm making too much noise—I just had to skip ahead."

Did anybody find the space within which you breathe? You found it? And it was also in the abdomen, so you could actually feel your abdomen expanding. Was that sense of looking for the space clear?

"It's a familiar kind of thing."

Anybody else find space? Did anybody think, "What the hell is he talking about?"

"I have a sense of my physical boundaries. There's space in my breath that I've got to find. But the challenge was—I didn't really understand the question."

When I drop in these things, they can be quite discombobulating. Or they can make perfect sense. You just don't know until you try. But the reason I introduced space was that I had one student who had been meditating for a long time. And one time in an interview, he said that he had finally clicked with breathing meditation—after struggling with it for years and years, he finally clicked. I asked him, "So how did you do it?" And he said, "I just forgot about the breathing and focused on the space within which the breathing happens." And there it was, perfectly clear. So I decided to add it to the script.

These things are quite mysterious—what the mind will hit on. And this I can get. So in your case, it was directions. And the space too. Good.

You never know. Some of these things that I toss in are completely obscure. You might think, "I have no idea what you're talking about." Fine. Just forget about it. But you're playing around to see what you can find, what does make sense. And it's quite arbitrary. It's not that there's right and there's wrong. We're just playing about.

Actually, there's another one I didn't include in the script, but I should add: rhythm. Isn't there a rhythm to the movement? And that comes from the same place—a long-time student who said, "I've discovered the rhythm of the breath, and then I could stay with it."

But these are just illustrations of the creativity that you bring to this practice. For a start, what is the experience? How does it actually present to you? And what aspect of it can I connect with?

Which one is longest? Which one is shortest? That's a pretty obvious one, isn't it? Out long, in short. How many people would vote for a long out and a short in? How many people would vote the opposite—long in, short out?

So you notice that there's no one correct answer. There's never one correct answer. There is never one correct experience. There's what you are experiencing now. That's it. That's what's going on.

But yes, let's experiment further. Which one is clearest—in or out? Some find them pretty much the same, but with the in being so much longer than the out. The in was definitely longer than the out, but both equally clear.

Did you find beginnings and ends? Were they clear? How many people found a clear, distinct border to the end of the out-breath—like, this is the point that the out-breath ends? Some know it's the end, but it's kind of faded because it overlaps with the beginning of the in-breath. You know it's finished, but you can't actually pinpoint exactly when. It's not like a dot. It's more of a fade. What about the end of the in-breath? Is that a dot? So you can't quite pinpoint it—it's a continuous flow. We'll get back to that.

Is there a gap between out and in, a rest period? Anybody find the gap between the out and the in? This is fairly common. One of the things about the out-breath is apparently—and when I say these physiological things I'm really guessing because I just hear about them—but apparently the body relaxes on the out-breath. And what can easily happen when people are doing breathing meditation and they complain that they're falling asleep or getting really dull, usually, more often than not, it happens on the out-breath. The out-breath kind of fades away, and as the out-breath fades away, the mind fades away.

So that's something to look for if you are getting dull during breathing meditation. Check your relationship to the out-breath. Check to see if there is a gap between the out-breath and the in-breath. And what does the mind do during that gap? Is it staying sharp and alert? Or is it going out for a snack and coming back later on?

These are the sorts of things to check on.

When I talked about movements, and this is something that you raised, I said let's assume there are two movements—one for the in-breath, one for the out-breath. Is that correct? Are there two movements?

"You would debate that. It just happens."

Yes, I think that's a fairly common experience. And when that happens, it shows you that if you're going to space out during breathing meditation, you're more likely to space out on the out-breath.

"Can I also say that it's the place where I will stop breathing? On the out-breath. If something happens, I actually hold it from that point."

That's another interesting thing about breathing—the close relationship between the breathing and the emotional life, and how they interconnect.

"For me it was the two polar opposites. So it's the same movement, but one is going up, the other one is going down. So there's not two movements, there's actually one movement, but it just changes direction."

Correct. How many people would agree with that? It's actually one movement.

"I don't know. Three movements."

Three movements? So discrete, separate movements, each in and out?

"No, they're overlapped. But you could distinguish them."

Good. So again, this shows us the variety of experiences that people have. We assume that if you have a room full of people and they're given the instruction to be mindful of breathing, they're all doing the same thing. But actually they're not. They're doing different things, because the breathing—what we call breathing, quote-unquote—presents in different ways at different times to different people. And as meditators, what we want to do is clarify: how is it presenting to me now?

"Patrick, when you were having interviews with Dada, specifically around breathing, would he be asking questions around direction, or would you be expected to report on that?"

First of all, he emphasized rising and falling of the abdomen, and you had to report that. You just had to. So in that sense it was quite rigid. But within that, what he wanted to know was exactly this kind of detail. How long was it? What was clear? What was not clear? What bits were missing? What bits were not missing? So it was using the structure of the rising and falling of the abdomen, but using that to be really detailed and precise on what exactly is happening—not just, "Oh, you know, it goes up and down." That was not good enough.

And the precision is important. We talked about it yesterday, and it's the same thing here. If you're practicing for insight, if that's the project, well, how does insight arise? The Buddha says it arises through the perception of impermanence, through the perception of change.

If someone comes into an interview, for example, and let's say they're using breathing as a meditation object, and I say, "How is it?" and they say, "Oh, it's really boring. This is really boring." And I say, "How is it boring?" And they say, "I'm sitting there breathing in, out, in, out, all day long." Now, do they get my sympathy? No. I say, "Well, obviously, you are not paying attention."

Because if you were paying attention, it would not be the same. This is really basic for this style of practice.

So we're generating accuracy and precision, but we're doing it because we want to see change. And the more accurate you are, the more change will present itself. Therefore, the more detail you can present in an interview. And if you're presenting detail in an interview, then the teacher can think, okay, they're seeing change.

Now, what detail is being presented is usually completely irrelevant. It really doesn't matter. But the fact that there is detail means the person is seeing change—that this breath is not the same as that breath. But if this breath is the same as that breath, that's the perception of permanence, nicca-saññā. And for the Buddha, the human condition of delusion is built upon nicca-saññā, the perception of sameness. The perception of self is built upon the perception of sameness, for example. You can't have a sense of self unless you're sitting there having this discussion, absolutely convinced that the person sitting here having this discussion is exactly the same person who turned up here a few days ago. If you don't believe that, you can't have a self.

So the perception of change is really important. And what the method is doing is getting an entry into that by using detail and precision.

Anybody find they were interfering with the breathing? Why were you doing that? Anxiety and breathing—closely linked. A psychologist and long-time meditator, a friend of mine, when he teaches meditation, strongly recommends that people suffering from anxiety should not use breathing as a meditation object. They should just not use it. It's not suitable. I'm not a psychologist, so I'm not in a position to comment, but anxiety and focusing on breathing can be very close.

The relationship to breathing is very important because it's very easy to reach out and try to control it—especially when it's a meditation object, and especially when it's an important meditation object. Because we're projecting all this importance onto it. And it's got to perform. If it's not performing, how can I succeed in my meditation practice? So it's an open invitation to anxiety.

Getting a sense of whether you're interfering with the breathing or not is quite important for a lot of people. And if you feel that you are, drop it. And as you just told us, you discovered a way that you could drop it—just anchor and let the breathing do whatever it does. What I'm actually doing is allowing us to sit still and be aware of what's actually happening, to see where it's coming from.

For this reason, breathing is not suitable as a grounding object for a certain proportion of the population. Very good as a secondary object, but not necessarily good as a grounding object. One thing to watch is that it is very easy to interfere with the breathing, so that's one thing to be wary of.

Although, again, as an illustration of the variety of experience—one time I was having this discussion in a practice workshop, and one of the meditators objected. She said, "How can I tell if I'm interfering with the breathing if the only time I know what it's doing is when I'm looking at it? So how can I tell whether that's interference or not?" And I thought, this person should be a lawyer.

This is a really good objection. I find it's a bit like that idea in quantum physics—that if something is observed, it's going to change automatically. So I do think even just being aware of the breath is affecting it somewhat.

This is something that's worthy of attention, but simply watch for it. If you find yourself getting into that sense of clinging or strain or grabbing, then step back, drop it, relax, and just be aware. You might find yourself extending the breath because you're trying really hard to pay attention. This is one of the problems with precision, particularly with the breath—you can interfere with it.

I think during my meditation boot camp in Burma, one of the things I did was, over time, create my "meditation breath." And then it took years to drop it afterwards when it was just getting in the way. But this is part of the broader issue: how can I be aware of something without interfering with it? Just simply be aware of it. And it's very, very delicate.

So don't be perfectionistic, but when you see a problem emerge, be aware of the problem and then step back. See what happens. This process is experimental. And we never get to a full conclusion, because the experience itself is constantly changing. But be playful with it. Don't take anything for granted. Just see what it is now.

So, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to go forth and breathe. Be aware. And see what happens as a result.

Some traditions link breathing with walking meditation—one breath, one step, that sort of thing. For me that makes it far too complicated, so I don't do that; I just do the walking. But as you do the walking, what can happen is the breathing becomes very clear, and sometimes breathing and movement spontaneously interconnect. You find a distinct breathing pattern associated with a distinct moving pattern. That can definitely happen, so breathing can become part of the moving meditation. But you don't have to make it be part of the moving meditation.

When you find the breath comforting, that sounds good. It's positive because it means there's less resistance and less likelihood of getting tangled up. It helps the serenity if it's comfortable. And that's good.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 37

Mindfulness with Breathing

Patrick Kearney · 47 min

In this evening talk from the 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney offers a careful reading of the Buddha's condensed instructions on ānāpānasati (mindfulness with breathing), drawing particularly from the Ānāpānasati Sutta. He emphasizes that these ancient teachings function as an 'executive summary' to be used creatively rather than applied literally, and explores the progressive stages the Buddha outlines: from simple mindful breathing, to understanding (pajānāti), to deliberate training (sikkhati).

Kearney illuminates a crucial distinction often missed by practitioners: the practice is about mindfulness, not about breathing. He references Ajahn Buddhadāsa's translation of ānāpānasati as 'mindfulness with breathing' rather than 'of breathing' to highlight this shift in emphasis. When we project excessive importance onto the breath itself, trying to make it 'spiritual' or worrying whether it's 'good enough,' we create the very obstacles that block our practice. The talk explores how this misplaced focus strengthens the sense of subject-object duality—the self as someone separate from experience who seeks results.

The teaching traces a journey into increasing intimacy with experience, where breathing eventually transmutes into vāyodhātu (air element) extending throughout and beyond the body. This intimacy is conveyed through the verb paṭisaṃvedati—to feel or sense—suggesting direct touching of experience rather than distant observation. As concepts about breathing fall away and the body construction (kāya saṅkhāra) calms, practitioners discover the interplay of serenity and insight that characterizes the Buddha's path. Kearney situates this practice within kāyagatā sati (mindfulness immersed in body), emphasizing the Buddha's view that we are sentient bodies, not souls trapped within physical forms.

This morning we looked at mindfulness of breathing as a practical meditation exercise, and in particular at a style of mindfulness of breathing which suits the Insight Project. Tonight we're going to examine the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness of breathing.

These instructions are very brief. They represent a kind of idealised template of the practice, not something to be taken literally as "I must do this and in this order." It's more like an executive summary—we can be guided by it but use it creatively. This is actually true of a lot of the suttas, because they're so dense, so brief. You tend to get tangled up in knots if you take everything to be absolutely literal and to be applied to every person and every situation.

The Buddha begins: "Here a practitioner goes into a forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty residence, sits down, crosses her legs, straightens her back, and establishes her mindfulness directly."

This is a standard sentence that introduces whenever the Buddha is talking about formal meditation practice. Notice that the first thing to do is find the right place in which to practice. For him, it's pretty obvious that the correct place to practice is the forest. So what are we doing here? There's lots of forest out there. But if you can't find a forest, then find a tree. Actually, there is a big tree out there that sometimes people use for that very purpose. And if you can't find a tree, then one could use an empty residence or an empty place.

Notice that "empty" does not necessarily mean that no one else is around. It can also mean that it is empty of any purpose other than the meditation practice. So this hall is an empty place or an empty residence. If you have a corner in your house set aside for meditation practice, that's an empty place. First find the right place.

Second, establish posture. As we have mentioned, meditation is a physical activity. We tend to see it as spiritual, I think partly because in the European tradition we inherit an understanding that sees the essence of a person, their soul, to be somehow radically separate from their body. This understanding is traditional to Europe but completely alien to the Buddha.

From the Buddha's perspective, we are bodies. We are not souls trapped inside a body. We are bodies. We are sentient bodies—bodies that are aware, but bodies. Ānāpānasati is part of mindfulness immersed in body, kāyagatā sati. It's one aspect of mindfulness of body. Our connection with our sentient body is central in this practice, and one way that we get in tune with it is through posture. The body is always in a posture. As the Buddha says, there are four postures: moving, standing, sitting, lying down. The posture is how the sentient body expresses its inner nature, its inner structure, as it is now.

To establish a posture is to settle body and mind into their natural state. When the body is balanced, it's easier for the mind to become balanced.

First we find the right place, then we establish posture, and then finally we establish mindfulness directly. The language the Buddha uses and the similes he employs to talk about mindfulness are always very earthy. When he says "establish mindfulness directly," he's talking about the directness or groundedness that characterises mindfulness. We plant ourselves in a meditation posture and directly confront the reality of our

physical situation. For example, it hurts. We also, within this posture, directly confront our own minds. Our mind might feel trapped in this posture, might feel uncomfortable, might want to get out of here.

We establish mindfulness directly through posture. We plant ourselves into this position, and then we're ready to confront what's going on—perhaps through a chosen meditation object. In this case, the breathing.

Find the right place, establish posture, and within that posture establish mindfulness directly, confronting the reality of body and mind.

And then the Buddha goes on describing the practitioner. This is typical of the Buddha when he's talking about meditation practice. Often what he will do is describe someone doing it, rather than give an abstract definition. He says, "Mindfully she breathes in, mindfully she breathes out." So establish the posture and then find the movements that indicate breathing and breathe mindfully.

So far it's all very simple, very basic, very natural. For starters, we are already breathing. We don't have to do anything extra in this practice. The only difference is that we are now breathing with mindfulness, which means we are remembering the breathing.

We are already breathing. But do we know we are breathing? Not know intellectually, but are we directly experiencing breathing? Can we remember that we are already breathing? Can we notice our tendency to forget our breathing? All of this is bound up with mindfulness. The key here is the mindfulness, and mindfulness is sustained awareness, the felt continuity of awareness over time.

Perhaps this point might be useful to remind ourselves that mindfulness of breathing is not about breathing. It's about mindfulness. What we translate as mindfulness of breathing, ānāpānasati, is a compound. Sati is mindfulness, ānāpāna is in and out breathing. Grammatically there are different possibilities of how you connect those two words when you create a compound. Traditionally it's regarded as "of." Ajahn Buddhadasa of Thailand translated it as "with"—mindfulness with breathing. Notice how this gives it a whole different flavour. It shifts the emphasis and makes it clear it's not about the breathing. It's about the mindfulness. It's about our relationship with breathing.

A mistake we can easily make is to assume that mindfulness of breathing, or with breathing, is about breathing. In other words, we can assume that what we're being asked to do is something special with our breathing—for example, to make it more spiritual. This attitude often results in problems.

One thing that can happen is that I might find awareness being sucked into the breathing, with the breathing becoming increasingly distorted. Over time, this can be accompanied by a sense of claustrophobia and tightness. Sometimes the breathing really becomes very strong, stronger than necessary. This happens because when I focus deliberately, it's easy to interfere with the breathing by breathing deliberately. This is why this morning we had that last exercise: Am I interfering with the breathing? Because it's a very common thing.

The effort I'm supposed to be making in this practice is the effort, the commitment, to remember my breathing. That effort, that commitment, is entirely in the mind. But it leaks out into the body and I find myself breathing deliberately, breathing with effort. I easily forget that I don't have to breathe deliberately—I have to attend deliberately. I have to aim my awareness deliberately.

In other words, if we're talking about mindfulness of breathing, I've forgotten the "mindfulness of" and I've got sucked into the breathing. I'm projecting into the breathing far more importance than it would normally have. Instead of just being what I'm already doing, it becomes something very special which I have to be careful about. Because I might do it wrong. And if I do it wrong, I can never be enlightened. I can never even get samādhi.

Have you ever had the experience when you're doing breathing meditation and you just think at the back of your mind, "This kind of breathing will never get me into concentration"? Have you ever had that feeling? And if we have that feeling, what are we doing? We're projecting an importance into the breathing. We think it's about the breathing. But it's not about the breathing. It's about the mindfulness.

And this brings us to something that we've already talked about here. We're now moving away from breathing specifically into awareness in general.

We've mentioned how the mind is structured when we practice meditation. What we're dealing with all of the time is awareness and its object. We could call this structure a dyad of awareness of X, where X is the meditation object.

Now this dyad is completely natural, it's just part of nature. And it's certainly not a problem, but it can become a problem when my conceptual mind starts working on this simple elemental dyad.

What I notice is that normally my interest and my concern lies in X. Every experience has the structure: awareness of X. Now in that structure, what do I think is important? It's X. That's what's important. What I am aware of is important. So if I'm thinking, what I'm thinking about is important. If I'm seeing, what I'm seeing is important. And so on.

When I'm wrapped up in what I am aware of, my background sense of the one who is experiencing all this—the one who is seeing, the one who is thinking—this grows stronger. And this sense of someone in the background who's actually experiencing this, this is what the Buddha calls the self: the one who is aware, the subject who's located just behind the awareness.

And so this natural partnership between awareness and its object—awareness of X—turns into a sense of subject-object duality. Me in here, the world out there.

Let's say, for example, I am working hard to focus on the object of my awareness. Let's say breathing. If I'm doing that, then I'm developing a sense, a concept, of what this object means to me—to the one who's doing the focusing. So if I'm mindful of breathing, I develop a sense of the one who is breathing, and the one who wants to get something from this extra activity of being mindful of breathing. And this creates all sorts of complications.

For example, is this breath good enough for my purpose in practicing mindfulness? Or do I have to discard it in favour of something better? I find myself judging and comparing. And in all of this, what I've done is I've lost the intimacy with breathing that I was born with.

But if I'm simply mindful of X, what am I doing? I'm keeping X in mind. And this implies opening into a wider field of awareness. When I'm mindful—in this case mindful of X, or mindful of breathing—my interest is not simply in X, in breathing. My interest is in my continuing awareness of X, my continuing awareness of breathing.

So if I'm thinking, I'm more interested in the activity of thinking than what I'm thinking about. If I'm seeing, I'm more interested in the activity of seeing than what I am seeing. I'm absorbed into the activity. And if I'm absorbed into the activity, I lose my preoccupation with the one who's doing the activity.

It's like when I'm absorbed in a game. If I'm playing a game and what I'm really concerned with is what the scoreboard says and who's going to win—and therefore who's going to lose—then my sense of myself as a player, separate from the game, gets very strong. And if it's a team sport, my teammates will be strongly tempted to dump me because I'm not playing very well at all.

But if I'm really absorbed in the activity, in the game, I lose my sense of being somehow separate from the game. And I lose my sense of someone who's looking for a result from the game. And this is awareness of X, mindfulness of X.

So it's about becoming intimate with the activity. And when I am intimate, I lose my sense of something to lose and something to gain. I drop the web of habitual concepts that stand between me and my life. There's just intimacy. And when we are intimate, mindfulness actually emerges.

So our relationship to breathing changes. When we're getting started on this, we may become interested in the quality of our awareness—not so much what the breath is doing, but what the awareness is doing. What is my relationship to breathing? Am I fighting the breathing?

Trying to pound it into submission and force it to do something else? Is the breath easy to find or difficult to find? Is the mind distracted or unified? We discover that breathing is part of a wider field of awareness and activity, and we learn to rest in that field.

Now this is an expansion of "mindfully she breathes in, mindfully she breathes out." The Buddha then says, "Breathing in a long breath, she understands she is breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, she understands she is breathing out a long breath. Breathing in a short breath, she understands she is breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, she understands she is breathing out a short breath."

Notice that the verb has changed here. There's breathing, but there's also understanding. This is the verb *pajanati*, from which we get *paññ̃a*—wisdom or understanding—and also *sampajaññ̃a*, clear understanding. The Buddha often links *sati* with *sampajaññ̃a*; often they appear as a compound. So what are we practicing? We're practicing *sati-sampajaññ̃a*, mindfulness and clear understanding.

As the practice develops, we're not just mindful of breathing but understanding breathing. The Buddha uses the shorthand of length—is it long or is it short?—but I think that's just shorthand for understanding all the varied characteristics of breathing when we start to explore it. This is what we were doing this morning.

What this suggests is what the Buddha calls *anupassanā*, tracking the breathing over time. We learn to remember the breathing. We learn to remember that we are already breathing. As we do that, the continuity of awareness becomes more apparent. As awareness becomes continuous, we see and understand more of the breathing and how it changes—and even what changes it. We begin to understand its conditionality.

In understanding, we're bringing intelligence to the mindfulness and to our relationship with breathing. We're interested in patterns, in how things unfold over a period of time, including the breathing.

Then the Buddha says, "She trains herself to breathe in, feeling the whole body. She trains herself to breathe out, feeling the whole body." Again we have a shift in the activity. From breathing, to breathing mindfully. From breathing mindfully, to understanding. From understanding, to training. This is from the verb *sikkhati*, to train.

A pattern is emerging—an increasing deliberation and sophistication in our relationship to the object of experience, to the meditation object. In this case, the breathing. From breathing to breathing mindfully, from breathing mindfully to understanding breathing, from understanding breathing to training breathing.

We start with just breathing. Breathing is natural; it just happens by itself. But when we start to practice mindfulness of breathing—or mindfulness with breathing—our relationship to the breathing becomes part of the picture. As understanding develops, our relationship becomes more sophisticated. We learn to see the patterns of breathing. We might see, for example, how the state of the body influences breathing, and how breathing influences the body. Or we might see how the state of the mind influences breathing, and how breathing influences the state of the mind.

Then training comes in. In training, what the Buddha is getting at is that we start to recognize the decisions we are making in maintaining awareness of breathing, mindfulness of breathing. It's a training. We're making choices along the way in order to get a certain result. We have a sense of direction to what we're doing. It's not just being aware of whatever is happening, but taking the practice in a chosen direction.

So for example, the mere fact that we've chosen to focus on breathing means we're already making a choice which is sending the awareness in a particular direction. And then even with breathing, we may choose to focus on breathing sensed in one specific part of the body. It might be the classic rising and falling of the abdomen. It might be the breath at the nostrils. It might be something else. Or we may choose to open up to the whole body and get a sense of movement of the air element throughout the whole body. Or we might make some other choice.

But in making these choices, we are deliberately moving along a path. We are developing a path, which means we have a sense of aim, a sense of direction. We're managing our relationship to breathing, or any other meditation object, in order to bring about a particular result. And here, according to the Buddha, the aim is to feel the whole body.

So let's get a sense of what this is all about. We'll be talking about feeling tomorrow morning, but in the relationship with breathing, we're becoming intimate with breathing. And this intimacy is conveyed by the verb *paṭisaṃvedati*, when the Buddha says, "She trains herself to breathe in or out, feeling the whole body." The verb is *paṭisaṃvedati*—to feel, to experience, to sense.

Now this is more than just awareness. What it's conveying is a felt intimacy. There's something going on in our relationship to breathing which is closer, more intimate, less cognitive than just awareness. Awareness itself, when we're aware of something, can have a sense of distance. It's like I'm aware of it from afar—I'm here, or my awareness is here, and the object of awareness is over there. Feeling suggests getting closer to the object, becoming intimate with it. It's like touch. When we touch something with the hand, we are intimately close to it. And the verb feeling, *paṭisaṃvedati*, conveys this sense of intimacy, directly touching our experience.

So we're not distant from our breathing. We're not separate from it. Awareness and breathing are intimately intertwined. And as intimacy develops, our concepts about breathing drop away. What we discover is its elemental aspect. So the object is no longer our concept of breathing, but what we've learned to call air element, *vāyodhātu*, or in other traditions, *prāṇa*, or in other traditions, *chi*.

Any ideas we have about breathing fall away, and all we have is the elemental quality of movement itself. And this changes the geography of the breathing. If I ask, "Where do I breathe?" well, the answer is in my lungs, and my lungs have a definite location within my body. But where do I find air element? I can find it anywhere in the body. I can find it throughout the body. I can find it extending beyond the body, because it is movement itself.

With this intimacy, any idea I have of where my breathing should be or what it should be doing no longer applies—it all drops away. In fact, any idea that I have of my breathing drops away, and I've entered into a different world. At this point, what we may find is that we open up to what the Buddha calls the whole body, *sabbakāya*. Where body, of course, is the experienced body. And this implies a complex network of felt elements, not the solid form that we suppose it to be. Even this whole body might extend way beyond the form that I see in a mirror. The familiar world of me, my body, and my breathing is falling away the more intimate I become with it.

Then the Buddha says, "She trains herself to breathe in, calming the body construction. She trains herself to breathe out, calming the body construction." Here we have a technical term: body construction. In Pali, this is *kāyasaṅkhāra*. So what is this all about?

Well, firstly, when the Buddha talks about body,

What he means is our experience of body. And secondly, construction or formation—sankhara—refers to the fact that all experienced events are constructed or conditioned by other events. And in turn, they construct or condition the next events. In other words, this introduces the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising.

So what forms or conditions or constructs our experience of body? Certainly one aspect is air element, the experience of movement. Let's take just one example. Have you ever felt relaxed and open to the world? If you have that experience, you notice that your body moves easily and your mind is sensitive and open. Have you ever felt defensive and threatened? You might have noticed that when you do, your body tightens and stiffens, and your mind becomes focused on a sense of threat felt in the body but conveyed by concepts.

When the air element moves easily and freely, the body is open. And when the body is open, the mind is relaxed and engaged with what's going on here and now. When the air element is blocked, the body is blocked. And when the body is blocked, the mind is tight and usually lost in a world of concept.

So calming the body formation refers to a state of peace and openness to the felt reality of the world. We're open to the direct experience of whatever is happening here and now, with no conceptual overlay and no defense mechanisms setting up layers of armor. We're simply here now. Everything calms and we're left with pure intimacy. And we've used the breathing as a vehicle to get there.

This is one possible reading of the Buddha's passage, because it's not the only one, obviously. If you look at how the Buddha's tradition is constructed, it's like having layers of teaching. At the bottom is what the tradition calls mula, the foundation—the Tipitaka, the discourses, the Vinaya, and also the Abhidhamma. These convey the words of the Buddha, and as I said, often the words of the Buddha are very compact. Then on top of that, you have atthakatha, which means explanation of the meaning—commentary. On top of that, you have the tika, the commentaries on the commentaries. On top of that, you have the anutika, the commentaries on the commentaries on the commentaries. And on top of that, you've got the dipani, the commentaries on the commentaries on the commentaries on the commentaries. So it starts to open up, and people play with it. What's being said here?

This is common to all the Indian traditions. What they do is play with it, and they play in particular with meaning. They play language games and draw out different meanings, and hence you have this huge variety of Buddhist traditions—because you have these different games that people have been playing with it, drawing out different meanings.

This is what we're doing in this retreat. So don't take whatever meaning I'm giving you too seriously. It's just my game, which I'm playing tonight, which may or may not be helpful. I hope it is helpful.

One way of looking at mindfulness with breathing or mindfulness of breathing is you can see it as a journey into the nature of experience, using breathing as the path. The journey is one of deeper and more refined awareness, which is another way of saying it's a journey into intimacy.

First of all, we bring awareness to what we normally take for granted and therefore don't notice—for example, breathing. Then we cultivate mindfulness. We train ourselves to remember our awareness, to maintain a felt continuity of awareness over time. Then we develop understanding. We learn the patterns of experiences, how the experiences come and go and under what conditions. In this case the breathing—we learn the patterns of breathing, what breathing does over time and how we respond to it. You could say we become interested in what breathing can teach us.

As our relationship to the meditation object changes—in this case the breathing—so too does the meditation object. As we change how we experience, we start to change what we experience. And so breathing ceases to be what we think it to be. We're getting beneath our concept of breathing, where breathing transmutes into vayodhatu, air element, that extends throughout the body and even beyond the body.

The relationship is becoming one of increasing intimacy—from just breathing, to being mindful of breathing, to understanding breathing, to the much more intimate feeling the breathing. And we take this intimacy to other aspects of experience. Finally, the felt openness and fluidity of the air element enables body and mind to calm, to become still and sensitive to whatever is arising in our experience.

The nature of mindfulness also changes. From just being mindful, which implies accepting whatever is happening, we move to training ourselves, which implies deliberately changing experience in order to move it in a different direction.

So we're not just uncovering what is happening, but we work to move it in a desired direction—toward, for example, the cultivation of serenity and insight.

Any questions?

Question: My question relates to the last point about moving the breath. Does this come later in the discourse? Sometimes you just get this little passage and that's it for the breathing, but there is the Ānāpānasati Sutta, and that goes into a lot more detail. It talks about the development of serenity and outlines a very particular path.

Response: Yes, these are sometimes called the sixteen steps of ānāpānasati. But here we've just looked at the executive summary only.

Follow-up: But still, the instruction seems kind of neutral—probably not the right word—but you mentioned calm. And calm has a positive sort of flavour to it.

Response: That will give rise to a sense of well-being. And that sense of well-being in turn opens and relaxes the body. And that in turn affects the mind, and so on. So the whole process rolls on.

When we talk about calm, we're talking about the development of serenity. And when we develop serenity, we can see more clearly what's going on inside. So these two go together.

One image that's used is like the two wings of a bird. Another image is this: let's say you go swimming in a deep pool, and you're just at the edge. You dive in and then swim around where you stopped, just underneath the surface. You're getting a certain view of what's going on. But let's say you climb onto a high diving board, you dive in, you go really deep, and then start swimming around. Well, you've got a very different view and a quite different experience.

The serenity represents the depth. And the swimming around having a look represents the insight. So they work together. If you want to have deep insight, you need a good foundation of serenity. And calm suggests that. But here we're not going into the detail.

Question: You talked about this process as a path, and we talked about lots of different meditation objects. I know you've said many times there's not a better one or a worse one, but are different meditation objects taking us along different paths?

Response: I think it's more the relationship to the meditation object. So there's not a hierarchy, there's not objectively better or worse meditation objects. But of course there are meditation objects that are better for this particular meditator at this particular time. So part of the training is working out what that is and then going with that one.

Follow-up: I think you mentioned the other day something about how if you're training your awareness on the breath at your nostrils, your experience can tend to be more disembodied than using the breath at your heart. So by our choice of meditation object, is that shaping the nature of the experience?

Response: The choice of the meditation object, the choice of the relationship to the meditation, the choice of what posture I'm meditating in—all of these shape experience.

In my Zen days, the emphasis was just following the breathing, or the koan, or the breath count, and it was always very specifically located. The retreat was structured with a lot of sitting and a little bit of walking. And the talk was always about concentration, concentration, concentration.

So that all adds up to a package of developing concentration rather than what the Buddha would call insight. The insight side was taken care of by the koans—a very different approach to insight. With that structure of meditation practice, you are sending your mind in a certain direction.

I've got a vivid example of that. I once had a brief talk with Christopher Titmuss. He was teaching a retreat and we didn't know each other. I was introducing my practice to him, saying, "I've got a question about whatever it was, and I've been practicing Zen for so many years."

The way he responded was, "Oh my God, not another! Look, it's not about concentration. It's not just about concentration."

I got the distinct impression that he had dealt with a lot of Zen practitioners and they were all banging on about their concentration. Which is fair enough, because I was about to bang on about my concentration. But the culture that you're trained in teaches you, "Well, this is what's important. This is what you should be talking about."

This is how you should be talking about it. Then you shift to another tradition, and it's something else that's important, another way of talking about it, something else that you should be doing. So that sends the experience off in another direction.

Which is one of the reasons why it's important to find the right tradition—which for me essentially means finding the place where you feel at home, where it feels natural, and then going with that. But it's also another reason why people might, after a long time working in a particular tradition or lineage, change to another one. Because they feel, "I need an alternative look, I need an alternative view of what's going on."

When you talk to mature practitioners of pretty much any tradition, what you find is a commonality in their understanding and experience. There can be quite different ways in which they express it, the ways they talk about it. I have some Zen students and even Zen teachers who do my retreats. When I'm listening to a question from them or engaging in an interview, sometimes I've really got to focus to work out what on earth they're talking about, because the language is so different. Are they talking about something that I talk about, but simply using different language? Or are they talking about something completely different? It's not so easy to figure that out. But when you get to know people, you can see that the end result in terms of how one's life changes—it's the same across traditions.

Many years ago when I was in India, I met a New Zealand Presbyterian minister who was wandering around in search of enlightenment. One constantly bumped into people wandering around India in search of enlightenment, but I'd never met a New Zealand Presbyterian minister doing this. We were having a talk about the different traditions, and he said the different religions or religious traditions are like silos—vertical structures. Most of it is just people who believe what they're told, go through the motions, and never really try to find out what it's about. And then at the top you have the practitioners, the meditators, the mystics, the yogis, who actually investigate: What is this about? What's going on?

If you line up these different traditions, what you often find is that the people at the top—the mystics, the yogis, the practitioners—have more in common with each other than they have with the people in their own tradition.

And I think he's right.

I asked him what he was going to do when he got back to Kiwiland. He said, "I don't think I'll get a job as a Presbyterian minister. I'll probably be a truck driver."

Thank you.

CHAPTER 38

Tracking Feeling (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · 50 min

> *In this workshop from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney introduces vedanā (feeling) as the second foundation of mindfulness, following the foundational work with body. Through a guided meditation experiment, participants explore the difference between watching the breath and feeling it—discovering how these represent distinct relationships to experience, with watching suggesting distance and objectivity, while feeling indicates intimacy and subjectivity.*
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> *Kearney explains that vedanā represents the affective or hedonic aspect of experience—like the flavor of food that moves us to respond. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising (paṭicca samuppāda), he clarifies that contact conditions feeling inseparably, but feeling need not condition craving—making this the crucial point where ethical choice becomes possible. The Buddha's vocabulary reveals how cognitive terms (avidyā, bodhi) and affective terms (taṇhā, nibbāna) describe complementary aspects of both our fundamental problem and its resolution.*
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> *A key practical insight emerges: don't look for vedanā, because it's already here. Like a historian who struggles to discover what was obvious to people in the past precisely because they never recorded it, meditators often miss what is most apparent because they're searching for something special or hidden. The teaching emphasizes starting with direct experience rather than concepts, using terms like vedanā as poetry rather than rigid scientific definitions—helpful maps that clarify experience without constraining it.*

Over the past few days we've been emphasizing the role of body in the meditation practice. The practice we're doing is called Satipaṭṭhāna, and there are four Satipaṭṭhānas. Body is the first one, and it's not listed first because of alphabetical order. It's listed first because it's foundational to the whole thing, to the whole enterprise.

But the second Satipaṭṭhāna is vedanā, or feeling. This is what we're going to play around with this morning, and we'll talk more about it tonight. So let's begin with a meditation experiment in vedanā. As you do this, play with it. Don't take it seriously. Don't think that there's a right or a wrong. Just experiment and see what happens.

Settle awareness in your body and construct your meditation posture. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body. From there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact at the base. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Start to settle your awareness on the movement of inbreath and outbreath. Now watch the movements of your breathing. Look at your breathing. Witness your breathing.

And now feel your breathing. Do not watch it. Do not look at it. Do not witness it. Feel it. Feel your breathing. Feel the movements.

Bring your awareness back to your whole body. Open awareness out to include your whole body. And from there, feel your body and everything happening within it. Feel your body.

So, is there a difference between watching the breathing and feeling the breathing? And if there is, what is it?

"The texture. The texture of the breathing, the contact with the esophagus and the nostrils."

So you've got a sense of texture when you feel. Is that right? But you don't get that when you watch?

"Less."

Anyone else? Is there a difference?

"I find it very hard to do one without the other. So when I was watching, I realised that I was also feeling, and when I tried just to feel, I wasn't quite sure. Because they're always mixed up."

But they're distinct—you can tell the difference?

"Sometimes I do, but on this occasion I didn't feel something so strongly that I could separate it from watching."

But you do have a sense that it's twofold. There's watching and there's feeling, and that's normal.

"Yeah, so when I watch, I probably feel as well."

So I definitely feel something, but I can't do it without watching.

Yes, so you've got to have both at once. It's a package.

That's right. It's almost like I'm looking with my eyes. If I'm watching the breath in my nose, I feel like my eyes are looking at this place.

So there's a sense of the location from which you are aware, and this is associated with the eyes. I think that's actually quite a common experience.

Anyway, that's our little experiment. Some of you have done this before, and you're thinking, why do I have to do this again? The reason is because I just told you to. Because I'm in charge.

This is a way of introducing the whole subject of vedana, feeling. Vedana represents the affective or hedonic aspect of experience. The language that the Buddha uses can be quite precise. He's got a sophisticated technical vocabulary when he talks about experience.

One of the basic problems we have in understanding what the Buddha is talking about is that if you look at English and the range of words we have to talk about what happens in the mind, it's about this number of words. Usually people fall back on "thinking" as a kind of catch-all. If you look at the range of words that the Buddha has for describing what's going on in the mind, it's this big. He's got a considerable vocabulary. He's got many more words which are very precise than we have, which strongly suggests that we literally have no idea what he's talking about, because the concepts just aren't part of our culture.

So it can be quite challenging to actually work out what exactly he means when he uses a certain word. And especially since we're approaching it through translation, which is somebody else's interpretation.

The basic vocabulary that we use when talking about the Buddha's teaching comes from pioneer late nineteenth, early twentieth century English translators. Most of them were English gentlemen of the Victorian era who had absolutely no comprehension whatsoever about meditation practice. It was a complete mystery to them. You've got learned scholars who opined that meditation meant someone would sit down and commune with the devas, and the devas would give them messages, and this would be the teaching that would come out of meditation. This is the sort of rubbish that they actually wrote about. They had no comprehension.

Did any of them ever practice?

No, no, no. They were scholars. They didn't go native completely. I mean, it was scandalous enough that someone like T.W. Rhys Davids actually studied Pali in Sri Lanka, which got in the way of his administrative duties. But it was okay because the British did admire linguists. But they were just linguists. And they were proper, objective nineteenth century scholars.

If you look at the image presented by how these pioneers introduced the Buddha to the Victorian public, he was presented as the perfect Victorian gentleman. Why do we think that the Buddha was against the priesthood of the Brahmins? It's because if you're a good Protestant gentleman, you're against the Catholic priesthood. So obviously priests are bad. Why was Buddhism presented as the religion, quote-unquote, of rationality? Because if you're a Protestant Victorian gentleman, you think rationality is right up there. And if you're going to present these uncivilized, barbaric black people, these Indians, as kind of civilized, well, you said, well, they're quite rational. They actually had what we might call a philosophy.

So a lot of it was PR. But it was presenting the Buddha to a Victorian imperialist, largely Christian audience in a way that wasn't threatening to them. So a lot of the translations are very Victorian Christian. And they really don't get what the Buddha's talking about because they really didn't get this whole project.

Patrick, can you give some examples? You said we have so many words for thinking or mind that came out in the translations. Can you give a sense of what's been lost?

One of them is mañña and the verb mañña, which comes from a root meaning mind, but it's an action, and it's usually translated as "conceiving." What does that mean?

Not at the moment. When I was obsessed with this years ago, I could have rattled off a few words, but I've forgotten them. I'm getting far too old for this job.

So anyway, we've got vedana. Now vedana comes from the root *vid*, to sense, to feel. And you get a whole number of words that come out of this. For example, the Vedas come out of this root. But the way the Buddha uses it, when he uses words based on this root, what's being suggested is intimacy—a close encounter with the experience.

So for example, last night we were talking about feeling, in terms of breathing, feeling the whole body. *Patisanvedati*. That's a word based on this root. So it suggests intimacy, getting closer. In contrast, with words based on the root *pas*, to see—like vipassana, insight—these words suggest distance and detachment and objectivity. So words based on *vid* suggest more of a subjective relationship, while words based on *pas* suggest a more objective relationship.

Now, vedana is translated as feeling, which I think is quite reasonably good, except people mix it up with emotion. People often think vedana has something to do with emotion. Well, it's connected with emotion, but it's not emotion. But like the English word feeling, vedana can indicate both what we experience and a way of experiencing.

So in English, we talk about feeling as a noun. "When you said that, you hurt my feelings." "You're taking no account of my feelings about this." Here we have feeling as a noun, but we also have it as a verb, as a way of experiencing. So you might say, "Well, I think that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel that it would be a disaster." Now that makes sense in English, doesn't it? If somebody says that, you know what they're talking about. So there, vedana is not a something, but a way of experiencing. Not something which is experienced, but a way of experiencing. And that, of course, was what we were doing in this little experiment—seeing if we could get in touch with that.

Now, feeling, of course, is very important. I've probably told you this story, but one of my profound realizations in the course of this practice occurred years ago. The first time I was living in Brisbane, I was on a bus. I lived in West End, heading down Boundary Street. I don't know how familiar you are with Brisbane geography, but at the bottom of Boundary Street is a pub. Which in those days was a working class pub. Now it's been all yuppified. And the bus stopped very close to the pub. And this old bloke got on the bus.

Well, at my age then, he was old. He was younger than I am now. He seemed to be about mid-sixties, I would say. Very overweight. Very stiff. Dressed in the Queensland working class uniform—singlet and shorts. Skin damaged by decades in the sun. And you take one look at him and you think, okay, this is an example of the body shaped, conditioned by decades of spending all day working, labouring in the hot sun, and every evening at the pub, downing as many beers as you can get hold of.

So he gets on the bus and he kind of staggers down the centre and sits behind me. On the window seat, there was another old codger who was sitting there, and they knew each other. And the bloke who was already sitting there said to this new arrival, "G'day Bill, how are you feeling?" And Bill replied, "Buggered if I know, mate."

And in that moment, I realized that Bill was actually a bodhisattva who had descended from the heavens to give me a teaching which I really needed to learn. Which was: if you don't know how you're feeling, as a practitioner, you're in trouble. You've really got to know how you feel. And this is the realm of vedana.

Now, if we want to understand what vedanā is about, we could compare it to flavour. When we eat, we experience the physical sensations of the food—like the elements we've been talking about and playing with: hardness, softness, wetness, dryness, and so on. But we also experience the flavour of the food. And the flavour is not the sensations, though it's intimately connected with them. It's distinct from them.

Generally speaking, it's the flavour that moves us. It's the flavour that provokes a response. "Oh, I like that—I'll take more." "Oh, I don't like that one—I'll just pass it by." If we register the flavour as pleasant, we're moved to take more. If we register the flavour as unpleasant, we're moved to take less. And if we can't find any flavour, we're moved to indifference. But what moves us, what stimulates a response, is the flavour.

Vedanā is like the flavour of experience, which means it's an aspect of affect—where affect is that which has the capacity to move us. We might say of something, "That was very moving," or "I was moved by what you said." What we're saying is that there was a response. Where you have vedanā, feeling, you have a response. It's always the case. It's always built in.

The Buddha says there are three basic categories of response, and therefore three basic categories of feeling. Pleasant feeling moves us to reach out and to hold on. Painful or unpleasant feeling moves us to resist or reject the experience, to distance ourselves or defend ourselves. And finally, when we don't know what we are feeling—when the feeling is neither painful nor pleasant—we move to ignore it. We just don't notice it. Or, if we do notice it, we move to dullness, doubt, and confusion. "What do I do about it? Do I take hold of it? Or reject it? Or what?" But in every situation, we are moved.

In his teaching on dependent arising, the Buddha says contact conditions feeling. Contact refers to the immediacy of experience, and what he's saying is that where there's contact, where there's experience, there is feeling.

This relationship is very, very tight. He's not saying that there's contact, there's experience, and then later on feeling joins the party. He's saying that in the moment of experience there is already feeling. And there's always feeling. There's never an instance where there's not feeling. It's locked in. This suggests that experience comes to us already affect-laden. In other words, we are already moved by the experience. We are already responding to what is happening.

The Buddha says contact conditions feeling, and then he says feeling conditions craving. Now this relationship is different. If you've got contact, you have feeling—there's no possibility otherwise. Even a Buddha, if he has contact, he has feeling. But if you have feeling, you don't necessarily have craving. If there's craving, that craving arose from feeling. But you can have feeling without the craving.

And this is one of the reasons why feeling is considered so important, because it's at that point where we respond, where we have a choice. This is the area of particular interest in the Buddha's ethics. This is where we can make a difference. But in every case, we are feeling, we are mood.

So when we come to do the practice, what we're doing is experiencing body and mind. And how do we experience, for example, body? I remember when I started doing meditation practice, the instructions, whether verbal or in books, were invariably "watch the meditation object." Watch, for example, the body. Sometimes in the non-dual traditions they talk about the witness—be the witness of whatever is happening.

But what about feeling life rather than watching it? What about feeling the breathing rather than watching it?

We could say that watching the breathing creates a relationship to the meditation object that emphasizes awareness, consciousness, what the Buddha calls vijñāna. Feeling the meditation object, feeling the breath, is a relationship that emphasizes feeling. So there are different relationships that we can have when we approach meditation.

Some people find that their natural way of working with an experience is watching. Other people find that it's actually feeling. And other people have both. For some people, if they're watching the experience in meditation, this indicates a degree of distance, a separation from the meditation object, while feeling indicates getting closer to it. For some people, watching is more objective, while feeling is more subjective.

For some people—and these are just reports that people have given over the years—watching is more specific and more detailed. So when we're doing all the detail of the breathing, that would be a relationship probably of watching, while feeling tends to be more general. For some people, the experience of feeling the meditation object is very clean but very difficult to communicate, whereas the experience of watching may not be that clean but is easier to communicate. So if you're reporting an experience in a meditation interview, the tendency is to report what you watch, what you see, as opposed to what you feel.

For some people, with breathing, if they watch it, they experience breathing in one part of the body; if they feel it, they experience it in another part. For some people, if they watch the breath, it naturally echoes at the nostrils, where the breath is less embodied. But when they feel the breath, it naturally brings the awareness down into the body.

Now these are just experiences that occur to some meditators, not everyone. For some people there is a very clear distinction between watching and feeling. For some people, these distinctions make absolutely no sense whatsoever. They go through this learned disquisition and look at me and say, "What the hell are you talking about?" There's always a certain proportion of the population who have that response, because the distinctions just don't make any sense in terms of their actual experience.

A student asks whether this relates to citta, the definition of heart and mind. We're going to get onto that, but citta includes both the affective and the cognitive. In our culture we tend to emphasize the cognitive—like the use of the word "mind" for citta. If you're meditating, you're training the mind. But of course you're training the heart as well. Cognitive and affective—these two sides.

This also comes out in the way the Buddha uses language. When the Buddha is talking about what he sees as the fundamental problem that we have, sometimes he'll use cognitive language. The fundamental problem is avidyā—ignorance, delusion. You notice that's cognitive. Sometimes he'll say the fundamental problem we have is craving. Where is that? That's in the heart. That's affective.

When he's talking about what's the ultimate solution to the problem, sometimes he'll use a common term. The ultimate solution to the problem is bodhi, literally awakening.

Classically translated as "enlightenment"—which is cognitive. By the way, why did Rhys Davids choose "enlightenment" to translate bodhi? Because it was referring to the European Enlightenment. So it gets a big tick from the Victorians. That's why we use the term enlightenment, although it means awakening.

So bodhi is cognitive. And sometimes what the Buddha says is that the ultimate solution to the problem is nibbāna. And nibbāna is an affective term. It's a heart experience.

Now, when I say bodhi is cognitive, I don't mean it's a cognitive phenomenon—I mean it's a cognitive word, a concept. They're different sides of the same coin, but they're quite distinct. Awakening is cognitive: it's like I can see what's going on, I understand what's going on. Nibbāna is affective, of the heart. It's the cooling of the heart.

Now, they go together. Let's say I finally recognize what's going on, and because of that I calm down. Or it could work the opposite way: the heart calms down and now I can finally see what's going on. It wouldn't be "I see what's happening and I'm furious about it"—that wouldn't be nibbāna, would it? So these are the two sides of the human being.

We're talking about vedanā, feeling, which represents a different relationship to experience—quite distinct from watching, usually indicating intimacy and subjectivity. And of course we've got words based on watching: vipassanā, insight, and so on.

Now, as we said, the Buddha uses a whole range of quite sophisticated technical terms to analyze and describe experience. But these words are not science. They're more poetry than they are science. What I'm suggesting by that is not that these terms have a single objectively correct meaning that we are supposed to identify in our experience. And it's not that there exists a single objectively correct experience and an objectively correct practice to get to that objectively correct experience. Experience is much more untidy than our concepts about experience.

It's really interesting, I find, to look closely at what the Buddha is saying and try to sort it out. But it is possible to get too caught up in the meanings of the terms and miss what's actually going on. So don't get caught up in concepts like watching and feeling. Words and concepts are just ways of reading our experience. They're just names. They're names of something, perhaps, that we need to discover. Or they're names of things we have already discovered but just haven't yet named.

So if you're taking on the job of tracking vedanā, using vedanā as a meditation object—or anything else, for that matter—we start with the experience, and from there we interpret it. I'm aware of this. Could this be vedanā? What we do not do is start with the interpretation and from there look for the experience: "Where is vedanā?" Always ground yourself on the experience. But at some point we have to read the experience. We have to interpret it. We have to understand it. And that's where we bring in these terms.

So if you find that a term helps you understand the experience, that's good. It clarifies the experience for you. But it's not that there's only one meaning. Again, it's like poetry. A good poet is very precise in their language, yet different people can quite legitimately get different meanings from the same poem. And I think the Dharma is like that. It's more like poetry than science.

What we're doing in this practice is seeking to directly encounter what is already here, already available. But if we have a map of the area, then we can put our experience into a context. And that, apart from anything else, gives us a way of communicating experience with others. So don't look for something to match the concept. But rather, if we understand the concept, then we'll recognize it if we experience it. The concepts are useful, but don't get caught up in them. This is a danger with this kind of talk where we're going on about subtle conceptual distinctions.

One student shared an example of this complexity. He was out doing a bushwalk and saw a butterfly come by. Normally when he sees a butterfly, there's an automatic response of "oh, lovely." But this time there was an automatic kind of aversion, which he interpreted with interest—"that's weird, why am I responding this way?" All this happened very quickly. And at the same time, what he saw in the colors of the butterfly reminded him of a German Shepherd. It was the same colors on the butterfly. As a child, his cousins had German Shepherds, and he was always scared of them. One day the German Shepherd broke through a rabbit cage and devoured his rabbit in front of him. So there was this interesting discovery—normally the vedana toward a butterfly would be "I like this, I want more of it." But in this case, something else happened.

Experience is always complex. And in this case, perception got in the way, because the perception wasn't "oh, that's a butterfly." The perception was "that's a German Shepherd." Change the perception, you change the affective response. And this is one of the things that we discover in the practice—how our experience is conditioned by so many different aspects, that what we take to be solid and real is just this network of conditions. And it's not so solid as we thought it was.

So if you want to, if you're interested, you could make vedana your meditation object, play around with it. What we did this morning in the experiment was feeling rather than watching. If that was interesting to you, you could explore it further. If it's not interesting to you, forget about it. Don't worry about it.

Usually, certainly in the Burmese traditions, they emphasize experiencing vedana within the body. And they do this because the contact, the phassa, the direct experience of body, of touch sensation, is stronger and clearer than in other senses. So the vedana tends to be stronger and clearer.

One piece of advice I came across in Burma was from a book about an insight method that's very popular in Mandalay and that area, but has never been exported. They have vedana as their grounding object. Reading this introduction to the meditation method, one of the pieces of advice the author gave was: do not look for vedana. And the reason is, don't look for it because it's already here. We can miss it precisely be-

cause we're so busy looking for it, thinking it must be something special, and it must be hidden—that's why we haven't come across it yet. But it's already here, and it's already obvious. So it's a question of not looking for anything, but feeling what's already here.

And this brings us to one interesting aspect about meditation practice: often the hardest thing to find is the most obvious.

This was clarified for me years ago. I was reading a book on the history wars in Australia—the black armband versus the white blindfold approaches to Australian history. There was a quote from Geoffrey Blainey in which he talked about what the job of the historian is. He said the job of the historian is to look at the records left by people in the past in order to work out what was going on at that time. And if you're engaged in that project, the most difficult thing to discover is what was bleeding obvious to those people. The reason is because we never record what is bleeding obvious. Why would we? It's bleeding obvious. So we don't write it down. We don't record it. If you're coming at it later on, as a historian, that's the most difficult thing to pick up.

I realized the same applies to meditation practice. What's most difficult to find is what is most obvious. Because it's so obvious, so habitual, we overlook it. We assume that we're looking for something special, something spiritual, something Buddhist-y. We assume we don't know. And we assume that whatever it is we're looking for must be located somewhere else, and we've got to go hunting for it. But what we're looking for is already obvious, and it's already here. So don't look anywhere else. Just recognize what's already here. This can be helpful advice if we're working with vedanā, because vedanā is already here.

Someone asked whether this might also be connected to the Buddha's understanding that we are fundamentally bodies—sentient bodies—and that everything is in the body. Definitely, that's where the whole game is. And particularly with insight meditation, that's one reason why body is the first satipaṭṭhāna. Because this is where it happens. This is where the whole project unfolds.

There's an expression that you come across in the Buddha's teaching about experiencing enlightenment *kāyena*—with the body, in the literal translation. Now this is controversial. There are some people who say it shouldn't be translated literally as "with the body," that it should be translated as something like "experientially" or "personally," that it doesn't really mean the body. I can't help but suspect that if the Buddha said it, he meant it. Everything happens in the body.

Of course, as you refine the body, becoming aware of increasingly subtle aspects, what you're left with is what's called the mental body, the mind body. So the concept of body goes deeper than our normal anatomical concept. People do have experiences that seem completely disembodied. But as a general principle, it's the relationship to the body which is absolutely central, and which gives you your entry in. Once you're in there, you might find experiences that seem to have nothing to do with body, quote-unquote. But how did you get there?

Someone asked how this links with the Dhammapada, where the Buddha talks about the mind leading. In the Dhammapada, mind is the chief, mind is the leader. But where is mind? It's indissolubly linked with the body. If there's a mind, there's a body. And if there's a living body, there's a mind. This is part of why sometimes the Buddha uses the term nāma-rūpa to emphasize this mind-body integration—that where you have one, you have the other.

You cannot have the experience of body without mind, because you cannot have any experience without mind. But equally, you cannot have mind unless it's located in a body. Even in the deva realms, according to the Buddha, beings have bodies—more subtle bodies, but bodies nonetheless. So it's always interconnected. The term we use for mind in this context is mano, which is mind as a sense sensitivity, the sixth sense. What mind does in this capacity is absorb all the data of the physical world through the five physical senses, plus its own forms of data—perceptions, thoughts, memories—and bring all of this together to create the sense of "me in my world." So it works together with the physical world.

There's a related question about teachers who say that no effort is required, that realization is already here. This touches on the whole issue of dealing with what is already present. Certain aspects of dharma teachings emphasize this—that what we're looking for is already here. We simply don't recognize it. We think of ourselves as being over here while what we're looking for is over there, and somehow we must make a journey to reach it.

The Buddha does speak in those terms. The idea of a path, for example—a path from here to there. But the flip side of this is the intimacy that what we're looking for is actually already happening.

Consider insight practice. What do you want to see and understand? The three universal characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anatta—impermanence, suffering, not-self. There's a clue in the name: they're universal. They're already here. There has never

been a moment in our lives when we have not been intimate with anicca, dukkha, and anatta. They're built into the very fabric of experience. It's simply a question of noticing. We tend not to notice because we're so busy doing something else.

In traditions that call themselves non-dual, this recognition is emphasized more. In Theravada, it's emphasized less. But you do find this stream—the recognition that what I'm looking for is already here, already available. If I'm pushing beyond what's already here to get to something else, that's when I trip up. That's when I tend to make too much effort, or misdirect my effort.

But when I start practice, this pushing is inevitably what I do. It's only gradually, over time, as sensitivity develops, that I begin to recognize: it's already here. And often when we have some kind of realization experience, we can feel that we've simply stumbled into what has always been available to us—but now we're noticing it.

CHAPTER 39

The Ocean of Affect

Patrick Kearney · 48 min

> *In this profound exploration of the second foundation of mindfulness, Patrick Kearney illuminates vedanā (feeling) as far more than mere emotion—it is the affective ocean in which we live, as fundamental and often as unnoticed as the air we breathe. Drawing from the Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN 44), taught by the arahant bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā, Kearney examines how feeling represents a way of experiencing rather than simply an object of experience. Contact (phassa) conditions feeling, and this relationship is as intimate as stimulus and response—where there is touch, there is already movement toward holding, rejecting, or confusion.*
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> *Kearney connects vedanā to the Buddha's understanding of sentience and ethics, explaining that sentient beings are defined by their capacity to feel pain, which places them within our circle of ethical concern. He explores why meditation is so easy to postpone—because sitting exposes us to the pervasive unease underlying experience, the vulnerability inherent in being a feeling body bombarded by sense stimuli. Our habitual retreat into conceptual thinking serves as refuge from this felt reality.*
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> *For practitioners, Kearney offers guidance on working with feeling through intimacy rather than cognitive clarity, surrendering into experience rather than analyzing it. He addresses the mysterious third category of feeling—neither painful nor pleasant—which he interprets not as neutral but as 'I don't know,' the ground from which ignorance (moha) arises. As practice matures, genuinely neutral feeling emerges, characterized paradoxically as more pleasant than pleasant, representing the equanimity of one who lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world.*

This morning we played around with, experimented with, and discussed vedana, feeling. Tonight we're going to talk about it in a bit more depth. The name of the talk is "The Ocean of Affect."

We start with this concept of vedana, usually translated as feeling, and what it refers to is the affective aspect of experience, where affect is that which has the power to move us, to stimulate a response. Vedana, or feeling, moves us to respond to what is happening.

We compared feeling to flavour—the flavour of food, not the physical sensations that we experience when we eat, but the flavour which is inevitably bound up with those sensations. Generally it's the flavour that moves us to take more or to have less.

The Buddha says there are three categories of feeling, and each one has its characteristic movement, its characteristic response. Pleasant feeling moves us to reach out and hold, to come closer and embrace. Painful feeling moves us to resist or to reject, to distance ourselves or to defend ourselves. But of course, sometimes we do not know what we are feeling, and then feeling is neither painful nor pleasant. This is the third category. When we recognize that feeling, we are moved either to ignore the event because it's not worthy of notice, or we move to dullness, doubt, and confusion in terms of what to do about it. But whatever the category of feeling, we are moved. We do respond.

I like the English word "feeling" very much. It can refer both to what we experience, as when we talk about someone's feelings, but it's also a way of experiencing things, as when we might speak about feeling our way forward. Tonight we're mostly concerned with this second aspect: feeling as a way of experiencing.

The first thing to recognize is that feeling is absolutely fundamental to our existence. If you look at our physical world, we live on the floor of a vast ocean composed of air. We are so dependent on this ocean that if we're separated from it, even for a brief period of time, we would die. This means that air is the most powerful and the most obvious aspect of existence, unforgettable in any circumstances. But as we all know, in fact we tend to ignore it completely. We notice it only when it disrupts our habitual functioning—when we smell it, or it seems particularly hot, or particularly cold, or we have trouble ingesting it. At other times, at most times, it completely disappears. We're not concerned with it at all. We don't even notice it.

This, by the way, reminds me of words of wisdom from my mother in my early adulthood. I told her that I was moving away from Sydney. She was born and raised in Sydney, and she was pretty horrified by a certain number of things I got up to, but this really hit her. Why would you leave Sydney? I said, well, it's so crowded and the air so polluted. She shook her head and said, "Never trust air you cannot see." I thought, this person has wisdom beyond my capacity.

Our psychological world is quite similar. We live in an ocean of affect, of feelings, and we tend not to notice it until it disturbs us in some way. Yet like air, it governs everything.

So let's have a look at feeling. First of all, where do we find feeling? The Buddha says the six sense fields condition contact; contact conditions feeling. The sense fields are the sensitivities that together constitute a sentient body. In Pali this is satviññanakaya. These sensitivities provide the location where all experience takes place. Where does experience actually happen? Well, it happens here, doesn't it? You probably think it happens out there somewhere, but it happens here. This is the location for experience.

Each of us is a locus of sensitivity surrounded by an ocean of stimuli. Sense data floods into the sentient body through the sensitivities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. And each sensitivity is a receptivity.

to particular kinds of data. When the Buddha talks about the eye, for example, he's not referring to the physical organ as a doctor might. He's referring to the sensitivity of that part of our body which is receptive to light and colour. These are two little bits of the body that have that particular sensitivity. The sensitivity itself is what the Buddha calls "eye"—and so on through the physical senses. For him, mind is also a sensitivity. It's a sensitivity to non-physical data, such as thoughts, perceptions, concepts, and so on.

Each sensitivity picks up its own unique flow of data, and then all six streams come into the mind, where they're woven together to create a world. This is the world that we live in.

Depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling. This applies to all six senses with the same analysis: depending on the sensitivity and the corresponding object, the corresponding awareness arises. Something is present. The meeting of the three is contact.

Contact is a coming together. Contact conditions feeling. As we've said this morning, contact translates the Pali word *phassa*, which literally means touch. The Buddha is saying that we are touched by what streams through the senses, and this touch is happening here and now. It is the immediacy of experience—the converging of the sensitivity, the sense object, and awareness. It's happening now.

Contact is like the arena of experience. It's the place where it happens, where everything intersects and comes together. Feeling is found in the response to experience. If I bring my hands together very gently and they touch, that touch is in a specific location. It's an event where something is happening. But as soon as there's touch, there's a response—warm, soft, pleasant—and there's just that little response of relaxation and opening in the body. That response is the feeling. The impact is contact. The response to that is feeling.

This relationship between contact and feeling, as we mentioned this morning, is particularly intimate. Contact and feeling are as close as stimulus and response. Where there is stimulus, there is already response. Where there is response, there is already stimulus. Stimulus and response, contact and feeling—they're different sides of the same coin. Contact is happening now, which means a response is happening now.

Let's look at one discourse where there's a discussion on feeling. It's very brief, from the Cūḷavedalla Sutta, "The Lesser Dialectic," in Majjhima Nikāya 44. The teaching is given by Dhammadinnā. She was an arahant bhikkhunī. I'm pretty sure she's the only woman who has her own sutta, her own discourse. The Buddha's teachings are the suttas—or in Sanskrit, sūtras—but sometimes a senior student would give a teaching, and the Buddha would hear about it. He might be present, or he might be told about it later, and he would give it the seal of approval, saying, "That's exactly what I would have said under those circumstances." Then that becomes a sutta. The Cūḷavedalla Sutta is the only sutta given by a woman, so Dhammadinnā must have been particularly important back in those early days.

This is what she says: "Whatever is felt physically or psychologically, as pleasant or soothing, is pleasant feeling."

Whatever is felt, physically or psychologically, as painful and hurting is painful feeling. Whatever is felt, physically or psychologically, as neither soothing nor hurting, is neither painful nor pleasant feeling.

This is her analysis. Again, you notice it's really brief. This is typical of the suttas—you've got to expand them to find out what's going on. But what she seems to be referring to when she's talking about feeling is the capacity of experience to soothe or to hurt. And this is what's central to vedanā, to feeling.

So as we've seen, feeling indicates a way of experiencing. She's saying that feeling is whatever is felt as pleasant or experienced as pleasant, felt as painful, experienced as painful. This "felt as," this "experiencing as," represents a form of understanding, of knowing. Because I know that it's pleasant. I know that it's painful. So there's an element of understanding. But this understanding is much more intimate than how we usually speak about understanding or knowing.

Let's say, in ordinary language, I say "I know something." If we say that, we are implying a subject-object distinction. There's a knower and there's what is known. And usually it's the I that knows and something which is known. Feeling implies a knowing which is much more intimate than that. And therefore it's less nameable. It can't quite

be pinned down as a something separate from the one who knows it. If I say "I know something," that something is what I am experiencing, what I know. But feeling doesn't really tell us what we are experiencing, but how we are responding.

So feeling is found in a response that moves us before we have had time to think about it. Contact conditions feeling. Later on comes perception, thought, and so on and so forth. So before we've had any time to think about it, there's already a response. And that means there's already some kind of understanding involved. Because our movement to hold out and to reach, our movement to resist and reject, is based on some kind of assessment of the event. But this is a foundational assessment, built into the fabric of experience itself. It's not something found later, once we consider what's going on.

And the Buddha says there are three fundamental responses, depending on the three categories of feeling. If the feeling of a sensation is pleasant, we're moved to hold it. If the feeling of a sensation is painful or unpleasant, we're moved to reject or resist. And if the feeling of the sensation is neither painful nor pleasant, we are moved to ignore it as beneath notice. Or if we do notice it, we're moved to confusion and doubt about it. What to do? Shall I hold this? Shall I reject it? Shall I hold it? Reject. Hold. Reject. The mind oscillates back and forth.

So these responses occur before we have made any conscious decision. And this brings us to the Buddha's teaching on cetanā, usually translated as intention, but perhaps we could see it as choice or decision. Cetanā is the decision to act that arises from the perceived significance of an event.

Now choice or decision, cetanā, is extremely important for the Buddha's ethics, for his teaching on how we live, because it represents how we shape the direction of our lives. And he even equates choice or decision or intention, cetanā, with karma, morally significant action.

So where does feeling fit into karma? Feeling represents the world as already given that demands a decision from us. We are already thrown into the world. And that thrownness has the flavor of vedanā. It's pleasant. It's painful. I don't know.

And it's that which demands a decision. What do I do about it? And our fundamental decision is all about how this experienced event that's happening right now is positioned in relation to us and our interests. Is it pleasant, to be held onto? Is it painful, to be rejected? Is it neither, to be not noticed at all?

So feeling has us already deciding, already engaging. The choice, karma, comes in later. It's almost like a kind of review of a commitment we've already made. Feeling is elemental. It's absolutely fundamental to experience. It's so fundamental that it's very difficult to get hold of, and it can be very difficult to understand conceptually.

At this level of elemental response, we find ourselves up against the limits of language. If we're going to speak about something, that something has to be an object out there, separate from the speaker. But feeling gives us a world before we recognize this world as separate from us. We are already committed to it. We are already responding, already entangled. And it's this response that we have to the world that helps create a sense of a world that we can recognize as separate from us and demanding our participation.

Feeling is absolutely elemental. It's before we construct any kind of perception, thought, and so on. It's the basis and foundation upon which we construct perception and thinking.

This brings us to the concept of sentience, which is another key concept in the Buddha's ethics. You notice that vedanā is right at the heart of the Buddha's understanding of ethics. For the Buddha, we are sentient beings, where to be sentient is to be aware and to feel. These are the two aspects of sentience. Living beings are sentient. Non-living things are not sentient.

For example, I may have an air conditioner and I may program it to maintain a steady temperature of twenty-five degrees by means of a thermostat. But we don't say that the thermostat feels hot or the thermostat feels cold. We, on the other hand, feel hot or feel cold. This capacity to feel is sentience. We are sentient bodies. This is another aspect of the Buddha's understanding of the human condition.

Sentience is central for the Buddha's understanding of ethics because our circle of ethical concern—who we should be concerned about—is that of sentient beings. In other words, the Buddha's ethical concern does not stop at the border of our species. Often in ethical systems, that boundary is taken for granted. But for the Buddha, all species that we can recognize as being sentient demand our ethical concern.

If you think about the first way of training, the first precept—abstaining from killing living beings—the beings covered by this way of training are sentient beings. We mentioned this on the first night: beings who feel pain, love life, and fear death. Roughly speaking, if a being tries to escape our blow, it's covered by this way of training. And you notice that the first characteristic of a sentient being is feeling pain. In other words, for the Buddha, sentience entails pain. If there is sentience, there is pain.

We could go so far as to say that the difference between a robot and a living being is not their comparative intelligence. That's got nothing to do with it. The difference is whether or not they feel pain. If an entity feels pain, that entity is sentient.

We won't speculate about robots, but there's no doubt that we are sentient. We are aware and we feel. And that means we are exposed to pain. That's built in. This becomes quite evident in our meditation practice. We run around living our lives caught up in our habitual obsessions and dullness.

And then when we press the pause button on all of that in order to meditate, when we allow ourselves to be aware of whatever we are experiencing now, without any barrier, what we recognise is the pervasive pain. Often in the form of pervasive restlessness, an inability for the body and the mind to settle and absorb into the present.

And that's one reason, maybe the main reason, why meditation is so easy to postpone. Did you know that there have been many scientific studies on mindfulness, and that these studies have proven beyond all doubt that of all human activities, meditation is the easiest to postpone? And you all know that, don't you, from your own experience.

Why is it so easy to postpone? It's because we don't want to expose ourselves to what we know or sense is happening just beneath the surface. When we give ourselves permission to feel whatever we are actually feeling now, without all the usual distractions and superficial preoccupations that we fill our days with, then we expose ourselves to an underlying sense of unease or dis-ease. And we don't want to see this because what it reveals is the vulnerability of experience, the pain inherent in sentience. It reveals the sensitivity of the heart and the uncontrollable flow of disturbances that arise when the heart's sensitivity is bombarded by sense stimuli.

I also suspect that this is one reason why, when we're meditating, we find it so easy to get lost in our thinking. Because if we get lost in our thinking, which we can do very quickly and easily—we're all very skilled at that—then what we're doing is running away from the immediate experience of the senses to live as refugees in a conceptual world. We create fantasies to separate us from the felt reality of the sentient body.

So if we're going to go deeply into our felt experience, what we need to do is face this vulnerability. Here we can talk about the role of feeling in our meditation practice. We've talked about feeling as being a way of experiencing, not just an object of experience. This suggests that feeling can be practiced. But how do we practice feeling, especially since it's so elemental and so entangled with the immediacy of experience itself?

I think the key is intimacy, which we talked about this morning. What we want to do is get close, as close as possible, to the felt touch of contact, the immediacy of sensation itself. And to do this, we have to open up to the vulnerability of sentience and drop the layers of armour that we normally carry, often in the form of layers and layers of concepts. We have to open up to the currents of pleasure and pain that are flowing through us regardless of our consent, often absolutely different to what we want.

One possible way of exploring this is, for example, when you're sitting, begin by checking feeling. And the easiest to check is pleasure and pain—they're the most obvious. Am I experiencing pleasure now? If so, I let myself relax into the pleasure. Am I experiencing pain now? I let myself surrender into the pain.

Now when we're doing this, we're not concerned about being clear or accurate in our awareness. Up to now we've been talking about being really precise, clear, accurate. But that concern for clarity belongs to what we were calling watching, the cognitive aspect of awareness. Here we're interested in feeling, which arises before perception, before judgment, before concept. So it may lack the clear boundaries of concept.

One of the reasons why we find concepts so attractive is that concepts have very discrete, definite borders. The concept of pleasant feeling—it's good, it's pleasant, I like it. Then there's this absolute border, and then you have the concept of painful feeling, and it's definitely not good. And they're definitely completely different. But all of that is concept.

The realm of feeling, the realm of intimacy, may lack these clean boundaries. Feeling is found in the disturbed vulnerability that characterises human experience before any perception or any concept arises about it. However, once it emerges, once it becomes clear, then we may become very clear about how the feeling is presenting itself to us. But this is after it emerges, and it's reasonably strong.

So if we're working with feeling, it's about surrendering into experience. Not getting lost in our concepts about the experience, but surrendering into it, relaxing into it. Staying with the vulnerability of sentience. And as we do this practice, we might get a sense of how deep these layers of concept go.

They're like layers of cling wrap blocking us from direct sensation. So we work our way through those layers. But of course, each one of those layers is characterized by feeling. So it's available. It's not that we have to dig deep down before we come to feeling. Every step of the way is dominated by vedanā.

But as a project, we're learning to stay with the vulnerability of sentience.

Now, we continue to construct a cognitive world out of our experience. We've been doing this quite literally longer than we can remember. So we're not going to stop now. But that's fine. When we notice that we're lost in a world of perception, judgment, and concept, what to do? Surrender to it and feel the intimacy and vulnerability of being in that world, the world of concept. Because that world also has its own unique flavor.

And as we do this, what we might notice is how feeling flows like a river. Nothing in it is stable. No single experience is reliable. When we're practicing with feeling, we're not disturbing this flow by clinging to any particular feeling. This is it. Grab it.

Of course we hold on to pleasant feeling, but we also hold on to painful feeling, which is really perverse, but that's what we do. Oh, this is my pain. This is the tragedy of my life. These other meditators, they think they've got dukkha. It's nothing compared to my dukkha.

This is the clinging to feeling which so characterizes our behavior. Instead, we enter into this river and allow pleasant to succeed painful, and painful to succeed pleasant. What we might find as we practice mindfulness of feeling is that feeling itself transforms. Pleasant segues into painful and back again. It's like a freely flowing river.

As mindfulness becomes stronger and clear understanding builds, we may discover more subtle levels of feeling—those that we originally sensed as neither painful nor pleasant. This is the level of feeling characterized by ignorance and delusion, and therefore the most difficult to actually pinpoint. Because if we pinpoint it, then we're clear about it, and so it's probably going to transform into something either pleasant or painful. This third category is the most obscure in practice.

But as we go deeper and deeper, this third category of neither painful nor pleasant transforms into genuinely neutral feeling. This neutrality emerges when the heart is dominated by mindfulness and equanimity. What characterizes it, quite counter-intuitively, is that neutral feeling—genuinely neutral feeling—is actually more pleasant than pleasant, usually. Which is quite odd.

But when this emerges, when the heart is dominated by equanimity and mindfulness, the neutral feeling represents the maturity of the practice, where, as the Buddha says in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the practitioner lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This represents, in its mature form, a stream of feeling that does not move into craving or drivenness. And so this is the equanimity of the awakened one.

Any questions?

"I think that today, and we've touched on it tonight, the idea that there's choice with vedanā. Is that right?"

Vedanā comes before choice. But then we're presented with a world in which we're already entangled. And then we recognize, oh, what to do about it? Then there's choice. And of course choice has vedanā. And what we choose has vedanā. Because vedanā is inescapable. It's not that there's vedanā here and then there's other things happening. All along the line—vedanā, vedanā, vedanā, vedanā, vedanā. This is one of the things that makes it so difficult to get a handle on.

This is a very interesting question: can one experience more than one feeling at the same time? This is the kind of question Buddhist philosophers have been debating for thousands of years, and it is indeed a very good question. If you follow orthodox Theravada, the answer is no—you can only have one at a time.

Does that mean one feeling is dominant? Not necessarily, but each feeling, like every event, lasts only for a moment and is immediately succeeded by another. So according to Theravada orthodoxy, if I think I'm experiencing two things at once, it's because the mind is going back and forth rapidly—this one, this one, this one, this one—and it merely appears to be two things at once.

But let me just say that this is a philosophical orthodoxy. It's not necessarily your experience. So the question is, as a practitioner, do you experience more than one thing at once? Forget about orthodoxy. Forget about neuroscience too. If you're making your living that way, I suppose you could go on about it. But we're practitioners, not neuroscientists. What they say is completely irrelevant to our experience. Never let someone talk you out of your experience. You're a practitioner—the one thing you have to rely upon is your experience. Your job is to be clear about it. If you experience something, that's it. You experience it.

Now, maybe if you want to bow down before the altar of neuroscience and worship accordingly, you might create an intellectual framework that says, "Oh, I'm experiencing more than one thing at once, but that's because my experience is inadequate, and if I go deeper, I will recognize the truth of whatever science says." But stick to your experience as a practitioner.

Someone wisely commented that they've had some experiences they don't want to stick to. That's a very wise observation indeed.

I'm not actually sure, but I always assumed that this one-thing-at-a-time doctrine—this is *khaṇavāda*, the doctrine of moments—is characteristic of Theravada. But I believe I read somewhere that every Buddhist tradition, at least in theory, subscribes to

this theory. They may ignore it in practice because it's completely unverifiable through direct experience. So you do find different attitudes in different traditions. But we're talking about orthodox Theravada here, not Theravada in general. I mean, how many people actually know what the orthodoxy is? How many practitioners doing meditation have the foggiest idea what Theravada orthodoxy actually says? Perhaps 0.001 percent. So it's pretty irrelevant. As practitioners, given that we're not doing a PhD in Buddhist philosophy, it doesn't matter what the philosophers think. What matters is: what do I experience? That's the important thing.

Someone mentioned feeling a bit dull, a bit foggy, and that while I was talking about this, it felt like a whole new way of dealing with that experience—just recognizing it as neither pleasant nor unpleasant, just this whole thing.

I'm always puzzled by the common interpretation of the third type of vedana. The Buddha says *sukha vedanā, dukkha vedanā, adukkhamasukha vedanā*. So the third one is literally "not unpleasant, not pleasant" vedana. That's precisely what he says. And I'm always puzzled why people think he's saying "neutral." If he wanted to say neutral, he would have said neutral. He has a word for neutral: *tatramajjhattatā*. He could have said *tatramajjhattatā vedanā*.

But he didn't. He said "not painful, not pleasant." So what is he talking about? I think, in context, what he's talking about is: I don't know. It isn't painful, it isn't pleasant—I don't know what it is.

And when you look at the three basic movements of the heart—greed, anger, and ignorance—ignorance arises from this third category of feeling. Why would ignorance arise from neutrality? This is what the Buddha says: you have the three movements—lobha, dosa, moha. Moha is generally translated as ignorance, and moha comes from the third category of feeling. That's basic Buddhism.

Now, I warn you that this is my interpretation, so feel free to chuck it out the window. Analayo says he's determined that the third category is neutral feeling, and I hesitate before I disagree with Analayo—but I just do. What to do?

All of this is theoretical, and so it's not particularly important from the perspective of the meditator. What's important is the clarity of your experience. If you have a question like "Is it neutral or is it something else?" or "Can two things be aware at once or not?"—these are excellent questions for practice. Clarify them in the practice. That process makes the mind sharper and clearer, and you go deeper into the nature of experience.

But what theory you wrap around it? That's not important. So long as you've got some kind of conceptual framework that helps you make sense of the experience, that gives it meaning in some way—that's all that counts. And it doesn't even have to be Buddhist. There are Christians who do Buddhist meditation, and their theoretical framework is Christianity. And it works.

A student shared that they had been thinking back to the earlier discussion about awareness and consciousness, and the Susan Blackmore poem with the question "What am I aware of now?" Their experience was that sometimes awareness seems like a shifting stage, but when they applied that question repeatedly—now, and then now, and then now—there was only one stage, and it became quite clear. They found that question helpful for clarifying what's going on.

Questions are important, but a good question is much more important than any answer you come up with. A good question sends awareness in a useful direction. It clarifies experience. So questions are good. And doubt can be very good.

Someone asked about magical thinking. What have you got in mind? What's magical thinking? They offered an example: "Crystals cure cancer." Do they? I tried it once—it only burned holes in my socks. That's pretty powerful.

No, I really have nothing to say about magical thinking. It's not something I'm preoccupied with. I see a lot of people firmly entrenched in magical thinking.

I think it's common. And while I view that as every minute they spend on magical thinking, which is just because they believe it makes it real, versus whether it's real or not, is one minute away from sitting. One minute away from practice. Probably wasting time.

But in this project, what we're interested in is the nature of experience. The project is to clarify the experience. And it's really important to have faith in your own experience.

In Burma, depending on the teacher, of course, but sometimes you go in for interviews six days a week and you give a very precise description of what you think is your best meditation over the previous twenty-four hours. Now, at some point, you're going to walk in and report something which is significant, which you may not know. You may not have the slightest idea.

And for some teachers, if you did that, the response would be a frown, even a grimace. And then an accusation: "You're making that up. You're telling me stories. You haven't experienced that. You heard someone talking about it and now you're coming

in and telling me about it. That's just your imagination. You must never be disrespectful to the Dharma and disrespectful to your teacher by coming in here and reporting something which did not happen."

Now this is in the context of a very hierarchical, authoritarian culture. So if someone gets that hammering, it's devastating. The temptation is to crawl out and hope they'll forget about it. But if the meditator stands their ground and says, with all respect, "I know what I experienced, and this is what I experienced," then the attitude completely shifts. And it's congratulations. Welcome to the club.

It's a way of really insisting that you've got to be clear about your experience and you've got to have faith in it. Because that's the only thing you've got to rely on when you're doing this practice. So it's a very important point. Don't get caught up in ideologies. Don't take an ideology and impose it on the experience. Keep the experience clean.

A lot of the time it's very difficult to find the language to explain. Describing experience is like describing music. And that's another problem, of course—the problem of how do you communicate experience in words. Some people are better at it than others and they, in a sense, have an unfair advantage.

But how can you be clear on your experience and sure about it? You'd be clear about what's coming up now. There's something happening now. What is it? That's the basic principle. Including what's coming up now might be the experience of memory arising now. And what is that experience?

CHAPTER 40

Tracking the Thought-Stream (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · 52 min

In this workshop from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney guides practitioners into the third foundation of mindfulness: contemplation of mind (cittānupassanā). Working within the Mahāsī Sayādaw framework of grounding and secondary objects, he addresses one of meditation's most common challenges—the addictive relationship with thinking that characterizes modern Western culture.

Kearney emphasizes a crucial distinction: thinking itself is not the problem; our obsessive identification with thought content creates suffering. Drawing on the image from Nisargadatta Maharaj of a mother watching her child play with a toy, he teaches practitioners to step back from absorption in thought content and instead observe the activity of thinking itself. The workshop explores how thoughts construct and reinforce our sense of self, noting that the fear of losing this thought-constructed identity often generates panic and more thinking when the mind approaches stillness.

Through a series of meditation experiments, participants investigate non-content aspects of thinking: How do thoughts appear—as words, images, feelings, or perceptions? Where in the body do thoughts seem located? What does thinking feel like—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? These inquiries apply the same precision of awareness developed with body contemplation to the cognitive dimension of experience. By directing attention to these formal qualities rather than narrative content, practitioners cut through the addictive pull of the thought-stream, weakening habitual identification and opening to what the Buddha called suññatā (emptiness) and anattā (not-self). This approach transforms distraction into a doorway for investigation.

In these morning workshops we're going through different aspects of the practice, and the practice is based on the framework of the four Satipaṭṭhānas.

When we begin, we spend a lot of time working on our relationship with the body because that's the first of the four Satipaṭṭhānas and it's the foundation for the practice. Then we move on to vedanā, feeling, which is so important that it gets its own Satipaṭṭhāna. And now we are entering into the third Satipaṭṭhāna: citta, usually translated as mind.

Here we come across what we were talking about before—that when the Buddha analyzes the human condition, he distinguishes between the cognitive aspect of the mind and the affective aspect. So roughly speaking: head, heart. Rationality, feeling. Today we're going to have a look at the mind, focusing on one aspect of the cognitive aspect of mind.

As you know, we're working with the basic framework laid out by Mahasi Sayadaw. In this lineage they talk about what we are aware of, the meditation object, in terms of grounding object and secondary object. The grounding object is the meditation object with a capital M and a capital O. This is what we focus on. This is the central reference point. This is where we learn to settle awareness and to keep it settled over a period of time.

What serves as the grounding object varies from person to person and from time to time, but it's important that we have a sense of it being our default position. Let's say we sit down to meditate. You think, what should I do in this sitting? Grounding object. It's the default.

But of course, inevitably, we're pulled away from it. When we're pulled away from it—okay, I've been dragged somewhere else—what is this? Secondary object. So: grounding, secondary. The secondary appears, at least in the early stages, as distraction—what pulls me away from the grounding object. As the practice develops, the whole relationship changes. The structure of grounding and secondary actually evaporates. When we practice, we're simply with whatever is happening, and whether it's grounding or secondary is completely irrelevant. But as we go through in these mornings, we're looking at it from the point of view of this structure of grounding and secondary.

Now, one area of human experience that people talk about as providing distraction is thinking. Has anybody here been distracted by thinking? One or two? Once or twice? Big tick on that one. It's a major source of distraction, particularly in our culture. I think other cultures don't have this as such a big deal because they're not so obsessed with their thinking. But in our culture, it is normal to be completely obsessed with thinking. So this brings us to what we could call the thought stream—the endless stream of thought generated by the mind.

Now, thinking gets a bad press in meditation. You get the subtext: what I want you to do is sit there for an hour and don't think. There is actually a meditation exercise, which I used to do—I don't do it anymore—where basically we get people to sit down, settle awareness, and then: stop thinking. Don't think. That's the instruction. It's quite interesting what comes up as a result. But we won't do that today.

Thinking is just part of nature.

Thinking gets a bad press, but there's nothing wrong with it. It's just part of nature. Thinking is not the problem. The problem is our relationship to thinking—that we are obsessed with our thinking. In other words, our relationship to thinking is addictive.

If you have a friend who's fond of a particular substance, and if you feel that this substance they're very fond of is leading them down dangerous pathways and is basically bad for them, you might rouse up the courage to suggest, "Maybe you should think about dropping it. Because it seems to me you're a touch addicted." And your friend gets all upset and says, "I'm not addicted. I could stop any time I want." What would be your response? We'd think, "Oh, definitely addicted." That's the problem.

How many of us can just stop? When I was in Burma, at one point I was going through a lot of incredibly obsessive and generally painful thinking. I was doing this long retreat, and one of my fellow meditators—he had ordained as a monk temporarily—had gone off to a branch monastery. But he came back for a visit to do something at the main center where I was. We had a little chat and he asked, "How's it going?" I said, "It's going really, really badly. I just can't stop thinking." I talked about my difficulty, and he said, "Look, I've got the solution for you. It's basically very simple." I said, "Do you?" Because this guy was a very good meditator. "What's the solution?" He said, "I'll tell you what I do. I get up in the morning—wake-up time was like four a.m. or something—and I go outside to my walking meditation place. I stand at the beginning of the walking track and I make a determination, an adhiṭṭhāna: for the next two hours I will not think. And then I just do walking meditation for two hours without thinking. By then it's time for breakfast and I'm set up for the day." And I said, "Oh. Is that what you do? Thanks."

Most of us can't do that. So in this situation, what we need to do is start to get interested in the addictive relationship. It's not the thinking which is the problem. It's the relationship which is the problem. And that's what we need to investigate.

The mind is constantly throwing up thought sparks, like sparks from a fire—little thought moments. What happens is that the mind is kind of hovering around and it sees one of those little sparks, thinks it looks interesting, grabs it, and turns it into a story. And then we get absorbed into the story.

Now, why are these stories so entrancing? Why are they so addictive? They're entrancing because they're all about me. When we think, who do we think about? We think about me. We're not completely narcissistic—we think about other people—but we think about them in relation to me. My friends. My enemies. My past. My future. My family. And so on.

It's all about me. And this is what makes thinking attractive, if not addictive. Thinking is a major way in which we build up, construct our view of ourself. In a sense, we are who we deeply think we are. And thinking solidifies that.

During that period of time when I was really wrestling with thought, I was approaching it through heroic effort. And gradually, gradually, gradually, the thinking level would decline. Until it reached the point where I really noticed that it was very close to disappearing. And at that point, what would arise was panic. And then, up goes the thought again.

I realized what was going on was fear. Who would I be if I wasn't thinking? Would I even exist? The mind was just horrified by this prospect. And in a panic, it immediately generated more thinking.

So I learned that a lot of this is about identity. And a lot of it is about habit—deeply ingrained habit. And identity and habit go together.

If we learn to track the thought stream, to use the thought stream as a meditation object, what this does is cut through our deeply ingrained determination to identify with the world created by thought. And it opens us up to a world beyond thought. This is the world that the Buddha called emptiness, sunyata, or not-self, anatta.

So let's have a look at how we go about doing that.

The basic principle is, as we've been discussing, that we're always dealing with a dyad of awaring and what is aware. Minding and what is minding. Awareness and its object. It's always that dyad we're working with. And as we've said, normally what we think is important is the object. So we have experiencing, which is an activity, and what we experience. All our lives, we've been projecting importance into what we experience. That to us is what's important, not the experiencing. So we tend to overlook it, although we can't have the one without the other.

This is particularly evident with thinking. Normally when we think, we assume that what is important is what we are thinking about—even when we know it's complete rubbish. We still, in that moment, think it's important. So we take for granted the activity of thinking, how we think.

But when we're tracking the thought stream, we're not interested in what we are thinking about. What we are thinking about is of no interest whatsoever. What we're interested in is the activity of thinking. We are interested in thinking, not thoughts. This is a very important distinction.

To get a sense of it, I always cite a passage in the writings of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj. He talks about meditation practice and compares it to a mother watching her child play with a favourite toy. So you have this image of the child and the toy. The child is completely caught up in the toy, completely absorbed with it. And then just over here, there's the mother. She's not particularly interested in the toy. What she's interested in is the child playing with the toy. She's interested in the game, in the relationship. That's what she's focused on.

Normally, in our relationship to thinking, we are like the child—completely obsessed with the toy. Our job is to step back and become like the mother, watching the child play with the toy. We're interested in the play of thinking and our relationship with that play.

So the basic method is to find some aspect of the activity of thinking that is not the content of our thoughts, and make that our meditation object. We're going to play with this, doing some meditation experiments. Again, it's important that we have an attitude of play. Don't take them seriously. It does not matter what happens when we do these exercises. But it would be nice if we enjoyed ourselves as we play.

In each exercise, we begin by settling awareness in the body. At some point, I'll direct attention to some aspect of the thought stream. If you get lost in thinking, simply drop it and come back to the body. Once you settle, return to the exploration. That's what we'll be doing.

Let's begin.

Settle awareness in your body, constructing the meditation posture. Start with the sensations at the base of the body, finding the balance, then lift up through your spine. Let your chest open, your shoulders relax. Lifting up through the spine, up through the neck, up through the head—around that lift, relax down. Then settle into your normal meditation object.

Are you thinking?

If you are thinking, and if you know you are thinking, then thoughts must be appearing to you in some way. How do thoughts appear? Do they appear as words? Do they appear as visual images? Do they appear as feelings? Do they appear as combinations of these? As something else entirely?

Study the flow of these thoughts. Don't focus on their content—what they are about—but on their appearance, how they present themselves to you. How do thoughts appear?

So, how do they appear? How do you know you are thinking?

One student shares that it starts with a visual image—sometimes aided by a word, a name—but it begins with a perception, a recognition. You recognize that something's happening, then you put an image on it, and that may be supported by a word.

Another student describes how you build an image, or you see the image, then you get some words, and you might even see text, and then it just changes. So you start with a sense perception, then there's an image supported by words, and they entangle each other, and away you go.

Another student describes a more complex unfolding: it began with the words of the question itself, hearing the words reverberate. Then other things started to add on—there was a bird, hearing the bird, a baby bird calling out—and an immediate response arose, a slight annoyance: "Oh, there's that little puppy bird again." There was an affective aspect as the entanglement began, starting with sound, then drawing in both words and visual images.

Images. Yes. Together? Yes.

I think sometimes there's a feeling that's present which makes my ability to see what's actually there somewhat vague. At some point I'll pick up a story about that feeling being there, but the feeling might just be something like, "Oh, I don't know if I'm doing this right." It's not actually the words—it's just a feeling. The feeling comes first, in this case.

I've done this experiment for a long time, and for most people it will be visual images, feelings, and words in different variations and combinations. And here we had something different: we had perception. The perception of the sound—this definitely came up twice.

So these three appear to be the main ways in which we think, and people have favourite ways. Usually there's a combination, but you get different weightings. For example, for me, I'm definitely a word man. I think in words.

For the fellow word thinkers: is there one voice or more than one voice? Does anybody have discussions, conversations between two separate entities? Some people have more than one person in there, having a chat. But some people, like me—I'm strictly a monologue person. My fundamental principle of thinking is that I never let anybody get a word in edgewise. I sometimes wonder whether that's why I became a teacher. Expounding seems to be my natural mental state, which is a bit of a worry, but what to do?

Now notice what we're doing here. We're just taking thought, but we're looking at an aspect of it which is not the content—it's not what it's about. In this case, it's the appearance. How do I know that I'm thinking? How does thought appear?

Normally, if thinking is going on, the awareness goes straight to the content, the story itself, and we take this for granted as being obvious. But here we ask you to try switching the aim from there to over here—to the appearance, how it appears.

So you notice that this is about aim, and this is about accuracy. This is what we've been practicing throughout this retreat, starting with the elements. We've been doing it with the body, getting a sense of what it means to be accurate with the awareness. Then we can bring that accuracy into the mind and start to tease apart the thinking process. This is the basic methodology, and we'll have just a couple more experiments to look at other possibilities.

"Yes, that sense of two voices in there talking back and forth. Invariably, there's one observing with an opinion or judgment—'that wasn't very kind' or 'return to the present'—that kind of thing. Catching that commentary."

So you've got the chatter, but over here you've got the commentator. And the commentator is saying, "Oh, you should... that's good... no, that's not... what are you doing that for?" and so on and so forth. The commentator at the back.

Some meditators say this is the most stubborn aspect of thinking in meditation. Even when they've got a nice samādhi going and the mind is very quiet, still in the background there's someone commenting, "Oh, the mind is quiet now."

"Oh, that's good. Maybe I should try doing this." The commentator seems to be very ubiquitous, and people say very difficult to let go of. In some respects, the commentator is an expression of wisdom, of understanding—but it's coming out as thinking instead

of just being able to be intuitive without the concept. Simply a knowing. A knowing that this is wholesome, this is unwholesome, without having to say "this is wholesome, this is unwholesome." The annoying commentator. A very common experience.

When you're monologuing, do you have an audience? Are you in specific spaces? Sometimes there's an explicit audience, sometimes there's no particular audience. And sometimes what I've done, when I realize I'm caught up in monologue, is I drop in the question: where's the audience? I can't even physically look around, but there is one. And then I can drop it. Because I have to convince myself there's an audience. The audience is conjured up, but that assumption that there's an audience is actually pretty weak, because there isn't one. By recognizing that, it helps to drop the monologue. Just ask: where's the audience?

Let's try another exercise. Here we're going to work with a question that I know has been bugging you for a long time, but you've always been afraid to ask. And this question is: where do you think?

Let's again settle into your meditation posture, constructing the posture from the ground up. Feel the contact of the base of the body and from there lift up through your spine. From there, settle into your usual meditation object.

Are you thinking? Turn your attention to the place where you think. This is similar to finding where physical sensations arise. The difference is that physical sensations have physical location, while the thought stream may not. People may experience their thoughts in the general area of the head, and it can be useful to begin there—but do not take anything for granted. Don't assume that you already know.

Where do you think? Is there a specific location? Is there more than one location? Does this location change? Or is there no location? Where do you think?

So where are those thoughts? The left side of the brain, with a connection going down into the heart. Inside the skull or outside? Inside and outside, going down into the heart. So there's a connection between the heart and the head. And they start in the heart and go up, so the thinking begins in the heart and goes up to the left side of the brain. It really takes shape in the brain, but it starts in the heart.

Anyone else? In the eyes?

Yes. I have access to a 150-inch TV screen.

So visual or auditory as well?

No, not so much. Mostly visual. Probably 98% visual.

And is the screen in the eyes or outside the eyes?

Outside. Just outside. Pretty close.

So you get a close-up of the big screen.

Anyone else?

I had two locations, depending on the type of thought. The normal sort of energetic thinking just happened around the head. But feeling states and tiredness—when those are predominant, the thoughts were slower and they were coming from here, from the heart area. And with me, whenever I focus on my thinking or ask myself what my next thought will be, there are no thoughts. That's the quickest way to quiet the mind. But sometimes, if I want to focus on my breath or something in my body, the thinking will start up. And then if I focus on my thoughts, the awareness becomes very recalcitrant. The awareness goes to the body and there's an absence of thoughts.

So you've got energetic thoughts up in the head area. But the more emotive thoughts are located in the heart. The slow thoughts are here, and the energetic ones are up here. And then thought behaves bizarrely in that if you turn your awareness toward thought, the thoughts go away and the awareness settles nicely with the meditation object. But if you try to get to the meditation object, they go up into thinking. The mind is definitely recalcitrant.

So here we have another exercise in which we give ourselves something to do: Where is it? Did anybody fail to find any location at all? Some people find it difficult to track down any kind of location. Some people say, "I can't find it. I can't find any location." And then others will say, "It's not that I couldn't find it. It's that there is no location. Location does not apply. It's a category error to look for a location." Does anybody have that experience? A very clear sense that there isn't a location?

Possibly. I was thinking it's in the head, but maybe it's my perception that thoughts might be coming from there. I didn't feel anything in any particular location.

So you expected them to be in the head, but they weren't there. There's definitely a stream of words, but you couldn't pinpoint any location. It's possible that you just couldn't pinpoint it. But there's also the distinct perception that there definitely is no location—that location does not apply. This is a different experience.

Some people will report that they hear a sound and that stimulates the thought, so it begins in the ear, and so on. But other people will say that's not their experience at all. So again, it's always a matter of the actual experience. We're not looking for the correct

experience. We're just trying to clarify: What is the experience? And what is it today, this morning? It could be completely different this afternoon. You never worry about that. It's just: What is it right now?

But sometimes people are quite clear that location does not apply. In a sense, thinking is both everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Location simply does not apply.

But again, it doesn't matter what the answer is. The point is that by asking the question, you're directing awareness to some aspect of thinking which is not the content. And if I'm directing awareness to some aspect of thinking that is not the content, then in that moment, I am not caught up in the content. Which means I am not caught up in my usual addictive relationship. I've cut through it. Maybe only for a few moments, but I've cut through it. And therefore, I'm weakening that addictive relationship.

We have time for another exploration. Let's try feeling—in other words, the basic question is: what does thinking feel like?

So again, establish your posture, constructing your meditation seat. And from there, settling into your normal meditation object.

Are you thinking? As thoughts cascade through your mind, don't concern yourself with what you are thinking, but how it feels to be thinking. Are you enjoying it? Is it pleasant? Do you dislike it? Is it unpleasant? Do you not care about it at all? Is it neither painful nor pleasant? How does it feel to think?

Okay, so how does it feel to think?

"That particular thing—all the spinning, when you stop on something. What do you call it? Like a lottery wheel. And the other image was the compost tumbler. That was my very first thought when you asked what it feels like: tumbling all over the place, and you're rubbish. Not being able to land on anything."

Anyone else? What does it feel like?

"Unacceptable."

Really nicely described.

"I find it really unpleasant. It feels like being caught up in a whirlpool. But thoughts that arose when I was simply responding to the wind—those were kind of lighter. It was like, 'Oh, I've noticed that.' And then I would get into more commentary, and then it became unpleasant."

So wind was pleasant and commentary was unpleasant.

"Yeah, just noticing what's happening outside felt very small, infinitely light."

"It felt like it was in the center of my head, right between the ears. It was tight, with tension. And then when it would drift off toward some commentary, it would drop down a little toward the throat. So it was slightly heading in that direction, like, 'Okay, I'm going to talk now.'"

So the whole thing was uncomfortable?

Generally.

But you also found a very specific location.

Yes, yes. It's uncomfortable, but it felt separate from a more unified experience. I didn't have this experience now, but when I see something that isn't kind, or I feel a barrier come up between myself and another, I can feel it in my heart—I feel like a contraction. It was sort of that kind of thing.

Yeah, good. Totally. I think for me it would tend to be on a thought—like I had an angry thought, and that's what I'm uncomfortable with, that kind of thing. But then I have this sense that all of a sudden you're in a state where you're spiritualized. It's interesting how when you're working on the feeling, the physical sensations also become more clear, more apparent for some people.

But again, it's a basic principle: find some aspect of the thinking process that is not the content, and make that the meditation object—in this case, feeling. Another possibility is the body. The question would be: do you think with your body? Does the body respond to the thinking? If so, how? These are all possibilities, but you see they're all illustrations of the basic principle. When you're caught up in thinking, number one, don't believe the story. Drop awareness out from the story, and then go into some aspect of the thinking process which is not the story, and zero in on it.

Now, you'll notice that mind is really, really quick. So it could be with these exercises that you only have to do it for a moment or two. It's like, "Oh, that's where it is," or "That's what it feels like," or whatever. And that can be enough. Then back to the grounding object. Or you might stay in there longer.

Generally, working with the thought stream is very high energy. A couple of you mentioned the energy of the thinking mind. And that means that using the thought stream as a meditation object, for most people, they can't do it for very long because they just get spun out. It becomes too much. So it's not suitable as a grounding object—

for most people. Some people can, but they're a minority who would use it as a grounding object. But in the context in which we've introduced it, it can be useful to play with when you realize you're distracted by thinking.

And once again, the basic principle is: what is a distraction? It's a meditation object wanting your attention. So note it. Be aware of it. But when you're aware of the thought stream, it is very tricky. So it helps to have a sense of what you can actually do, how to be aware of it. And these are basic games to learn how to do that.

Is it worthwhile tracking back thoughts? Sometimes I find, once I've been lost in the stream for a while, I find it helpful to trace how I got here from there.

Yeah, that can be quite a useful exercise. The question would be: what happened just then? How did it begin? And then you track back, track back to the initial arising of the thought. Some people really like that—they do it a lot. And other people don't do it at all. But it can be quite a useful exercise. And it's the same principle. You're treating the thinking as a conditional process, as you point out, and you track it back. What sparked it, and how did it move from A to B to C?

Some thoughts can be quite bold. You notice it, and it could be half an hour later. And that is, you could say, from a meditation point of view, one of the most dangerous kinds of thoughts—the ones that suck you in completely.

But the important thing, even there, is that once you know you're thinking, then you can work with it. We do have this very common experience that we're thinking and we don't know we're thinking. At that point there's nothing I can do, because I don't know. But as soon as I know it—bang—I can bring awareness to it.

This is a vortex. This is a black hole. What does the black hole feel like? Where is the black hole? What is it doing? Is it light? Is it heavy? Is it attractive? Is it disturbing?

So we're always working in the present. What's happening now? And that gradually builds our relationship with the present, builds the capacity to simply be present.

Okay. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to stop thinking. But if you can't manage that, please be aware of your thinking process.

CHAPTER 41

The Mirror of Dharma Part 1

Patrick Kearney · 51 min

In this first of four talks on "The Mirror of Dharma," Patrick Kearney draws from a 1960 teaching by Mahāsī Sayādaw originally given to experienced practitioners to help them assess their own attainment. The talk centers on the Brick Hall Sutta (SN 55.8), where the Buddha, weary of being asked about deceased practitioners' destinies, offers the "Mirror of Dharma" as a tool for self-assessment of stream-entry (sotāpanna).

Kearney explains the Buddha's four stages of awakening—stream-enterer, once-returner (sakadāgāmī), non-returner (anāgāmī), and arahant—noting that awakening is a process rather than a binary event. He presents both psychological and cosmological frameworks for understanding these stages. Psychologically, stream-entry involves the cognitive breakthrough of abandoning sakkāya-diṭṭhi (view of self-identity), directly realizing anattā. The affective dimensions of greed and hatred, being deeper than cognitive delusion, require the subsequent stages to overcome.

The talk emphasizes that stream-entry marks a point of no return on the path to full awakening. Drawing on Mahāsī Sayādaw's insight, Kearney highlights how the stream-enterer grasps the essential simplicity of practice—continuous awareness of nāma-rūpa phenomena arising in the present moment. This understanding, once realized, cannot be forgotten. The Buddha's criteria for stream-entry include experiential faith in Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, plus virtues "dear to cultivated ones"—an ethical life arising naturally from the direct experience of not-self and consequent empathy with all beings.

This is the first in a series of four talks on the theme, The Mirror of Dharma. And I have to confess, I'm making this up as I go along, so I hope it's not too ragged around the edges. But we shall hope and see.

So let's begin. This comes from a talk—a long, obviously a very long talk—given by Mahasi Sayadaw in 1960 to what is described in the title as "fully practiced yogis." The purpose of it was to help them be confident in reading their own experience, in understanding their own experience. The talk was published for limited circulation, and presumably limited only to mature practitioners or fully practiced yogis, perhaps. When I was in Malaysia one time, I came across a typed photocopy of this, which was given to me. So I took it home and promptly worked on it. And I was pondering what to do in this retreat, whether we should have a series of Wednesday night talks. I thought, well, the Mirror of Dharma—that would be a good place to start. So here we are.

We're back in 1960. Mahasi Sayadaw is teaching these practitioners, and they are essentially graduates of his meditation system. He was teaching them so that they could make an assessment of their own practice and an assessment about their level of attainment—what had they attained in the course of doing all this?

The thing is, of course, that assessing one's own practice and assessing one's own level of attainment is not easy or straightforward. Mahasi said to them: "Some would hold the opinion that every yogi can decide for himself on the stage of insight knowledge experienced by him, together with its name. That's just not so. For their knowledge, they will mostly know the uniqueness of samādhi ñāṇa, knowledge born of concentration, but are not capable of deciding on the naming of the particular insight."

In other words, he's saying what we understand when we meditate is the specific events that we go through as the practice develops. But we don't know the name of these events, these experiences. We can't read the experience. We don't know what it means. We don't know where it fits in a broader context.

Mahasi Sayadaw adds that the only person who can actually recognize somebody else's attainment is the Buddha, who of course is not available. And since he's not available, this suggests the importance of the yogi being independent. They can't rely on the Buddha to tell them what's going on. And they need to be accurate in their assessment. If nobody can tell me what's going on, then I have to decide for myself. But how can I if I don't understand my own practice experience and how that individual experience fits into a broader system?

So here we have Mahasi Sayadaw educating his graduate students on the meaning of what they have gone through. And he begins by going back to the Buddha, to a particular discourse. We're going to look at this discourse. This is Saṃyutta Nikāya 55.8, The Brick Hall.

It begins: "This is how I heard it. Once upon a time, the Blessed One was living at Nātika in the brick hall. Then Venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One, greeted him respectfully, sat down to one side, and said to him: 'Bhante, the bhikkhu named Sāḷha has died. What is his destination? What is his future state? The bhikkhunī named Nandā has died. What is her destination and future state? The male lay follower named Sudatta has died. What is his destination and future state? The female lay follower named Sujātā has died. What is her destination and future state?'"

First of all, you notice that everybody here takes for granted life after life. That's just a given. And everybody takes for granted that the conditions of one's rebirth is a direct reflection on the maturity of one's practice. So this question is really asking: How far did these people get in their practice? Were they enlightened?

The first thing that strikes me when I read this is how the love of gossip about one's fellow practitioners goes back a very long way, right back to the beginning. Don't we all want to know? There are a number of different discourses in which the Buddha is asked this question for different people.

But we're just looking at this one. And in this instance, the Buddha begins by answering the question directly.

He explains that Salha is an Arahant, meaning fully awakened. Nanda attained "spontaneous birth due to attain Nibbana without returning from that world." Sudatta "became a once-returner," and Sujata "had, with the utter destruction of three fetters, become a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the netherworld, fixed in destiny, with awakening as her destination."

So each of these people had attained some measure of enlightenment, from full awakening in Salha's case, down to stream-entry for Sujata.

For the Buddha, awakening is not a binary. It's not that we're unawakened and then suddenly—bang—we're fully awakened. It's a process. And this makes a great deal of sense when you get to know the Buddha's teaching, because he's always talking about process. The practice is a process. Life is a process. Death is a process. So it's not surprising that awakening, enlightenment, is also a process.

He says there are four stages of awakening. In order, these are: stream-entry (*sotapanna*), once-returner (*sakadagami*), non-returner (*anagami*), and fully awakened (*arahant*).

Let's get a sense of what he's talking about here.

Starting at the top, we have the arahant, who is fully awakened. *Arahant* literally means "worthy" or "deserving." The idea here is that there's an assumption that arahants are monks or nuns, bhikkhus or bhikkhunis. Lay people support bhikkhus and bhikkhunis in their practice—they feed them, house them, clothe them, look after them. But of course, the question swimming around in everybody's mind is: are they worthy of this support? Are the lay people getting a return on their investment? The answer is yes, once the practitioner attains full awakening. But until then, not so much. So you can see that the standard is pretty high.

The standards have come down over the centuries, of course. When I was at the Mahasi Centre, we'd go in for interviews—for example, with U Pandita. He conducted his interviews in his reception room, which also had a large library of books. Now, in our culture, interviews are private, one-on-one. Close the door. Nobody else can hear. But there, you'd go into his room, and apart from your fellow practitioners lined up behind you sitting against the wall, there would be a Burmese family. Each day, a different family. And you might wonder, what on earth are they doing there?

Well, the answer is they're the ones who paid for today's meals. They're feeding the meditators that day, and they want to see what value they're getting for their investment. So they're checking out the practice standards. Nothing private about it—which is very interesting.

So this is the arahant. What is full awakening? Briefly, all greed, hatred, and ignorance are completely gone, vanished, and they're not coming back. Arahants are rare, particularly in today's world. And just as an aside, Mahasi Sayadaw was regarded as an arahant.

So that's at the top. At the bottom, we have the stream-enterer. Stream-enterers are those who have had the first glimpse of reality. In other words, they've experienced the *dhamma cakkhu*, the vision of Dharma, at least once. They are much more numerous—there are far more stream-enterers wandering around than there are arahants. In fact, Mahasi Sayadaw's practice system was designed specifically to bring ordinary people along from normal everyday delusion to stream-entry. Hence the "fully practiced yogis."

His talk is addressed to. So these are graduates of the system, which means, as far as anybody's aware, they've attained stream entry.

Now the central insight that characterizes stream entry—in other words, the central insight that this practice is aiming at—is conveyed by the idea of the abandonment of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, which can be translated as the view of the reality of the person. Sometimes you see it translated as "personality view," but it goes a lot deeper than what we would normally call personality. The stream-enterer directly realizes anattā, not-self, and recognizes that the identity he or she has constructed since birth is no more than a construction—a network of concepts that he or she has been busily building all this time. In other words, fundamentally, this individual person is not real. She is real only as a network of concepts. A person who actually gets this, who fully understands and embodies this, is one who is described as accomplished in view, diṭṭhi-sampanna. And this person has made the breakthrough, the abhisamaya.

We'll talk about this later on during these talks, but notice again that Mahasi Sayadaw's audience are these people. Presumably they wouldn't have been in that group if Mahasi Sayadaw thought they shouldn't be, so they probably were stream-enterers.

Stream-enterer at the bottom, Arahant at the top—and as we move from stream-entry to Arahant stage, we could chart the number of graduates of each level in a non-linear curve of ascending difficulty and rarity.

Now this is my personal opinion. People who could be reasonably considered as attaining the second stage of awakening are much rarer than those who made it to the first stage. People who could be reasonably considered as attaining the third stage of awakening are much rarer than those who made it to the second stage. And people who could be reasonably considered as attaining the fourth stage, the Arahant, are much rarer than those who made it to the third stage. Again, that's just my personal opinion based on my own observations.

The first one and the last one are both reasonably straightforward. The final one is fully awakened—pretty abstract, but it's clear intellectually, conceptually. And the first one is reasonably clear: direct recognition of not-self. But what about the in-betweeners, called once-returner and non-returner?

There are two ways to make sense of these classifications: psychological and cosmological. The names themselves are essentially cosmological, so let's start with the psychological.

This rests on the Buddha's distinction between the cognitive and the affective aspects of human nature, which we've already discussed in this retreat. When the Buddha talks about the cognitive problem that we have, or the problem that we have looked at cognitively, he says the problem is avijjā—ignorance or delusion. I don't know what's going on. And delusion is stronger than this: I don't know what's going on, but I think I do.

Sometimes I've heard Buddhists adopt an air of superiority over Christians because Christians are burdened with the doctrine of original sin. And I shake my head and say Buddhists are far worse off. We have original delusion. It's a lot worse.

Now the solution to this problem is bodhi—classically translated as enlightenment, though we've been translating it as awakening because linguistically that's actually what it means. So that's the cognitive aspect of the teaching.

Then you have the affective aspect. What is the fundamental problem that we have? It's what the Buddha calls taṇhā, literally thirst, and essentially it's drivenness—the drivenness of the heart. What's the solution to the problem? Nibbāna, or in English, nirvana, which is an affective term. It's the cooling of the heart.

You're probably all familiar with the idea of the three fires or the three poisons, often translated as greed, hatred, and ignorance. If you look at those three, you'll notice the first two are affective in nature—they're of the heart. I want. I hate. And the third is cognitive. For the Buddha, the power of the affective is central to understanding the human condition. The Western tradition emphasizes the centrality of rationality in human nature, so we tend to see humans as rational beings who also feel.

But the Buddha tends to see us as feeling beings who also think. And this is entailed in the idea of sentient beings that we've already talked about, where to be sentient is to feel and to be aware—but in particular to feel, and in particular to feel pain.

And this is where we see why the stages of awakening beyond stream entry are progressively more rare. Stream entry cuts through *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the view of the reality of the person. And you note that view is cognitive. So this initial breakthrough is cognitive in nature—it's not affective, it's cognitive. And this means that while the practitioner has significantly reduced the ignorance or delusion that characterizes the human condition, greed and hatred continue to roll on. The affective drive continues to haunt us.

So in ordinary everyday language, while we have a deeper understanding of what is going on, we remain driven by our disordered emotions. Now the advantage of the realization of stream entry, this vision of Dharma, is that although the practitioner still clings to the affective drives, when he is mindful, he sees what he's doing when he gets caught up in these, and he recognizes that no specific experience—including this experience of being driven—actually belongs to him. And when he recognizes this, he lets it go. If he forgets his mindfulness, he can get caught up again. But sooner rather than later, he will recognize what's going on and let go.

At the second stage of awakening, greed and hatred—in other words the affective drives—are greatly reduced. And at the third stage of awakening, all but the most subtle affective drives are gone. So what this model suggests is that of the three fires—greed, hatred and ignorance—the most difficult to abandon are the first two, greed and hatred. The affective drives are deeper and more difficult to come to terms with than the cognitive delusions.

So when we see that the practice of insight, *vipassanā*, favors the cognitive—seeing and understanding—this is because it's easier to change the cognitive. It's harder to change the affective. This is a kind of psychological explanation of the model.

But then there's the cosmological one, which in the Buddha's time they took for granted, but to us is alien. In the Buddha's cosmology, the human realm is located between the heavenly realms above and, roughly speaking, the hell realms below. The heavenly realms are those characterized by the dominance of happiness, and the hell realms are characterized by the dominance of pain. We are in the middle.

Cosmologically speaking, practitioners who attain the second and third stages will tend to be reborn in the higher and more subtle heavens. A second stage practitioner will "return once" to the human realm, while a third stage practitioner will "never return" to the human realm. Hence, "one-returner" and "never-returner." This is the basic model. It begins with the stream-enterers, and they're the ones we're going to focus on.

So let's come back to our discourse. We read how the Buddha answered these questions about the fate of his senior students after their death. However—if it's not too disrespectful to say that a Buddha sometimes gets fed up—then he's showing clear signs of doing so in this discourse. After answering the question, the Buddha says:

"It is not surprising, Ānanda, that a human being should die. But if each time someone has died, you approach and question me about this, that will be annoying for the Tathāgata."

Tathāgata is how the Buddha would refer to himself—a title he used for himself. And so he says:

"I will teach you an explanation of Dharma called The Mirror of the Dharma. A mature student who is equipped with this could independently declare: 'I am one who is finished with hell, finished with the animal realm, finished with the domain of spirits, finished with the realms of misery, the bad destinations, the lower worlds.'"

So someone who has this Mirror of the Dharma can be confident in saying, "That's it, I'm done with these lower realms. I am a stream-enterer, no longer tied to the lower realms, fixed in destiny, with awakening as my destination."

No longer tied to the lower realms. Have you ever played the game Snakes and Ladders? It was invented in India. It illustrates *saṃsāra*. You go up on the ladders and down on the snakes. You're moving up, then you bump into a snake, and you're right down again.

So you stumble around, you get another ladder, you move up, crash, you're down again. This illustrates the Indian view of samsara. You're more likely to fall down than you are to rise up.

But one who is a mature student—and here "mature student" clearly means stream enterer—could independently declare, knowing it for themselves: "I am one who is finished with hell. I am a stream enterer, no longer tied to the lower worlds, fixed in destiny with awakening as my destination." I'm on my way, and I'm definitely getting there.

Now, you notice that despite the fact that the Buddha is being asked about students at every level of attainment, what he's concerned with is only to give an explanation for the first. And why is this? Possibly because this is the most common level of attainment, and therefore more people are concerned with it. But also perhaps because once the practitioner is clear about stream entry, then the higher levels of realization will also be clear, if in fact they arise. So it's the key. Understand this one and you'll get the whole lot.

Being clear about stream entry is central because once this attainment has been experienced, full awakening is guaranteed. The stream enterer is, as the texts say, "finished with the lower worlds." In terms of cosmology, the stream enterer will not be reborn beneath the human realm. As we've seen, for the Buddha, the human realm is the middle. It's between realms that are predominantly painful and realms that are predominantly pleasant.

Lower realms are so painful there's no opportunity for Dharma practice. Beings there are struggling just to survive. Higher realms are so pleasant that the beings there are dull and complacent. They're not motivated to take up the practice. And if you look at the stories about the devas in the suttas, by and large they're a pretty self-satisfied, dull bunch. They've got basically no interest in Dharma because they're so busy enjoying themselves.

The human realm is characterized by a mixture of pleasure and pain. Isn't that why we are here? Because we live a life which is reasonably evenly mixed. Some people do live in hell realms. A friend of mine who's a mature practitioner and also a clinical psychologist once described his job to me this way: he reaches down into the hell realms and tries to lift his clients up into the human realm. That's how he sees his work.

To be in the human realm—in this sense of a roughly even mixture of pleasure and pain, enough pain to motivate us, enough pleasure to not destroy us—to be in this position is very valuable, and from the Buddha's cosmology, rare. Only a tiny minority of beings are in this realm.

There's one story which comes to mind here. In the Buddha's time, there was a young man who got religion and ordained. He meditated fiercely and determinedly. But unfortunately, he was so dedicated to his practice and so ascetic in his approach that he ended up killing himself. He died, like the Buddha before he became the Buddha almost did.

And what happened was this: he's meditating away with closed eyes, and then he opens his eyes because his meditation is over, and he's looking at the most gorgeous woman he's ever seen in his entire life. She's gobsmackingly gorgeous. And he's surprised. He says, "Who are you?" And she says, "I'm your wife." And he says, "What are you talking about? I'm a bhikkhu." And she says, "No you're not. You live in that palace over there." It's a fantastic palace, full of gorgeous women. And then he looks down and realizes he's endowed with a perfect sixteen-year-old body, adorned with jewellery and fine garments. He looks at this, he looks at her, and he thinks, "Oh no, I've gone and died and I'm in heaven."

Now fortunately, he has the presence of mind—he's only been there consciously for a number of seconds, so he hasn't yet completely forgotten his previous life. And he realises he's in deep trouble. So he uses his deva powers to rocket down to earth and seek out the Buddha.

He says, "I've got a terrible problem. I'm dead, and I'm in heaven. What do I do?"

And the Buddha teaches him the Dhamma. And he gets it. He attains stream entry. And he goes, "Phew!" Off he goes. And right now he's enjoying himself, but he knows he's heading to enlightenment. It'll take a bit longer because he's got a bit of enjoyment to go through first.

So these are the kinds of attitudes that people had in those days. The Buddha is saying that one who enters the stream is guaranteed that their practice and their psychological state will never collapse to the point that they can no longer make progress. They will make progress—maybe slowly, if they're really slack in their practice, or if they take a detour through heaven; maybe quickly, if they're diligent—but they will go forward, to the point that the stream-enterer can say of herself that she is, quote, "fixed in destiny," unquote, with awakening as her destination. She's on a one-way street to awakening. And by the way, the Buddha describes this practice of satipaṭṭhāna as a one-way street to awakening.

So you can see why it's extremely important that practitioners be very careful in their estimation of their own practice. What if I mistakenly thought that I've attained stream entry? What if my teacher mistakenly thought that I've attained stream entry? What if my teacher mistakenly thought that he or she attained stream entry?

If it was me, maybe at that point I would become complacent and drift away from the practice. After all, it's not essential that I continue it—not in this lifetime. But if I'm wrong, then I will end up a lot worse than I was before. And if I became a teacher on the basis of this mistake, I could do a lot of damage. So it's important to get this right.

In another discourse, the Buddha and Sāriputta are discussing the state of the stream-enterer. Sāriputta is one of the two chief students of the Buddha, and he's foremost in wisdom. The Buddha says that people talk about "the stream." What is this stream that people are talking about? And Sāriputta replies that the stream is the Noble Eightfold Path. Then the Buddha asks, "Then who is a stream-enterer?" And Sāriputta says that a stream-enterer is, quote, "one who is endowed with this Noble Eightfold Path."

Think about the image of a path, which is really basic to the Buddha's way of talking about things. Sometimes a path is hard and steep. Sometimes it goes around in circles. Sometimes it's suddenly blocked by rockfalls or other obstacles. Sometimes it extends through difficult deserts. It's hard work walking this path.

Then think of the image of a stream. Entering the stream, I'm automatically carried downstream to its ultimate destination—the ocean, or in this case, full awakening. This is what the simile of stream entry suggests. The practitioner, or the practice of Dhamma, has turned a corner such that the end result is now inevitable. The stream-enterer is heading to awakening. It's just a question of time.

Now just as an aside, Mahāsi Sayādaw says that awakening will inevitably arise in part because, at this level of attainment, the practitioner realises for herself the nature of this practice, making her independent in this practice. This is really important.

Mahāsi Sayādaw says, "The fact is that a sotāpanna already possesses the know-how regarding the method of practice, which cannot be forgotten in any existence. It is indeed unforgettable because it is solely awareness of the nāma-rūpa phenomena arising within oneself."

It is not the sort of thing which has to be recited and memorized.

What Mahasi Sayadaw is getting at here is the essential simplicity of the practice. And at this level of attainment, this essential simplicity has become vividly clear. The Mahasi method, quote-unquote, consists of various techniques and practices, and we have been going through some of these. You notice that when we do these exercises, we jump through various meditation hoops—do this, do that, check out this, don't do that, and so on. But all of them are secondary to the basic principle of the practice, which consists, quote, "solely of awareness of the nama-rupa phenomena arising within oneself." In other words, continuous awareness of the flow of experience now. That's all. That's it. That is what Mahasi Sayadaw is teaching.

And once we realise the essence of the method, the method itself—the method as a method, as a technique—falls away. What's revealed is the radical simplicity of whatever is happening now. And this is not something that one can forget. One can, for example, go to another life and forget all about ever having done the Mahasi method, but it remains experientially clear that what's going on is a stream of phenomena. Now. That's it. That's what's happening. And this is the essence of the practice, which will never be forgotten, according to Mahasi Sayadaw.

Let us return to the Dhamma Mirror, the Brick Hall Sutta that we started with. What is that Dhamma explanation, the Mirror of Dhamma? This is the Buddha speaking:

"Here, a mature student has experiential faith in the Buddha in this way: This Blessed One is accomplished, fully awakened, endowed with understanding and conduct, well gone, the knower of worlds, the unsurpassed trainer of people with potential for training, teacher of gods and people, awakened and blessed.

He has experiential faith in the Dhamma in this way: The Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One—visible, immediate, verifiable, leading onwards, to be personally experienced by the wise.

He has experiential faith in the Sangha in this way: The community of the Blessed One's students has entered the good way. The community of the Blessed One's students has entered the straight way. The community of the Blessed One's students has entered the true way. The community of the Blessed One's students has entered the right way. That is, the four pairs of persons, the eight types of persons. This community of the Blessed One's students is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of respectful greetings—an incomparable field of auspicious action for the world.

And finally, he possesses the virtues dear to cultivated ones—unbroken, untorn, unblemished, unflawed, liberating, praised by the wise, not clung to, leading to concentration, leading to samadhi."

So the Buddha speaks of basically two qualities that characterise the stream-enterer: experiential faith, with the objects of that faith being Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha (which we won't elaborate on here as it becomes quite extensive), and virtues dear to cultivated ones—and these cultivated ones are the ariya.

Now why are these important? Let us start with faith. When we hear this, we might think of the stream-enterer as a convert—a person who has converted to Buddhism and therefore possesses complete faith. The early translators and commentators on the Buddha's teaching thought that was exactly what stream-entry was. They said, "Oh, this is obviously conversion, hence the faith business."

But the key to understanding what the Buddha is talking about is the idea of experiential faith. The stream-enterer has faith because she has directly experienced what the Buddha is talking about. Her practice has revealed to her a world that makes perfect sense, and within which she can live with satisfaction and well-being—a degree of satisfaction and well-being that was never available before, and perhaps not even imagined before.

She does not believe, quote-unquote, in this world, and she certainly doesn't believe in doctrines that can never be proved. She believes—if that's the right word—in her own experience. She believes in the undeniable facts of the way her life flows. This is experiential faith. And similarly, there is experiential faith in the Dhamma, the way things really are, and experiential faith in the Sangha, the community of practitioners. And of course, she is now a member of that community.

And then finally, the stream-enterer possesses, quote, "virtues dear to cultivated ones." Again, the cultivated ones are the ariya. We talked at the beginning of the retreat about this Indian term ariya, found in both Sanskrit and Pali. When the British came across this word, being themselves hopelessly racist, they assumed it was a racial term. But for the Indians, it isn't.

It's a cultural term, not a racial term. An ariya is one who is cultivated. And different communities within India would have different ideas of what constitutes cultivation. For secular society, for example, you would need to be fluent in Sanskrit. I mean, how can you be cultivated if you didn't know Sanskrit? And you would need to live according to your caste rules, and so on. There would be various things expected of you—roughly speaking, a gentleman or a lady.

But for the Buddha, the cultivated one is the mature practitioner. His citta, his heart and mind, is cultivated. So he possesses the virtues dear to cultivated ones—unbroken, untorn, unblemished, unflawed, liberating, praised by the wise, not clung to, leading to samadhi.

Now, what this is suggesting is that the mature practitioner has learned to live in a world in which it is abundantly clear that an ethical life leads to welfare and happiness, both for himself and for those around him. And this becomes obvious. When the sense of a separate self falls away, what arises is a natural empathy.

So the stream-enterer knows, truly knows, that if someone behaves badly towards him, he suffers. And it's equally obvious that if he behaves badly towards somebody else, that person suffers in exactly the same way. And so he won't do that. Because he looks at the suffering of other people and knows exactly how they feel. They feel the way he does. He looks at the happiness of other people and knows exactly how they feel. They feel like he does.

So there's a natural empathy that emerges which guides the ethical life. And this natural ethical stance is based on the stream-enterer's understanding of anatta, of not-self.

That is enough for tonight. Next week we'll continue our exploration of the dharma mirror.

A question came about how the realms the Buddha talks about relate to the Abhidharma realms. In the Abhidharma, which is the work of scholars systematizing the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha never attempted to create a system. What he did was wander around and teach this group of people what he felt they needed to know, then wander off and teach that group what he thought they wanted to know.

The way I look at it is this. One time, for my sins, I worked in the public service with a relational database. In a relational database you have a whole series of tables, each of them linked because one field in a table connects to another field in another table, and you end up with this complex web of information. You can go into the database, create the appropriate inquiry, and have a report spread out.

Now let's say you've got an incredibly complex, deep, subtle, and sophisticated relational database and you print out a report. Is that report the database? No. Let's say you print out a thousand reports. Is that pile of a thousand reports the database? No.

So the database is the Dharma, and it's held in the minds and the hearts of the Sangha, the sangha of practitioners. The Buddha never created a systematic system that would satisfy the requirements of an academic, for example, because he wasn't an academic.

So after he died, senior students got together and said, "What do we do about this? We've got to somehow preserve this teaching without him wandering around inspiring everybody." And so they created a system. They systematized it.

Now, in the case of these realms, you do get in the early discourses mention of various types of non-human beings, amanusa. But there's no systematic way of classifying them. And it could well be that the Buddha was in one area and the people there believed in certain kinds of spirits, and then he went to another area where those people believed in certain other kinds of spirits, and he just accepted it. So in the suttas it's more of a mix-up.

Later on, you get the system. For example, you get the thirty-one planes of existence. If you look at orthodox Theravada, you get charts that show all the planes of existence from the top down to the bottom. That's a product of the later tradition.

The concept is much looser in the Buddha's time.

A question arises: this teaching comes from twenty-five centuries ago, from a very different culture. Many of these things could be considered metaphors or understood to carry different meanings. How do we interpret some of these stories? They're incredibly colorful, but they come from a different place. How do they translate into twenty-first century Australia?

Well, they can translate, but we've got no idea whether we're getting it right. We don't know a great deal about ancient India. We know something, but we don't know a huge amount. But what we do know is the practice. And we do know that the practice instructions that have come down through the centuries work. We know this experientially, because we try it and it works. So that's what we know.

From that place of experiencing the practice, we can then look at the discourses, look at the metaphors, and we can read them, interpret them, in a way that makes sense to us. Are we reading them the same way that they were read two and a half millennia ago? It seems unlikely—the people were so different. But can we read them in a way that makes sense to us and gives us a coherent sense of the universe within which we can find our place?

This is what the tradition calls *loka*—usually translated as "world." But a *loka* is not just a world in the sense of a planet. It's a meaningful world. It's a world in which things hang together, and within which I can function because I have a role, I have a place, and this place is useful for myself and the beings around me. We use this heritage to create a *loka*.

When we're talking about the stages of awakening, for example, you can look at it psychologically and completely dismiss the cosmology. Say, look, the cosmology is nonsense, it's not scientific, forget about it. And it works. This is the world of secular Buddhism. Or you could look at it both psychologically and cosmologically and say, yeah, why not? Why shouldn't there be heavens above and hells below? There are people who have been reborn and who have memories of previous births. Why shouldn't there be rebirth? And just live in that world. Both worlds work.

So it doesn't really matter. The main thing is that we live in a world that is coherent and makes sense and gives us a role—something we do that makes the world better. If we've got that, then all is well.

Another question: talking about going up the ladder, as you go up, the numbers keep getting smaller and smaller. Rarer and rarer. And that's even within the Buddhist world. There's a whole bunch of other people out there who aren't interested, who don't have a clue. It's not even within their culture—they don't even know what the Buddha taught. So it's even rarer at the top. Who have you got to talk to?

That's even within Buddhism. Outside of Buddhism, maybe there's no one going up the ladder, although I suspect there are some. But at the top, who have you got to talk to? I'll even go for halfway. Even halfway? Who have you got to talk to? Well, I can answer that question when I get there. But until then, I'm just speculating.

The main thing, and this is actually the practical problem of Sangha—if you want a Sangha, if you want a community, if you're going to join a community, what you're looking for are people you can talk to about your practice such that they actually understand what you're talking about and have something useful to reply. That eliminates most of the world's population at a stroke.

Now, I shouldn't say this, but you'll never hear it elsewhere. For example, my brother. For the decades that I've been involved in Buddhadharma, not only has he never shown the slightest interest, but he has shown every indication that he doesn't want to know anything at all about it. So if we're having a chat on the phone—we keep in touch

—and he says, "How are you going?" and I say, "Good," he's happy. But if I say, "Oh, well, I was just teaching this retreat and..." he'll say, "Oh, that's good," and change the subject. Impossible to talk to him about these things. And he's not alone.

That's why you need a Sangha.

CHAPTER 42

Tracking Heart-Mind (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · 48 min

> *In this workshop from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney examines citta—the third foundation of mindfulness—explaining why 'heart-mind' captures both the cognitive and affective dimensions that the traditional translation 'mind' often misses. Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explores how the Buddha introduces citta through its colorings of obsession (rāga), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha), the three fundamental movements that constitute our basic human problem.*
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> *Kearney offers a detailed practical approach to working with disturbing emotions as secondary meditation objects. Rather than trying to solve emotional problems or getting caught in narrative content, practitioners learn to locate emotion in the body and investigate its elemental qualities—heat, hardness, moisture, texture—beneath the surface sensations. Using anger and sorrow as examples from his own practice, he demonstrates how emotions are complex phenomena involving body, vedanā (feeling), and mental narrative simultaneously.*
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> *The talk addresses how direct awareness of emotion's impermanence weakens identification, leading to what Kearney calls 'emotional fluidity'—where emotions flow naturally without creating stuck patterns of self-construction. He candidly discusses the challenges Western practitioners face compared to Asian meditators, the economic and psychological barriers to intensive practice, and clarifies technical terms like saṅkhāra and the relationship between citta and vedanā. Throughout, he emphasizes that the work is done in the sentient body, not in the stories we tell ourselves.*

So these morning workshops and talks, we've been going through different aspects of the practice, working our way through the four Satipatthanas.

The first one is body. We start with body, and we spent a fair bit of time talking about and playing with our relationship to body. We moved on to vedana, feelings. Then yesterday we started working on citta, classically translated as mind. Yesterday we looked at one cognitive aspect of mind—the cognitive aspect that is concerned with thought, perception, understanding, and so on. We looked at thinking in particular.

Today we're going to look at the affective aspect of mind, which is about feeling in our normal everyday sense of the word, and emotions. Again, we're doing it in the structure of grounding object and secondary object. The grounding object represents

where our awareness makes its home—where we stay, unless we have a reason to go somewhere else. Our secondary object represents how we work with distraction, how we work with whatever pulls us away from our grounding object. In other words, in most cases, what presents to us as a problem.

Now that we're coming to the affective aspect of mind, we're going to look at it from the perspective of working with disturbing emotions that can arise as a distraction, as a problem. For some people, disturbing emotion can be a major distraction. For other people, not so much. But if it does present as a difficulty, then we need to know how to work with it. This is what we're talking about today.

We'll start with defining our terms. This third satipatthana is what the Buddha calls citta. The classic translation for citta is mind. Citta plays a crucial role in the practice because when the Buddha talks about bondage or hindrance or fetter, what is it that is bound, hindered, fettered? It's the citta. When the Buddha talks about liberation, awakening, what is it that is liberated, awakened? It's the citta. So it's quite central, and of course it's also one of the four domains of mindfulness.

Classically citta has been translated as mind, but this can easily give us the wrong idea about what it actually means. If you come out of the Western tradition, then mind is regarded as the center of rationality. This comes out of the ancient Greek tradition where the Greek philosophers debated among themselves: What is it that makes the human species different from other species, and of course superior? Well, it's reason. Human beings have reason; other species do not. And it's the possession of reason that makes us superior. Where do we look for reason, rationality? In the mind. This attitude permeates our culture today.

I suspect that for most people, if you ask them what the mind actually does, they'll probably say it thinks. And if asked to point to where the mind is located, they would probably point to their head. In fact, in normal conversation—even normal learned conversation, academic conversation such as you get on programs on the ABC—people often use the terms mind, head, and brain interchangeably, as if they're the same thing. I've always found this astonishing. But this is quite common in our culture.

The Buddha is coming at it from a different direction. For the Buddha, citta is the center of rationality—so he agreed with that. But for him it's also the center of mood and emotion, the center of affect. Most people in the European tradition would call this the heart, and would tend to place it, in terms of a hierarchy, beneath mind. But for the Buddha, citta equally embraces both head and heart. It's both, equally.

Overall, citta is a technical term, and it's one of those multi-layered technical terms. If you look up the Pali-English dictionary—the old one, which is the one I've got—four big pages, small print, and the entry for citta goes on for several pages. When you see that, you know you're dealing with an important technical term.

And it gets variously defined, depending on context. As Buddhist philosophy developed, the understanding of what exactly is meant by citta also developed. But in its broadest sense, citta essentially refers to our inner state, what's happening within us.

One way of looking at it is that we notice there are certain aspects of our experience which are public, and certain aspects which are private. For example, if someone happened in the course of casual conversation to say, "It's really hot this morning, isn't it? The sun's just blasting down. This is the hottest summer day we've had in the retreat so far," you'd look at them and think, is this person having a go at me? Because it's pretty obviously cool and wet. And we can all agree on that. In other words, physical experience is shared, it's public. There's generally a consensus that we just take for granted.

But of course, what I think about the weather at Medlow Bath—that's private. No one knows what I am thinking. Phew. What a relief.

We completely take this for granted. There are aspects of my experience which are purely private to me. And if by some accident it somehow leaks out, I'm often very embarrassed. "Oh my God, they've found out what I really think about this."

So citta refers to that internal, private realm. And it's in this realm that thoughts and feelings and perceptions arise. Does that make sense?

Citta can be translated as "mind," and sometimes that's a good translation. In certain contexts it could be translated as "heart," and sometimes I do translate it that way, when it's clear that the affective dimension is being emphasized. Personally, I think the best translation would be "soul." But I don't use it because the word soul has been taken over by Christians, and if you use it, there are all sorts of theological implications associated with it which just get in the way. So we have to leave soul to them.

Often these days you get the compromise term "heart-mind." I think that's become increasingly popular because it covers both the affective and the cognitive. So generally, that's what I use.

As far as I can see, the way the term "soul" was originally used, it comes from the Greeks. In Latin translation, the anima or the animus, depending on male or female. I don't know the Greek term. But Aristotle, for example, wrote a book on the soul, and

that's his book on psychology. So soul is the inner person, and it's not restricted to the rational. It's much broader than that. When we use it non-theologically, we include the feeling aspect. "The music was very soulful"—so it includes the affective aspect. It's in that sense that I think soul would actually be the best translation for citta.

Now, when the Buddha introduces citta in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, first of all he doesn't give it an exact definition. He's not using it, I think, as a precise technical term. He's using it in a general sense. And when he introduces it in terms of the practice, he talks about the practitioner understanding whether or not the citta is colored by obsession, aversion, or delusion.

These are the three fires or the three poisons that we talked about last night. They constitute the fundamental movements of the mind, of the citta, and they constitute the basic human problem that we've got to resolve if we want to live a satisfactory life. So what is the fundamental coloring of my heart-mind as it presents now? This is the way that he introduces it in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. And we can see that heart-mind, that citta, is very close to vedanā.

They're very close in their meanings. And in fact, in practical terms, from the point of view of the practitioner, it may be impossible to tell the difference between citta and vedanā, between heart-mind and feeling. Sometimes any given experience could be equally labelled either one or both. But it's not important what label we give to the experience. The important thing is that we are intimate with the experience. So in this case, whether we have an experience of our inner self and we label that feeling, or whether we label that our mind, doesn't really matter. They are very, very close to each other.

Now this brings us to the subject of emotion. As we said, when we start the meditation practice, there's a great deal of emphasis on the body. We've got our particular meditation objects and we're chasing after them. We may tend to ignore or push aside the arising of any kind of strong affective feeling emerging. Practitioners often stumble into the heart-mind, the tracking of the heart-mind, when they become aware of disturbing emotions that distract them from their practice—fear, anger, anxiety, irritation, desire, and so on.

Just out of interest, has anybody here during this retreat ever become irritated by their fellow meditators? It's not unusual. These are examples of citta, of heart-mind, coloured by obsession and aversion.

Some emotions have a flavour of delusion. I would say, for example, boredom. I find boredom difficult to note, difficult to be aware of. The delusion flavour for me is found in its restlessness and the vague sense of dissatisfaction and not knowing what to do about it. For me, these are all flavours of delusion.

Normally, the emotions that are easiest to notice, and once you find them, easiest to stay with, are those that are flavoured by attraction and aversion, or obsession and aversion. These are usually the easiest ones. And the ones that really grab our attention, generally, are the ones flavoured by aversion.

So how do we attend to disturbing emotion? The essence of the practice is awareness, and a basic principle of it is that it doesn't matter what we are aware of. What matters is the quality of our awareness. If emotion is present and if it is dominant, then emotion becomes our meditation object. We become intimate with how emotion presents—as we've been saying—without getting caught up in the content of the emotion, what the emotion is about, the story that accompanies the emotion. We are not interested in that.

The other thing, closely related, that is worth keeping in mind for the context of this practice, is this: if we're working with emotion as a meditation object, what we are not trying to do is solve our emotional problems. That is not the agenda in the meditation practice. It's not that there's anything wrong with that agenda—it's a really good thing to do, and there are all sorts of ways in which we can do it. But when we come to the meditation, that's not the agenda. The agenda is only seeing and understanding the emptiness of emotion. The not-self quality of emotion. Emotions are not me, and they do not belong to me. They're just natural processes. They're just natural phenomena, and they come and go according to conditions. And that's it.

But in order to really discover this, we have to be intimate with them. Otherwise, we will construct a self out of them.

So let's begin with the fact that emotion is a very complex phenomenon. Actually, there's no word in Pali or Sanskrit that corresponds to the English word emotion. You just don't find it. And apparently, according to the Dalai Lama, there's no word in classical Tibetan that corresponds to the English word emotion.

Now this clearly indicates that ancient Indians had no emotions. No, I don't think so. The problem with the word emotion is that it's a catch-all. It's a collective term. And in fact, in English, it's a modern term.

So, for example, in Shakespeare, who has a vast vocabulary, you never find the word "emotion." It either did not exist, or it was so obscure that not even Shakespeare ever used it. The term was introduced in the 18th century and became dominant in the 19th century, part of the separation of psychology from religion—the birth of modern psychology. Psychology was classified as a science, which means it positioned itself a long, long way from religion.

But in the era before the emergence of modern psychology, who were the psychologists? Who were the people who dealt with a disturbed soul? It was the clergy. And the language of what we now call psychology was strongly influenced by theology. So when people started inventing this new science of psychology, they wanted to distance themselves as much as possible from that heritage. One of the things they did was create their own vocabulary, and one word they created was "emotion."

But it is a catch-all. And I think the reason why there's no equivalent in the Buddha's language for emotion is that the term is just too vague, too general for him. His language is quite precise. His project is often to take a given behavior or a given set of circumstances and break it down into its parts, then see how those parts connect. For example, with the body, he examines the elements, breaking things down into their elemental parts, and then seeing how they connect. He brings the same kind of project to the mind, to the heart, to the citta. And "emotion" just doesn't cut it, because it's just too broad.

Emotion is complex. It's made up of different parts, and it involves all the satipaṭṭhānas. Take, for example, the emotion of anger. When I talk about emotion as a problem, the emotions I normally discuss are anger and sorrow. These are the emotions that I tend to address in the context of meditation because these are the emotions I wrestled with during my practice.

Anger I understood to some degree. But sorrow—sadness, misery, grief, despair, depression, melancholy—I really had to work with these. So I talk about them because these are the ones I've been practicing with the most.

Let's take anger as an example. We cannot have anger without tension in the body. If our body is completely relaxed, it is impossible to be angry. So there's an inescapably physical aspect to emotion—it's part body, part physical. And since all body sensations have physical location, this means we can speak of feeling emotion in our body. We might feel it in our heart, or in our gut, or somewhere else. Usually people feel emotion somewhere in the torso area. So there's a physical aspect to it, some kind of response in the body.

Now, I'm speaking as someone who is completely ignorant about Western psychology. I've never studied it. I've never had the slightest interest in it. So if I'm technically wrong, that's, as far as I'm concerned, perfectly understandable. But to me, the way the word "emotion" is used, emotion always has a strong feeling charge. And it's either pleasant or it's painful.

Some emotions are pleasant and some emotions are painful. I find it difficult, if not impossible, to think of an emotion that is neither painful nor pleasant. Mood, certainly—mood would fit into that third category—but not emotion.

In the case of anger, for instance, anger can be experienced as pleasant and it can be experienced as painful. In my experience, it's pleasant when it gives me a sense of power. If I'm really pissed off, then I run the fantasy of marching over there and smashing through and doing this and that. That sense of power is very pleasant. But anger is acute and painful when it's accompanied by a sense of powerlessness. We have the expression "impotent rage"—very, very painful. So it can be painful, it can be pleasant. There's the vedana, the feeling charge. Emotion is part body, part feeling.

And emotion normally includes a narrative in the mind. This narrative, this story, provides the intentionality of emotion. For example, if I am angry, I am angry *at* someone or some situation *about* something. This intentionality appears as a story I'm telling myself in my mind—a story that paints me as the victim of some kind of injustice. So emotion includes the thought stream we were exploring yesterday. Emotion is complex, and when we work with it, we basically break it down into its parts.

Here I'll share what I've found useful in my own practice. In Burma, I found that the Sayadaws were not interested in working with emotion. They were interested in the fine-tuning of details—the rising and falling, the lifting, moving, placing, the coming and going of mind states.

Someone asked about states like compassion and grace, whether I would call those emotions. I think the word "emotion" is a bit vague—you could call them that. The Buddha calls them dhammas: qualities or states. Whether or not you'd call them emotions, who knows? From the Buddha's perspective, the main thing he's interested in is whether any given psychological event or state could be seen as wholesome or unwholesome. If it's wholesome, cultivate it. If it's unwholesome, abandon it. This is his fundamental ethical stance.

In the context we're discussing now—emotion as a disturbance that takes me away from the practice—then pretty much by definition it's unwholesome, and the job would be abandonment. But if compassion arises, well, that's wholesome. I could cultivate it, and in fact I could turn it into a meditation, as in the Brahma Viharas.

But again, the context here is emotion as a problem. The Sayadaws just didn't want to go there. If you stumbled into an interview and said, "I can't meditate, I'm just full of rage," the response would be, "Did you know that? Next, please." If you couldn't meditate because you were overwhelmed by whatever storm had hit you, they would simply wait for the storm to blow over and then start again.

So how to work with emotion is something I developed for myself. And since it doesn't come from the tradition as such, please feel free to dismiss it completely as being totally eccentric and not worthy of your attention.

What I found useful is making my meditation object the felt essence of the emotion as revealed in its elemental quality. Here we go back to the elements. When the Buddha talks about the elements—earth, air, fire, water—he talks about them only in terms of body. But I find them very useful in the context of citta.

What are the elements that characterize the nature of this particular emotion? I begin by locating the emotion in the body.

So where is it? And if I can't find any particular location, I just settle awareness in the heart area. Then I note, I'm directly aware—not the sensation itself, but I'm aiming at the sensation while going through it. Here a certain amount of imagination might be applicable. I go through the sensation looking for the felt elemental quality of the emotion that lies beneath.

So, for example, anger. I've found it to be usually hot, but sometimes cold. It's hard, energetic, restless, moving, dry, rough, sharp. And as I said, sometimes pleasant and sometimes painful. If I had to put a colour onto it, I'd say red.

In contrast, sorrow I've found to be cool, moist, even wet, soft, gentle, smooth—and often, very strangely, pleasant. There were periods where I really enjoyed my sorrow. At the time I thought this was really bizarre, but it was what was happening. If I had to put a colour on it, I would say blue.

So what's the elemental quality of the emotions? Where is it in the body? How does it present elementally?

Throughout all of this, what I'm not interested in—at all—are the stories I am telling myself. Now, that's where the interest and the awareness tends to go: the story of my life, the story about these people who are doing these things, the story of the tragedy of my existence. But I'm not interested in these stories. Again and again and again, I'm dropping awareness from the story into the body, into the sentient body.

The story tells me nothing useful, except it can name what emotion currently possesses me. That is the only useful data it presents. The rest is rubbish at best.

The work is done in the sentient body. It's not done in the stories. It's not done in thinking and perception. Thinking and perception come later; they're on top. What's underneath is the raw emotion itself. This is found in the sentient body. It's here that we find the sensitivity that is the center of the citta—the raw sensitivity which is being bombarded by sense stimulus and which is reacting to that bombardment. That's where the work is done. And the story is far, far away from that.

Is there any benefit in tracking those stories—not in great depth, but noticing when this happens and when it doesn't, so that one can then see patterns?

Yeah, that's where I hammer this: don't get involved in the story, because that's our addictive response. But sometimes the story can be useful in that it leads you in a certain direction. There might be a particular traumatic event, and the thought of it spontaneously pops up. And I think, "Oh, that's interesting. Where is this taking me?" Then it's a kind of—it's not an active thinking about it, but allowing the imagery to come up while staying with the sentient body and seeing what the sentient body is doing. The story is in the background, but the attention remains in the sentient body.

Sometimes I will find the story will go boom, boom, boom, boom, boom—bang! And I'm back into that primeval traumatic event. But I'm into it in a way in which I can clearly see its emptiness. I can clearly recognize in real time: this is not me, and it's not about me. It's just an event coming and going according to conditions. Because it's deeply buried, every now and again it pops up for air, as it were. It kind of waves, and then it disappears.

As we do this, what we can see is that what presents as an emotion changes. If I'm tracking this, I can see that at some point it ceases, it ends.

Now this is obvious, but normally we don't see the cessation of an emotion in real time. For example, I know I am angry, and then later on I realise that I have already calmed down. But normally I don't see the moment that the emotion ends. And often we

don't see the arising of the emotion either—we just recognize that we're already in it. Catching the arising is something we normally don't manage. In the case of anger, I just suddenly realize that I am already angry.

But with this practice, what we learn to see is the actual moment of cessation—in particular, the cessation. Now, we can be ambushed by the emotion, so we miss the beginning. We just realize, "Oh, I'm in it." Sometimes we see the beginning, but often we don't. We're in it. But if I track it, if I'm with it, then I see the moment it ends.

And when that happens, the emotion ceases cleanly, and it doesn't leave any aftertaste. Usually, after I emerge from a strong emotion, for some time my mood is disturbed in some way, and gradually that fades. But if I'm directly engaged with the impermanence of the emotion in real time, then I see it end, and in that moment it's completely finished. There's no aftertaste. It's like, "Oh, right, it's over. That's it."

What this does is weaken my determination to identify with the emotion. Seeing clearly the impermanence weakens identification. And this is how it leads to the perception of not-self. The emotion comes and goes according to nature, but I learn to not identify with it.

The result is what could be called emotional fluidity. I find that my emotions flow readily from one to the next to the next, and I don't get stuck in any of them—because I'm not identified with any of them. I'm not using them as a means of constructing an identity.

Normally there are particular emotions that I am identified with, and once they arise I feed them with my thinking, with my story, and I use them to construct an identity and a world. I'm stuck in the emotion, and it cannot express its natural impermanence. But if I just keep the awareness of the elemental flow of the emotion flowing through the citta, the emotions just flow naturally. I'm not stuck in any of them, and I do not create an identity from them.

And so emotions are experienced as empty, as not-self. When that happens, they are not problems—even the painful ones. They're not actually problems. They're just events. That's all. And they can be very interesting events, and they can teach us a lot about the nature of the citta.

You'll notice that this morning we're not doing any little meditation exercises. There are meditation exercises in which the student will be asked to conjure up an emotion—like, "Think of something that makes you really pissed off"—and then when the emotion arises, use it as a meditation object. But I have far too much respect for emotion to play with it like this. I don't do it, so I'm just talking about it.

To put it in contemporary terms, there simply isn't a market for it. It's too difficult. There's too much working world pressure. And Westerners are slower.

The Burmese teachers, early on at the Mahasi centers, concluded that when people come in for retreat, the recommendation would be two months, perhaps extended to three. This was for Burmese practitioners, and that was plenty of time for them. Then they started teaching Western students. Oh my God! For a start, their minds never shut up. The emotions are rampaging, and the sense of entitlement is completely out of control. It takes them a lot longer.

When I was there, my impression—and this is purely subjective—was that it took maybe ten months to get through. If someone completed the practice in two or three months, they were remarkably quick. And usually people come back. You do a three-month retreat, you go away, you return next year for another three-month retreat, you go away again, you come back for another one. Eventually, you get there. The amount of commitment involved is great, especially for us.

I have been teaching in Malaysia, where the students are Chinese. These are thoroughly modern people. Often Westerners assume, "Oh yes, the Asians—they're all just peasants, aren't they? Mindlessly growing their rice, so they find concentration easy." No, no, no. These are urban, middle-class, highly educated, very hardworking people. But they find samādhi much easier than, for example, Australians. Much easier. And they're much faster to develop it. There are exceptions, of course. But for us, in contemporary Western culture, it's really hard. Because, basically, we are, as a collective, deeply disturbed.

"I still would like the opportunity to fail," someone says.

Absolutely. You should give it a go. There's no reason to think you can't do it. You've just got to commit fully.

Places like Spirit Rock and IMS are attempting exactly this—making deep practice accessible to Western practitioners. At IMS, they hold a three-month retreat every year. That's a huge undertaking. To have maintained that year after year, decade after decade, is a significant accomplishment. How often do you get a three-month retreat in Australia? You rarely even get a month. It's unusual.

"It's the money," someone observes. "You mean if I have more money, I can get enlightened faster?"

No, but financial pressure is one of the things preventing people from committing three months. When I started practice back in the seventies in Australia, the Aussie dollar was more valuable than the American dollar. When I went to Hawaii in 1980, one Australian dollar was worth $1.15 US. So it's become more expensive. But beyond that, the career pressure is greater. In my day, people would confidently walk away from a job, spend whatever time they needed meditating or wandering around Asia, return maybe years later, and be confident they could walk into another job and proceed to have a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. These days, you can't. You'd never buy a house.

If you get off the treadmill for five seconds. So economically it's much harder than it was. And psychologically it seems to be much harder. There seems to be more disturbance in the citta than there was before. So it's getting harder.

Going back to anger—sometimes I can see anger being energetic and almost life-giving. And sorrow can be so heavy that life can start feeling really impossible. And it's not always. But is that an okay perspective?

Oh yeah, I mean that's your experience and it sounds very authentic. The challenge then would be to stay with the heaviness or the sense of being drained or whatever flavor it is. The challenge is to make that a meditation object. Again, dropping the story, dropping the identification. And when working with really strong emotion, you let the body do what the body wants to do. So if the body wants to walk out and scream at the universe, go out and scream at the universe. If the body wants to roll around and weep, roll around and weep. But just keeping the awareness going all the time.

Not to nitpick at all, but just out of interest—you're talking about emotion being a catch-all and too vague. Wouldn't you also argue that citta is a catch-all?

It is, definitely. And later on, in the later Buddhist tradition, it gets very precise definitions. They kind of try to pin it down. But I think it's actually less useful when they do that. It functions better as a catch-all.

In the khandhas, the five aggregates, the term "mental formations" is often translated —

At this point we get technical. The Buddha creates this framework of human experience. The two frameworks he uses are the five aggregates and the six sense fields. Sometimes you use one, sometimes you use the other. With the five aggregates, the five collections, the fourth is sankhāra khandha. Sankhāra is another one of these multilayered technical terms that can be variously translated depending on context.

Literally it means construction or formation. It comes from the root *kr*—to make, to do—from which we get the word *karoti*. And the word karma comes from the same root. And you get *kāra*. So, for example, a carpenter or a builder would be a house-kāra, one who makes a house. Sankhāra is *kāra*—making—and then you have the prefix *sam*, together. So, to make together, to put together.

It refers to anything which is put together, anything constructed out of parts. So for example, this body is sankhāra. This building is sankhāra. This retreat is sankhāra, because it's put together out of parts. And as part of that understanding, anything that's put together out of parts, at some point it collapses and goes back into its parts. So it's impermanent.

This is the fourth khandha. So the question is, what is the Buddha getting at when he uses this? What does he mean by sankhāra here? It's generally understood that the Buddha himself saw this one as being essentially what we're going to talk about tomorrow—choice, intention. Because choice or intention is what constructs our life. So this is the constructing aspect.

But then in the later Theravada, when the scholars were systematizing everything, they looked at these five khandhas and thought, "It's a bit untidy. It would be best if it included everything, not just these five aspects of what we identify with to construct a self." So they used the fourth one, sankhāra khandha, as a catch-all for everything other than the others. They just put it in. And that's where you get "mental formations."

So you get two different ways in which this five aggregates model is used: the way the Buddha uses it, and the way the later tradition uses it. Body, feeling, perception, sankhāras, and awareness.

And we're going to be talking about the aggregates and the self later on in the retreat.

Sankhara is the Sanskrit term; sankhata is the Pali. They're the same word in different languages.

We've wandered rather far from our original point, but it's been quite interesting. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 43

Tracking Choice: Cetanā and the Movement of Awareness

Patrick Kearney · 1h03

> *In this profound dharma talk from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney examines cetanā—the Buddha's radical redefinition of kamma as choice itself. Drawing on the Buddha's emphatic declaration "I declare that choice is action," Kearney distinguishes cetanā from the English concept of intention, noting that for the Buddha, there can be no conflict between our choices and our actions—they are inseparable.*
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> *Kearney illuminates how cetanā relates to other key Pāli terms around directing the mind: sammāsaṅkappa (right intention) from the Noble Eightfold Path, adhiṭṭhāna (determination), and saṅkhāra (construction). He explains that tracking choice in meditation means recognizing the impulse to act, feeling awareness move toward its object, and understanding that what we experience as 'self noting something in the world' is actually just the choice to aware and whatever appears in awareness—the fundamental dyad of nāma-rūpa.*
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> *The talk addresses the relationship between choice and conditioning, clarifying that while all choices are conditioned within paṭicca samuppāda (dependent arising), this doesn't preclude working skillfully with them. Habits remain habitual choices, and where choice exists, alternatives remain possible. Kearney offers practical methods for investigating cetanā: observing changes of posture, noting intention before movement in walking meditation, and using adhiṭṭhāna to catch the arising of thought. He emphasizes that even failed attempts at catching choice succeed in refining our aim, and that mindfulness in everyday activity—not just formal sitting—is the essential practice for transformation.*

This morning we're going to talk about cetanā, usually translated as intention. This brings us to the subject of kamma vipāka—action and its ripening—which of course is central to the Buddha's teaching on ethics.

This doctrine of kamma (in Pali), karma (in Sanskrit or English), is a teaching that the Buddha inherited, one that was part of the Indian tradition at the time. But he gave his own particular spin on it. He says, "I declare that choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing."

Here I'm translating the Pali cetanā as "choice," although it's usually translated as "intention," and kamma is, of course, action. You'll notice the sentence begins with the Buddha saying, "I declare..." When he phrases things this way, it's a kind of emphasis. He's being emphatic. It's like he's saying, "This is serious, pay attention."

So choice is central for the Buddha in working out how we live. It's the basis of kamma. And if this is so, then as practitioners, we need to become sensitive to the choices that we're making and the results of those choices. We need to become aware of them. To put it in terms of meditation method, choice becomes a meditation object.

In different parts of his teaching, the Buddha uses a number of technical terms that center around this central concept of choice, intention, or decision. All of them involve where we direct the mind. In terms of meditation practice, we've been talking about directed awareness and undirected awareness—directing awareness, sending awareness somewhere. This is the foundation for the meditation practice, and different terms revolve around this concept.

For example, in the Eightfold Path we find sammā saṅkappa. This is the second factor in the Eightfold Path, and it's part of the wisdom group. Right view, right saṅkappa—these together make up wisdom. Saṅkappa is one of those words that gets translated in a whole number of different ways, which indicates that there is no English equivalent. People are casting about for the closest one. But in every case, the translations refer to the direction in which we send our mind.

Directing the mind can be seen from the most broad and general to the most detailed and specific. Consider the fundamental decisions of our lives: What career path will I take up? Who will I associate with? Who will I marry? Where will I live? These fundamental decisions send our lives in a certain direction. And then right down to the microscopic level: when we're meditating, do I direct awareness to the rising movement of the abdomen or to the thought which has just arisen? From one end of the spectrum to the other, what all these have in common is the direction in which we send our minds.

Sammā saṅkappa could be translated as "right intention." Sometimes you see it translated as "right thought"—I'm not quite sure why; I've never quite understood that one. In the meditation context, you could translate it as "right aim." And of course this is absolutely central to the practice that we're doing.

As Mahāsi Sayādaw says, the source of the practice—where it comes from—is choice or intention: the choice to be aware of something and the movement of awareness toward that something. When Mahāsi Sayādaw talks about noting intention, that's what he's talking about. He's talking about directly being aware of the choice to be aware and the movement of the mind toward the object.

From Mahāsi's point of view, what is the source of each action of noting or directly being aware? It's choice, it's decision—the choice made now to be aware of this. Notice that this is not effort as such. We're not trying to decide to be aware. We're simply choosing to be aware. We're making the choice. We're always making the choice. But we could choose: instead of being aware of this, I could be aware of that.

Effort comes later on. Effort appears as the commitment to continue this choice over a period of time—this particular choice. The choice to stay with the breathing, for example. The choice to open awareness out. And sustaining that choice over a period of time. That commitment—that's where the effort comes in. But the choice itself does not involve effort.

So choice sends awareness on its journey. And in the practice, we learn to recognize the choice itself, to feel the movement of awareness, and to recognize the object of awareness. This is all part of the tracking of choice.

As the perception develops, one thing it teaches us is that we do not have a separate self noting or awaring something in the world out there. We assume that's what's going on. But when we pay attention, we realize actually that's not going on. What's going on is the choice to aware, and then whatever appears in that awareness.

I am going to elaborate, but not this morning, because this takes us into the whole area of nāma-rūpa and the arising of insight. We're going to talk about it at night, because to get into it properly takes a fair bit of time, and it's so counter-intuitive to the way we normally perceive the world.

We perceive the world as: this is me, there's the world out there, and I'm choosing to aware whatever it is. But what the Buddha is saying is no—what there is, is the choice to aware and what appears in awareness. That's what it is.

So he doesn't talk about mind and body, although sometimes you see that in English translations. But that's a kind of mistranslation. What he talks about is nāma-rūpa. Nāma is mind, but specifically it's the activity of mind—mind reaching out to aware something. And rūpa is the appearance, what is awared.

Remember we started with thinking? The first exercise was: how does thought appear? Does it appear as words? Does it appear as visual images? Well, the appearance is rūpa. Something appears in the field of awareness, and there's the action of the mind aware of it. The Buddha is saying that's all there actually is.

Out of that we construct a world, and we construct a self within the world. But all of that is a conceptual construction, and it's happening within this process of nāma-rūpa.

A student asked for clarification, and I acknowledged: this is where the question of choice becomes challenging. When we think about it, choice seems to involve a self—someone who chooses. So perhaps "motivational drive" is better than "choice," because choice assumes a chooser, whereas motivational drive does not imply a motivational driver.

This is a problem we have in conceptualizing all this. It brings us into the whole area of what in the Western tradition is called free will. I've had people who are philosophically literate assure me with great confidence that at the center of the Buddha's teaching is the teaching of free will. And I've had equally good practitioners, equally philosophically literate, who have assured me with total confidence that the teaching of free will is entirely absent from the Buddhist teaching. Absolute confidence on both sides.

I think the problem is that the way free will is talked about always assumes a self making a choice. And it also gets tied up in theology.

But that's right—when people in the Western philosophical tradition talk about conditioning, if something is conditioned, then they assume that means it belongs to a realm separate from free will. So if the human being is conditioned, then you either get complete determinism, where nobody's making a choice anywhere and everything starts rolling on according to the laws of physics or whatever, or there is a chooser, but that chooser is outside the world of conditioning. You can't have a choice unless you have a chooser who's outside conditioning—which is the soul, of course. That's the way we tend to think about these things.

But for the Buddha, he doesn't think about it that way. He's got a whole different way of thinking about it. It's language, really. If you've found a phrase or a word that suits you, then you might stick to that—it's as good as any other. What might be helpful is thinking in terms of conscious choice, and perhaps creative choice. This is what we're going to get to.

This very morning I read a book called *The Power of Habit*—I really recommend it. This very subject came up in there. The statistics are that eighty-five percent of the decisions we make all day are habit. Another ten percent are situational—a forced choice

that has to be dealt with immediately. And there's just over five percent that are truly deliberate choices. Do we have free will? Perhaps five percent of the time. I think one way of looking at it is that the meditator's job is to increase from five percent to six percent, maybe to seven percent. Possibly as far as eight percent.

So just to sum up: are all choices conditioned? Yes—this is actually one of the confusing things from the Western point of view. The Buddha is saying that choice is conditioned. It's part of the system of conditioning. Choices arise because of conditions. But that doesn't mean we can't work on it. We can change the system of conditioning, influence the system of conditioning. But basically, all of samsara is conditioned.

One pair of terms the Buddha uses is the *sankhata* and the *asankhata*. The *sankhata* is the constructed, the conditioned. We've briefly talked about this. So for example, this body is constructed. This mind is constructed. This building is constructed. This meditation retreat is constructed. Basically everything is constructed except one thing—which you can't even call a thing. This is the *asankhata*: the not-constructed, the not-born, the not-become, and so on. And this is so mysterious that it's quite difficult; you can only talk about it in terms of poetic imagery. But that's what's outside the system of conditioning.

So we are working within the system of conditionings. It's like we're taking hold of it and conditioning ourselves to head in a certain direction—the path—such that we will stumble into the unconditioned. But we can't make that happen. This is quite important, I think, in the meditation practice when you're talking about the arising of insight.

Robert Aitken Roshi, my old Zen teacher, put it quite nicely. In Zen, meditation is zazen, and everything revolves around zazen. He once said that zazen does not bring about realization. Realization, when it happens, always happens as an accident. But zazen makes you accident-prone.

And that sums it up pretty much.

So we're working with the conditioned. If you're doing a meditation practice, you're conditioning your mind, moment by moment by moment by moment. That's the work of it. So it's still within the realm of the conditioned. But if the citta is ripened, then by accident—click—it can stumble into the unconditioned. But you can't make that happen. And then, once there's been an immersion in the unconstructed, in the unconditioned, this begins to filter back into how the conditioned works. So the conditioned world begins to change as a result.

So we got very metaphysical there. Getting back to what Mahasi is talking about: we make a choice to aware, or we have a motivational drive to aware, as the case may be. And this motivational drive sends awareness on its journey. So in the practice, what we want to do is to learn to see, to recognize this choice, this decision, this intention, this motivational drive—this whatever it is—to recognize it, to feel the movement of awareness, and to recognize the object of awareness. And as this perception develops, what becomes clear is that there's no separate self noting something in the world out there. What there is, is the choice to aware and whatever arises within the field of awareness. So what we take to be the world and to be real is made up of awaring and what we aware. And that dyad is essentially what there is in the realm of human experience.

Now there are other terms that revolve around this concept of choice, decision, intention. One of them is adhiṭṭhāna. If you've done Goenka practice, you'll be familiar with this. An adhiṭṭhāna is a determination, a resolution. So it's a deliberately created, strong intention or choice or direction to perform a certain action or for a particular experience to arise. And adhiṭṭhāna is used within the meditation practice—we're going to introduce it a bit later this morning. In Goenka, I think they have adhiṭṭhāna to sit without moving for an hour. But again, it's the determination: "Oh, this is what I'm going to do." So it's a deliberately creative choice or decision to send awareness in a certain direction, or to do a certain action, for something to happen.

And then in the five aggregates that we've talked about before, the fourth one is saṅkhāra khandha, where saṅkhāra is construction. In the schema of the five aggregates—which are basically what create our identity, the raw materials from which we construct an identity—saṅkhāra represents our choices that form or construct our identity. The choices that we make, again and again and again, that construct an identity. And this, of course, brings us to karma.

And then finally we have cetanā. This is the term that we're looking at today. Cetanā is normally translated as intention, but the way the Buddha uses it, I don't think intention quite fits the bill. For example, in English, we believe—apparently, judging from the way that we speak—that it is possible to act against our intentions. We have the saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." You've heard that one? And you know what it's getting at. It's coherent, it's understandable. But for the Buddha, if he heard that, I think what he'd be hearing is the statement that our actions take us in one direction while our cetanā is heading in another direction. And for him, that's nonsense. It's incoherent. If our cetanā is heading in this direction, our actions are heading in that direction. And that's it. There's no way that there could be a conflict between them.

So there's a very tight relationship between cetanā and action—tighter than intention in the sense that we normally use the word. Intention, I think, is too wide in its meaning to capture what the Buddha means. Intention is quite general. So, for example, I'm walking down here to this room and I intend to give a good talk this morning. That's my intention.

And that makes sense, doesn't it?

But while I'm speaking, I am making multiple specific decisions. I'll look at my notes now. I'll look up now. I'll look in this direction. I'll look in that direction. I'll wave my hand like this to make a point, or I'll make a big circle with my hand to make another point. There are multiple individual decisions being made. That's the cetanā. This is what the Buddha is getting at.

And finally, cetanā goes a lot deeper than we normally assume intention goes. A classic example is our intention to think. Sometimes meditators feel oppressed, harassed by their thinking. They believe that if only they could stop thinking, then they could meditate, and their life would be better. Have you ever had that thought pop up in your mind? They feel trapped by their thinking. The experience they're having is not that "I am thinking," but that "thinking is happening to me."

Now, if we go to a meditation master and say, "I want to know how to stop thinking," and the meditation master says, "No problem. I know exactly what you can do, and the effect is instant." You say, "What? What do I do?" And they reply, "All you've got to do is stop choosing to think."

If you were having a really hard time on a meditation retreat and someone seriously gave you this advice, would you think, "I've found my answer at last"? Or would you think, "What the hell is this person trying to do with me?" You'd get really upset about it. If it was me, I'd get very upset.

But if we actually look at how the mind works—how can I stop thinking in my meditation practice? Very simple. Just stop choosing to think. That really is it. Because when we choose to stop, the thinking stops immediately. And it will not arise again until we choose to think. Then it will arise.

From the Buddhist perspective, our determination to think, the choices we are making to think—they go very, very deep. But fundamentally, it is a matter of choice. This is what meditators discover when they, in fact, stop thinking or even reduce the level of thinking.

And this brings us to what we've been talking about before: the problem of habit. Cetanā is part of dependent arising, paṭicca samuppāda, which is the basic framework for the Buddha's teaching. In other words, our choices are conditioned. They are the product of habit, and in turn they produce new habits. We are caught up in our habits and our addictions because we have constructed them from the choices we have made over a long period of time.

Actually, looking back, I can remember when I was a little kid and I made the discovery that whatever unpleasant situation I was in, I could catapult out of it immediately by creating a fantasy—and going into the fantasy. It was fantastic. It was magic. I remember one instance when I was walking home from school. There was about a couple of kilometres to walk, and towards the end there was a hill just before I reached home. Walking up that hill there was a big staircase. I always experienced it as hard work, and I didn't really like it. I can remember approaching the staircase and deciding, "Okay, I'm out of here." I went into a fantasy and came out of it about a block later, when I was already descending. And I thought, "That was pretty good. I've got to keep doing this."

And so, of course, as an adult, when I start meditating, it's obsessive.

I can't stop. It's a habit. But it's a habit I created. And I created it through making choice. What's the way out of the habit? Make the other choice. So habits remain habitual choices. And if choice is involved, which it is, there is always an alternative. You can always make another decision. This is why understanding cetanā is so important.

And we can also see how the Buddha's teaching is essentially optimistic. He's got a reputation as an old misery bag because he's constantly banging on about dukkha. But what he emphasises is that we can always intervene into the situation. We can always do something to make things better.

So, for example, the teaching of dukkha: pain is inherent to samsara. It's just built in. And the teaching says, and the meditator discovers, that we can never find a place of rest within samsara. Understanding this is part of understanding the universal characteristic of dukkha. Yet there is something we can do. And more intimately, there is something we are already doing. We aware this situation.

And awareing, as we've said, has a twofold quality. There's a sense in which we do not do awareing, because the mind is already awareing. Simply, that's what it does. And that's not a question of choice. But we can choose to be present to our awareing of, for example, pain, and not try to hide somewhere else. And this awareing is very powerful and very healing. So the sense of "there's always something I can do" is really central to the Buddha's understanding of the situation.

This is why I translate cetanā as choice. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as volition, and Thanissaro, I think, uses decision—he sees it as the decision to act. So decision is another possibility. But I'm just using choice.

Now, if you're practising and you want to aware cetanā, how does it present? Sometimes, and this is based on what people have said in their practice, sometimes it presents as an impulse. And the impulse can be physical or it can be mental. If it's physical, that means impelled by the body. If it's mental, it means impelled by the mind. So for example, the impulse to look at something, the impulse to reach for something, the impulse to listen to something, the impulse to think something. Have you ever noticed that impulse? That's where you find the choice.

And sometimes it presents as a decision between possibilities. Suddenly we're faced with a situation and we know I could do this, or this, or that. And I'll do that one. Now, that is incredibly quick, and often, usually, we don't notice it. But when we're meditating and we're a lot clearer, we can start to notice it.

So if we're talking about thinking in the meditation practice: have you ever had the experience where you're minding your own business doing the meditation, suddenly you slide into thinking and you don't know that you're thinking, and then there comes that moment when you know that you're thinking, and you're faced with a choice? I could get back to the meditation object, or I could just finish this off first. I think I'll just finish it off first. Have you ever gone through that? It goes incredibly fast, but it's a decision between possibilities. And we just made a choice. And if we chose to just finish that off, we've just put another layer of habit.

And finally, and this is what Mahasi emphasises, we can see choice as the movement of awareness towards the object.

We can feel, having made that choice, that awareness goes off to where it goes.

So if we're looking for choice, if we're going to incorporate this into the practice, where might we look? One classic instance that the tradition talks about is in changes of posture. Let's say I'm sitting in meditation and at some point—in a situation like this where basically I'm the one who decides when to end it—at some point I end the session and I move. Can I see the decision to end the session and to move? Or do I just move?

I might make a point of deliberately extending the normal sitting period until discomfort or pain impels me to move, and then see if I can be aware of the moment I make that decision. To catch that moment. That's one possibility.

Another possibility is non-routine movement, changes of movement. If I'm doing walking meditation up and down a track, for example, I'm standing and I am about to move. Have you ever had that experience in your meditation? How do you know you're about to move? I'm walking and I'm about to stop. How do I know I'm about to stop? This is where the choice or decision to move or to stop is located. This is where I might find it.

Sometimes you can tell that someone's practicing this in walking meditation, when they're doing the standing before the walking and they're looking for the decision to move. You can tell because they just stand there for an hour. They've got the spotlight on, waiting for this decision to arise, and it hides away and doesn't turn up. So weird things can happen.

We can also see choice in routine movements. In walking, I'm noting the movement of my feet or legs, or using the classic language of the Mahasi tradition, I could note the intention to move. In the classic slow walking meditation—the lift of the foot, pushing, placing—I could note the intention to lift, push, and place. The choice to do it. The number of choices involved in walking.

Yes, that's why I'm standing. So I'm actually choosing to stand, waiting for the choice to move. And this may explain why it never turns up.

It is tricky. You don't want to get too caught up in this. At this point you just start walking. It's very simple once you get it, but it can be very curly when you're looking for it. Because why are you looking? You're making the choice to look. The choice doesn't come. Or the choice to fight. Let's wait for the choice to arise spontaneously.

Question: What about when there's a strong outside stimulus creating a reaction internally? Is there cetanā in that?

It depends on how sensitive you are. If you can see in real time the stimulus, if you can actually see it in real time, then within that seeing there's the possibility of choosing: No, I won't do that. No, I'm not going to get annoyed by this. The mind will be annoyed, but I'm not going to lash out. I'm not going to respond. I'm not going to do my usual response.

But the annoyance arises, and that can become the object to watch. You can't choose to not have the aversive response. So part of this is recognizing: what is the field of experience within which I actually do have a choice?

The more habit there is, the smaller that area becomes. But the more habit is reduced, the wider the area. And it comes out in basic but important ways.

One time, years ago, I was teaching a retreat here, and one of the meditators was a young woman who had taken up meditation as part of her recovery from drug addiction. At the end of the retreat, she was just really happy because she had seen, really, really clearly, that it's her choice. She really saw it—that she's not the victim of circumstances beyond her control. It really is her choice. And she felt free for the first time in years. Very simple. But she saw it.

When you're working with choice, that's what you want. You want the sensitivity to what's going on in the mind so you see it—that moment, that turning point. Because if you see it, you can do something about it. But if you don't see it, there's nothing you can do.

A retreatant shares: "It reminds me of the first retreat I did with you. It was in the middle of winter in Victoria, a sunny couple of days. In the first two or three days, there was a blowfly in the hall. I'm surrounded by Buddhist meditators who aren't going to kill the fly. What do you do? Two weeks of this? And I would just notice it—the frustration, the annoyance, the fly, the annoyance. Then the fly went away after three days and it got really cold. Towards the end of the retreat, it got really sunny again and the fly came back. But my initial response was, 'Oh, it's back!' I would never have guessed that I would have a pleasant response to this previously very negative stimulus. You know, it was like seeing a friend."

Yes, we're seeing what's going on. When the awareness gets into the citta and you can actually see what's happening, then you're not driven. And then the possibility of something else arising is there. In this case, it was your old mate. Or as I used to say in Burma, being haunted by the flies and the mosquitoes and so on: "May all beings enter and be happy." I didn't really mean it at first.

There's something about the way the time it takes to form an intention is shorter than the time it takes to complete the action, so that you can be making the intention, sending off the impulse to do the action, and you're already on the second intention before the first one is complete. Could be. It's very quick. The mind is really, really, really fast. And that's one of the things that makes it so difficult to actually get in there and really see what's going on. A lot of what the mind does is simply invisible to us, in part because it's so quick that it's over before we even notice it. And we're already in the situation.

One of the effects—and this comes out in everyday mindfulness—let's say you're doing a retreat and you're developing better and better samādhi power, seeing deeper and deeper into the movements of the mind. You might think, "Well, I can do it now because I'm in the middle of a retreat and I've got the samādhi power. But what happens when I

go back to work?" What you find is that having seen it once, the mind now is sensitive to it. Even in normal circumstances—bang—you see things that previously you would have been completely oblivious to. It's just vividly there. Incredibly quick, but there. And a response is possible.

We're creating a sheltered workshop, basically, where we get the opportunity to go into aspects of human experience that normally we would not have access to. But once the mind goes there, once the mind recognizes, "Oh, this is what's happening," it doesn't forget. So it's available in everyday life. And there in everyday life, we cooperate with it by practicing mindfulness, awareness in everyday activity. We're present to whatever the mind will throw up—whatever insight, whatever understanding the mind will offer.

We're ready for it. We're ready to catch it.

So can those changes occur because you do the work here and they're there—can they get lost from not keeping up, from not continuing a sitting practice? Can that awareness of the changes in habits get lost through neglect? Can we allow the weeds to climb back over things?

They can. But I think what's crucial is mindfulness in everyday activity, not so much the formal sitting. It certainly helps if you have a regular meditation practice because that provides a stability that assists with the seeing and the understanding. But the most important thing is mindfulness in everyday activity—just being awake as I go through the day. That's the most important thing.

My colleague Emma likes to say that in this tradition, in this lineage, meditation between retreats consists mostly of guilt—guilt that I'm not meditating enough. And from her perspective, this is a complete waste of energy. Rather, just be aware of life as it unfolds.

And in fact, I've got students who are quite dedicated meditators. They come to retreats year after year, not necessarily with me but with other teachers as well—a decade, two decades, whatever. And during that period, they will confess rather sheepishly that they never meditate at home. They just don't do it. They never quite get around to it. Yet you can see their practice getting deeper and deeper, and they will say, "My life is transformed." Because they're practicing mindfulness in everyday activity. That's the key. That's why it's so important here, because you've got an opportunity to get into it. But that's the most important thing.

This is what Sayadaw U Tejaniya really hammers, really emphasizes. He's been out to Australia twice, and I did retreats with him in Western Australia. They were classic residential retreats, except that all the rules were thrown into the air. But it turned out,

according to his interpreter, that what he would actually prefer to do would be to have a retreat in which you have a central place and people come at night. They meditate and have group interviews, then go home. They go to work and do what they do. They come the next night, meditate, have a group interview, and go home. For him, that's more real—because every day, you're dealing with it.

I teach online retreats, and that's one of the advantages of that format. People will turn up in the Zoom room and then go back to their ordinary life, and come back to the Zoom room. People talk about how powerful it is, how practical it is.

The Mahasi approach is very much retreat-oriented—very much about going deep, deep, deep in order to transform everything. And although they pay lip service to everyday mindfulness, there's not really the emphasis on it, except with U Tejaniya. For him, that's the central thing.

But what we're doing here, we're doing for the purpose of when we get out. You can have a situation in which people create a kind of silo—the practice is what I do when I'm on retreat, with little reminders occasionally when I do my daily meditation practice. But no, the practice is the whole thing. And seeing the choices that we make is really central to that. What am I doing? Literally, what am I doing? Now. Being interested in that as I go through the day. I can take that with me.

I think that's why it's really useful to belong to a sangha.

Because you can support the network outside of you. It's the strength of the sangha, the first of the supportive factors. It's like finding right-minded, good people that you can meet with.

And this doesn't mean that in ordinary everyday life you're going to become some kind of super yogi. I've got a friend who is a longtime meditator, and his normal routine would be to meditate four hours every day. This is his standard practice. I mean, he gets up ridiculously early in the morning.

One time I was running a retreat here, and at the end of it, we were having a chat, and one of the perennial questions came up: "In my daily life, how much should I sit?" And I must have been feeling a bit frisky because I thought of my friend, and I said, "Oh, four hours is good." And the poor woman just completely lost it. But it was too late. I'd made the choice. The words had come out. I couldn't pull them back in again.

But we do have this sense that we're supposed to be the super yogi. I'm not supposed to be the super yogi. What I'm supposed to do is be aware. And there's nothing more natural than to be aware. What we're doing here is learning techniques. We're going deeper into it and we're learning how to play the game. But basically, it's really simple. Just be aware. That's it.

Shall we finish off? Because we've got one more esoteric meditation exercise to cover, which is thinking. The choice to think.

If you're interested in this, one way to play with it is doing walking meditation where you're using one of those tracks—in other words, you've got a set distance which isn't too great. You begin by standing, and then you make the adhiṭṭhāna, the determination: "From here to the end of this path, I will be aware. I will know the moment thought begins."

Now when you're working with adhiṭṭhāna, you make the determination, and it's like you just drop it into the mind, and then you forget about it. And then you just start to walk. At the end of the path, stop, stand, turn, and then review what happened just then. Did it work? Did it not work? And then make the determination again: "From here to the end of this path, I will note the moment thought begins." And off you go. You just go back and forth.

If you get comfortable with it, you could change the adhiṭṭhāna: "From here to the end of this path, I will not think." Same thing. At the end, review what happened. And the reviewing is very important, because this going back over the experience stimulates mindfulness, which remember means memory.

What people will say when they do this is that they don't necessarily stop thinking, but they become much more sensitive to the arising of thought. They catch it much sooner.

This brings us to the point that tracking choice or decision is a question of aim. And again, we've talked about aim—how important it is in practicing for insight that we practice aiming awareness to where we want it to go. We've been playing around with this with the elements, with breathing, and so on.

So when we're working with cetanā, instead of aiming awareness at the body, for example, we're aiming awareness at the stream of choices that result in the movement. It's quite subtle. Instead of aiming there, it's just over here. Instead of tracking the thoughts, we're aiming awareness at the choices producing the thoughts.

Once we recognize that this is a practice of aim, then we realize that even if we fail, we succeed. Because looking for choice cultivates our aim and our precision.

So it's like if you decide to take up archery. You pick up the bow, draw back the arrow, aim at the target, release the arrow, and the arrow goes plop—completely misses the target.

Now what would be the reasonable and rational response at that point? Possibly it would be to hurl the bow down on the ground, jump up and down on it until it's completely smashed, and storm off the range never to take up archery again. You could do that. Or you could think, "Well, yeah, my aim is complete crap because I've only just started." And you just keep going and see what happens. Over time, your aim will improve. It's just practice. That's all. So treat it as a game. You're learning to aim.

Let's say, for example, people who practice catching the choice to move when they're doing walking meditation—like the choice to lift the foot, the choice to push it, the choice to drop it. They might go through a number of sessions in which they're never satisfied that they ever caught any of these. But what they will find is that the movements themselves have become clearer because their aim is getting better.

In my case, I was instructed on noting intention when walking up and down. The Sayadaws like to do it within the first week of a retreat. Once people have settled down, I like to direct them towards intention. I always found it frustrating and somewhat embarrassing in the interviews, because whenever I was asked, "Are you noting intention in the walking meditation?" I would have to say, "No, Sayadaw, I never saw it. I can never catch it." This is embarrassing, particularly in Burma, because the interviews aren't private—people are lined up. So everybody knows I'm a failure.

This went on for years.

And then one day I was doing walking meditation before breakfast, walking up and down this hallway. And suddenly, there it was. It wasn't the intention to lift, the intention to push, the intention to drop. It was like within each of those micro-movements there was a stream of intentions. It was like a river flowing down a hallway. A stream of choices. And it was fascinating. It was great.

Next interview: "Sayadaw, I noted the intention in walking." And he kind of went, "Yeah, yeah, sure, sure. Next." He wasn't interested at all. Presumably because for him it's so routine.

Anyway, it was a brilliant success. And I decided I have mastered intention. And from that day to this, I have never seen it again. Not once, ever.

But I am sensitive to the intention to think. I've worked on that, and to me it's generally pretty obvious—while other people are the exact opposite. So you're always working with your own particular set of sensitivities. You don't worry about whether you hit the target or not, whether you can hit this target but you always miss that target. It's irrelevant. Work with the aim. And if you work with the aim, the whole thing will get better.

A student asked about being in a state where you're not aware of choices you're making with your body—where the body seems to be moving in a flow state, with no conscious decision around what's happening. Like playing an instrument, improvising, where what's coming up is constantly a surprise. There seems to be a pattern but you're not driving it. What is that? Is it a complete non-awareness of the cetanā, or is something else going on?

Well, there you'd be seeing the cetanā as the movement of awareness toward what you're doing. The awareness just knows to go there and to do whatever it is. So the cetanā would be in the movement itself—in the movement of awareness. Not necessarily through the mind, not through cognition. It bypasses cognition.

But this aspect of chaitanya—you can see it not just in the cognition, but in the actual movement of awareness. That's also the chaitanya. And I think that's why the Sayadaws actually introduce it quite early. They use the English word "intention," and that always creates confusion, because intention sounds like something very cognitive. But they're actually referring to something much more embodied—the movement of awareness itself.

You can have a sense of choice in the ordinary sense of the word: "I choose this." And sometimes it presents as that—it presents as a choice that is quite discrete, like a turning point, turning a corner. But sometimes you can feel it differently. That word chaitanya also covers having made that turn, having turned that corner, and then the awareness flowing in that direction. So the chaitanya includes the awareness going in that direction.

Sometimes you will see it as the awareness flowing in a certain direction, but without having seen the moment behind it—the "I think I'll try doing this one." You may not have seen the moment of determination, but you're conscious of the flow of aim or intention. This is what I didn't understand when I was in Burma—that this is what they were getting at—because of the English word "intention." And of course they never really explained it. You've got to be very sensitive and have the awareness just so.

One of the important aspects of this is to get a feel for the awareness flowing toward the subject. And in states of flow, I think you do get a clear sense of it. It's like the awareness is just going without the sense of someone at the back. Tremendous skill and expertise and refinement operate to do their work, but they've become invisible. There's lots going on in the mind, but what you've got is just the awareness.

The mind is really active in those moments. Sometimes words just pop up. How did I do that? But when the mind is really active and the samadhi power is there, all that activity disappears from experience. Because you don't experience that there's a mind doing this. It's just the doing. So this would be an example of not-self. The mind is operating in the background, but there's no self-awareness of it. It's just the flow, just the activity.

After you turn the corner, it seems like there should be one more step—a "how did that work out?" And yes, that's part of the teaching of karma: action and its ripening. And it's part of mindfulness—tracking the experience over time. Part of that is the monitoring, the reflection: how did that work out? This is all part of the package.

But in any given experience, some of it might be obvious and other parts of it may have vanished. You just don't see it. It depends on the individual circumstances. One of the advantages of the karma part is that it's not immediate. It doesn't have to be right then. It can be later on, when you've got time to reflect on what happened in all those processes. That's part of the teaching of karma vipaka—of action and its ripening. And the ripening could be instant, or it could be very long term, or anywhere in between.

And the mindfulness is monitoring the whole flow, all the way through.

But that's what the mind does. It monitors. It awares. It processes. It's incredibly active. But when it's really absorbed and just doing it, all of this disappears from awareness. We don't notice it.

It's like when you're talking to someone and you understand what they're saying. You're not constantly going back and reviewing your English grammar and vocabulary and trying to work it out. But in fact, that's what the mind is doing. When the mind is doing it smoothly, it disappears from view.

But if you try to learn a second language, you know how much work is involved—memorization of vocabulary, understanding the framework of the grammar, how to put words together, how to extract meaning. An unusual use of a term—what is it? Is this irony? Is this humor? What is this? An incredible amount of mental processing goes on just to understand when someone says something, and you think, "Oh yeah, I know what they said." All that processing vanishes. You don't see it. But it's there.

And when we're meditating, it's like we've got a spotlight into this immensely complex system. We're aware of just a tiny fragment of it. But what the Buddha is doing is saying: if we spotlight there, it will change the whole system. And the system will start to turn in a direction which is much more satisfactory to us. It will just do it, because that's nature.

"It seems like that's the point where a lot of failure occurs—where there is no realization that it didn't work out, and it becomes someone else's fault."

Yes. I think we have to somehow make meditation more efficient, because at the moment it seems to be very inefficient. I have to get a committee to work on this.

Okay, we're over time.

CHAPTER 44

Finding Right Effort

Patrick Kearney · 40 min

> *In this illuminating talk from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney delves into one of meditation's most challenging aspects: finding the balance of right effort (sammā vāyāma). Drawing from the Mahāsaccaka Sutta (MN 36) and Bhayabherava Sutta (MN 4), Patrick examines the Buddha's own pre-awakening struggles with effort, revealing how even Gotama himself fell into the trap of "crushing mind with mind" during his ascetic phase.*
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> *Patrick explains how the Eightfold Path positions effort (vāyāma), mindfulness (sati), and concentration (samādhi) as interconnected qualities, with mindfulness serving to balance the active and receptive aspects of practice. He highlights a crucial distinction: while we cannot have too much mindfulness, we can certainly have too much or too little effort. The Buddha's mistake in his youth was allowing mental energy to overwhelm his body, creating agitation that blocked his progress—despite having continuous mindfulness and high energy.*
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> *The talk addresses how striving for future results traps us in papañca (conceptual proliferation), pulling us away from present-moment awareness. Patrick offers practical guidance for exploring right effort, particularly recommending the lying-down posture as a laboratory for experiencing mental alertness with physical relaxation. He suggests following lying meditation with sitting practice to transfer this felt sense of balanced effort. The key insight: when we're fully committed to recognizing what's happening now rather than trading present experience for imagined future attainments, the body opens, the heart settles, and genuine progress becomes possible.*

Tonight we're going to talk about right effort, finding right effort, because the whole question of the effort that we make in meditation is a very vexed one.

When the Buddha talked about meditation practice in the Eightfold Path, which is his basic template, he talked about it in terms of three qualities that have to be cultivated: sammā vāyāma, sammā sati, and sammā samādhi. Sammā vāyāma, usually translated as right effort, could also be translated as right energy or right commitment. Then we have right mindfulness, and then right concentration or unification.

If you look at these three qualities, right effort or energy represents the active side of meditation practice. This is the "do it now, do it now, do it now" aspect of practice—the continuity of the practice without taking any break. On the other end, you've got right concentration or unification, samādhi, and this represents the peaceful, receptive side of meditation. Samādhi, concentration, unification, doesn't do anything. It's just stillness. Then in the middle sits right mindfulness, and it balances the two of them. One of its functions is balancing the active with the receptive aspects of the practice.

A great deal of the practice, like most of our experience, involves finding a balance between the active and the receptive. With sammā vāyāma, right effort, we can have too much energy and effort. This is where we get really tight and tie ourselves up in knots and eventually our head explodes. I do have an old meditation friend who once advised me that you haven't really seriously begun your meditation practice until your head explodes. So there's that aspect. And of course we can have not enough energy and effort, and this is when we're having a nice peaceful meditation spiritual holiday and nothing much is happening.

Notice the difference between that quality and the next one, right mindfulness. We can have not enough mindfulness, and if we don't have enough mindfulness, we're in trouble. But we cannot have too much mindfulness—that's just impossible. Vāyāma, energy, effort, commitment, that one we can have too much of, just as we can have not enough of.

Finding a balance between too much effort and not enough effort, too much energy and not enough energy—this is crucial for the meditator, and for most people it's quite difficult to find that balance. It can take a great deal of time and a great deal of experimentation to actually get it right. But if we're struggling with this, we can comfort ourselves with the thought that we are not alone in being affected by this problem. The Buddha himself had this problem, and in fact, he had it seriously badly. Tonight we're going to have a look at what his problem was, how he faced it, and how he overcame it.

We're going to do this by looking at two texts that are largely parallel. Each comes from a different discourse, a different sutta. Both of them show the Buddha speaking to his students, reminiscing about the bad old days before he was the Buddha, and in particular, when he was doing ascetic practices. In one of these texts, he describes the problem that blocked him in his practice. In the other, he describes the solution he discovered to overcome the problem.

Because we're talking about the Buddha before he became the Buddha, we shall call him by name: Gotama. He was an aristocrat of the Sakya Republic. Gotama was his family name or his clan name. In the early discourses, there's actually no mention of his

personal name. A number of the characters who appear in the discourses have that characteristic—we know their clan name, but we don't know their personal name. Sometimes we know their nickname, and sometimes we get a personal name. But in the case of the Buddha, we just know him as Gotama. That's how people who were not his students addressed him: Mr. Gotama.

As a young man, he left home in search of awakening. He did so because he thought he had a problem, and he thought that awakening or enlightenment would solve his problem.

So he went out in search of it. And clearly he must have been a pretty macho young bloke, just refusing to listen to anybody and determined to do exactly what he wanted to do, exactly in the way that he wanted to do it.

Anyway, he embarks on his meditation career and ends up going down a blind alley, as it were, getting stuck in his practice. At first he practiced yoga and meditation in what was then the Vajji Confederation, the largest of the tribal republics in North India at the time. Two or three centuries before, it had been the kingdom of Videha, and it was the center of yogic and Upanishadic teaching and practice. This is roughly what would be North Bihar state today. But it didn't work out for him. So he went south, crossed the Ganga, and ended up in the Gaya area in what is now South Bihar state. But again, a dead end.

Now, at this point in the South, he's doing extreme practices. He's part of an extreme ascetic tradition, which was quite strong in that area. Not only did his practice come to a dead end, but he almost came to death himself because he was abusing his body so much.

This brought him to a stop where he started to seriously reflect on what he was doing wrong, because he was clearly doing something wrong and his whole project was about to collapse. He thought about it, and he located his problematic relationship to the practice in terms of the stress that was brought on by it—in particular, the stress that he felt in his body.

Now decades later, when he's the fully awakened Buddha and a highly successful teacher who's built an international empire, this is how he describes the practice of his immature youth to his students. This comes from Majjhima 36, if you want to look it up, the Mahāsaccakasutta. He says: "Although I generated lively energy and established continuous mindfulness, my body was agitated and disturbed because I was overwhelmed by the painful striving."

This is how he sums up his practice then. It describes Gotama's approach to the practice in his ascetic phase. Notice what he's doing: he's striving for awakening. He wanted something. He wanted it really, really, really badly. He threw away everything that he had and gambled it all in order to get this one thing he really wanted, which was enlightenment, awakening. And he saw his body and his mind as instruments to get that something he wanted. He had a very instrumentalist relationship to his body and his mind. If he flogged his mind and body hard enough, he could drive them onwards to awakening and get what he wanted.

It's rather like the relationship a dedicated athlete has towards his or her body. Often athletes have terrible injuries because they've just trashed their bodies, driving them in order to get what they want. Gotama seems to have had the same relationship to his body and his mind.

So he's describing his practice and he says he had high energy effort, *vīriya*, and he had continuous mindfulness, *sati*. Two big ticks. He's doing really well—very high energy, continuous mindfulness. That's pretty good. But he's making a crucial mistake, and in his obsession, he's completely blind to it. The mistake is that the power of his mind is being used to overwhelm his body and drive it towards a goal. There's an imbalance between mind and body.

This comes about because, in terms of the meditation practice, when we talk about the path factor of *vīriya*—driving, effort, energy, however you translate it—these are mental activities. They are not physical activities. But in the way that he was pushing himself, Gotama's mental energy bled into his body, and his body became agitated and disturbed. In other words, he lost touch with the delicacy of the practicing mind, the mind that is doing the aware-ing. He lost touch with how delicate and sensitive that mind is. His mind was clear, strong, awakened—but his body was overwhelmed by agitation. His mind and body were at war with each other, and this war was the expression of his delusion.

A question came from the group: "If he had this really good mindfulness but was disconnected from the sensitivity of the body, isn't that kind of a gap in the mindfulness itself? Isn't that part of the work?"

Yes, it's part of mindfulness applied skillfully. But consider this: when you meditate, you can be really focused on something—let's say the breathing—and you're really absorbed in it. You're not noticing certain things, and therefore you're staying in the sitting posture for a long period of time.

And you don't notice that your left knee is screaming out in pain. So you're mindful of the meditation object, but you've blotted out everything else.

"So isn't that samadhi?"

It is, but samadhi is supported by mindfulness. Yet it's mindful of simply one part of experience, blind to the others—not the whole picture. When you focus on something, it can be like wearing blinkers, like shining a spotlight in a dark night.

"I thought the whole idea of mindfulness was that it kind of balanced things out."

Exactly. That's the mistake he was making.

"I don't understand why you can say he had good mindfulness if he wasn't actually —"

He said his mindfulness was continuous. But he didn't have what he later came to call sammā sati, right mindfulness. He didn't have what he later came to call sammā vāyāma, right effort. So in the path, he qualifies each of these qualities with "right" as opposed to wrong—because you can have them but completely screw up the whole thing, depending on how you're doing it, depending on your relationship to it. I think this is part of the reason why the Eightfold Path has that emphasis on "right." And in his younger days, he was definitely getting it wrong. But there's also the impression that he was not a man to actually listen to anybody else. So he had to make the mistake.

Now, this is a rather extreme example. Again, I get the impression he was a pretty extreme young character. But this is the problem we have when we struggle in our practice.

The practice demands effort. Many years ago when I was resident teaching here, sometimes people would ring up and say, "Oh, we hear you're a Buddhist meditation center and we'd like to come up and just meditate for a while." "Oh, we don't want to join an organized retreat. We just want to come up and meditate." "Okay, are you an experienced meditator?" "Oh yeah, I've done a bit." "So what do you think you would be doing when you're up here?" "Well, I thought, you know, me and my girlfriend could give each other massages. We just relax, and you've got vegetarian food." Basically, they wanted a spiritual holiday. Because this is what they thought meditation was.

The practice does demand effort. And sometimes, if people expect to spend a meditation retreat relaxing, they get a complete shock when they actually come here and start doing it. The problem is that if we're working really hard and making great effort, we

end up feeling stressed. And when we're stressed, we cannot settle. We're agitated. We might be suppressing the agitation through our effort, but we're agitated. And this agitation gets in the way of the practice.

The way Gautama articulated this problem was: How can we make mental effort with the body relaxed? How do we do that?

When Gautama worked out the solution to his problem, this is how he expressed it. This comes from Majjhima Nikāya 4, the Bhaya Bhairava Sutta. He says, "I generated lively energy and established continuous mindfulness. My body was calm and peaceful and my heart was settled and unified." This is one occasion where I would translate *citta* as "heart" because I think it fits.

So at this point his mind had high energy and mindfulness as before. Now, this involves a highly active state of the mind. Highly active. When we develop samādhi—let's say we really start to develop samādhi concentration, the mind really settles, becomes still, very clear—it's very peaceful, and it's easy to miss that this is actually a high energy state. But the energy is flowing completely freely, and so it just disappears. It vanishes from view because there's nothing disturbing it.

So his mind had high energy and mindfulness, while his body was calm and peaceful. This is a very interesting state of balance, because this is what we're trying to achieve. We want an active, energetic mind in a body that is calm and peaceful. This is a big challenge for anybody, and it's something that, as practitioners, we need to explore in our practice.

So what's central here is the interconnection between mind and body, the networking between them. We want the mind to put out maximum energy while the body relaxes, and therefore does not distract or get in the way of mental activity.

To understand what this means, let's look at a very mundane example of when this does not work—when body and mind are feeding each other's stress.

Let's say you're doing something very simple, everyday, straightforward—something physical with your hands, like buttoning a shirt. And let's say the context is that I'm buttoning my shirt because I've got to go out somewhere where I have to look respectable, and time is short. I've got to get out the door soon. So I'm doing it perfectly routinely, except for that last button. And that last button is recalcitrant. It will not go into the buttonhole. Have you ever had buttons like that? Buttons that turn on you?

So I'm getting frustrated as I'm wrestling with this button, this final button. My energy rises. I try harder to get that button into that buttonhole. But the very act of trying harder causes my awareness to slip away from the physical delicacy of touch sensations in the hands and fingers, which is where the work is actually being done. The awareness slips into the mind, into an inner determination to smash through this job and get it done.

Stress pushes awareness away from the body into the mind, and that mind is becoming increasingly agitated and frustrated. This determination to get the job done is expressed physically throughout the body as tension and hardness, and it's expressed mentally as a separation from the actual physical activity—into an inner sense of frustration and striving. Mind and body are fighting each other in a kind of vicious feedback loop. Each is feeding the stress and tension of the other, and the whole situation is rapidly escalating.

Now, if we get back to meditation—have you ever found yourself struggling in your meditation practice?

Let's say I am struggling in my meditation. How do I experience this sense of struggle? Well, in part it's a sense of hardness and pushing in the body. There's tension throughout. Sometimes in breathing meditation, it expresses itself by the breathing itself becoming much stronger and harder. We might discover, for example, if we're in the habit of struggling in our practice, that we have a special meditation breath. My breathing is operating in a certain way, I sit down, construct my meditation posture, decide now I've got to start meditating, and immediately the breath goes zoom, zoom, zoom—loud and clear. This is my meditation breath, which is actually harder and more escalated than my normal everyday breath. And as soon as I decide "that's it, I'm getting out of here," my breath calms down. Has that ever happened? Maybe it's just me.

The physical sensations in the body which indicate stress are signaling back to me that I am trying hard in the practice. And that must be good, surely. So I should keep going. But my mind has lost its engagement with the present—partly because it's overwhelmed by the distress signals from the body, and partly because it's taken over by a concept, a concept of a future result, of what I'm going to get out of this sometime in the future. Basically, my attitude to the practice becomes "I have to get from here to there"—from here, which is bad, to there, which is good—and as soon as possible. The days are ticking by. I've got to generate that samadhi.

But if the body is relaxed while the mind is working, then mind and body come together in a harmony which one can feel. There's no threat. There's no danger. There's no stress. There's just something to be done. Body and mind settle together. And when that happens, the heart opens.

Remember what the Buddha said: "I generated lively energy and established continuous mindfulness. My body was calm and peaceful and my heart was settled and unified." This is the samadhi aspect.

In other words, in wrong effort we have a two-fold process. In right effort, it's a three-fold process. In wrong effort, we have mind and body in conflict, fighting each other. The mind is using willpower to try to force the body to be still and force itself to be still.

And this creates conflict. Because if we're trying to force mind and body to be still, we're trying to suppress our obstacles, our impulses, with willpower. We're trying to crush our obsessions and our impulses with the power of the mind. And this creates strain in the mind, tension in the body. And even if we succeed, we can't get any further. We're blocked.

But in right effort, mind and body are working together. This is the twofold aspect. And when mind and body work together, the heart can settle. The heart can open and settle and unify. This represents the affective aspect of the person. The effort that we're making is conative—it's the willpower aspect. But here, we're talking about the heart aspect. That settles. And it opens up. And then we can become absorbed into the present.

We've talked about how the mind loses its engagement with the present when it becomes overwhelmed by distress signals in the body. And we also said that the mind loses engagement with the present when it's taken over by the concept of a future result. "I've got to get from here, which is bad, to there, which is good. And as soon as possible, thank you very much."

This brings us to the problem of time. And the problem of time is intimately bound up with the problem of effort. Here we will look at another discourse, Majjhima 36, the Mahasaccaka Sutta, where again the Buddha is reflecting on the mistakes that he made in his youth. When he was practicing wrong effort, this is how he described his meditation practice:

"I thought, suppose I clench my teeth and press my tongue against the roof of my mouth, then beat down, control, and crush mind with mind. So with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, controlled, and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits."

This is why, you may wonder, in interviews I sometimes ask, "Are you sweating from your armpits when you meditate?" And why I look disillusioned when you say, "No, I haven't noticed any."

You could sum up Gotama's practice at this point as crushing mind with mind. Now, if you engage in this kind of practice, you have to be looking for a result, something that will happen next, in order to justify what you're putting yourself through now. Gotama clearly had an image of himself at some time in the future as finally awakened. And if only he could work hard enough, then he could fulfill that ambition. And if he was not yet awakened—which he wasn't—then it's obvious he's not working hard enough. So he has to work harder, and he has to work harder, and he has to work harder, and he has to work harder.

He goes on to say: "I thought, whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion practitioners have experienced in the past, in the future, or in the present, this is the utmost. There is none beyond this. Yet I have not attained any states surpassing the human by this wracking practice of austerities—any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of cultivated ones."

This is what he was thinking about when he was reflecting that he had completely stuffed up the whole project. What he was doing was going nowhere.

So what went wrong? Notice that in his description of having done his best—that anyone had done in the past, or anyone will do or could do in the future—Gotama was caught up in the reality of time. Past and future were real to him. And this meant that he was caught up in what he later came to call papañca—conceptual proliferation or complication.

Because time, in the sense of an experience of time, the felt reality of past and future, is real only in the world of concept. It's not real as a direct experience. Past and future are real only as concepts. So he's allowing the world of concept to dominate the agenda. He's allowing concepts of past and future to dominate the agenda, which means he's not actually fully present.

When we step out of the realm of concept, when we step out of the river of stories flowing through our minds, what do we actually experience? Or more intimately, we could ask: right now, what are we experiencing? Are we experiencing the past? Are we experiencing the future?

In reality, in actual experience, all we have, and all we can ever have, is the present.

Now, the present is very wide, and it includes everything that we remember from the past and everything we anticipate for the future. Because after all, when we remember the past, when do we remember it? We remember it now. When we anticipate the future, when do we anticipate it? We anticipate it now. What we've got is now. And we haven't got anything else.

So right effort, if we're looking for it, is found in the commitment to recognizing the felt present. It's all about recognizing what's happening now.

If I'm here meditating because I want to get something else, what is it actually that I'm trying to get? What I'm trying to get is a mental image. It can't be anything else, because it's not actually here. And if I'm constantly reaching beyond, past, what's actually happening now in order to grab hold of an image of what I want to happen sometime in the future, then I'm missing what's happening now. I'm pushing past it as fast as I can to get to where the action takes place. So my relationship to what's happening now is that basically it's not important. It's important only as a step on the ladder that I want to climb, and I want to move past this step as quickly as possible.

This is how we practice when we're caught up in the reality of time and we're motivated to really do the job. And this is why we talk about relaxation and why it's so important.

I want something to happen, something that is not happening now—that's why I came to the retreat. So I work hard to make it happen. But because my view is projected forward to some imagined destination sometime in the future, what I'm actually trying to do is trade in my current experience for what I imagine is going to be more satisfactory. And that very struggle blocks my progress. Because when I struggle, I feel under threat. And when I feel under threat, my body tightens and my mind resists what's happening now.

But let's say I do not want something else to happen, and I also allow myself to be intimate with what's happening now. When I'm fully committed to being aware of what's happening now, then I'm not struggling. Why should I struggle when whatever is hap-

pening now is already available? When I recognize that there's nothing to strive for sometime in the future, then I can relax. Even while the mind is dynamic and active, still it's not striving for something else. It's just fully engaged with the present.

In that state of relaxation, my body opens, my mind is calm. There is pleasure in that opening. And the energy of the mind is devoted to exploring what's going on right now, including that pleasure. I experience ease. The heart opens and it settles. And I'm curious about that ease. I'm interested in the experience. So the mind is very sharp and very alert.

This is what we're looking for if we're looking for right effort. We could sum it up as: How do I maintain maximum commitment in the mind while keeping the body completely relaxed?

One way of experimenting with this, which we've already talked about, is using the lying down posture. Because here we can really get into the experience of the body relaxing while the mind is working. And as we've discussed, and as some of you have already experienced, the movements of the breathing become very clear in this posture. So breathing meditation in the lying down posture can be very satisfactory. As you breathe out, you sink into the floor, the body becomes relaxed. And as this happens, one of the things which will occur is that you will feel very strongly all those parts of your body where you store habitual tension. Then you can just accept this tension, relax into it, and settle into the breathing.

Now, as we said, the disadvantage in lying down meditation is that one can fall asleep.

This could happen simply because we're tired, but let's assume that's not the case. What's happening then is that the relaxation in the body is bleeding into the mind. When we're in the sitting posture, if we're working hard, the effort in the mind can bleed into the body and we become tense. In the lying down posture, the relaxation in the body can bleed into the mind and we fall asleep.

So no situation is perfect. It's always a matter of maintaining a balance and becoming sensitive to the movements—as we go into balance, out of it, lose it, get it again, lose it again, get it again. But the lying posture allows us to explore the question: what does it feel like to be mentally active and awake while physically relaxed? What does that actually feel like? How can I get a felt sense of it so that when I'm sitting, standing, or moving, I know how it feels? The mind knows how to get there, and I can recognise it when it happens.

So experiment with the lying posture. One thing to try is doing a session of lying meditation followed immediately by a session of sitting meditation. Some people find that there's a lot less tension in the body during that sitting period. The body is much more relaxed, and so you can get a sense of what it feels like to be sitting upright with the body relaxed.

As you sit, if you start to feel tension, be aware of it and relax. You might feel tension popping up somewhere else. Be aware of it, relax. It might pop up somewhere else again. Be aware of it, relax. This is another way to get a sense of this balance.

And another thing to check: when you feel the arising of tension, just ask yourself—do I want something to happen? Am I looking for a future result? Is this experience right now not good enough? Just check that. And if that attitude is there, drop it and just be present.

So the project is how to make mental effort while the body remains relaxed. You might try it out particularly in the lying down posture, but then export it to the other postures—any posture. How do I make mental effort while the body is relaxed? This provides a whole field of experimentation, something to get interested in and to explore.

CHAPTER 45

The Insight Chorus Part 1

Patrick Kearney · 50 min

> *In this dharma talk from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney begins a detailed examination of the chorus (or refrain) that follows each of the 21 sections in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). He explains how this discourse functions as a technical training manual, with the chorus containing the essential heart of insight practice. The talk explores oral tradition in Buddhism, including the remarkable memorization practices still used in Burmese monastic education.*
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> *Kearney unpacks the chorus phrase by phrase, explaining how tracking body "internally, externally, and both" reflects the dissolving boundary between self and other as practice deepens. He describes the crucial foreground-background shift where the universal characteristic of impermanence (anicca) itself becomes the meditation object rather than merely being noticed in changing phenomena. This marks the true beginning of vipassanā.*
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> *The talk culminates in an exploration of intransitive or non-dual awareness, where "body is" points beyond subject-object duality. Kearney explains how mature mindfulness (paṭisati) involves both continuity and a recursive quality—awareness aware of awareness. He illustrates this radical simplicity with Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching that "rain is wet"—neither good nor bad, just what it is. This ultimate simplicity, free from the endless complications of self-centered agenda, is what the Buddha points to in this profound chorus.*

Tonight and tomorrow night we're going to look at the chorus of the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse on the applications of mindfulness or the establishing of mindfulness. This is the root text of the practice that we're doing.

In the Buddha's teaching you find references to satipatthana—the cultivation of mindfulness as a practice—scattered throughout the teachings. There's also one discourse devoted to it specifically, which comes in two forms, one slightly longer than the other. And there's a Satipatthana Samyutta as well. A samyutta is a collection, so there's a collection of discourses about satipatthana too. We're looking at the discourse itself.

It's rather unusual. There's no story involved, virtually no narrative framework. It functions as a kind of technical workbook, and it may well have been compiled as a training manual for students. As the Buddha's sangha grew and more and more people were taking up the practice, this discourse was likely composed and memorized—noth-

ing was written down, of course; this is an oral tradition—to be used as a kind of technical training manual. What it does is create a fixed structure that underlies the practice, and it's used for that purpose to this day.

The discourse, the version that we're looking at, which is the shorter version, consists of twenty-one sections—let's call them verses. Each of these twenty-one verses looks at one particular aspect of the practice, classified according to the four categories: body, feeling, heart-mind, and dharma. At the end of each of these sections or verses, there is a chorus that specifically introduces the subject of insight, vipassana. The chorus that follows each verse refers back to the preceding verse, and it's identical in every case except for the bit where it's referring back to the just-completed section. So it lays out the same way of insight for each one of these sections. The sections are basically meant to cover all of human experience, and the insight chorus describes how insight arises in relation to each aspect.

If you're reciting or chanting this discourse—and again, in an oral tradition, that's how information is passed on—the Pali word for "to learn" or "to study" is actually the verb "to listen," because that's how information would come in. A student was a listener. They would listen as the teacher recited, then recite back. The recitation would go forward and back, forward and back. They'd move on to the next section, forward, back, forward, back. And so people would memorize whatever they were studying.

In Burma today, they use a kind of half-oral, half-written approach. They have books and everything's written down. But if you go into the monastery as a boy or a girl, as a novice monk or novice nun, the education system is all memorization—all of it. If you visit a traditional Burmese monastic school, there are no classrooms. What you'll find instead are students sitting cross-legged, swaying backwards and forwards with a book open before them, chanting. Sometimes they're chanting lines individually, sometimes chanting together, but they're memorizing the book.

The Sayadaws, the monks, and the Sayalays, the nuns, are great Pali scholars. How do they learn Pali? Imagine you're a ten, eleven, or twelve-year-old entering the system. Your first book is a medieval Pali grammar written in Pali. You memorize the book. In the examination, you recite the book. If you pass that, you're given the Burmese translation of the Pali grammar, and you memorize that. In the examination, you recite the book. Then you're given another Pali text, then Burmese, then Pali, then Burmese. By the time you get out of the school in your late teens, you know Pali—and you know it really well.

If you go on to higher study, the undergraduate degree is called Dhammacharya, "Teacher of Dhamma." In fact, it's illegal to give a public Dharma talk in Burma unless you have that degree.

They guard their orthodoxy carefully.

But if you want to go on to higher study, you study for Dhammābhivamsa. My main teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, he was a Dhammābhivamsa. Sayadaw U Janaka, another teacher, he also was Dhammābhivamsa. And if you go to the very top, then you study for the Tipiṭakadhara examination. Tipiṭaka—the three baskets: the suttas, the Vinaya or monastic discipline, and the Abhidhamma. Dhara—one who holds it. But they hold it in their memory. They memorize the entire Tipiṭaka, which is roughly forty large volumes.

When I was there, in December they would hold the examination for Tipiṭakadhara at the Mahasi Centre. You could go along and watch. Very few candidates pass. The failure rate is extremely high.

Now think about these exams. You cannot sit for them once you reach thirty, because it's considered that if you haven't passed by then, you're never going to. This is a young person's endeavor.

They would hold the exam in the main women's meditation hall, which is enormous. They set up rows of these little seats where the candidate sits slightly elevated. In front of him and beside him are examiners. The monk undergoing the examination recites the Pali while two examiners follow along with the texts, checking everything. In the oral portion, you're allowed a maximum of three mistakes, and then you're out—you've failed. There's also a written section, because they're modernizing, you see. In the written part, candidates are asked to write out certain sections, and again, three mistakes maximum. Any failure in either the oral or written section means you fail completely. Come back next year.

So there are very few Tipiṭakadharas. But if you achieve that, your career is set.

It's memorization. In Burma today, if you give a book to a young monk and say, "I want you to study this book," what they assume you mean is memorize it—and they will. They have phenomenal memories.

In the Buddha's time, memories would have been even more extraordinary, because studies have shown something remarkable. In India, research was conducted on a particular caste in Rajasthan where the men's traditional role was to recite the great epics by memory. That's how they made their living, and they would raise their sons to mem-

orize and recite as well. But modernity crept in, and eventually the sons had to attend school for a minimum number of years. What researchers discovered was striking: graduates of those schools, even just primary school, had memory capacities that had dropped precipitously—far worse than their fathers'. It seems that even a small amount of education in literacy begins to torpedo the memory. Which is fascinating.

So in the Buddha's time, memories would have been phenomenal, beyond anything we can comprehend today. Because we don't have memories anymore. We have phones. We have Google. We don't remember anything—except maybe the password to get in there, and even that's a challenge.

But we're talking about people with phenomenal memories, beyond anything we can ever experience.

So in an oral tradition, repetition signals importance. Even in our own culture, the classic popular song has three verses.

Verse one, boy meets girl. Verse two, boy and girl get together. Verse three, boy and girl – tragedy, party. So the verses tell a story; there's some kind of narrative arc. And the chorus is exactly the same, repeating at least three times. The chorus provides the essence of the song. And if twenty years later you're meditating and feeling a bit bored, and your mind starts throwing up this song you remember from a few decades ago – how did it go again? What do you remember first? The chorus.

So the chorus in this discourse, you can see that's the centre. And everything builds off that. The chorus is very important. And yes, that's how they memorised – they chanted. They either chanted alone, but in particular they chanted in choir. This means that the transmission of the text was much more accurate than writing it down. Because you've got a group of people chanting a particular section of teachings, and if anybody chants anything different, if a single word is different, everybody knows. Everybody knows we've got a problem, and you've got to work it out.

But when they started writing the discourses down – and as far as we know, this happened first in Sri Lanka during a period of famine and civil war – circumstances became dire. If you have famine, for whatever reason, and the monks and nuns live off the gifts of the laypeople, but the laypeople don't have anything to give, then the monks and nuns starve. Basically, they've got a choice: they could disrobe and fend for themselves, or they could die.

During this particular famine, compounded by civil war, when society was finally reconstituting itself, one of the first things the authorities did was ask: how many monks have we got left who actually remember the teachings? There were so few that they got really worried and decided they had to write it down, just in case. And this was seen as evidence of the decay of the Dharma.

So you've got people copying every single word. In modern volumes, you've got forty large volumes, but they were scratching it on palm leaves because they didn't have paper. It's a tedious, humdrum, never-ending job. And it has to be done again and again because the palm leaves rot in the monsoon. So they've got to do it again and do it again. And who gets to do that job? The people at the bottom of the hierarchy – the novices. "You take care of it." So they make a slight mistake in writing it out, where one letter looks rather like another. Who picks it up? No one. And then the mistakes start to creep in over the centuries. So the oral tradition is very powerful.

Anyway, that's enough preliminary. Let's get into it.

We're looking at the first instance of a chorus, in the section on tracking the body. The Buddha says – and again he's describing the practitioner. Often when he's talking about the practice, he doesn't define it; he describes someone doing it. This is the way that he conveys it.

"In this way, she lives tracking body as body internally, or she lives tracking body as body externally, or she lives tracking body as body both internally and externally."

Now, in the first verse, it's all about the practitioner lives tracking body as body. So tracking physical experience. Body as body means it's just this sensation. That's it. It isn't anything else. Just this. Just this. So this is the boot camp of the training.

But here, she tracks body as body internally, externally, both internally and externally. So what's this about? Basically, as the practice deepens, our sense of the solidity of the body fades away. As does the sense of an absolute boundary between self and other, between in here and out there.

Where is the border of the self? For practical purposes, for most of it, the border of the self is here. The self occupies this body. And just outside the body is the world—internal, external. But as the practice deepens and perception starts to change, this sense of a boundary begins to get aberrant. It's more dynamic and more shifting than before, and may even start to disappear.

Now, this boundary gives us a sense of subject-object duality. Our normal relationship to the world is based on the fundamental perception: I am in here, and you lot are out there. And what is happening in here, to me and to mine, is far more important than what is happening out there to you and yours. This is bleeding obvious, but if you behave in a way which indicates you don't understand this, I will correct your mistake.

So this is, of course, the construction of self. Now this fundamental sense of duality or separation is not inherent to awareness. It's a structure imposed upon awareness. It's a product of habitual grasping. And as the practice develops, what we begin to recognize is that this way of structuring our experience—me here, you out there—is not fundamental. At first I assumed that it was, but it turns out that it isn't.

So our sense of an absolute boundary between inner and outer starts to fade, and with it, our sense of an absolute boundary to I and mine, him, you and yours, there. We begin to realize that the movements of mind and body that we are experiencing in the practice are not mine. They're not unique. They don't define me. They're universal and they're fundamentally not personal.

And I begin to see that what is true here is true there. It's true everywhere. I recognize that the experiences arising here in this sentient body are not personal and not mine. They're just nature. And nature belongs to everyone and to no one. So this sense of a boundary between self and other starts to weaken.

And then the Buddha goes on to say, she lives tracking the nature of arising as body, or she lives tracking the nature of ceasing as body, or she lives tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body.

So again, the language changes. Again, it's all about tracking, the continuity of awareness. But here, the tracking is the nature of arising and ceasing as body. And this represents a shift of perception. We begin with a meditation object—let's say the breathing, which is part of the body. And as we track it over a period of time, we notice that it changes. Has anybody noticed that the meditation object changes? Yes.

So what the Buddha is talking about here is a shift in perception from tracking the meditation object and noticing that it changes, to tracking the fact of change itself and noticing that it's happening in the meditation object. And this means what's being introduced is insight. Because insight is always characterized by generalization, by universality. And strictly speaking, according to the tradition, this is where insight meditation actually begins.

It begins when the object of awareness, the meditation object, is the universal characteristic of impermanence itself. Until then, we're doing a kind of preliminary serenity practice to get us to this point.

And alongside impermanence, the anicca lakkhana, we find dukkha lakkhana and anatta lakkhana—change, pain, not-self. They always come together as a package. But the first one to be introduced, the first one the Buddha talks about, is change. Basically because it's the most obvious. It's the easiest to recognize.

So what we're talking about here is what we could call a foreground-background shift. At first, let's say I'm actively aware of a meditation object. That meditation object—let's call it a breathing object—is at the foreground of my awareness. But just because I'm tracking the breathing doesn't mean that everything else is disappearing. Other things are happening: sounds, temperature, thoughts. But they're in the background. I'm aiming at one thing or a group of things, and that is in the foreground while other stuff is going on in the background.

Sometimes they swap around. Let's say I notice in the background there's a bit of thinking, and the next thing I know, breathing is in the background—or gone—and the thinking is in the foreground. But I've still got foreground and background. And then I realize I've got to establish a new foreground, put the thinking aside, bring the breathing back. Foreground, background.

So I'm tracking the meditation object, and I notice that it changes. In the foreground there's the meditation object and all the different changes that are happening to it. And one of the things in the background is the observation: oh yes, it really does change. I had a good sitting with the breathing in the last period, and this sitting was complete rubbish. So it changes. It's different. I can't really rely on it. That's a background observation. Then in the foreground, come back to the breathing, come back to the breathing, come back to the breathing.

Then at some point, there's a foreground-background shift, and the meditation object as an isolated entity or process slips to the background, while the foreground is occupied by the universal fact of change itself. If we're talking about breathing, it may be that it's no longer my breathing—it's air element. And air element is by nature impermanent. It doesn't belong to me. It's not restricted to me. So we begin with perceiving the object of awareness as both internal and external. This sense of things opening up starts to happen. And then there's a shift, and the universal fact of change itself occupies the foreground, while the object which changes fades to the background. It's still there, but it's no longer where the action is. The action is in the foreground—the fact of change itself.

Now this shift is very subtle. So much so that sometimes it can happen without the practitioner even noticing it. Sometimes the practitioner is reflecting on their practice and they think, "You know, it's different these days. I can't quite put my finger on it, but it feels a bit different." And then they realize what's happening: "I'm no longer actually preoccupied by the meditation object which is changing. What I'm looking at is the fact of change, and it includes the meditation object."

This shift is very subtle and it's not something that we can do. It's not part of our agenda. We cannot do it. It either happens or it doesn't happen. But we can prepare for it by ripening the circumstances that will give rise to it. And this is done by cultivating the perception of impermanence, or the perception of change. We'll talk more about this later in the retreat.

So there's a shift which just happens, and then the meditation object becomes one or more of the three universal characteristics. At first there's a meditation object which begins to display the three characteristics. And then at some point there's a very subtle shift. And actually the meditation object becomes the three characteristics—that is happening in that meditation object.

And now we have entered into the world of insight.

The Buddha says further, "Her mindfulness is established as body is." Sometimes you see this translated as "there is body." The Pali is *atthi kāyo*. "Further, her mindfulness is established as body is, just for understanding, just for continuity of mindfulness."

This is the third sentence, and the rest of the talk will unpack it, because there's a lot here. Here we enter into what some traditions might call non-duality, or at least non-duality becomes clear.

Let's begin with "body is." Again, we have some aspect of body as the meditation object. At the beginning of the retreat, when we were introducing all this, we talked about awareness. We said awareness always has an object—if I'm aware, I'm aware of something.

Now let's compare this to grammar. In English grammar, we have verbs that are transitive and verbs that are intransitive. A transitive verb is one that has a direct object. For example, the verb "to see": "I see you." In that sentence, we have a subject (I), a verb (see), and an object (you)—the one whom I see.

An intransitive verb is a verb that does not have a direct object. For example, "It rained." We have a subject (it), we have a verb (rained), but we don't have an object. It's just rain.

The sentence "I had a bad dream"—the verb is transitive. We have a subject (I), a verb (had), and an object (bad dream). The verb links subject to object: I had a bad dream.

Now contrast this with the sentence "I was sleeping." We've got a subject (I), we've got a verb (was sleeping), but we don't have an object. I wasn't sleeping something. I was just sleeping.

Notice how intransitive verbs without an object are about process. They're about doing. They're not about the things that are processed or done. They're just about the process, a doing, an activity.

When we begin the practice, we emphasize the transitive nature of awareness. If I'm seeing, I'm seeing something. If I'm hearing, I'm hearing something. If I'm thinking, I'm thinking something. This is transitive awareness—the fact that we have a subject (I), an object (something), and a verb.

This distinction goes deeper than just grammar. Transitive awareness is awareness that is structured by subject-object dualism. Duality. So "I see you" doesn't just convey a grammatical structure, but an existential structure. There is I here, there is you whom I see—someone who is separate from me—and there's seeing, awareness that links the two.

And in this distinction, what is the most important?

What is primary? It's I. Everything revolves around I.

But when the Buddha says "body is," he seems to be speaking about intransitive awareness. Body is. What exactly? Well, he doesn't say. There's nothing there. There's nothing filling in the gap. He just says, "body is." So there's no object. But if there's no object, there's not really any subject in it either. So there's no dualism. There's no one experiencing body. There's no one whose body this is. There's just body. Body is.

And this represents a relationship to experience which is characterized by radical simplicity, by intimacy. This relationship lies beneath all the normal layers of concept and meaning that we pile on top of our experience in order to make sense of it.

So her mindfulness is established as "body is." And then he adds: "just for understanding, just for continuity of mindfulness."

This "just for understanding" expands the significance of the intransitive or non-dual awareness. It indicates the natural arising of wisdom. Because when the conditions are right, understanding arises. And remembering that I cannot do insight—looking for it or trying to make it happen is completely useless. Because this is just the agenda of I, locked into the subject-object duality.

In the Pali, this "just for understanding" is *ñāṇa-mattaya*, where *ñāṇa* conveys knowing, understanding, and *mattaya* conveys the sense that there's nothing beyond this—it's just this. It also conveys that the understanding itself is not for anything. It's not instrumental in its nature. The practice and the understanding that it generates is not instrumental. It has no goal within itself. We're not trying to get something out of it. It simply is what it is, full and complete within itself.

"Just for continuity of mindfulness"—this is *paṭisati-mattaya*. And this takes things a step further by introducing intransitive or non-dual mindfulness, conveyed by adding the prefix *paṭi* to *sati*. So *sati* is mindfulness, and again and again the Buddha talks about mindfulness using the word *sati*. But sometimes, like here, he uses the term *paṭisati*. So what is this prefix *paṭi* about?

In Pali and Sanskrit, prefixes don't have an exact one-to-one meaning. Prefixes have a cluster of possibilities, and the person reading or reciting the text can reach in and pick out this possibility or that possibility. So there are inherently different ways of reading this. That's very typical of the Indian tradition—they play with language and draw out different possibilities. Often this is what you see in commentary. If you ever look at the Pali commentaries, the main commentator is Buddhaghosa, and sometimes he'll ask, "What does this word mean?" and then give a list of four or five meanings.

Then he would give a Dharma talk based on each one of them. It's not that there's one meaning. He's being playful. He's saying, well, you can play with it this way, you can play with it that way, you can play with it the other way. So there is this playfulness with language that's built into this method.

Pati can be taken to indicate again—in other words, continuity over time. And as we've been saying, continuity is built into mindfulness. What's the difference between awareness and mindfulness? Mindfulness is awareness continuously over time. So continuity is built into the concept of mindfulness. There are no gaps of forgetting. *Pati-sati* indicates really strong continuity—the continuity is getting very powerful.

But *pati* also indicates "back" in a recursive sense. In other words, it refers to what we could call awareness of awareness. The awareness comes back. The mindfulness comes back. This is what we've been calling intransitive awareness. We could say it's awareness, awareing, awareness.

Now, this indicates mature mindfulness. The continuity emphasizes maturity. But the intransitive nature of it—the awareness awareing awareness itself—also indicates maturity of the mindfulness. And this mature mindfulness is associated with clarity and depth. This is going very deep.

So *pati-sati* can be read as indicating both the continuity of mindfulness, the unbroken nature of mindfulness, along with its depth and its clarity. Look at Anālayo's translation. He translates it as "continuity." He emphasizes the first meaning.

So, *yāvati ca sati matāya*. And again, *matāya* indicates that this is not for anything. It's just itself. It's just for itself. Both of these indicate a radical simplification and maturity of the practice.

Notice how the practice becomes simpler when it matures. On Wednesday night, we were talking about Mahasi Sayadaw, and he was describing how the stream-enterer—let's say the graduate of the whole system—will never forget how to meditate. He points out that the mature level of this practice has got nothing to do with the method. It's got nothing to do with the technique. It's simply tracking what's happening over a period of time. Just: this is what's happening, this is what's happening, this is what's happening. This is what the Buddha was talking about here.

And it is the simplicity of this practice that makes it so difficult. We want to make things more complicated. We make things more complicated by judging them, by manipulating them, by massaging them. All of this is trying to make the experience fit me and my concerns.

Have you ever come into the meditation hall and sat down? You start, and the experience could be regarded as dukkha-ish. You respond by thinking, "Oh, well, conditions aren't so good this morning. I didn't get much sleep last night. I'm a bit tired. Maybe I should take a break. Then I'll come back later on and it'll be better." So we're overlaying the experience with judgment, manipulation, and so on. We're making it complicated.

But it's actually very simple. I'm sitting here, and I'm tired. That's it. That's what's happening.

So what the Buddha is talking about here is a practice where there is no agenda, and therefore there is no practitioner. Because the practitioner always has an agenda. The self always has an agenda. But once the agenda is dropped, the practitioner is dropped. What we have is complete intimacy with no sense of any purpose to the practice beyond this situation, even now.

So mindfulness and understanding are strong, and with them come equanimity and balance, and the three characteristics simply appear by themselves. They're kind of bleeding obvious. And this is insight.

I think that's probably enough, really. I've got more I could say, but I think it just makes things more complicated. Let me try to make it less complicated with a story.

Many years ago, I spent much of the 1980s in Asia, and a fair amount of that time as a monk. I was ordained in Burma, doing relentless Mahasi meditation. Mercifully, the visa ran out and I went to Thailand. Phew!

There I established myself as a monk in the Thai system. I stayed in various places during my time in Thailand, but I would always come back to one monastery in the deep south—Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery. At the time he was alive and flourishing. The abbot, Ajahn Po, started running retreats for farangs—mostly Westerners.

If you're familiar with southern Thailand, the isthmus gets very, very narrow. And in the Gulf of Thailand, there are two big islands, Koh Samui and Koh Phangan. Have you heard of those? They've become these huge resort islands now. But in the early 1980s, it was just the hippies who had discovered them, and the infrastructure was very, very primitive.

Ajahn Po, who ran Wat Suan Mokkh, was actually a native of Koh Samui. *Koh* means island, so Samui Island. Every now and again he would go home to visit family. And as he would visit, he noticed an increasing number of young, obviously prosperous people from the West who had come to Koh Samui to enjoy themselves—which they could do very easily because everything was so cheap. The more he saw these people, the more sorry he felt for them. Because, he said, they all seem to be miserable. They all seem to be suffering. So he thought, we've got to do something for them.

They started running these retreats, and gradually it built up. But this particular retreat I'm about to describe was very early in those days, and the retreat itself was held inside Wat Suan Mokkh, which was on a hill. It still is a hill.

Ajahn Buddhadasa moved to the base of that hill, I think about 1932 or 1933, early 1930s, and at that time it was all jungle. He tucked himself away and practiced and studied and tried to avoid people, except his reputation spread and monks came to join him. Gradually a monastery developed. People came to support him. And then as development came and forests were being chopped down, the lay people protected that area by building a wall around it.

So when I was there in the early 1980s, everywhere outside the wall the forest was gone—just paddy fields—except for what was inside this wall and on the hill. That was all covered in the original jungle, and that was the monastery.

They started running these retreats, but the facilities weren't really developed for them. The meditation hall was at the back of the property—just a hall and a playing field. Obviously at some point it had been used for the local kids to play whatever they played. That field was just outside the jungle, and inside the jungle, in different buildings, they had worked out primitive accommodations.

And they built kind of bush toilets and bucket bathing facilities. There was a dining area—a big tent put up to keep the rain off with open cooking facilities. That's where the food was.

For the Dhamma talks, you'd go into the heart of the monastery, which was all properly constructed, and enter the Bort. The Bort is the main ceremonial building, very elaborate, built of concrete. And Ajahn Buddhadasa would give these Dhamma talks seated on a traditional Dhamma throne. It would go up from here to the ceiling, the height of it. He must have climbed up a ladder to get there. He was towering over everybody else—because if you're higher than others, it means you're on top of the hierarchy. The Thais are very aware of altitudes in terms of how to show respect. So it was quite an affair. Up the steps, get in there, and he gave his talks.

One of the reasons they were running this program was because there happened to be a resident at the monastery, an American monk from Chicago originally. He'd gone out to Thailand on the Peace Corps and had learned Thai, become fluent in it. When his time was up, he ordained. And he was a superb interpreter, a superb translator. Buddhadasa would rattle off these Dhamma talks and the interpreter would go for it. He was just really good.

Anyway, one day Buddhadasa is explaining the ultimate truths of Buddhism. These were in terms of—I think there were nine *tās*. *Tā*, T-long-A, roughly in English is "-ness." It turns something into an abstract. So *anicca*, impermanent. *Aniccatā*, impermanence. *Dukkha*, painful. *Dukkhatā*, the fact of suffering. *Anattatā*. And so on.

So he's going up this kind of ladder of increasing philosophical sophistication and deep realisation. And finally he comes to the top. And at the top is *tathatā*. And *tathā* means "just"—just so, just this. And he's explaining that this is the ultimate truth of Buddhism, and we're kind of sitting in it.

He tried to explain it. He said, "Look, it's wet season." And in fact it was monsoon season, which meant every day it just poured down. And it's a jungle. The jungle is seething with life of all forms. Everything is incredibly humid. Nothing dries. Anything that can rot does rot, including human flesh.

And if you do this retreat, it means you've got to slosh around from one place to another—from the hall across the park to your accommodation, from there to bathe, back to the accommodation, then to the dining hall, and from there trudge to the centre of the monastery for your Dhamma talk. So everybody was completely sodden.

The Thais had pity on us because we'd sit on this concrete floor and people would begin to whinge. They were not comfortable. Can't you get comfortable on concrete? So feeling pity on us, feeling compassion, they arranged that each meditator would have their very own hessian bag—an empty hessian bag you could sit on during the Dhamma talks—which of course became completely sodden. So we're sitting in this hall on sodden hessian bags, dripping with water.

And he looks down on us and he says, "It's raining."

And you think, the rain is bad because you're sloshing around in the mud all day.

"Well, let me tell you something. On the other side of this hill, there are farmers who right now are dancing for joy in their fields, because this rain means that they can feed their families for another year. So you think the rain is bad. They think the rain is good. You're both wrong. The rain is wet."

And this is the highest truth of Buddhism.

That was the end of the talk. A very fitting and appropriate end. This is the ultimate simplicity that the Buddha is getting at in this chorus. Rain is wet. I'm sitting here and it hurts. I'm sitting here and it's really nice. That's it. That's all there is.

But we're not satisfied with that. We're driven. "Oh, I want more of this. Oh, I don't want that. But if only I can negotiate it so that I can get what I want, then I'll be okay. Then I'll be able to meditate." Endlessly. And this is just endlessly adding complication upon complication upon complication.

But the practice is taking us towards radical simplicity. And if we hit it, we actually find out what the Buddha is talking about.

Okay, that's enough for tonight. Any questions?

Let me anticipate one question. No, it won't work if next time it rains you just go outside. That shortcut doesn't work. Believe me, I've tried.

Any questions?

"I have a question. Sometimes in the news, you hear about people who have just responded in a moment to a situation. You know, like you've probably all been in that situation where somebody drops something and you just pick it up—there's no thought, it's more of an impulse. Sometimes you can see these poor people that the news reporters have got hold of and made a story out of, and they say, 'Oh, you caught some child, or something that was falling.' And I think these poor people, they just don't look at the camera—I don't know—because you get the sense that there's no one doing it."

This is what the Chinese call no action. And in Zen it's quite significant. You just live. And there's no one living life. It's just life.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 46

Open Awareness (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · 38 min

> *In this workshop from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney examines the relationship between active and receptive awareness within the Mahāsī Sayādaw meditation tradition. He distinguishes between 'noting' (active awareness where we send attention to objects) and 'noticing' (receptive awareness where objects come to us), explaining how both lie on a spectrum essential to practice development.*
>
> *Kearney shares a memorable teaching story from Sayādaw U Paṇḍita's first Australian retreat, where teacher John Hale would respond to distressed meditators with one simple question: 'And did you note that?' This illustrates the profound simplicity underlying the practice. He then introduces the metaphor of mind as a window—we typically focus on what lies beyond the window while remaining blind to the window itself. Through receptive awareness, we begin to notice the medium through which we perceive, becoming sensitive to the state of mind doing the observing.*
>
> *The talk includes a guided meditation exploring open awareness, using the image of gradually loosening one's grip on the breath while maintaining a stable 'posture of awareness.' Kearney discusses how this receptive mode cultivates sensitivity, connects to sammā-vāyāma (right effort), and proves particularly valuable for everyday mindfulness. He notes that while some practitioners find this approach liberating, others may struggle without something concrete to grasp—highlighting the importance of finding what serves each individual's path toward insight.*

When we started the retreat about a week ago, we began with awareness, and then we went from awareness to mindfulness, and then we introduced the meditation method. The meditation method revolves around what Mahasi Sayadaw calls noting and noticing—what we could call active awareness and receptive awareness.

Throughout the week we've been working largely with active awareness, where we're learning how to send awareness to particular meditation objects, particular aspects of human experience. One thing that distinguishes this approach is that every aspect of human experience is a meditation object. Nothing is excluded.

I'm reminded of the first time Sayadaw U Pandita taught a retreat in Australia. He taught a six-week retreat at a Catholic retreat center in the southern highlands, south of Sydney. A lot of people turned up because he had developed this reputation and people

were curious. You could say there were waves of shock running through the meditators as they were actually exposed to U Pandita and his approach to the meditation, which was absolutely relentless. As a result, there was a certain amount of discombobulation among the meditators.

The manager of the retreat was John Hale, who I'd met originally in India but got to know in Burma at Mahasi Centre, and who was even then the most advanced practitioner I'd ever known. Once a day, there was a time we'd go and see John in order to request anything we really needed—if we ran out of toothpaste or shampoo or chocolate or some absolute necessity. This turned into impromptu dharma counselling sessions, where the most agitated meditators would come and talk to him.

I found out about this because there was a breezeway in the building, and against one wall there was a sofa where he would talk to people. He'd be on one end and the meditator would be on the other end. To get to my favourite walking meditation place, I used to go down and come back up through the breezeway, and so each day I'd be walking down, and each day John would be there, talking to a distressed meditator. Sometimes when I came back, there was another distressed meditator. He was still there, still going. Sometimes not.

But the conversations always took exactly the same form: the meditator talking, and John saying absolutely nothing, but listening with total attention and total compassion. Finally, the meditator would stop talking, and John would say, "And did you note that?"

As far as I could tell, that was the only thing he ever said. And of course he meant it. What he was illustrating was the utter simplicity of the practice. And what the meditators were illustrating was the determination to make it more complicated.

This is what the practice is all about: the simplicity of awareness.

The word that John was using was, "Did you note it?" Were you deliberately turning towards it? Did you actively engage it? When we look at Mahasi's approach, sometimes in the lineage they talk about noting, and sometimes they talk about noticing. We've talked about this before. Noting is active awareness. It's sending awareness to its object, and it's characterized by its active nature. Then you have noticing, or receptive awareness, where you're not sending awareness anywhere, but rather the meditation object is coming to you. In active awareness, I go out to the meditation object. In receptive awareness, the meditation object comes to me.

These lie on a spectrum. In the early stages of the practice, what tends to be emphasized is the active. U Pandita, in particular, really strongly emphasized the active. Generally, that's probably the most common approach, because active awareness first of all

gives the practitioner something to do. If you say, "Well, just sit there and be aware," no problem. But what? What do you mean, be aware? What does that even mean? How do I do it? What am I supposed to be aware of? Why am I doing this? And the questions start piling up.

But if you have a specific project—sit here and just see if you can follow the in-breath and the out-breath—then the practitioner has something to do, something to engage with, something to get the process started.

But of course, the noticing of receptive awareness is always there. And over time, it may actually become much more important. So when we're practicing the noting and the active awareness, there's always something in the background. I can feel my body. I can hear sounds. I notice there's thinking going on. There's sensations in the body. So I'm actively aware of the meditation object while receptively noticing everything else around it. Foreground, background, as we talked about before.

Now, this noticing—the receptive aspect of the practice—has an enormous amount to teach us. We practice mindfulness because we want to know what's going on. Mindfulness for the Buddha is always associated with wisdom, with understanding, which is essentially finding out what's really going on. The noting, the active awareness, cultivates energy, strengthens the mindfulness, and develops concentration. It's like a specialized exercise regime in a gym. You go through, repeat certain exercises, and get better at them over time.

But of course, at some point, we leave the gymnasium and re-enter the ordinary world. And the question then is: I've developed this strength, now what do I do with it? What we do with it in our ordinary lives is very largely through receptive awareness rather than active awareness. And how do we do that when receptive awareness is characterized by an absence of doing? Active awareness, we do it. But how do we cultivate receptive awareness when its characteristic is that it's not doing?

I think this works through sensitivity. The active awareness, the noting, makes the mind stronger. And remember that for the Buddha, mind is one of the senses—it's the sixth sense. And a sense is a sensitivity. It's one aspect of the sentient body which is sensitive to particular forms of data. The five physical sensitivities are sensitivities toward data that come from the physical world. The eyes are sensitive to light and color. The ears are sensitive to sound. The tongue is sensitive to tastes, and so on. Mind is also a sensitivity. And as the mind becomes stronger and clearer through active awareness, it also becomes more sensitive. Because it's becoming much more sensitive, it's opening

up to all sorts of forms of data that normally it doesn't catch. This is one of the reasons why we emphasize that we must be particularly careful in our interrelationships with each other—people are very sensitive when they become mindful.

Now, this sensitivity depends in part on our relationship with sammā vāyāma, right effort, right energy. Sometimes we might be making too much effort in the meditation practice. We might be straining in our effort to do something, to accomplish something, and we might lose the sensitivity to what else is happening. We might become so absorbed in our project that we become blind to anything else. That's one of the reasons why we've talked about finding right effort, the importance of right effort. And the sensitivity we're talking about here is, of course, very closely linked to vedanā, the world of affect.

I might just give an illustration. This was the first time this whole area of the practice was introduced to me explicitly, and it was by John. He gave a simile which at the time I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. But I've got to offer it up and see if you can make any sense of it.

He said, during this practice, it's rather like imagining yourself standing in a room with a big window that looks out over a garden. You're the meditator, standing there looking at the garden, and the meditation teacher is right beside you. Your companion, the meditation teacher, asks you, "What do you see?" And you answer, "The garden." And your companion says, "Look more closely."

What do you see?

And you say, "Well, I see a rose garden."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a bed of roses."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a rose bush."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a rose."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a rose petal."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a dewdrop on the rose petal."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see the light shimmering off the dewdrop."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see the window."

And I thought, what on earth is he talking about?

What we're talking about here—what receptive awareness opens up—is the window. The mind is like a window. It's the medium through which we look out at the world. And the window is so obvious that we don't see it. We think what's on the other side of the window is what's important. It doesn't occur to us that what's important is the window.

But the window is absolutely essential to the whole business. If there was no window, we couldn't see anything. If the window is there but dirty, the view changes. If the window is wet, the view changes. If the window is coloured, the view changes. If the window is completely clear, the view changes—and the window just disappears.

In receptive awareness, we're learning to notice the window. We start to incorporate the window into what we see. In other words, we begin to pay attention to the state of our mind as we are being mindful. And in large part, we enter into this through the noticing of receptive awareness, rather than the noting of active awareness.

We could call this open awareness. The Buddha doesn't have a Pali term for it, as far as I know, so you encounter different words for this style of practice and its variations. Back in the last millennium—long, long ago—this was what used to be called choiceless awareness. Choiceless awareness was very fashionable at one time, and I think the term actually came from Krishnamurti. But these days, if you talk about choiceless awareness, you're just showing your age, so I advise avoiding that term.

Then open awareness became fashionable, and that's been in vogue for some time. But these days, if you want to be hip, if you want to be on the cutting edge, talk about natural awareness. That seems to be the flavour of the moment. I'm just taking the middle way and calling it open awareness.

Open awareness, or receptive awareness, or natural awareness—whatever we choose to call it—is not a specific technique. There are different ways in which people go about it; it's not that there's one way of doing it. But this morning I'm just presenting one possibility, one game to play. We'll play with it and see what happens.

Now, during this guided practice, I'm going to use breathing as the meditation object. But if you want to use something else, just use something else. It's not dependent upon the breathing. So if I say breathing, you can simply go into whatever your chosen meditation object is.

I'm going to use an image. As we said, active awareness is when awareness goes out to take hold of the object. So the central image is this idea of reaching out and holding an object of awareness—just like our hand might reach out and hold something. As the game progresses, we're going to become interested in how tightly we're holding. In other words, we're going to become interested in the state of the mind which is doing the noting.

So, let's begin.

Settle awareness in your body. Construct your meditation posture. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body, and from there lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact on the ground. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame, there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Now track the movements of your breathing. Follow your breathing. Be interested in what is happening to your breathing. It is as if you are holding the movements of your breathing in your hand—keeping your hand steady and watching what you are holding.

Now relax your grip on your breathing so your hold is more gentle, less intense. Allow yourself to become sensitive to the broader field of awareness around your breathing. Become interested in the space within which being aware of breathing occurs.

Don't do anything with your breathing. Just hold your mind steady. Breathing comes and goes. Be interested in this without clinging to it.

Your mind changes all the time. Be interested in this without clinging to it. Awareness moves from one object to another. Be interested in these movements without trying to stop them.

Don't force anything. If breathing slips out of view, let it go. Just notice that it slipped away and what replaced it. Things come and go. Let them. Just stay aware that things are coming and going.

Open your awareness to the space within which things come and go.

We could see this practice as first establishing a physical posture and from there establishing a posture of awareness. Then we hold that posture of awareness but let the objects of awareness move and change, come and go. If you get lost in thought, come back to breathing. When you feel settled and stabilized, relax your hold on your breathing and open up to the mind itself—letting objects of awareness come and go as you maintain your posture of awareness.

So how did it go? You took a nap? It didn't hold your interest? Too relaxed? Peaceful?

Were you awake?

Very aware and very peaceful.

That sounds like a good combination. What do you think made it very aware and very peaceful?

The lack of pressure. It took me a while to see what the problem was. It wasn't around the vision—I didn't understand what was going on.

So you managed to find that gentle receptivity, but as you say, it took some time and it snuck up on you. This rather points out the paradox: you can't actually *do* it. If you try to do it, you'll probably smother it. But if you let it sneak up on you...

Yes, Carolyn.

I think there's a similarity with terms that are comfortable in Christian culture. But I noticed also there's this hinge of anxiety. While I was enjoying it, there was this thing happening—these undercurrents of anxiety. Like, I don't know if I'm going to be able to maintain this for as long as I need to. Right now I'm aware, but I don't know if I'm going to be able to stay aware.

That might be a factor, because again, if you've got something to do, then as long as you keep doing it, things should be okay. But if there's not something you're specifically doing, then you've got no control over it. The habitual holding on to the breath becomes

difficult—or rather, the habit of holding on to the breath becomes difficult to let go of. The mind tends to go, "Get me out of here." The mind wants to hold on. The power of habit.

It's interesting, isn't it? When we're practicing, if we do it a lot, we're creating new habits—the way that I meditate. And sometimes, over a period of time, these habits will get in the way because the practice matures. But if I'm locked into a certain way of practicing which I just default into, then I can get stuck there. It's difficult to move on.

So it's very interesting when you notice that what you're doing is simply allowing habit to take over. And it's very useful to see that, to get a sense of it. It's a better way to possibly abandon that habit.

Because the habit gives security.

Yes. Yes.

So this is one style of what you could call open awareness. People have different relationships to it. Some people find that it just doesn't work for them—there's nothing for the mind to grab onto and they just drift off or get bored. Other people find it a huge relief. They think, you know, there's no business—it's like a straitjacket has been removed and now they can finally be liberated. You get all sorts of different responses.

As I said with all these exercises, if you find it useful, do it. If it's not useful, forget about it.

But more generally, the receptive aspect of awareness—well, first of all, some people make it their entire practice. That's what they do; that's their whole approach. Some people use it particularly in everyday mindfulness. Even if you prefer a more active style of meditation when you're doing a formal practice, when you're out and about, the open awareness becomes a kind of home base. And it's quite important for staying present throughout whatever activity we're doing—staying present to it.

But this approach can also give you a sense of the whole package: the object of awareness and the awareness itself. Getting a sense of that whole package is very useful, particularly if you're meditating for the purpose of insight.

Receptive awareness can give you an entry into starting to notice that whole package of awareness itself.

And the other thing is, if you've had a good time with this practice, keep in mind that you've been meditating for a week now. The mind is sharper, clearer, stronger, more sensitive than it is under normal circumstances. What you've experienced today may not necessarily be what you would experience all the time—it may be completely different. But if you find this is something useful to add to your repertoire, then use it.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 47

The Insight Chorus Part 2

Patrick Kearney · 37 min

In this continuation of his examination of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's insight chorus, Patrick Kearney focuses on the final sentence: 'She lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world.' He explains how this independence (anissita) represents the maturity of practice—not a meditation technique, but a way of life where nothing further needs to be gained and the practitioner experiences no sense of lack.

Kearney draws on multiple sources to illuminate this teaching, including the Alagaddūpama Sutta (MN 22) where devas cannot locate an awakened one because they find nothing that awareness depends upon, and the Attirāga Sutta (SN 12.64) with its famous simile of light that lands nowhere. He connects these Pāli teachings to the Diamond Sūtra's 'unsupported heart' and the Chan phrase that awakened Huineng: 'Dwell nowhere and bring forth that mind.'

Through vivid Chan stories—including Dàowú's refusal to say whether someone is alive or dead, and Luóhàn's teaching that 'not knowing is most intimate'—Kearney illustrates how liberated awareness cannot be captured by concepts. The practical implication is profound: when we recognize that our concepts and labels never match actual experience, we can relax into uncertainty. This genuine not-knowing keeps us alert and curious, naturally giving rise to sati-sampajañña (mindfulness and clear comprehension). The talk concludes with a discussion of how upādāna (clinging/appropriation) creates the sense of self, and how mental phenomena can arise without identification—simply coming and going according to conditions.

Last night we started talking about the insight chorus of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. We said how the discourse itself acts as a kind of technical workbook for this practice. It has twenty-one different sections, and each section ends in a chorus where the chorus talks about insight—the arising of insight. In English translation, this chorus is quite brief: four sentences. Last night we covered the first three, which leaves one for tonight.

So we'll start from the beginning. "In this way she lives, tracking body as body internally, or tracking body as body externally, or tracking body as body, both internally and externally." Tracking body as body means this physical experience is just this physical experience. It's not what I'm projecting into it. It's not what I want about it. It isn't what I want it to do. It isn't what I don't want it to do. It's just a physical experience.

Here the sutta talks about internally and externally—the fading away of the absolute distinction between self and other, here and there, that begins to drop away as the meditation practice deepens. Things start to loosen up.

"She lives tracking the nature of arising as body, or tracking the nature of ceasing as body, or tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body." Here you get a shift into insight, unambiguously, where what's being tracked is not body, but the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing. In other words, change—impermanence, the universal characteristic of impermanence. What becomes the meditation object is actually the universal characteristic of change, and technically this is where insight meditation begins. Of course, if the universal characteristic of change is evident, then the other two characteristics are also evident: dukkha and not-self. But one may be more predominant, more obvious.

"Further, mindfulness is established as body is, just for understanding, just for continuity of mindfulness." Here we're talking about the radical simplicity of both the practice and the realization. The rain is wet. That's it. It's just this experience now, with no reference to anything else. It's not for anything. It's just what it is.

And then we have the final sentence: "And she lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world." This living independently is the maturity of the practice. Notice that what the Buddha is talking about is a way of life, not a meditation technique. And "not clinging" indicates there's nothing further to be gained. The destination of the path has been reached, and the practitioner has no sense of lack, of anything missing. The practitioner, you could say, is entirely intimate.

So let's get a sense of what this independence means. We start with where we are, which is before independence. We could ask the question: why do we undertake the practice? What are we doing here? We undertake the practice because we want something. We don't want what we have now; we want something better to replace it. Desire is the basis of effort. What this implies is that our relationship to experience is dominated by the sense of "what's in this for me? What do I get out of this?" We find ourselves habitually judging our experience to see whether it's good enough—and in particular, good enough to suit our agenda, to actualize the fantasies that we have regarding the future.

And this implies a relationship to the practice which is ruled by what the Buddha calls *taṇhā* and *avijjā*—craving and delusion. Because we're always pushing forward into an imagined future to get something that we think we're missing right now.

So this brings up our relationship to time, which we've talked about. When our practice is supported by a sense of something to be gained or something to be lost, time becomes real. We find ourselves resisting what is happening now because we think what happened before is more important, or what may happen later is more important—and even more real than what's going on right now. So we don't fully commit to what's happening now, because this now we see only as the prelude to something more significant.

But when we are intimate, this experience now is already enough. There's nothing more to gain. There's no thought of anything to come later, or even anything that happened before. Time dissolves, in the sense that any felt sense of past or future dissolves. And when past and future dissolve, of course the concept of the present dissolves, because the concept of the present only makes sense compared to past and future. So time dissolves, and we may even feel that there's no sense that anything alternative to this is even possible—and certainly it's not needed.

This is the kind of progression that the Buddha is talking about. And it brings in the sense of independence. "She lives independently." Now, this translates the word *anissita*. *A* means the negative—not *nissita*—where *nissita* means dependent on, attached to, supported by. And when we see this term, it's clear that what the Buddha was talking about is dependent arising. This is his basic framework, and it teaches that whatever we experience arises because of conditions other than itself. Whatever happens is conditioned by something else. In other words, it's dependent on, supported by those conditions. If this condition arises, this experience arises. But without those conditions, this experience will not arise. So this experience is dependent on these conditions, and the reality of a dependent event or experience is inseparable from the reality of what supports it.

For example, my sense of self. Now, this may come as a surprise to you, but I think I am real. In part because you think I'm real, and you treat me as if I'm real, and you are certainly real, and you're sitting around listening to me—so I must be real. Makes perfect sense, doesn't it? So there's the external support.

And there's an internal support: my thoughts about myself. Who I am, how I got here, what I'm going to do next—these thoughts seem real. The drama of my life and the emotions flowing through the heart, these seem to be real. So I must be real. And of course, my possessions seem real. These clothes seem real. This body seems real. And if they are real, they give me reality because I'm the owner of them. So the sense of self is dependent upon other events, other conditions, and it's a product of those conditions coming together. It is dependent. Does that make sense?

So the opposite is independence. How does the Buddha speak about this? There's one interesting little bit in Majjhima 22, the *Alagaddūpamasutta*, the simile of the snake. He gives the example of how the devas fail to find an awakened one, someone whose citta is fully liberated. He says that when the devas—including Indra, Brahma, and Pajāpati—look for a practitioner whose citta is liberated, they cannot get hold of anything that an awakened one's awareness depends on. So the devas, when they've got nothing better to do, are looking out in the world.

And they've heard about a practitioner whose heart is liberated, so they go looking. But they cannot find this person, because they cannot get hold of anything that an awakened one's awareness depends on. Why? Because an awakened one is unknowable right here and now.

So what he's saying is that an awakened one cannot be known. Because to know her, to find her, to establish her as real, we have to find what her inner state depends upon. What supports her inner state, her citta? What is her inner state grounded on? In other words, what does she cling to in her inner state? What does her inner state organize itself around?

The devas have a perception that is greatly superior to that of humans, and when they perceive a being, they look into their minds and they discern the personality that animates the body. But when it comes to awakened ones, all the devas can actually perceive is a body moving around—they cannot find what she is clinging to, what she is dependent upon, what she is supported by. In other words, they cannot find a command and control centre. They cannot find an identity headquarters.

So this brings us to what's happening in the citta, in the heart-mind. The essence of the citta is viññāna, awareness itself. And awareness is an elemental quality—it's not a something, but the presence of something. According to the Buddha, this elemental presence, which is awareness, grounds itself on a network of physical and mental qualities, organizes itself around them, and through them constructs an identity. The expression the Buddha uses is that awareness lands, and then it organizes itself and constructs an identity out of different physical and psychological phenomena.

This network consists of a unique sentient body with its characteristics, its possessions, its desires, its aversions, its obsessions, aspirations, and so on. These are the things that animate that sentient body and guide it through life. We call that network of physical and mental qualities the self. And in our own case, we identify with that particular network and we call it "me."

We get a sense of what this might mean when we think of people we know who are entirely predictable. Why are they predictable? Because they're caught in a network of habits, and they do not move beyond the network. Their awareness is grounded on, organized around, clinging to this network of habits, so they always respond in the same way.

But sometimes we meet people who surprise us, who seem to be quite different, for example, from who they used to be, or who seem capable of responding to life in ways that are not dependent upon the habits of the past. Their awareness also is grounded in and organized around a network of habits and qualities, but noticeably more loosely, so that they do not cling so tightly to their sense of themselves and the nature of the world that they live in. They appear to be much more adaptable to changing circumstances.

And if we take that to the end degree, an awakened one is not grounded anywhere. They do not cling to anything. Their awareness is not supported by, dependent upon, anything at all.

Let's look at another discourse, the Attirāga Sutta—Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.64. Attirāga means "if there is obsession." Here the Buddha is talking about how the normal human condition is one where our citta, the heart-mind, is disturbed by, even defined by, obsession, delight, and craving. Delight here indicates agitation. Technically, delight means, "Oh, this is so great, I've got to do it again!" Have you ever had that kind of experience? "This is fantastic, I've got to have another one." This is delight in the sense that the Buddha uses it.

So awareness lands—the Pāli term is patiṭṭhita—and it organizes itself around these qualities and constructs a self and a world that are characterized by grasping, aversion, and pain. This is the normal human condition.

But in this discourse, the Buddha goes on to talk about the alternative: when our inner state, our citta, is not driven by, not organized around, obsession, delight, and craving. And this is a very famous simile, often quoted. The Buddha is talking to his students and he says, "A roofed building or hall has windows to the north, the south, and the east. When light enters a window at sunrise, where would it land?" So you have the hall, and you've got windows to the north, the south, and the east, but not to the west. The sun rises, the light goes through the east window.

Where would the light land?

Now, the term that he's using for "land" is the same as when he talks about awareness landing and organizing itself. So the monks reply, "On the west wall, Bhante."

"If there was no west wall, where would it land?"

"On earth, Bhante."

"If there was no earth, where would it land?"

"On water, Bhante."

This is ancient Indian cosmology—the great ocean holds the great earth.

"If there was no water, where would it land?"

"It would not land, Bhante. It would not land."

So this is the unlanded awareness.

We have the saying "to see the light." But as we've discussed, we don't actually see light. We see what light illuminates, what light falls upon, what light lands on. That's what we see. But if light did not land anywhere, what could we say about it? Does the light exist? Does the light not exist? Or does concept fail? And if concept fails, what do we have?

This term translated as "unlanded" is *apatiṭṭha*. And we find the same term in its Sanskrit version as a key technical term in the Diamond Sutra. I don't know if you've come across that—if you're into Mahayana Buddhism, you've heard about the Diamond Sutra. It's very big in Zen, for example. And there the term is *apratiṣṭha*.

Let me give a brief quote from the Diamond Sutra, where *apratiṣṭha* is translated here as "unsupported." The Buddha says, "The Bodhisattva Mahasattva"—now, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva is an incredibly advanced practitioner; there's bugger all difference between a Bodhisattva Mahasattva and a Buddha—"the Bodhisattva Mahasattva should give rise to an unsupported heart. A heart not supported anywhere. A heart unsupported by sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles, or phenomena." So he goes through the six senses. A bodhisattva mahasattva should give rise to a citta which is not supported anywhere—not supported by any of the six senses.

So this unlanded awareness and the unsupported heart, they're both pointing in the same direction.

Now, this is from the Sanskrit version of the Diamond Sutra. In the Chinese version, which is what is influential in the Zen tradition, we get a much simpler and different translation for this particular passage, where it says, "Dwell nowhere and bring forth that mind." And this is the phrase that sent the Sixth Ancestor, Huineng, off on his quest for awakening. Dwell nowhere and bring forth that mind.

So what can we say about this unlanded awareness, this unsupported heart? It exists, but it cannot be described. An awakened one exists but cannot be captured by concepts. It cannot be captured by anything we think or say about him or her. Because consider how description works. How can I describe X, whatever X is? Whatever I say does not capture X, because whatever I say is not X. It's a network of concepts about X. So no explanation can capture the actual lived experience. The citta of the liberated one exists—there really is liberation—but it cannot be pinned down by concept. And of course, this is true even of mundane concepts. No concept, for example, can pin down the taste of a good cup of coffee.

So this is a concept we find in early Buddhism, we find in the Theravada, but the people who really get to play with it are certain streams of the Mahayana. And here, let's have a look at how the practitioners of the Chan tradition played with this concept of unlanded awareness, or the unsupported heart.

Daowu and Qian Yuan went to a house to make a condolence call after a death in the family—in other words, they were going to the funeral. Now, of these two characters, Daowu is the teacher. Yuan, the student, hit the coffin. Bang! And said, "Alive or dead?" Wu said, "I won't say alive and I won't say dead." Yuan said, "Why won't you say?" Wu said, "I won't say. I won't say."

Halfway back, as they were returning to the monastery, Yuan said, "Tell me right away, teacher." The student had been stewing over this the whole time. "Tell me right away, teacher. If you don't tell me, I'll hit you." Wu said, "You may hit me, but I won't say." Yuan then hit him.

I get the impression that the people who got reborn as Chan monks must have been footy players in a previous life. It's all very macho and blokey—always biffing each other and shouting at each other.

Time goes by. After Daowu died, Yuan went to Xishuang and brought up this story. His teacher had died and Yuan had to find himself another teacher because he hadn't finished his training yet. But this business had been bugging him all this time. Years had gone by and it still bugged him. So he goes to this other teacher, Xishuang, and tells him the whole story.

Shuang said, "I won't say alive, and I won't say dead." Yuan said, "Why won't you say?" Shuang said, "I won't say, I won't say." At these words, Yuan had insight. He got it. After all those years.

Are you enlightened by this? Shall we just move on?

Basically, no description works. "I won't say alive. I won't say dead." These are just concepts. But what's happening is this: this is the world of non-clinging. And how is the world of non-clinging? The world continues to function. There's still seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding. But while we are in a world of experience, we are no longer in a world of named experience. No concept works. No label of the experience convinces us because the label is not the experience. We cannot pin down the experience of not clinging as anything at all.

Later on we can look back and name it as something—"this happened." But we know that the name has already missed the named. We understand in real time the gap between what is actually happening and any name or concept that we place upon it.

Ordinary life goes on. We see, we hear, we think. But we learn to recognise that while our seeing, our hearing, our thinking are real, what we see, hear, and think are not what we think them to be. Our perceptions and our judgments—all of them—of what we are sensing are fundamentally wrong. They may be useful because they get us through the day,

But fundamentally, they are wrong because they miss the felt experience.

In that case, if they're wrong, then what is right? And as soon as we reach out to name something as right or as wrong, what we're doing is clinging to certainty—the certainty that's granted by concept. And in that clinging, we are stuck, and we are in pain.

But when we recognise that our name, our label does not match, that our concept is wrong, then we can relax. We relax into the gap of uncertainty. And this gap stimulates our curiosity. "I don't know—then what is it after all?" We are curious, investigation arises, and we naturally practise what the Buddha calls sati sampajañña, mindfulness and clear understanding.

But when we think we know, we fall back into habit, which means we fall back into habitual clinging. We are asleep. But when we know that we don't know, we stay alert, because we genuinely don't know what this is, or what happens next. So we have what Dōgen Zenji calls beginner's mind. And the beginner's mind is the mind of the mature practitioner.

If you are genuinely agnostic—most people who claim to be agnostic actually have all sorts of beliefs. Genuine agnosticism is quite difficult, to genuinely not know. True agnosticism means you can't say. But you can't say that you don't live. You act. And this

is very much what they emphasise in the Chan and Zen tradition—what's important is the action, not what you think you know. There's a beautiful expression about this: the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.

So let's look at another illustration of this, another Zen story, which will be completely obscure, as they always are. This comes from Case 20 of the Book of Serenity: Luohan's Most Intimate.

This dialogue apparently—although there is disagreement about this—occurred after a three-month retreat. Now, in China at the time, the meditation monks and nuns would do two retreats per year, the summer and the winter, and each retreat would last two months. Then in between the retreats, they'd wander off and do other things. This system is still present in Korea.

Recently, we were visiting Korea and staying at a temple down south, in Jirisan, hanging out with some pretty senior meditation monks. They were talking about meditation, and I asked one of them, "What does it take to be qualified to be a meditation teacher in Korea?" He said, "Well, you know, between thirty and thirty-five years seniority as a monk or a nun, and about fifteen years of meditation practice." Now, by fifteen years, he didn't mean that for fifteen years you did some meditation. He meant literally fifteen years—two six-month retreats per annum, adding up to fifteen years' worth. The implication being, if you haven't done that, why would you pretend to be a meditation teacher?

And I thought, oh my God, no wonder they don't have a particularly high opinion of lay Dharma. It's a pretty high standard.

Anyway, so this story takes place at the end of one of these retreats. The teacher is Lohan, and he's saying goodbye to his students one by one as they leave. One of his students is Fa Yen, and Lohan has got his eye on this man. He thinks he's ripe—maybe he just needs a little push.

So Lohan asks Fa Yen, "Why are you leaving?"

Fa Yen said, "I am following the wind, wandering on pilgrimage."

Lohan said, "What does pilgrimage mean for you?"

Fa Yen said, "I don't know."

Lohan said, "Not knowing is most intimate."

Fa Yen suddenly attained great awakening.

I'll leave that one with you. Not knowing is most intimate.

Are there any questions? Presumably not—it's all as clear as mud. We're going to talk about that when we get to anatta.

So "clinging"—the word that gets translated as clinging is *upadana*. And *upadana* is appropriation, taking as one's own. *This is mine.* So this Dharma talk is mine. By the way, just in case you're in any doubt about it, this retreat is mine. This is *upadana*, and it results in self. But that's the executive summary. We'll talk more about it later in the retreat.

Question from participant about whether this relates to Dipa Ma's teaching that anger and fear still arise but without identification.

Yes, I think that's the basic territory we're talking about. The citta throws up what the citta throws up, but it doesn't stick. Of course, if you're a mature practitioner, then what the citta throws up—if you've cleared out all the rubbish, as it were—will be quite different from what it used to throw up. But the essential point is, from the point of view of the practice, it doesn't matter what the citta throws up. What matters is: do we grab onto it? Do we claim it as me and mine? Or do we let it go? It's just an event that comes and goes according to conditions.

I'll give you a very minor example. I was one time doing my own retreat, doing walking meditation around dusk, and suddenly the citta threw up an old obsession—I forget what it was. My first response was, "Oh my God, what's that doing here? That hasn't been around for the past twenty years. Have I not progressed beyond this?"

And then the absurdity of the whole situation struck me. It's got nothing to do with me. And it's got nothing to do with progress. When the conditions are such, these things arise. The conditions change, they go. It's not about me, and it's not about progress, and it's not about the lack of progress. When the conditions are there, this arises.

When the conditions change, they cease.

And in fact, it did cease—immediately. Because there was nothing to hold on to. There was nothing supporting it. There was nothing feeding it.

So one could go through all sorts of quite deep disturbances, but as it were, be untouched by it. And just let it flow through.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 48

Origins 1: The Quest for Awakening

Patrick Kearney · 54 min

In this opening talk of a series on the Buddha's first three discourses, Patrick Kearney traces the remarkable journey of Gotama before he became the Buddha. Beginning with historical context—Gotama was not a prince but the son of the elected president of the Śākya Republic—Patrick explores how a radical insight into aging, sickness, and death propelled the young Gotama into a life-changing quest for awakening.

The talk follows Gotama's training in the Upaniṣadic yogic traditions under teachers Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta in the Licchavi Republic, his mastery of formless absorptions, and his subsequent rejection of these traditions as inadequate. Patrick then examines Gotama's turn to extreme asceticism (tapas) in Magadha, his competitive drive, his near-death from austerities, and his eventual abandonment of this path—scandalizing his five companions.

Patrick illuminates the Buddha's post-awakening hesitation to teach, his reflection that people are trapped in their positions (ālaya) and unable to grasp dependent arising (paṭicca-samuppāda) and nibbāna. The intervention of Brahmā Sahampati, the failed encounter with the Ājīvaka wanderer Upaka, and the Buddha's realization that he must be strategic in teaching set the stage for the historic first discourse. Throughout, Patrick draws parallels to practitioners' own journeys, inviting reflection on what obstacles we face in our practice.

Tonight we're going to start a series of talks on origins. We're going to look at the first three formal discourses given by the Buddha: the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Anattalakkhana Sutta, and the Āditta-Pariyāya Sutta. These mark the beginning of his teaching career, and these three discourses are considered extremely important by the tradition.

Before we look at the first one, before we get to it, we have to understand how the Buddha came to be teaching it in the first place. And for that, of course, we begin with Gotama.

As we've said, Buddha is a title, not a name. Before he was Buddha, his name was Gotama, and this was his clan name. In the early sources, we actually don't know his personal name. And that's true of a lot of the characters in the discourses. Sometimes they're called by their clan name—often they're called by their clan name—sometimes by nickname. But most of the time we actually don't know their personal names.

Gotama was the son of basically the president for life of the Sakya Republic. Later legend said he was a prince, the son of a king. He was not a prince, he was not the son of a king. He came from a republic. But he was a member of the aristocracy, and he would have been expected to succeed his father once his father died or retired.

When still young—and my personal hypothesis is that at this point he must have been a teenager, because that's the only way this story makes sense to me—Gotama saw aging, sickness, and death as if for the first time. In other words, he had some kind of radical insight in which he saw, for the first time, the depth of normal, everyday suffering. The kind of suffering that all sensible people were just taking in their stride. So the initial awakening is the capacity to be shocked by life. Seeing life as dukkha.

Now dukkha is omnipresent and it is inescapable, which means that anybody who lives a sane, meaningful life has come to terms with it. And so had Gotama, until the crisis hit. And now he recognises as a crisis, as something that has to be responded to, what everybody else sees as the obvious, the ordinary, the everyday. So he's radically out of sync with the world. And he's radically out of sync with his family, and in particular is radically out of sync with his father, who has the responsible job of being the President of the Republic and who expects his only son to succeed him.

Gotama is in conflict with the world, and perhaps most importantly he is totally, utterly unwilling to compromise. So in an action still scandalous, he abandons everything and walks out, including abandoning his wife and his newborn child. However, he does delay his departure until at the age of twenty-nine he actually fathers a son. And then he decides, that's it, I've done my job. I'm out of here.

Gotama is now the bodhisattva—the person or being, sattva, in search of awakening, bodhi. And his first problem is where to go. It's one thing to walk out the front door, but then where do you go?

His home is Kapilavatthu, the capital of the Sakya Republic, and this lies on the main trading route between the kingdom of Kosala to the west and the Licchavi Republic to the southeast. Kosala was the biggest of the new centralized monarchies, and its capital was Sāvatthī, which is where the Buddha later on made his centre of operations. The Licchavi Republic was the largest of the tribal republics, and its capital was at Vesālī.

So Gotama could turn west and head to Sāvatthī, or he could turn southeast and head to Vesālī. And he chooses southeast.

Why does he do that? Why does he head to the Licchavi Republic?

This area is what is now northern Bihar state, and it was the successor to the old kingdom of Videha. Videha had for centuries been a major centre for the yogic traditions that we know as the Upanishads. For example, it was in Videha that the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad was composed—one of the early, great Upanishads.

So during the Buddha's time, this was still an area where aspiring yogis would go to study and to practice. That's where Gautama goes, and he trains in the Upanishadic tradition under at least two teachers. We know there were at least two because the early discourses, the Nikayas, preserved their names: Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. They must have been really famous at that time, for the Buddha's followers—who tend to disparage anything that wasn't Buddha Dharma—to include their names in their records.

According to Buddhist tradition, these teachers taught serenity meditation up to a high level of formless absorption. Formless means the material world has completely disappeared and the mind is in a subtle realm above the physical. This may possibly be a reference to the practice mentioned in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad: the practice of silence, the silence that reveals the Ātman, the Self.

Gautama joins this tradition and practices with first one and then another teacher. What we learn about him is that he had a really fierce independence of mind along with a deeply competitive streak. This comes out in how he describes his relationships with his two teachers. Let's talk about the first one, Ālāra Kālāma.

Later on, the Buddha is telling the story to his students of his life as a student under Ālāra Kālāma, and he told them how he got himself geared up to really go for it, go for the practice. He says, "I consider: not only Ālāra Kālāma has faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—I too have faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom." I think this is a polite way of saying, "I am at least as good as he is. And in fact, I could be better."

And so Gautama jumps into it, and in fact, he is very, very good. He does master these practices and the teachings. In each community, the teacher graduates him and says, "You've done really well. Please help out with the teaching. You've got a whole community here, and you've got something to offer. Please join in."

But Gautama rejects each tradition as inadequate. He refuses the request to contribute to the community. He walks away without looking back. And it would appear to be rather similar to his walking away from his family. Basically, he's not going to settle for anything other than full awakening, and he's not going to let anyone get in his way.

We don't know how long he spent in Videha—probably longer than the tradition cares to admit. But once he realizes there's nothing more to be learned there, he moves south. He crosses the Gaṅgā to the kingdom of Magadha, the second of the two major kingdoms in the Ganges Valley at the time. This is roughly south Bihar state. He goes to the district around the city of Gayā, a district known for its powerful and restless spirits, and for the shamans who dealt with them. To this day, it still has that reputation.

Here we see the shamanic side of Gautama coming out, an aspect that gets played down in the tradition. Are you familiar with the story of Sujātā and the Bodhi tree? This is later on, when he's on the home stretch toward awakening. He's meditating under this tree, and a young woman from the local village called Sujātā comes to make an offering to the deity, the spirit of the tree. She sees Gautama and thinks, "Oh, he must be the spirit. I should offer the food to him." Gautama, of course, does not explain that he isn't, that this is a case of mistaken identity. He just eats the lunch.

This story is variously interpreted, and these days a feminist interpretation is popular: Gautama is the macho young yogi, Sujātā is the feminine side, and when he absorbs his feminine side, then he can be enlightened. And, you know, why not? But if you look at it from the point of view of what was going on at the time, there were powerful spirits who lived in various places, including trees. If a village was making the point of worshipping the spirit, by worshipping it wasn't exactly, "Oh, we think you're so great and we're bowing to you. Wonderful."

It's take this, now leave us alone, and running away before anything bad happens. These spirits were powerful and dangerous.

Now Gautama, as a yogi, is looking for somewhere to practice. He's very familiar with this culture, and he's very sensitive—he would pick up the vibes. He's looking for a place to meditate, and he sees this tree. And he immediately knows this is the house of a powerful spirit. And he marches in and takes over.

Now imagine you're sitting at home in your lounge room. Suddenly the door swings open. This young macho bloke walks in, looks around, and says, "Yeah, this will do. Oh, you—ah!" It would be a bit of a shock.

So there he is. He's taken over the spirit's tree. But not content with that, he then steals his lunch. This is the powerful shaman. And it's the side of the Buddha that, as I said, the tradition tends to play down.

So anyway, Gautama takes up the practice of tapas—extreme asceticism. And the purpose of this practice is to summon power. It's all about power. The power necessary for the breakthrough to awakening.

Now India has a long tradition of cultivating what we call spiritual practices in order to develop power. In the literature, there's all sorts of stories about a yogi who would develop such power that even the gods would feel threatened by him. And then what you can do with this power is compel the gods to do your will. And so it looks like that during this period of his practice, Gautama's main concern was power.

Another aspect of Gautama's practice in this phase was that it was solitary. He wants no teacher and he wants no community. He's done with that. But he attracts five companions, and these are equally fanatical. These are also committed to this tradition. And the way it's talked about, it doesn't seem to be a normal teaching community with Gautama at the head as the teacher. It seems to be more like a loose association of people with no real ties to each other. The association seems rather like competitors running the same race. So the question is, who's going to get to awakening first? And there's a sneaking suspicion among the five that it's going to be Gautama. They want to be there when it happens.

So Gautama's austerities have this competitive edge. And this is coming out stronger and stronger. This is a quote that we've already given in an earlier talk. When he's thinking back about this period, he says to his students: "I thought whatever painful, wracking, piercing feelings due to exertion practitioners have experienced in the past, in the future, or in the present—this is the utmost. There is none beyond this. Yet I have not attained any status surpassing the human by this racking practice of austerities, any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of cultivated ones."

Now you see from this that basically Gautama is in competition with himself and with others. And he stops only when he decides he has won the race. No ascetic, anywhere, at any time, could have beaten this.

The problem is, he's won the race, but he has not won the prize. And no one seems to be applauding. He has not won any distinction in understanding and seeing worthy of the cultivated ones.

So what he's then left with is another failure. There's a sense in which he already failed with Udaka.

But he thought, this isn't it. It's not what I'm looking for.

So then he jumps into this extreme practice to the point where he's close to death. And it still doesn't work. And Gautama quits. He walks away. And his companions are scandalized and angered by his desertion. I mean, what's he saying? Is he saying that they too are wasting their time? Or has he just given up because it's too hard? Either way, they are completely disillusioned with him and they walk away.

So they are rejecting him, but is he also rejecting them? Because again, he's walking away from the community that wants to share the Dharma with him in some way, even though in this particular group it's a bit weird. And this time he's absolutely determined. He wants no one getting in his way. He's going to do this alone.

At this point, it might be interesting to note that what Gautama is doing is employing what later became known as the mirror of Dharma, as we're talking about on Wednesday nights. He's looking into the mirror and asking himself, what's going wrong? And at this point in the retreat, it can be useful to ask ourselves: What's getting in the way now? Because what we want is momentum. We've been here a week. We're building up momentum. We want to be able to keep building on that. So it can be useful for us to check what is getting in the way now, and what do I do about it?

Anyway, let's get back to Gautama. So he's failed in the practice of yoga and he's failed in the practice of tapas. And so Gautama turns to developing his own way independently. The style of practice that he develops is what he later comes to call the middle way. And it worked. It leads him to awakening, to bodhi, under a tree that came to be called the Bodhi tree. And of course, the question is, why did he choose that tree? Well, it's pretty obvious. It must have been the power he felt radiating from it.

So he's awakened, and we'll talk more about this later on. Tonight is mostly story time. After the awakening, the Buddha—because now he's the Buddha—sits for four weeks at different places around the Bodhi tree, and what he's doing is quite feeling the bliss of deliverance. In other words, he's just had this incredible blast of enlightenment, and he's adjusting to it.

During the fifth week, when he's staying at the Goat Herds' Banyan tree, the newly minted Buddha thinks about the depth and the subtlety of what he has realized. And he says, "This Dharma I have discovered is deep, difficult to understand, difficult to awaken to, peaceful, exalted, beyond reason, subtle, experienced only by the wise. But people find pleasure in their positions, are devoted to their positions, delight in their

positions. And for such people, this is difficult to see: specific conditionality, dependent arising. And this is extremely difficult to see: calming all constructions, abandoning all supports, exhausting cravings, fading away of obsession, cessation, nirvana."

He is contemplating the depth of what he has realized and thinking about how difficult it is for others to ever comprehend it. And the reason why it's difficult for people is that people cling to their positions. This is ālaya.

So what does this mean? One way of viewing the mind's activities, which I must say I personally found useful at one point, is that the thought stream consists either of norms or positions. A position is a viewpoint that we cling to in order to define ourselves—to ourselves or to others. So it represents a foundation of what we take to be real and what we take to be self.

Now, a self for the Buddha is always defined by something other than itself—something that indicates itself, that points towards itself. And this is necessarily the case because the self does not exist as something directly experienced. This is the central aspect of the Buddhist teaching of not-self.

The self doesn't exist as something directly experienced. It exists as a concept, or as a network of concepts. The self always lies just beyond, or just behind, actual experience. And it exists only in terms of its reference—something it points toward, and which in turn points toward it.

So, for example, on a really basic level, possession. Possessions point towards the self. If I own something, that something confirms my reality as the owner. After all, the possession is real, and so the owner must be real. And this, of course, is understood by the advertising industry and by politicians, who often are selling us a sense of identity. Buy this car, and I am the trendy, happy person portrayed in the advertisement. Support attacks on refugees, and I am a true blue Aussie defending true blue Aussie women. The payoff in both cases is identity.

So when I take a position on something through thinking and clinging to these concepts, I create a self and a world that seems real and solid. The positions that the mind takes serve to concretize what otherwise would have no empirical reference—the self. Taking these positions and assuming them to be real and to point towards a real person blinds us to what is actually happening.

If we're in that state, we could not possibly grasp what the Buddha had just experienced: "The Dharma I have discovered is deep, difficult to understand, difficult to awaken to, peaceful, exalted, beyond reason, subtle, experienced only by the wise." Nevertheless, I'm going to advertise an enlightenment weekend—if you pay a lot of money, enlightenment is guaranteed.

People are stuck in their positions. How can they be persuaded to abandon all positions? It's way too hard. And so the Buddha decides that he will not teach, because it's just too difficult.

But fortunately for us, there's a certain deva, a Brahma—specifically Brahma Sahampati—who is at that moment eavesdropping on the Buddha's mind. He hears this thought and is horrified by it.

Now, why was Brahma Sahampati skulking about? During the time of Kassapa Buddha, the previous Buddha, Sahampati was actually a monk. He practiced under that Buddha's teaching, and after his death he was reborn as a Brahma, way up there. Our Buddha was also a student of Kassapa, and his name then was Jotipala. So Sahampati knew Jotipala, knew he was a talented chap, and just used to keep an eye on him over the lifetimes. He happened to be keeping an eye on him at that moment and realized, "Oh my God, he's about to wreck everything."

So he rockets down to earth and persuades the Buddha to teach on the grounds that yes, you're absolutely right about the Dharma being extremely difficult to teach and to understand, but he says there are just a few people "with little dust" who will understand if you teach them. If you don't, they will perish.

The Buddha is persuaded. But notice what he thinks he's signing on to—a tiny group of highly advanced disciples. The last thing on his mind is that he's about to start a world religion. That was definitely not part of his agenda at this point.

The Buddha thinks first of Alara Kalama and then Udaka Ramaputta, his teachers. Perhaps they could get it. But the devas inform him that they have died. The tradition says Udaka Ramaputta died the day before, and Alara Kalama about a week before.

I think about the Indian idea of life after life of practicing to attain enlightenment. These teachers had attained a tremendous spiritual status, but not awakening. A Buddha pops up, and they just missed him. They were reborn in heavens so remote and so subtle that they don't even know that Buddhism ever appeared on earth.

And they're going to be sitting in that heaven for about a zillion years. Then by the time they're reborn, there'll be no Buddhism. They just missed out. So don't miss out.

The Buddha then thinks about his five former companions. Perhaps they would understand. But why was the Buddha initially unwilling to teach? It was certainly the difficulty of understanding the Dharma. Yet when he was reflecting on this, what else was he thinking? Was he also thinking of his younger self? Was he thinking of how fiercely he had clung to his own positions? Is he thinking now about how fanatical his five former companions are, and how difficult it would be to get them to see the world differently?

When Govind thought about his conflicted relationships with his family, his teachers, his companions, and when he thought of his stubbornness in pursuing the dead end of asceticism, did he think of how difficult he himself had been to teach? Was this movement towards the first teaching an attempt to find a breakthrough—in the sense that if he could find a way to teach his former self, in the form of his old companions, then he could teach anyone at all? If he could crack this nut, he could do it.

So he decides he's going to give it a go. Again, the devas helpfully inform him that the five companions are now living just north of Varanasi. The Buddha heads there in search of them. He hasn't gone very far—in fact, he hasn't even arrived at Gaya—before he meets Upaka coming down the road.

Now, Upaka is also a renunciant. He is an Ajivaka, and the Ajivikas were an early Indian sect that taught determinism. Upaka is walking along the path when he sees this young Buddha walking towards him. He's really impressed by what he sees. He stops the Buddha and says, "Friend, your faculties are clear. Your complexion is pure and bright. Under whom have you gone out? Who is your teacher? Whose dharma do you follow?"

The point about this encounter is that it is entirely unrehearsed, unprepared for. The Buddha has his mind focused on the companions. He's not expecting this. So he responds purely spontaneously in what's called an *udāna*, a spontaneous verse. I'll go through much of it, just to give you a sense of it.

The Buddha says: "I am one who has overcome everything, who understands everything, unstained among all phenomena, abandoning everything, free by putting an end to craving, having understood directly by myself—to whom should I point?" In other words, who's this teacher you're talking about? "For me, there is no teacher, and one like me is unknown. In the world with all its deities, there is no one equal to me. I am the worthy one of the world. I am the supreme teacher. I alone am *Sammāsambuddha*. I am cool, extinguished. To turn the wheel of Dharma, I am going to the city of Kasi. In a world gone blind, I go to beat the drum of the deathless."

This is a very famous verse. Upaka responds by pointing out that this is quite a claim. The Buddha agrees. Upaka shakes his head, Indian style, and says, "Yeah, friend, maybe." And he walks off.

This expression would be equivalent to our "yeah, whatever"—or even the Australian expression, "yeah, no." In any event, he's completely unimpressed, and he walks away.

This declaration by the Buddha is inspired,

spontaneous, completely unplanned. His heart is full, overwhelmed by the good news. But Upaka is not moved.

So as the Buddha walked away, he must have been thinking, "That went well... not." In other words, he's realising that he has to be very careful, very strategic, in how he speaks, if he is not going to drive people away rather than persuade them to open up to what he's got to say.

And so he's on his way to Kāsi, to Bārāṇasī, wondering how on earth he is going to handle his five companions. And we shall find that out tomorrow.

So, any questions?

Yes, his name was Rāhula, according to tradition. Seven years after he left home, the Buddha returned. And he had, well, let's say his father was really pissed off. Seriously pissed off.

So he and his dad are having a bit of a flaming blue in the courtyard, and his wife is upstairs. She looks down and sees her husband has come back, dressed as an ascetic. Then Rāhula turns up, looks out the window and says, "Who's he?" And his mother says, "That's your father." Then she says, "Go down there and ask him for your inheritance."

Now why she wanted him to do that, who knows what's going on in her mind. But the boy does. So he marches up to his grandfather and his father—they're having a blue, and I'm showing you the footage, it's very polite. And he looks up at his father and says, "Where's my inheritance?"

And the Buddha looks down and turns. He's brought with him some of his students, and he says to Sāriputta, "Ordain that boy now." So basically, he kidnaps his son. And his father is even more pissed off.

So Rāhula goes off and becomes a novice monk, a sāmaṇera. And there are two teachings, two suttas, in which the Buddha teaches his son—one when he was still very young, and the other when he was twenty, when he was ordained as a bhikkhu.

And then Rāhula disappears. There's no mention of him. He disappears. And he's highly respected in the tradition for this. Because as the son of a Buddha, he could have made a play for power. He could have said, "I'm the enlightened one's son. Enlightenment comes to me." And he was enlightened—he was an arahant. But he didn't. He just vanished. Not heard of again at all. And the tradition really respects him for that. They feel it demonstrates his sincerity.

Well, according to later Buddhist thinking, exactly, he would have. But according to the early tradition, definitely he didn't. And these stories come from the Vinaya Piṭaka, the Mahākhandhaka. This is the earliest history that we have of the formation of the Saṅgha—very early. So it was composed way before the theological constructs of bodhisattvas wanting to rescue everybody came into being.

The record that we have shows him basically saying to himself, "If I try to teach and nobody understands, this is going to be a real bother. So I won't do it." And he had to be persuaded.

No, it's scandalous. There is a later interpretation that, oh, this is just play acting—Brahmā was coming down just to illustrate some kind of teaching point. I don't think so. I think we can see here stories that don't fit the orthodoxy, something that was never ironed out. So the early records went through an editorial process.

And every now and again, something comes out that doesn't seem to fit the image. But you can be pretty sure that if it wasn't edited away, it was because everybody knew—no, this actually happened. And we can't just rewrite history, even though it would be less embarrassing if we did.

So the Shakyas lived in a republic. The Kshatriyas, the upper class, they had a vote—something like the Roman system. There would be an assembly, and all the major decisions were made in that assembly. Every member of the community had the right to speak publicly and to vote. So there would have to be debates. But "every member" meant male aristocrats of that status—not all men, just those of that particular status. And the president was elected.

There's no mention of terms, and it would have been probably unusual to have them. So his father expected that the young Siddhartha would take over, but he would have had to be elected as well. He would be presented to the assembly: "This is my son. I've been your leader, running this republic for decades. You've done well under my

guidance. Vote for him." And everybody would likely say, "Yep, okay." Presumably that's how it would have gone. But he would have had to have earned it. If he had been hopeless, they wouldn't have elected him. So there would have been a lot of pressure on him to do well.

After his father died, they elected Mahanama—he was a cousin, part of that same broad family, a cousin of the Buddha. He became the last president, because the Shakya Republic was destroyed either soon after the Buddha's death or just before it.

Did his father and the Buddha ever resolve their differences? There's no indication that they really did. His father complained to him about Rahula's ordination, and the Vinaya rule about how old a boy must be before being allowed to ordain as a samanera was instituted because of his father's complaints. I think the rule is something like: if the boy is old enough to throw stones at birds in the fields, he's old enough to ordain. In other words, if he's old enough to enter the workforce, he's old enough to ordain.

His mother died a week after he was born, but his mother's sister raised him. And she eventually went off and ordained. A lot of his family ordained—a lot of his cousins. In fact, the Shakyas constituted the elite, the governing elite, the people who ran the Sangha. It was largely a family enterprise, which would have been typical for the time. That probably would have really irritated his father—it would have got right up his nose.

As for his wife, I can't recall whether she went off and ordained as well. I don't think so, but it's possible.

Or it could be that she was telling him, look, this is your opportunity—go for it. Who knows? All we've got is the story.

Now, regarding Viḍūḍabha—after Pasenadi of Kosala was very old, he was overthrown. The prince was a Shakya, the son of a woman whom the Republic had sent to Pasenadi a long time before. There's a very strange story in the Buddhist tradition about why this happened, which I think is complete nonsense.

But at the time, we have two major kingdoms, and the modernizing one is Magadha. When the Buddha passed through, the king was Bimbisāra, who became a follower of the Buddha, and Buddhism was well established in Magadha. In ancient Indian history, the most common cause of death for kings was to be murdered by one of their own sons, impatient for the top job. That's what happened to Bimbisāra. His son was Ajātasattu, who appears in the later stories. Ajātasattu had a plan for imperial expansion. He launched a war north of the Ganga, destroying the Vajjian Republic, and he faced off with Kosala.

By the time the Buddha was old and coming to the end of his time, it was pretty clear that the whole political balance of power in the Ganges Valley was coming unstuck. These two elephants, Magadha and Kosala, were going to be trampling at each other and trampling everybody else.

Now, if you were a young, ambitious king of Kosala, maybe you would see an opportunity. The other thing about Kosala was that it was an old-fashioned kingdom, quite feudal. Different rajas ran their own domains but answered to the king in sovereignty. The Shakya Republic was one of these—autonomous but answering to Kosala. It was rather like Australia and the Crown. This kind of very loose confederation, maybe the king thought, isn't good enough. "I've got to have everybody under my control, and I'll start with these people. They occupy a highly strategic position, and they have a reputation for independence. I'll make an example of them." I suspect it was something like that. Power politics is power politics.

Regarding the question of enlightenment before the Buddha—there would have been ideas about enlightenment from the Upanishadic tradition, but they had the concept of Ātman and Brahman. You realize that Ātman is one with Brahman. They have a whole theology out of which the non-dual tradition emerged. But it seems the Buddha wasn't convinced. He studied it, he did the practices, but he thought, no, this isn't it. He had very high standards. It took a lot before he was satisfied.

As for the question about whether there were Buddhas before Gotama—yes, the tradition holds there were past Buddhas who were regarded as enlightened with the same status. I think there were five or seven of them listed in the early sources. But in the later tradition, they extended the cosmology out considerably.

There are an infinite number of Buddhas before and an infinite number of Buddhas after. But we don't know when that tradition began, at what point people started talking about previous Buddhas. In the early tradition, they do talk about previous Buddhas, but they all teach the same thing—they teach the Dharma.

The difference between our Buddha and the previous Buddhas was that our Buddha took a long, long, long time to become enlightened. According to the tradition, it took him six years. Can you believe it? And apparently this is because when he was a student of the previous Buddha, that previous Buddha was talking to his students about how long it had taken him to be enlightened—how after he left home it took him six days to be enlightened. And our Buddha, who at the time was a bodhisattva, thought, "Six days? I'd be at this for six years." And because of that misplaced determination, he took six years.

What happened to the previous Buddhas' knowledge? They're gone. Impermanent.

So the reason we have the Buddha's teaching is because he got convinced to teach. But it wasn't just that he decided to teach—the thing is, he was a brilliant politician and organiser. Because he didn't just teach. He created a structure that has lasted for over two millennia.

The Vinaya, the legal code that governs the life of his monks and nuns, is one of the oldest continuous legal traditions on the planet. That's the Vinaya that determines the life of the monks and the nuns—the code of discipline. Lay people aren't exposed to those legal codes; lay people have the five precepts, the Panchasila, which we chant each night. But the monks and nuns were very regulated in their life. And that code, that legal code, is one of the oldest continuous legal codes on the planet. That's an astonishing cultural achievement. So he wasn't just enlightened—he was a genius as well.

The stories of the previous Buddhas are couched in a culture and cosmology about the yugas, about how many thousands of years humans have been on the planet and the different cosmic ages. This reflects the Indian sense of time. And we don't know if there have been other planets or worlds where there have been other Buddhas. But the stories of the previous Buddhas are expressions of that worldview. There is the Indian sense that birth is followed by death, death is followed by birth, and it just rolls on. And there's no reason to suppose that it's limited to this little piece of galactic real estate. So they have a very big picture of life and the universe.

You get the Jataka stories that began to develop—these are stories of the bodhisattva's companions in previous lives. They're very famous stories, Indian folk tales. But if you look at these stories, in theory they represent the Buddhist world projected back in time, a long time ago. And if you look at the political, social, economic structure in those stories, they're exactly the same as in the Buddha's time. In other words, for them, the past was simply the present projected backwards. But in modernity, you know you can't do that.

The past is not the same as the present—it's different. And so you have the invention of history, which says the past is definitely different and asks how we can understand it.

One of the fascinating things about these early Buddhist records is that they actually are history. Many of them are people reporting what happened in their own lifetime—how all of this started—and keeping those records. So we're witnessing the beginnings of history as we know it. But when you look at their stories of the distant past, that past is always simply the present projected backwards. In other words, they invented it.

Question from the audience: At the beginning of the talk, you were describing identity and used an example about buying something. Can you remind me how that relates to your teaching?

When the Buddha was considering whether he should teach, he said he couldn't because people are locked into their positions—*ālaya*. This is where the mind takes a position on something, and verbally it functions to concretize the self and the world. This, of course, comes out later when he starts teaching not-self, which at this point he hasn't yet mentioned. But we're going to explore not-self later in this series.

Question about vegetarianism.

There's a strong tradition of *ahimsa*—non-harming—in India. Not harming any living being. So many people were vegetarian. But the Buddha was not into food trips. And particularly for his monastics—monks and nuns—they were beggars. He rejected making vegetarianism part of the monastic rules, essentially because it would make life more difficult for the lay people. There would be certain foods they couldn't offer and others they could. And it would introduce the monks and nuns making choices about their diet. If you ordain in the Theravada tradition, one of the things you abandon is any control over your diet. Someone offers it to you—that's what you receive.

Question about reintegration and why we are split.

That's a good question. We're going to talk about life after life later in this series, although discussing it now might just create more fixed positions, so I really shouldn't go into it.

Anyway, it's getting late. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 49

Origins 2: The Middle Way

Patrick Kearney · 43 min

In this talk from the 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney continues exploring the Buddha's first teaching by examining the Majjhimā Paṭipadā (Middle Way) as presented in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). The teaching unfolds through the dramatic context of the Buddha's encounter with his five former ascetic companions who had rejected him for abandoning severe austerities.

Kearney illuminates how the Buddha discovered the Middle Way through a pivotal childhood memory of spontaneous jhāna under a rose-apple tree. This memory prompted the revolutionary question: 'Why am I afraid of pleasure that is unconnected to sensual stimulation?' The Buddha realized that both the pursuit of sensual indulgence and the pursuit of painful asceticism share the same fundamental problem—taṇhā (drivenness, craving). The ascetics' mistake was believing that pain, as the opposite of pleasure, must be the correct path. But being driven by aversion is no different from being driven by desire.

The Middle Way is revealed not as mere moderation or a fixed point between extremes, but as a dynamic balance where no fixed position is taken. This is expressed through the Noble Eightfold Path's complex interrelationship of eight factors across three subsystems (sīla, samādhi, paññā). Each factor must balance with every other, creating what Kearney describes as 'dynamic complexity.' The practical implication for meditators is profound: whenever we take a fixed position—straining toward a goal or collapsing in exhaustion—we lose the Middle Way. True pleasure arises from the absence of drivenness, available only in complete absorption in the present moment.

Last night we started to tell the story of the newly minted Buddha. We talked about his quest for awakening, which eventually ended in success. This happened on the full moon of the lunar month of Vesākha, which roughly corresponds to our May or June. The first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, or Rolling the Dharma Wheel, was delivered two months later on the full moon of Āsāḷha, roughly July. This is in the lunar calendar, so it doesn't quite correspond. In this first discourse, he taught the middle way and the four truths. This gets the whole ball rolling, and tonight we're going to look at the middle way—the *majjhimā paṭipadā*.

If we go back earlier in the story, the newly awakened Buddha at first does not want to teach, because he feels that the Dharma he has discovered is too deep, too subtle, too profound for anybody else to actually understand. He says, "This Dharma I have discovered is deep, difficult to understand, difficult to awaken to, peaceful, exalted, beyond reason, subtle, experienced only by the wise."

But as we know, fortunately for us, an eavesdropping deity, Brahmā Sahampati, overhears his thought, appears before him, and pleads with him to teach on the grounds that there are just a few people "with little dust" who will understand if he teaches them. But if he doesn't teach them, they will perish.

And so the Buddha decides he's going to start with his five former companions. They were with him when he was practicing asceticism, but their communities split apart when Gotama abandoned that practice. Off the Buddha goes to try it and see, but his first attempt ends in disaster. He hasn't even reached the city of Gayā yet when he meets the ascetic Upaka, who shows interest in him and in his Dharma. The Buddha responds with an *udāna*—a spontaneous, inspired poem. We give just one verse of it to offer a flavour:

I am the worthy one of the world.
I am the supreme teacher.
I alone am Sammāsambuddha.
I am cooled, extinguished.

The "cooled and extinguished," by the way, refers to Nibbāna. Upaka, as we saw, was not impressed, and he leaves.

This leaves the Buddha with a problem. How will he find a way to convey his teaching to others? And in particular, how will he convey it to his five former companions who have walked out on him and are really quite unhappy with him? Presumably, as he walked to Vārāṇasī and then from there north to Isipatana, he was thinking about this.

Eventually, two months later, he arrives where the five companions are practicing. He rolls up and basically says, "Okay lads, I've done it. I'm enlightened. Gather around and I'll tell you the story." They do not want to listen. They want nothing to do with him. They were disillusioned with him when he turned away from asceticism. They see him as a backslider, a lover of luxury—also known as lunch. From being a champion of the practice, he's now a threat. They refuse the respect they would normally offer him. They're not impressed by his declaration of awakening, and they're not impressed by his offer to teach them.

There's a bit of to-ing and fro-ing as he tries to persuade them. Finally, he says to them, "Have you ever known me to speak like this before?" They say, "No, we haven't." It reminds them—they know him. They don't particularly like him, but they do know that he would never lie. If he says he's attained awakening, then at the very least, he thinks he's attained awakening. At the very least.

So the declaration of truth moves them to the point where they are prepared to agree to listen. Now, the Buddha made a much more poetic declaration of truth to Upaka, and it didn't work. It seems that the power of truth is in part dependent upon the context. Here the context is that they know him, and they know he would not lie.

So the Buddha begins by teaching the middle way.

Now we're going to read out the discourse, but again, notice that these recorded words are not exactly what the Buddha would have actually said. These are an executive summary bundled up for chanting and memorization—rhythmic repetitions and so on.

In what we have recorded, he says: "These two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone out into homelessness." So this is someone who abandons the world and heads out to practice. What are these two extremes? "The pursuit of sensual happiness among sensual pleasures, which is inferior, normal, the way of ordinary people, lacking in refinement and useless. And, on the other hand, the pursuit of the practice of self-exhaustion, which is painful, lacking in refinement and useless. Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way."

Now, Tathagata is a title that the Buddha used to refer to himself. We won't go into it deeply, but basically it means an awakened one. "Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way that gives rise to seeing and understanding and leads to calming, direct knowledge, full awakening, Nibbana. What is the middle way that gives rise to seeing and understanding and leads to calming, direct knowledge, full awakening, Nibbana? This eightfold path of the cultivated one: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration."

So this is the presentation, and what we need to do is unpack it. Notice that the eightfold path is the eightfold path of the cultivated one, of the noble one. Why would I translate it that way? In this world, how many Noble Ones are there at this point? This is an Arya—a Noble One, a cultivated one, a refined one, a developed one. There's one: the guy who's talking. So basically he's saying, "This is my Noble Eightfold Path. This is my eightfold path."

He opens up with the middle way. Now the middle way is the Buddha's strategy to teach the Dharma. Context is everything. And one of the reasons why the Buddha was so respected as a teacher was that he had an uncanny ability to adapt his teaching to suit the specific characters and needs of his audience of the day—unlike me, who just rattles off abstract, learned stuff and doesn't care who's in the audience.

In the situation that the Buddha faces here, he needs to be very careful because he needs to find a way to penetrate through his listeners' defenses against hearing the truth. Why is the Dharma so hard to understand? The Buddha may have realized the difficulty of communicating the Dharma from reflecting, for example, on his first realization of dukkha when he was a young man. He suddenly saw the universality of aging, sickness, and death. In other words, he saw what everyone sees, but he was suddenly and unexpectedly stripped of the normal layers of defenses that we all have when we're faced with this.

It's these defenses, of course, that enable us to function within the world. So if we drop our armor, we could find ourselves suddenly exposed to a reality that could drive us mad. In his case, when he was very young and he suddenly had this profound and shocking realization, how could he have communicated this vision to his family? How could he have possibly done that? How could he have penetrated their defenses? Especially since at that time he had no understanding of what was happening to him. He just knew he had to do something about it. So of course he couldn't communicate it.

Now, when he arrives at Isipatina and is facing the five companions, he's dealing with people who do understand the existential problem. But what they do not understand is the way out of the existential problem. And what makes them particularly difficult as an audience is that they think they know the way out of the existential problem, when in fact they don't, because they're completely mistaken. So this audience is a really hard nut to crack.

This particular audience consists of practitioners of the path of tapas—not the Mexican food. It's a Sanskrit word, and essentially it refers to severe asceticism. The word tapas in Sanskrit means warmth, heat, fire. What it refers to is the burning away of one's past karma, and in particular doing this through voluntary suffering. Tapas is also associated with the generation of power, the power that fuels liberation, and hence its connection with shamanism.

So the Buddha's companions, his former companions, are practicing to overcome dukkha, pain. And they believe that the opposite of dukkha is sukha.

So sukha is happiness, bliss, satisfaction and so on. And they believe that sukha comes from the capacity to endure dukkha, and so transcend it. They hold this view because sukha is the opposite of dukkha. The Buddha's job is to cut through this particular delusion and show his audience something new that had never occurred to them before. And he has the advantage that he does understand them, because he shared the same beliefs and the same practices.

When he was an ascetic, Gautama believed that what holds us back from our awakening is our attachment—in particular, our attachment to pleasure. So for him and his companions, pleasure was the enemy. Eventually he came to realize that we can be just as stuck on our pain as we are on our pleasure. The problem is not the pleasure; it's the stuckness.

This realization came out of his failure as a practitioner of the ascetic path. Which, by the way, I think is a universal lesson for the practitioner: often the best lessons emerge out of failure.

When he was practicing asceticism, he felt that a measure, a standard of his success was his capacity to endure what the texts call "painful, wracking, piercing feelings because of exertion." We quoted this when we were talking about finding right effort. The more pain, the better. And this is how, years later, he described to his students the practice he was doing when he was young and completely deluded. Again, we quoted this before: "I thought, suppose I clench my teeth and press my tongue against the roof of my mouth, and then beat down, control, and crush mind with mind. So with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, controlled, and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits."

Now we looked at this before and we asked the question: why was Gautama practicing in this way? Why was he crushing mind with mind? Because he was driven by the desire to get the result that he was looking for. He was using the power of his will to take hold of the object of his desire—awakening.

What he had since come to realize was that the source of our dukkha is what he now came to call tanha. Literally this means thirst, normally translated as craving. Essentially, it's drivenness. Tanha is shorthand for the state of being driven. Gotama's practice was stuck in his drivenness, and it was this very drivenness that fueled his practice and created his dukkha. He was stuck in this loop.

What moved him forward was a spontaneous memory of the pleasure of his childhood and a question that came from it. This was after he gave up asceticism, when he must have been seriously reflecting on what went wrong. Spontaneously, a memory of his childhood popped up. And at the center of it was a question: Why am I afraid of pleasure?

This is the earliest instance we have of this very famous story: "I remember that when my father, the Shakyan, was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, withdrawn from sensual pleasures and unwholesome states, I attained and lived in the first jhana, which is accompanied by applied and sustained application, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Could this be the way to awaken?" Then, following on that memory, came the awareness: "This is the way to awaken."

What he's describing is a spontaneous concentration state that occurred as a child, sitting in the cool shade, watching other people working in the hot sun. You can understand how that's really pleasurable. Now, the way it's expressed is by using the standard formula for the first stage of meditative absorption. But the way an oral tradition works is it takes a formula and inserts it in an appropriate place. So whether he actually thought of it in that memory, whether he actually conjured up in his mind the technical characteristics of what he later came to call the first jhana—maybe not. But maybe he just had the sense of: Yeah, I just stepped back from all the stuff that I'm normally involved in. Body was at ease. Mind was at ease. And this absorption in the present just popped up. There it was.

And then he adds: I thought, why am I afraid of pleasure that is unconnected to sensual stimulation and unwholesome states?

So here he asks the question, but in particular he's talking about a particular kind of pleasure—pleasure which is unconnected to sensual stimulation and unwholesome states.

Now, what I translate as "sensual stimulation" is *kāma*—K-A-M-A with a long A, not *karma* with an R. This word indicates pleasure that is stimulus-driven. This is its characteristic. Normally it would be translated as "sensual pleasure," but the point about it is that it's stimulus-driven, entirely dependent upon a temporary stimulus.

Such a pleasure is first of all inherently agitated because it needs the sense stimulus, and it can only be maintained by constant repetition of the stimulus. But this constant repetition ends in boredom and flatness and dullness. Sensual stimulation also involves a restless movement from one sense object to another to another, because any one of them just gets boring after a while, and it's time to move on.

All of this restlessness and stimulation indicates *taṇhā*—drivenness, thirst, craving. And so now Gautama realizes that doesn't work. That's not really all that pleasurable. Gautama is looking for pleasure, but a pleasure that is free from *taṇhā*, free from drivenness.

He came to his new understanding of pleasure through his memory of childhood, long before he had ever thought of awakening. And so this new relationship to pleasure, which he is rediscovering, has a childlike quality of spontaneity to it—a willingness to accept what the world has to offer before disillusionment, so that grasping is not only unnecessary but as yet not even conceived of.

Gautama's project becomes how to return to that relationship to pleasure in the world as an adult.

Now, this is a pleasure that is simple and already available, but it's hidden. It's obscured by our narcissistic obsessions. And in order to find it, we have to drop our self-enclosure, our self-obsession, and open up to what is already here—provided, as it were, by grace, as a gift. It's in this spirit that he worked out the Eightfold Path.

An example of this pleasure—actually, I've been enjoying it for a while—when I stepped out of the veranda into the garden and the cloud was moving in. We're in the cloud. The air is cool. The garden is beautiful. The light is really subtle. Just walking down the steps. That's pleasurable. And the point is, it's a pleasure already available. I didn't have to do anything to look for it, to seek it. It's just here. This is the kind of pleasure that Gautama was interested in. How do I cultivate that pleasure?

Now the implication, if we're coming to the Eightfold Path, is that for the practitioner, the path itself must be pleasurable in the sense of generating contentment. If we're going to get through a month's meditation, we could do it through willpower—by leaping upon our meditation object, wrestling it to the ground, and any time it shows signs of trying to slip away, just pounding it into submission. We could do it. For some people it might even work if they've got really strong willpower. But wouldn't it be better to cultivate contentment within this context?

When we're contented, we don't have any felt need to look beyond this now. This now is actually fine. It's actually pretty good. So we're no longer concerned with a result which may or may not arise in the future. Path and destination are not radically separated. The practitioner feels that the path already contains the destination.

In contrast, when Gautama was crushing mind with mind, he must have been looking for something that would happen next as a result of his efforts. But now he's realized that a whole different relationship is necessary—one where awareness is so completely absorbed in the present that any sense of a future result can be forgotten.

In fact, it is forgotten. A quality of absorption that has no need to look to an imagined future means something is no longer missing now.

Pain feeds aversion, and aversion always fuels the need for something else to happen—for example, in the future. Pleasure cuts through aversion, but it too can be very sticky. When we feel pleasure, we want to control it. We want to extend it into the future. We don't want it to go away. And then pleasure feeds attachment. We're stuck.

So what we need, from the Buddha's perspective, is pleasure without clinging—where clinging expresses itself often as swings between aversion and attachment. Like, don't like. Like, don't like. Now where can we find this pleasure? We can find it in the middle way. This is largely the purpose of the middle way.

The Buddha says that the middle way is located between asceticism and indulgence. Notice what they both have in common: they are both driven by taṇhā. Or simply, they are both driven.

Now the five companions have already rejected the extreme of sensual happiness, so the middle way is presented here as an alternative to asceticism. What does it look like from that perspective? Nothing about pursuing pain, and everything about cultivating a sense of balance.

Let's look at the first extreme, the pleasure extreme, which for the Buddha and his companions revolves around the home life. Home life turns around the issue of sukha, the pursuit of happiness. We can see this in our culture, exemplified in the practice of consumerism. Happiness comes from having more. It comes from being more. It's fascinating that when people speak about rich people and want to say how much money they've got, they talk about their "personal worth." Isn't that a bizarre expression? Personal worth? We won't go there, but it's very strange.

The ascetic path begins with the realization that this path—the path of the pursuit of pleasure, let's call it consumerism—does not work. In other words, the realization that the destination of the path consisting of the pursuit of pleasure is pain. That's where it ends up.

This realization is counterintuitive, and the people whose path is based upon it have to realize that they're part of a very small cultural minority. There's a certain stubbornness contained in this practice. Only the most fanatical pursue this path—the path of the pursuit of pain. Remember, this pursuit exists because it's the opposite of the path of the pursuit of pleasure.

But the problem is this path is wrong. Now it should be right. As far as the pain is concerned, this should be the right path because it is the exact opposite of the wrong path, the path of consumerism. So it should be right, because it's the opposite of the wrong. But this is what the practitioners miss: it's wrong because it's the opposite. Because this is an aspect of anta, of extreme.

When the Buddha talks about how the Tathāgata has avoided the two extremes, the word he uses is anta. One of the meanings of anta is extreme, but another meaning is opposite. The ascetics are trying to overcome pleasure by pursuing this opposite, pain. But all that meant was that instead of being driven by attraction, by desire, like everybody else, they're being driven by aversion.

But they're still driven. And therefore they're still bound to dukkha. Because it's the drivenness which is the problem.

So the fundamental problem is not pleasure and it's not pain. The problem is drivenness. Because it's drivenness that causes us to become stuck—in either what gives us pleasure, or equally in what gives us pain. And drivenness brings pain. Real pleasure comes from the absence of drivenness, the absence of stuckness.

So this new understanding of pleasure and pain lies at the heart of the four truths and the middle way. This is the middle way that the Buddha is presenting.

And if we ask, where can the middle way be found? Well, first of all, the middle way cannot be defined as an opposite of another way. Because that's just another extreme—it's not a middle.

Often the middle way is presented as moderation. So let's imagine you have a ruler. One end is one extreme, the other end is the other extreme, so the middle way must be dead set in the center. But of course, dead set in the center is just the opposite of the two ends. It's just another opposite. It's just another extreme.

The opposite of indulgence is asceticism, and that doesn't work. And the opposite of asceticism is indulgence, and that doesn't work either.

We can get a sense of this in the problem of effort. If you find yourself making effort in the meditation practice, and you find yourself in particular making too much effort—strain—well, how do you know that you're straining? A pretty good indication is the felt need to take a break. Have you ever felt the need just to take a break? Straining is an anta, an extreme. But taking a break is just another extreme—it's just the opposite. And this tends to be the pattern in our practice: strain, collapse; strain, collapse; strain, collapse. It can be very subtle, but it's there.

And of course, as we've seen, the problem of effort is very closely associated with the problem of time. We feel driven to get through what's happening now in order to make something better happen later. So this relationship also has a quality of drivenness to it. And where we find drivenness—tanha—we find the extremes, and we find pain.

So where is the middle way? The middle way can be found where there are no anta, no extremes, no opposites. In other words, where we are not stuck on anything. The middle way is found as a dynamic balance between opposites—the place characterized by no fixed position.

And this balance, this dynamic balance, can only be found in the present. In the absence of any holding to the past or striving for the future. No clinging to, no escaping from. And this absence of any fixed position is dynamic. It's never still—it's always moving.

Hence the eightfold path is characterized by dynamic complexity. You begin with eight factors. All of them are necessary. If one is missing, the whole thing jams up.

If any one of them is too weak, the whole system collapses. If any one of them is too strong, the whole system collapses. The whole system is thrown out of balance and the path does not work.

So balance is everything. And balance requires pleasure because it requires delicacy. When we are driven, we blunder. We're desperate to get away and arrive somewhere else, and we lose our sensitivity to what is happening now.

If we look at the path and its complexity, first of all, as we said, it's one system of eight aspects: right view, right aspiration, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Each one of these factors has to be balanced with every other factor.

And these eight factors are divided into three subsystems. There's one system, the eightfold path, that consists of three subsystems: sīla, samādhi, paññā. Each one has its own internal dynamic. So each subsystem has to be balanced within itself, and each one of them has to balance with the other two.

If we look at just one of these, the one we work with most often as meditators—the meditation subsystem—we have right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration, as we've been talking about. Right energy is the active, doing side of meditation practice. Right concentration is the receptive, peaceful side of meditation. And right mindfulness—its job is to balance both. This is just one subsystem out of the three.

So what we have is a complex network of relationships. I'm not mathematically inclined, so I haven't worked out how many relationships are possible here, but I gather there must be a lot. And all of these relationships are dynamic, because each relationship between any two or more factors is influenced by the behavior of every individual factor and every individual subsystem.

In this complexity, there is no place to take a stand. There is no ground upon which to build a position and then cling to it. Remembering that the Buddha felt what makes this Dhamma hard to understand is that people find pleasure in their positions, are devoted to their positions, delight in their positions.

Taking a stand—"This is it. This is right. Now I've arrived. I've just got to keep doing this. I've just got to extend this experience for the rest of the month."

Now, who does this? Who finds pleasure in their positions, is devoted to their positions, delights in their positions? Well, Gautama did, before his awakening. And his five companions certainly did. And of course, we do.

So the Buddha presents the middle way, and the companions actually understand what he's talking about. They actually get it, which means they can now challenge, if not drop, their deeply held convictions about life, about their world, about their practice, about what they're doing—their positions. And so now they're ready to listen to what he's got to say.

The Buddha has found a way through their defenses, and now he can actually get started. He'll do this by teaching the four truths.

For us, every time we take a position, we lose the middle way. Because we find ourselves in an anta, an extreme—a place which is defined as the opposite of another. Self, for example, is an extreme. And that's something we're going to look at later on.

Thursday we'll have a look at the four truths and continue the Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta.

Any questions?

"I don't find pleasure in sticking to some of my opinions."

Why do you stick to them then? You don't find pleasure?

I find frustration in holding to certain positions.

But why do you stick to frustration? If you're sticking to it, there must be a payoff. There's got to be something you're getting from it, otherwise you wouldn't do it. And that's the clinging to the position itself—the satisfaction that comes from maintaining that stance. This is one of the more perverse things about human behavior: we get enormous satisfaction out of our pain. Huge satisfaction.

When I see somebody harming themselves, it sets off a reaction in me. That is the opinion arising. Why are you harming yourself? And so there's a movement of the heart, which is compassion. But it's compassion mixed with holding. How can one have that response without the holding part?

There's one discourse where the Buddha is talking about his job as a teacher. He says, essentially: I teach students, and some of them resist what I'm telling them. They don't get it, they don't understand what I'm talking about, they don't do what I advise, and they don't get the good result. What's that to me? But I have other students who do listen to what I say, who do take my advice, who do the practice, and who do get the result. What's that to me? It's the same response. And that's what enabled him to keep going for all those decades—because it didn't matter whether it worked or didn't work. Fundamentally, it didn't matter. It was his dharma to teach, so he taught. And if it didn't work, well, it didn't work. He just moved on and continued his activity.

This is one aspect of the meaning of dharma. Dharma is duty. Dharma is reality. This is what's going on. Now, given that this is what's going on, what should I do about it? What's my dharma? What should I be doing? What the Buddha is suggesting is that a deeply held sense of satisfaction comes from doing one's dharma—regardless of whether or not people think it's successful. That's got nothing to do with it. Is this my dharma? This is what I do.

Just to give a personal example: in the early years of teaching these retreats, around about the middle of each one-week retreat, I would have something of an anxiety attack. People would be meditating and things would be happening, and I'd suddenly think, "Oh my God, who do I think I am that I should be messing with the minds of these people?"

And it would really quite agitate me until the thought would eventually arise: I'm not in charge of their experience. They are in charge of their experience. My job is to teach the best I can. And that's it. The rest is up to them. And then I would calm down.

I don't know if that's at all helpful.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 50

The Mirror of Dharma Part 2

Patrick Kearney · 58 min

In this second talk of the Mirror of Dharma series, Patrick Kearney examines the historical development and practical mechanics of the Mahāsī Sayādaw's pure insight (suddha vipassanā) method. He traces how this approach emerged from a broader Burmese Buddhist reform movement following the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, designed to make awakening accessible to ordinary lay practitioners.

Kearney unpacks the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's remarkable promise that practitioners who maintain continuous mindfulness for as little as seven days can expect either full awakening or the state of non-return. He clarifies a crucial misunderstanding about Mahāsī's practice of 'noting' (anupasanā), explaining that it means directly 'aware-ing' experience rather than conceptually labeling it. Drawing on the Yuganaddha Sutta, he situates the Mahāsī method within the Buddha's teaching that insight can precede serenity, offering an alternative to the more commonly known path of establishing deep concentration first.

The talk explores the distinction between direct first-hand experience (paramatthadhamma or 'ultimate reality') and conceptual second-hand experience ('conventional reality'), showing how noting the nāma-rūpa stream—the dyad of awareness and its object—provides the gateway to insight. Kearney emphasizes that what matters is the continuity of awareness rather than the specific object being noted, preparing practitioners for the journey through the sixteen insight knowledges (ñāṇa) that map the path to nibbāna.

So welcome to the second in our series of four talks around the general theme of the mirror of Dharma.

Last week we discussed the concept of the sotāpanna, stream enterer, in Mahasi Sayadaw's system of meditation. You might remember that the original text, the Mirror of Dhamma, was a talk given by Mahasi Sayadaw to, quote, "well-practiced yogis." In other words, people who he thought had attained stream entry. What we call the Mahasi method is explicitly designed to take the practitioner from here to awakening using the pure insight approach. This is suddha vipassanā, or sometimes you see it called dry insight, sukkha vipassanā. I can tell from the response in this room that a lot of people think, "Yeah, dry." The tradition says this approach to practice is dry, and if you need to moisten, to get a bit wet, try doing mettā, because mettā is wet.

Now this method is a product of the twentieth century, developed by Mahasi Sayadaw, who lived from 1904 to 1982. He established his reputation in Burma in 1945 when he published a book called Manual of Insight—probably in Pali it's called Vipassanā Dīpanī—which has recently been translated into English. This laid out his method along with the doctrinal context in which it's embedded.

Mahasi Sayadaw himself was part of a broader movement within Burmese Buddhism that began in the mid-nineteenth century. Specifically, it began after the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852. This was one of three wars through which the British Empire conquered and occupied Burma during the nineteenth century. The whole process had pretty much finished by 1888, which marked the end of the so-called pacification campaign in Upper Burma.

After the Anglo-Burmese War, their defeat in the Second Anglo-Burmese War shocked the Burmese. They were already shocked by their defeat in the first war, and it inspired them to begin a program of national revival in order to be ready to face the threat they were under. This national revival included the reform of Buddhism to make it fit for the purpose of preventing Burmese culture from being overwhelmed by that of the British.

A central part of this reform movement was the creation of methods of insight meditation—in Pali, vipassanā bhāvanā, the cultivation of insight, or mindfulness meditation, satipaṭṭhāna. The idea was to revive its practice in such a way that it would enable ordinary lay people to penetrate into the Buddha's Dhamma to the point of realizing awakening. In particular, it was focused on bringing as many people as possible to the vision of Dhamma, the dhammacakkhu, which represents the first stage of awakening.

So Mahasi Sayadaw was part of this broader movement. In 1945 he published his Manual of Insight, and in 1947 he was invited to Rangoon to become the head teacher of a new center. Burma formally attained independence in January 1948, but it was actually granted through an act of parliament in 1947. So in 1947 and 1948, finally, the Burmese had shaken off the British and were embarking on a shaky career as an independent nation.

In 1947, Mahasi Sayadaw was invited to Rangoon to become the head teacher of a new center dedicated to the practice and propagation of insight meditation according to his method. In Burmese, this became known as the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha, usually in English known as the Mahasi Center. This center became the headquarters of a movement to spread insight meditation throughout Burma and the world.

The aim of this center, like all the others that had been opened in the twentieth century and were flourishing, was to spread insight meditation to ordinary people—lay people, ordained people, men, women, makes no difference—and teach them the way to at least the first stage of awakening: stream entry.

To revise what we talked about last week, the Buddha saw awakening as a process, which is not surprising when you consider he saw pretty much everything as a process. It was marked by four distinct stages—four landmarks in this process. The first one is stream entry, the most junior. The last one, the most senior and therefore the most difficult, is full awakening or arahant.

As we talked about last week, the Buddha sees the human condition as consisting of two aspects: the cognitive and the affective. The cognitive is the area of reason, rationality, understanding and so on. The affective is the realm of feeling, emotion and so on. When he talked about the fundamental human problem, what is it from the Buddha's perspective? If we speak cognitively, it is avijjā or moha.

These are two Pali words which can be translated as ignorance, or they can be translated as delusion. Speaking affectively, what's the fundamental problem? It's *tanha*—literally "thirst," but normally translated as craving, or it could be translated as drivenness.

Now, what is the solution to the fundamental problem that we have? Speaking cognitively, it's *bodhi*: awakening, waking up. And again, you notice this is essentially cognitive. "Enlightenment" is the classic translation. Speaking affectively, it is *nibbana*. This is coolness, and it's literally the going out of the fires of greed, hatred, and ignorance.

When you look at this model and compare it to his model of the process of awakening, it does seem clear that he thought the cognitive aspects of our problem are more easily dealt with than the affective.

So stream entry—what marks stream entry is the vision of Dharma, which cuts through the cognitive problem of wrong view. Notice "vision," "seeing"—this is a hint that it's cognitive. This cuts through wrong view by abandoning what he called *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, which is essentially the view that the person is real, not just a bundle of concepts and drives that we cling to and believe to be "me." In other words, this is an insight into *anattā*, into not-self. So stream entry cuts through delusion, and it results in the perception of not-self.

But the affective drives of greed and hatred, attraction and aversion—these continue to roll on. And as a result, let's say that someone has actually gone through this whole program, they've attained the first stage of enlightenment. Others may find it difficult to

recognize that anything special has happened to this person. They still get pissed off. But they might not notice that they're not pissed off for as long as they used to be. It's subtle; the change is subtle. Even the stream enterer herself may have doubts.

But from the perspective of the tradition, once the practitioner has glimpsed the vision of Dharma, further progress along the path is inevitable. Such a person will complete the journey. Now, it may take a while—like lifetimes—but this journey will be completed. This is the Buddha's teaching.

Given the centrality of the experience of the vision of Dharma and the attainment of stream entry, and given that doubts may linger about this, it becomes important that practitioners learn to accurately assess their own attainment. Hence the importance of the mirror of Dharma that we talked about last week.

Tonight we're going to focus on the practice that leads toward, or culminates in, stream entry. In other words, we're going to talk about the practice which cuts through delusion. And we'll begin with the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which is the root text of our practice in this lineage.

Now again, *satipaṭṭhāna* is essentially mindfulness meditation. You notice that people will use the expressions "insight meditation" and "mindfulness meditation" synonymously, and there's good reason for doing this. This particular discourse—again, it's the root text of the practice, and it's the text from which the teachers teach—begins with a quite remarkable statement. The Buddha says: "This is a one-way street for purifying beings, transcending sorrow and distress, dissipating pain and grief, attaining the method and realizing nibbana: the four applications of mindfulness."

So this is my translation of this introductory sentence. Notice that the practice of satipaṭṭhāna is a "one-way street." Now that's my translation. Anālayo translates it as "direct way." But they're really both pointing in the same direction. *Ekāyana magga* —"one going way."

And this is a one-way street, a direct way to where exactly? Well, the Buddha goes through a series of attainments and it culminates in nibbana. So, for practical purposes, at the very least: stream entry. Take this path and it will lead us to nibbana. Again, perhaps it will take a while, but if the practitioner matures in her mindfulness practice, she will attain nibbana.

Now this sounds very much like the promise that the stream enterer will attain full awakening. It's got the same measure of complete confidence and total certainty. And the resemblance becomes greater when we think of the belief that the stream enterer will attain awakening within seven existences. Because at the end of the Satipaṭṭhāna

Sutta, we find something very unusual. In fact, I can't think of any other discourse in which I've seen this. We have the Buddha making a prophecy—prophesying the future. And this is what he says.

Whoever practices these four applications of mindfulness like this for seven years can expect one of two results: either perfect insight here and now, or if a touch of clinging remains, the state of non-return. So full awakening, or number three in the process, non-return. Only seven years—this is pretty good.

But then he says, forget about seven years. Whoever practices these four applications of mindfulness like this for six years can expect one of two results: either perfect insight here and now, or if a touch of clinging remains, the state of non-return. Forget about six years. Whoever practices these four applications of mindfulness like this for five years, four years, three years, two years, one year, can expect one of two results: either perfect insight here and now, or if a touch of clinging remains, the state of non-return.

So he keeps bringing the bidding down, down, down. Forget about one year. Whoever practices these four applications of mindfulness like this for seven months, six months, five months, two weeks, can expect one of two results: either perfect insight here and now, or if a touch of clinging remains, the state of non-return. Forget about two weeks. Whoever practices these four applications of mindfulness like this for seven days can expect one of two results: either perfect insight here and now, or if a touch of clinging remains, the state of non-return.

This is why it is said: this is a one-way street for purifying beings, transcending sorrow and distress, vanishing pain and grief, gaining the method, and realizing Nibbana —the four applications of mindfulness.

Now, in all of this, first we have the prophecy, the absolute certainty, and this comes from the very earliest tradition. Second, notice the importance of the number seven. The Buddha begins with seven years, then takes it down. When it reaches one year, he resumes the bidding at seven months and ends up with seven days. But always seven.

Let me just remind the people in this room who are engaged in this practice: seven days. Does that mean continuous awareness for seven days? So if you've got any friends here and they come back unchanged, you can berate them. They can't make the excuse they didn't have enough time.

In an oral tradition—and of course this is all oral tradition—numbers often have symbolic meaning. In the case of seven, it seems to relate to natural cycles. In the Indian tradition, you have the five visible planets along with the sun and the moon, making

up seven. Beyond the Indian tradition, in the book of Genesis, the cycle of creation takes seven days. So the number seven appears in Indian and non-Indian traditions alike, and it seems to indicate a natural cycle. Perhaps what they're suggesting here is that the practice journey of a stream enterer is part of a natural cycle which, when complete, will culminate in awakening.

To get a sense of how long this natural cycle might take, one simile we find in the tradition is that Samsara is like an infinite ocean within which beings are trapped. The vision of Dharma immediately, like that, evaporates that ocean so that only a puddle remains. Of course, if the ocean is infinitely large, there could be a pretty big puddle. In other words, this attainment is highly significant, but it's not the end. Some people would say it's the beginning. One practitioner I know said it's like when you start the practice, you're crawling around on the floor. At stream entry, you can actually stand up. Basically, you're just beginning.

When the tradition talks about the eightfold path, sometimes you have the earlier eightfold path, and then the noble eightfold path. When does the noble eightfold path begin? It begins at stream entry. Before then, it's just the eightfold path. So stream entry is both a culmination of something profoundly significant and a beginning. It's a good beginning, but it's just a beginning.

So you've got this connection between Satipatthana, mindfulness meditation, and the attainment of stream entry—a very close connection. The Mahasi method of meditation represents an attempt to make available in our world the practice method presented in the Satipatthana Sutta.

So what is that method? Let's backtrack to the udesa, the summary or introduction to the Satipatthana Sutta. Here the Buddha gives a kind of executive summary of the practice, and he does it not by giving a definition, but by describing someone undertaking the practice. This is quite common for the Buddha—often, especially when it's practice-related, he won't give a definition.

He'll describe how it's done.

So you have a sentence which appears four times, one time for each of the four satipatthanas. We'll just go through the first one, where the object of meditation is body. And the Buddha says: a practitioner, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body—ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful. This is the executive summary of the practice.

Now let's focus on the phrase "tracking body as body." This expression, "body as body," implies a direct, face-to-face encounter with body, with physical experience, rather than an experience mediated by concepts.

So let's say I'm doing sitting meditation. Let's say I'm in a retreat, doing lots of sitting meditation, and I feel a sudden pain in my left knee. And I know that the left knee is the dodgy one. So what is this experience? It could be a problem. It could be a serious problem. It could be a problem that, if it gets bad, could sabotage my whole practice—certainly my whole sitting meditation, not to mention involving visits to a physiotherapist. This is a serious problem and it could really screw up my retreat. So that's one way, one mode of experience. By the way, does this kind of encounter sound familiar?

Now, you notice that the answer to the question "what is this experience?" is entirely conceptual, and it's concerned with the fate of the self—me. It's not actually about body. It's a cloud of concepts.

Alternatively, we could ask the question "what is this experience?" and one might answer it with: sharp, tingling, numb, aversion, hard. Now these are also concepts, but they're concepts that are grounded in the actual physical sensation. They indicate that the awareness is being aimed at the actual physical sensation and not at the cloud of concepts buzzing about. And this is being aware of body as body—keeping the mind grounded on the particulars of the actual physical event as it presents, rather than getting lost in concepts about the physical event. In other words, it indicates what sometimes we call intimacy, becoming intimate with the experience.

So: "Here a practitioner lives tracking body as body." We have the verb "tracking," and this translates the verb *anupassati*. You get different translations from different people. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as "contemplates" or "contemplating," which I don't like because it implies or suggests thinking about. I prefer "tracking."

It's a translation of the Pali verb *anupassati*, which is a compound made up of the prefix *anu* and the verb *passati*. And *passati* is the verb "to see"—*vipassana*, insight, for example. *Anu* denotes "along." So *anupassana* is seeing along, tracking experience over time. And this is the central practice of satipatthana. This is essentially what it's about.

It implies, first of all, directing awareness towards something—in this case body—and so establishing awareness with a direct, face-to-face encounter with the object of experience, whatever it is. And then continuing this direct, face-to-face encounter over a period of time. In other words, establishing a continuity of awareness over time, which is what we've been talking about in this retreat. This is what mindfulness is. We experience mindfulness as the continuity of awareness.

Now, if this reminds you of Mahasi Sayadaw's practice of noting, it's hardly surprising, because that's exactly what it is.

There is some confusion over what Mahasi Sayadaw means by "noting" a meditation object. Does it, for example, mean to name something? Does it mean to write a note about something? And the problem is translation. This is a chronic problem in establishing the Buddha Dharma in the West, because it's astonishing—and it's very distressing, actually—how few meditation students know Sanskrit and Pali. I shake my head.

Much less Burmese. Now, I admit I've never learned Burmese. I didn't have time when I was in Burma—I was too busy noting.

Keep in mind, Mahasi Sayadaw wrote and taught in Burmese. Now the Burmese language, apparently—since this is what I've been told by someone who speaks Burmese—possesses a verb "to aware," as does Pali, as does Sanskrit. And of course Pali is what Mahasi Sayadaw draws upon in order to talk about the practice.

So the Pali word for awareness is viññāṇa, and this is derived directly from the verb vijānāti. In one discourse, when the Buddha is defining certain key terms, he defines them based on the verb. So he says, "When you say awareness, one awares, therefore one says awareness." Now, in English, this sounds rather odd—like, what? But in Pali, it's: Why do you say viññāṇa? Vijānāti, therefore viññāṇa. And you can see the connection. Similarly with perception, saññā. Why do you say perception? One perceives, therefore one says perception. Why do you say saññā? Sañjānāti, therefore saññā. So there is this very close relationship between noun and verb in Indian languages.

Now, in English, by and large, we do not use the verb "to aware." We generally just use the noun "awareness." But there is a verb "to aware" in Burmese. And when Mahasi Sayadaw's translators—these were lay supporters, volunteers, not professional linguists by any stretch of the imagination—when they came to translate this, they were faced with the problem of the absence of the same verb in English. Mahasi Sayadaw is using an ordinary Burmese verb, but as far as they could see, it doesn't exist in English. What to do? So they used the verb "to note," not realizing the confusion that they were creating.

So when Mahasi Sayadaw says we must note something—body and mind—what he's saying is we must directly aware it without adding any layers of concepts on top of it. In other words, using the Buddha's language, we aware body as body, mind as mind.

Now this understanding of the meaning of noting, I get the distinct feeling, is not widespread in the lineage. So let's briefly look at the words of Mahasi Sayadaw. I'm calling on his authority to back me up.

Let's begin with his Manual of Insight, the central text of our lineage. Mahasi says, "True insight practice is an awareness of all the mental and physical phenomena that constantly arise at the six sense doors." You'll notice he backs away from using awareness as a verb. But in this context, awareness is clearly used to refer to what normally we would call noting. It is interesting, though, that it's presented as a noun rather than as an activity.

Elsewhere in the Manual of Insight, Mahasi says, "The terms 'to note,' 'to observe,' and 'to bear in mind' are synonyms for the purpose of insight practice." So to note, to observe—they're the same thing. To bear in mind. Now this is interesting because "bearing in mind" is an expression often used to explain mindfulness. To bear in mind, to carry in the mind, to be aware over a period of time.

Mahasi Sayadaw also tells us that his way of practice is called pure insight or dry insight—suddha vipassanā, sukkha vipassanā. And in his book The Progress of Insight, he says, "The approach followed is that of quite bare insight"—or what in the English translation is "bare insight" is also "dry insight." But let's say bare insight, "where by direct observation, one's own bodily and mental processes are seen with increasing clarity as being impermanent, liable to suffering, and without a self or soul."

So observation, seeing, awareness—all these terms indicate that when Mahasi is talking about noting, he's not talking about putting names on things and writing little notes about them. He does not mean building a concept on top of what is observed. Now, writing notes can in fact be useful. This is what in this retreat we've been calling naming. But it's an optional added extra. It's not noting.

Directly aware of experience, and doing this consistently over a period of time—this is the essence of his approach. And it's designed to take us directly to insight.

Now, just to add that this approach remains controversial in the world of Theravada Buddhism. First of all, it's modern, invented in the twentieth century, along with other methods in Burma. Secondly—I don't know if I should really say this because I'm being recorded—I'll say it anyway. It's Burmese. Now, if you're a Thai Buddhist, you have to think, "Who the hell are the Burmese to teach us how to meditate?" And if you're Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, you might well be tempted to think, "Who the hell are you, the Burmese, to teach us how to meditate?" And in fact, there was a lot of controversy in the fifties, the sixties, and beyond. You find that some meditation lineages based in Thailand and Sri Lanka explicitly reject the Burmese way. So a certain amount of nationalism is involved in this controversy.

But the main controversy, the main problem, is that this approach of pure insight, dry insight, bare insight—it bypasses the better-known route of first establishing deep concentration or serenity, *samatha*, and then cultivating insight. This approach is repeated again and again in the discourses. It's part of the template of the practice called the gradual training, which tracks a linear progression of the student from the beginning, all the way to full awakening. And it involves first doing deep serenity practice, and then doing insight.

However, the early teachings are quite diverse when you actually get into them. Just to give an example, we can find mention of different approaches to meditation practice in a discourse called the *Yuganaddha Sutta*—"Intermeshed." This discourse was presented after the Buddha's death. We know this because the person speaking is the Venerable Ananda, who only became a teacher in his own right and only became fully awakened after the Buddha died. Because basically, when the Buddha was alive, Ananda was too busy looking after him and managing the traffic. He was, in a sense, the guard dog between the Buddha and the public.

If you go to Rajgir in northern India, this is where you find the ruins of the city of Rajagaha. Outside the ruins is a hill called Vulture's Peak, very famous in Mahayana Buddhism. If you follow a track up towards the top, you come to two rectangles of solid brick or stone—one right beside the track and the other further away. According to tradition, these are what remains of huts built for Ananda and the Buddha. Ananda lived right at the front. So if anybody wanted up the hill to see the Buddha, they literally had to go past him to get there. The Buddha was in the rear. This was very much part of Ananda's job. He was too busy to do a lot of meditation.

It was only after the Buddha died that he could devote himself to his practice, and eventually he became fully awakened and a major teacher in his own right. In the Zen and Chan tradition, he's seen as the third ancestor.

Now, here Ananda is talking about how different students of his, when they come to report full awakening and he asks them, "So how did you get there? What were you doing?"—they expressed one of four ways of practicing. We're going to drop the fourth because it's a bit strange. We'll just stick to the first three.

These are the three ways. Ananda says: Number one, a practitioner develops serenity preceding insight. First develop deep concentration, then develop insight. As he develops serenity preceding insight, the path is created. Number two, the practitioner develops insight preceding serenity. First you develop insight, then you develop the

deep concentration. As she develops insight preceding serenity, the path is created. Or, a practitioner develops serenity and insight intermeshed. As you develop serenity and insight intermeshed, the path is created. And so on.

In other words, every way to awakening involves both serenity and insight, and they're working together in some way—but not necessarily always in the same way.

One of the images used is this: imagine you have an ox cart pulled by two oxen. Now, ox carts were incredibly important in the Buddha's time, a major form of land transportation for goods. Let's assume you've got two oxen and you've loaded up the cart and you want the oxen to take the cart to its destination. Now let's say that one of these oxen is particularly strong, and maybe a bit feisty. Well, you put that ox in at the front, and the other ox behind. The strong one leads the way. But let's say they're pretty evenly matched.

If the two oxen happen to get on quite well with each other, you simply put them side by side, and away they go. In other words, serenity and insight are qualities absolutely essential for the practice, regardless of what method one uses, but the relationship between them can vary from person to person.

Mahasi Sayadaw appears to have regarded his approach as an example of insight preceding serenity. Certainly, at the Mahasi Center, students who "graduate" by attaining the first stage through pure insight—or dry insight—are then offered instruction in serenity practice by their teachers. So insight first, serenity second. This seems to be Mahasi's approach.

Now, when one is actually doing this practice, we come back again to the difference between directly experiencing something and experiencing concepts about that something. This is really central for the Buddha and for the later tradition. The basis for this, the underlying concept, is the idea of *dharmas*—or in Pali, *dhammas*—always in the plural. Often you see the word *dharma* in the singular, where it has various possible meanings, but sometimes you see it in the plural, *dharmas*, and there it has quite a distinct meaning.

If we ask what is real—what is really out there, what is really in here—for the Buddha, what is really happening is a flow of dharmas. And what is a dharma? It is a directly encountered event.

Mahasi's explanation of this is that reality, whatever we mean by that word, comes to us in two forms. First, there is what we directly experience firsthand through the senses—and this includes mind, because for the Buddha, mind is a sense. Second, there is what comes to us indirectly, secondhand, through concepts about what we directly

experience. So we have firsthand experience, what directly impacts the senses, and secondhand experience, which is made up of concepts about what is directly impacting the senses.

Firsthand, direct experience is always associated with understanding and insight. Secondhand experience, made up of concepts, is associated with delusion and the suffering that comes from delusion. The aim of the practice, then, is to move from secondhand experience to firsthand experience. In a sense, that is the job—that is the boot camp.

In the Theravada tradition—this is not the Buddha himself but later Theravada—direct firsthand experience is called ultimate reality, while secondhand experience, concepts about what we directly experience, is called conventional reality.

So if we are practicing noting, what are we doing? We are training ourselves to ground our perception in what the Theravada calls ultimate reality—in other words, the world of directly experienced events. This is the world of dharmas. And this is the world where insight arises.

Normally, our habit is to live in the world of conventional reality, a world of concepts about what we are directly encountering. For the Buddha, this world is a product of our habitual conditioning from a very deep past. This conditioning has been shaping us since our birth—and in fact, for the Buddha, far longer than that. When we ask what forces accomplish this conditioning, they are the three *akusala mūla*, the three roots of the unwholesome: greed, hatred, and ignorance. This tells us that the world presented to us through our concepts is not just wrong, but actually entangles us in pain and misery.

The job of the practice is to move us out of this secondhand conceptual world into a world of ultimate reality, direct firsthand experience, because it is in this world where insight arises. And the practice of noting gives us entry into this world.

One way Mahasi Sayadaw speaks about the practice is to describe it as noting the *nāma-rūpa* stream. This comes out of our original text, *The Mirror of Dharma*. To understand what he means, we must examine this technical term, *nāma-rūpa*.

Essentially, what this is saying is that awareness is always accompanied by an object. If I am aware, I am aware of something. If I am seeing, I am seeing something. If I am hearing, I am hearing something. If I am thinking, I am thinking something. Awareness is structured as a dyad of awareness and its object. They always arise together in this dyad.

Now again, awareness—let's use the verb, "awareing." If there is awareing, it's tied to an object. There's something that is aware. So if something is happening, and this is the object of awareness, if something is happening, there must be awareness of it. Otherwise, it wouldn't be happening. And if there's awareness, then something must be happening. You can't separate them. You can't have one without the other. If you've got one, you've got both. They always arise and cease tied together. And the Buddha speaks of this as the dyad of nama-rupa. What exactly these words mean, we may or may not explore next week. But that's enough for this week.

Now, remembering that both the Buddha and Mahasi Sayadaw speak of awareness as a verb, as an activity—when we are aware, usually, habitually, we assume that what is important is the object of awareness. So when I am seeing, I assume that what I am seeing is important. When I'm thinking, I assume that what I am thinking is important. I don't normally pay any attention to the activity of seeing, the activity of thinking. But it's here, in the activity, that we find awareness. Not there, in the object.

And in the technical language that both the Buddha and Mahasi Sayadaw use, awareing is nama. The object of awareness is rupa. And so you have the compound nama-rupa. If you've got one, you've got the other. They come together.

So nama-rupa indicates the stream of direct, first-hand experience—events coming and going into and out of awareness. Not the web of concepts that surround our direct, first-hand experience. Unless, of course, we note the web of concepts, in which case the web of concepts becomes direct first-hand experience.

So here is how Mahasi Sayadaw describes the practice: "For the practicing yogi, he has to be noting the ever-arising nama-rupa phenomena and continuously noting such phenomena as rising-falling of the abdomen, sitting, touching, seeing, hearing, bending, stretching. Not just four, five or ten notings, not even a hundred, nor a thousand. It has to be continuous and in close succession."

What Mahasi is emphasizing is the continuity of the awareness—or rather, the continuity of awareing, of the activity. Now, you notice that he's not particularly concerned with the object of awareness. It could be breathing, it could be posture, it could be sitting, it could be moving, whatever. Although we can see that he's staying within the broad territory of the grounding object, or the primary object, because all these examples are body, the five physical senses. And body usually provides our grounding object, because for most people, body as an object of awareness is clear and available.

But you notice, first of all, continuity of awareness. And secondly, it doesn't really matter what the object is, so long as it's clear. That really helps. And you notice how he says that the meditation object consists of nama-rupa phenomena. So what are these phenomena? They are dharmas. They are the events we experience directly, first-hand, through the senses. They are not concepts about what we are directly encountering. In other words, they're not what comes to us indirectly, secondhand. They're not about. They're the actual direct encounter with the senses, cutting through the concept. And this is the key to the practice. And this is the gateway into insight for Mahasi Sayadaw.

Now, once through this gateway, the world of insight emerges. And it emerges as the three universal characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anatta—change, pain, not-self. And Mahasi Sayadaw maps our journey into these three characteristics.

using a conceptual framework developed by the later Orthodox Theravada of sixteen ñāṇas. A ñāṇa is often translated as insight knowledge or simply understanding. It's a very simple term—the root *ñā*, to know, to understand, with the suffix *ṇa* added, which turns it into an action noun. So: knowing, understanding. In the Orthodox Theravada there's a system of sixteen of these understandings which map the journey of insight from here to Nibbāna. And next Wednesday, if all goes according to plan, we will explore this world as mapped by the Buddha and by Mahasi Sayadaw.

Any questions?

"You may not wish to answer this question, Patrick. It's just my voracious curiosity driving the question. What was the fourth somewhat weird method?"

The practitioner is seized by Dharma agitation. And once this agitation dies down, then the path is established. It's a very mysterious one. Basically, not practicing, but seized by something. What it could be, who knows? Some people, if you heard the story of Bahiya, would say, oh, that's Bahiya's method. But we don't really know. It's an interesting one.

"You were talking about the revival of cultural Buddhism in Burma and how it was remodeled in the twentieth century. I'm curious, there was this revival going on there—what was it that made it jump to the West? What was happening in the West?"

The question is enormous and would keep us here all night. There was this revival of Dharma and meditation practice in Burma, so what was it in the West that connected with this so that it spreads throughout the world? Very good question. Very big question. Don't know.

What is clear is that the Burmese themselves, even in the nineteenth century, had this sense that insight is universal and would be of benefit to non-Burmese. So from the very beginning they planned to export it. And it took a while. The attitudes of cultural superiority in the West in the mid-twentieth century were too great for very many people to actually encounter this approach. I think it was basically hippiedom in the 1960s and 70s. Peace Corps helped too. But culturally it was the explosion of hippiedom and people prepared to explore alternatives. People began to turn up at these different countries' meditation centers seeking out meditation teachers, and it particularly took off in the sixties and seventies.

"And maybe because the Burmese had this notion that it would be helpful beyond Burma, maybe they were more receptive to teaching Westerners?"

Yes, they were receptive to teaching Westerners, which, when you get there—when you got there—is very strange, because the Burmese do not adapt easily to other cultures. And Burmese culture, particularly back then in the seventies and eighties, was largely shut off from the world, quite authoritarian. You step into the monasteries, it's like you stepped into medieval times. Yet they had this commitment, this absolute commitment, that whoever walked through the gates, they would teach. And they asked no questions. They didn't care if you were atheist, Muslim, Christian, whatever.

There was one very senior Catholic monk who turned up when I was there, and they were really interested in him. But they didn't care. They just taught him. In fact, they gave him a lot of encouragement. And they sent off their graduates into the world not knowing what they were going to do with it. Absolutely no idea what these people—who they never really understood, frankly—

what they would do with this. But they just spread it out because they had this complete faith: if we just get it out there, it's going to be good for humanity. And so they did it.

Question from the audience: Why is it that Mahasi says this approach will be quicker than the other?

Because generally it is—well, in terms of getting to the first stage. Once the whole thing settled down, basically if you went to Mahasi Center or one of the other centers to do a retreat, you were expected to sign off for two or three months to do the practice. So one month, you're just warming up, really. If you worked relentlessly hard for two or three months, a reasonable proportion of practitioners—particularly Burmese—would get through. Some people would take longer, but that's okay. They can leave, they can come back.

Whereas if you're talking about mastering the jhānas first, for most people that takes a fair bit of time. But some people get through them reasonably quickly. So a lot depends on the person. For some people this approach is quite good—it suits the way their mind works. But for other people it doesn't suit them at all, and they're better off heading into the serenity world. Any kind of meditation technique is appropriate for certain kinds of people, but not for others. And if you're a meditator looking around, your job is to find the approach that suits the way your mind operates.

In my case, I spent years wandering around the Dharma world, and I wandered into Mahasi Center in 1984. I think within 24 hours I knew: this is it. This suits me. So I've been there ever since. But for other people, it doesn't really suit them. It just depends on the person.

Question: How did Japan, Korea, China, and Tibet get left out of this?

They're not left out. We're just talking about this lineage. To talk about all of them—I mean, you'd spend the month discoursing on the history of modern Buddhism. So we just focused on this particular lineage.

Follow-up question about distance and timing—whether it was too late for places like Japan when the Burmese teachers went out to teach.

No, Zen was going through its own revolution that began with the Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century, again adapting to modernity. The Chinese had problems because they were busy being thrashed by Western imperialism. The Tibetans stayed behind their borders until they fled after the Chinese invasion. So each lineage has its own particular history.

What they have in common is the collision with modernity. And this collision pretty much everywhere came in the form of incredible suffering and disruption, courtesy of imperialism of one form or another. It was when that collision occurred that things started to spread out. But until then, people were happy to stay within their own walls. For the Burmese, it was national emergency that got them started—but it just happened in the mid-19th century, so it gave them time to develop something. By the time the hippies turned up, they'd been working on it for a while.

CHAPTER 51

Origins: The Four Truths

Patrick Kearney · 45 min

> *In this talk from the 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney continues his exploration of the Buddha's earliest teachings by examining the four truths (ariya saccāni) as presented in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). He clarifies that these are "truths of the noble ones" - perspectives that make sense specifically to those on the path of awakening, not necessarily to everyone.*
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> *Kearney provides a detailed analysis of dukkha as a compound meaning "painful emptiness," exploring its three aspects: ordinary suffering (dukkha dukkha), the suffering inherent in change (vipariṇāma dukkha), and the suffering involved in constructing a self (saṅkhāra dukkha). He examines taṇhā (craving) as the cause of dukkha, distinguishing it from ordinary desire by its characteristics of leading to further becoming, being bound up with obsession (rāga) and delight (nandī), and restlessly seeking satisfaction "now here, now there."*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance on letting go, suggesting intimacy with drivenness rather than fighting it, developing equanimity (upekkhā) as "intimate witnessing," and not feeding the fire of craving. Kearney connects ethics to meditation practice itself, showing how each choice to drop distraction is an ethical decision to step outside self-enclosure. The discourse concludes with Koṇḍañña's awakening and the Buddha's joyful response - marking the moment when the wheel of Dhamma began to roll.*

So now we're continuing with our series on the origins of the teachings, going through the first three formal discourses and the surrounding context.

We've followed Gautama in his search for awakening. He became Buddha, and we saw the internal struggle that he had over whether or not to teach. The problem from his perspective was that he didn't know how he could communicate this to others. Finally he decides he'll zero in on his five former companions. When he arrives, after some initial resistance, he persuades them to listen. And he teaches the Dhammacakkha Pavattana Sutta, setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma. He opens this with the middle way.

Now, the middle way is the Buddha's strategy to dissolve the resistance of his audience, to persuade them to actually take him seriously and listen to him. And they do. So now he moves on to the four truths. Let's go through those.

This is the noble one's truth of dukkha. Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha. Association with the unloved is dukkha. Separation from the loved is dukkha. Not getting what one wants is dukkha. In brief, the five aggregates associated with appropriation are dukkha.

This is the noble one's truth of the arising of dukkha. It is craving which leads to further becoming, is bound up with obsession and delight, and finds its delight now here, now there—specifically craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.

This is the noble one's truth of the cessation of dukkha. It is the complete cessation of this very craving, abandoning it, renouncing it, releasing it, letting it go.

This is the noble one's truth of the way leading to the cessation of dukkha: the noble eightfold path of right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness and right concentration.

So these are the four truths. What they give us is the basic framework of the Buddha's teaching.

In Pali, these are the ariya saccāni, and this is a compound. Saccāni are truths. Ariya means noble or cultivated. They're usually translated as the noble truths, but it probably means the truths of the noble ones, or the cultivated ones—the Buddha and other awakened ones. At this point, there's only one ariya, and that's the Buddha. So here I translate it as the truths of the noble one.

What the truths do is show us the world from the perspective of someone who has awakened, or at least who is on the path to awakening. Broadly speaking, these are what is true for practitioners, but not necessarily true for others. And of course, we must remember that we're not speaking of a simple dichotomy of full awakening versus not awakened at all. There are levels or depths of awakening, and there are levels or depths of delusion. In general terms, a noble one, or a cultivated one, is someone who has attained to any degree of awakening, but more generally, a mature practitioner on the path—even someone on the way to this awakening. But the key point is that these are truths for some people, but for a lot of people, they're not. They don't make any sense at all.

The truths are dukkha, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. As you can see, they all revolve around this key concept, dukkha. So let's have a look at it.

It's a compound word, derived from the word kha, meaning empty space, and the prefix du, conveying the idea of bad, unpleasant, painful, undesirable, and so on. So dukkha is a painful emptiness. It refers to the painful emptiness that we find at the center of our being. We can recognize this because we have this sense that something necessary for our well-being is missing in our lives, and we have to do something to fill that gap.

Kha also refers to the hub of a wheel. So dukkha is a badly fitting axle that results, if it's fitted to a vehicle, in the vehicle either not being able to move at all, or if it does move, it's only with difficulty and with grind. Dukkha represents a sense of grind and slog in our everyday experience, like pushing a cart uphill. Do you have the sense that this meditation practice is rather like pushing a cart uphill? If so, you've experienced dukkha.

Dukkha is classically translated as suffering, but this is quite inaccurate. Dukkha is a term for which there is no English equivalent.

The English word simply doesn't exist, because dukkha extends from the most gross form of suffering right through to the most subtle form of discontent. Even the slightest discontent is dukkha. The term covers the whole range.

So, why does the teaching begin with dukkha? Some people feel that the Buddha is an old misery bags because he starts off by banging on about dukkha. And perhaps he began with dukkha because the experience of dukkha was his starting point, his motivation. Because if we take action, if we do something, action comes from affect, from a movement of the heart. And here, for the Buddha, it was the pain of dukkha that got him started. So maybe that was why he begins with dukkha, because everybody begins with dukkha. It's the starting point of everyone.

He talks about dukkha in three aspects, and in these three aspects he's going deeper into it. The first one is what came in the tradition to be called dukkha dukkha—the dukkha inherent in pain. This is normal, everyday suffering, represented in this discourse by birth, aging, sickness, and death, accompanied by sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. This is just the normal everyday suffering that every human being goes through.

At a deeper level, we find viparinama dukkha—the dukkha inherent in change. This is the pain that arises when experience is recognized as inherently unreliable and out of control. It's represented by "association with the unloved, separation from the loved, not getting what one wants."

Has anybody here ever been separated from what they love? Has that ever happened? What about not getting what you want—once or twice? What this is pointing to is that our circumstances are constantly changing, and we are not in charge of these changes. This is the key point. And of course this becomes more evident the deeper we go into the practice—the more obvious it is that if anybody's in charge of this process, it's certainly not me, the practitioner.

Things change. And they change not because we want them to change, but because they are the result of a network of conditions infinitely more complex than ourselves, and therefore impossible for us to control—usually impossible for us to even understand. This network of conditions has no firm, stable foundation. There is nothing upon which we can stand and say, "Here I am. I can hold on to this." So we keep groping around, looking for this foundation, but we come up with nothing. And this sense of absence at the core of existence—this is dukkha.

Finally we get sankhara dukkha. This is differently translated, but here it's translated as constructing dukkha, where the Buddha says, "In brief, the five aggregates associated with appropriation are dukkha."

We're going to look more closely at this later when we talk about anatta. The five aggregates is one of the two basic schemas the Buddha uses to analyze the human condition—the other one is the six senses. Basically, they are those aspects of our experience that we appropriate to construct an identity that we can see as permanent and hopefully satisfactory. This is the self that the Buddha talks about.

For the Buddha, self—roughly speaking, who we deeply think and feel we are—never presents as a direct, first-hand, unmediated experience. We can never note self. We take it to be real, but we can never quite bring it into awareness. And we take self to be not just real, but the center of our world. We assume that this world I'm in is all about me, and it centers on me. I am, quite literally, the center of my world. If I look around, go 360 degrees, there it is.

It's around me.

So let's say you're attending a meditation retreat and you're deeply into it. What is this retreat for? What is it about? Isn't it for me? Isn't it about me? Isn't it my retreat?

This taking as mine is upadana. Upadana is normally translated as clinging, but it's literally possession, a taking to be mine. And where there's upadana, appropriation, there's a self.

Now, from the Buddhist perspective, a self is painful because its demands can never be satisfied. So, for example, this retreat, which is all about me—what would it take for this retreat to be fully satisfactory to me? Well, I can think of a few things: developing samadhi in every sit, unbroken mindfulness throughout the day, pleasant meditation experience followed by pleasant meditation experience, fellow practitioners who never do anything to annoy me—and the list goes on.

And of course, when we think about it, it's perfectly obvious that this is a fantasy world. It's not real. And the Buddha is saying that any attempt to construct a satisfactory self ends in failure. We see this in the fact that the construction of the self never stops. We never quite arrive. But we're always scrambling to arrive.

We're going to go more into this when we get to talking about not-self. You notice that the Buddha doesn't explicitly mention not-self here. But the framework of the truths kind of assumes not-self. It's there in the background, but not mentioned.

So this is the first truth, dukkha. And then: "This is the Noble One's truth of the arising of dukkha. It is craving, which leads to further becoming, is bound up with obsession and delight, and finds its delight now here, now there. Specifically, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence."

So what causes dukkha? Tanha—literally thirst, as we've spoken about before. The unquenchable thirst to possess and to become. We have to fill this emptiness that we feel at our core. And we're driven by this to construct a self, someone who's in charge.

Now the Buddha describes tanha, craving, as desire that has certain characteristics. Often people assume that the Buddha is talking about all desire—that desire causes dukkha. He isn't. He's talking about tanha. This is a specific kind of desire. And he explains; he says it has certain characteristics: it leads to further becoming, and it's bound up with obsession and delight.

So let's look at these. It leads to further becoming. And again, this is linked with self and not-self. We deeply desire to become someone—someone real and satisfactory to ourselves and to others. So we create images of ourselves to ourselves, and we try to believe these images. And we project images of ourselves to the world, and we try to act as if we really are the person that we're representing.

But this job of creating ourselves never ends. It has to be constantly renewed. And we never seem to be satisfied with who we are, with the result. So the drama never ends. And of course this is one reason why getting lost in thinking in the meditation practice

is so catastrophic—because we're lost in that world of endlessly patching up a self that maybe, just maybe, will finally work.

So craving leads to further becoming, bound up with obsession and delight. "Obsession" translates *raga*, which you sometimes see rendered as "lust"—I think that's a fairly common translation. *Raga* literally means "colour." So it's the colouring of the heart when it's trapped in desire and drivenness. And *raga* implies the inability to see beyond something and so let it go. If I'm completely obsessed by something—I must have this, I must get rid of that—I'm so absorbed in it that I cannot see beyond it to the consequences. What will happen if I get this? What would happen if I get rid of that? Would I really be better off?

So this is obsession. And then there is delight—*nandi*. In this case, again, it has a specialised sense: the gratification that comes from satisfying desire. Without *nandi*, we wouldn't bother, because there wouldn't be any payoff. But this gratification sets up another round of desire. That was nice—I think I'll do it again. And then satisfying that desire sets up the next one, and the next one, and the next one. And so it never ends.

Just a couple of examples. In the wider world, consider consumerism and the fetish of the commodity. As a society, it's perfectly clear that we never have enough. If we ever did have enough, the economy would collapse, and the results would be catastrophic. It is our duty to be greedy, because then we're productive and the economy keeps growing. This system works because it appeals to the unquenchable thirst at the centre of each one of us.

So this is the nature of craving and the cause of our suffering.

Another example, perhaps more subtle: have you ever been obsessed by thoughts that you can't let go? Can we stop thinking when we want to? Our relationship to the stories we're constantly telling ourselves, and the satisfaction we gain from them, show us obsession and delight in action.

And then we get the third characteristic of this particular kind of desire: craving "finding delight now here, now there." This conveys the restlessness implied in the endless search for a satisfaction and a completion that never quite arrives. We attempt to satisfy our desires, and sometimes we succeed. But this success sets us up for another desire, or for the repetition of the same desire. This process is endless, and it leads to the wandering on—which is *samsara*. In our practice, we can see this in the thoughts we endlessly repeat, moving from one story to another, to another, to another. Finding delight now here, now there.

And then the Buddha gets down to specifics. He says: craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence. Now, the first one makes perfect sense—craving for sense pleasures. But notice that out of the three categories of craving, two of them are all about identity: the craving for existence and non-existence, the desire to be someone, the desire to not be someone. For the Buddha, these are the deepest forms of desire, and often the kind of desire that drives our obsessive thoughts and emotions.

So that's the arising of *dukkha*.

The Noble One's truth of the cessation of *dukkha*: it is the complete cessation of that very craving—abandoning it, renouncing it, releasing it, letting it go. This varies from subtle to gross. Craving for

Non-existence: I'm in the dining hall getting food, and I'm acutely aware that everybody can see me. It's perfectly obvious that they're all glaring at me and judging my hopeless practice. And so I just don't want to exist. I want to disappear. So I bolt outside where no one can see me. *Don't look at me. Don't look at me. Don't look at me.* That would be a kind of mild form of the craving for non-existence.

The opposite would be *Look at me, look at me, look at me, look at me.* And often we find ourselves swinging between these two.

But of course you have depth, layer upon layer. The craving for existence at a deeper layer would be the clinging onto life regardless—desperately holding on. And the craving for non-existence would be wanting death, wanting obliteration. Drug addicts and alcoholics are often motivated by the craving for non-existence. *Get me out of here. Just for a while, just get me out of here.* That would be craving for non-existence.

I'm wondering also about people—not necessarily Buddhists, but sometimes on the spiritual path—craving to not be here, to not have a body, for example. In Theravada Buddhism, the ultimate ideal is Parinibbana, and this is often interpreted as annihilation, like ceasing to be. And people who actually genuinely feel, "God, it'd be good to get out of here," can be attracted to Theravada. In the Mahayana, the ideal is the bodhisattva, who endlessly cycles through samsara to save all beings. And people who want to keep existing forever and ever find that an attractive idea, so they become drawn to Mahayana. So it permeates everything. And it can be very subtle. And frankly, if we're not enlightened, we've got it. It's one of the things pushing us along.

So, the cessation of dukkha. This is the Noble One's truth of the cessation of dukkha: it is the complete cessation of that very craving, abandoning it, renouncing it, releasing it, letting it go.

Now the Buddha compares the cessation of dukkha to the ending of hunger. If you think about hunger, we are hungry, so we are driven to eat. And this satisfies us for a while. But then we're hungry again, so we're driven to eat again. And this satisfies us for a while. And then we're hungry again, and so on and so on. The cycle goes on. So the Buddha says, well, think about the satisfaction that would come when hunger itself ceases.

To get a sense of what the Buddha might be talking about—although I say this as a non-smoker—compare the desire to smoke another cigarette with the desire to give up smoking. When I satisfy my desire to smoke another cigarette, this sets me up for another cigarette, which sets me up for another one, another one, another one, and so on. But when I satisfy my desire to give up smoking, the desire itself is dissolved. And what's left is peace, a relative absence of disturbance.

In a mundane sense, what the Buddha is talking about here is contentment. For the Buddha, contentment is actually more important than happiness. Because happiness tends to be very transient and highly dependent on certain circumstances. But contentment is much more stable and can flow on through changing circumstances.

So the Buddha says the third truth is the cessation of dukkha through letting go. And letting go, of course, is a very popular—if not clichéd—Buddhist term.

And it raises the obvious question: how do we let go of our drivenness?

This idea of letting go reminds me of relaxation. We can't do it, because any doing is not relaxation. So we begin with drivenness and the tension and stress associated with drivenness. We are driven to do something, to fix this problem, to chase this obsession. We may even be driven to try to let go. So we demand of ourselves: relax now, let go now. And it doesn't work—because basically, the letting go is something we've just added to our agenda. But letting go, in common with relaxation, these are not activities we add to our agenda. They are the cessation of the agenda.

So what can we do? Well, a few suggestions in the practice.

First: be intimate with the drivenness. When you find yourself caught up in it, surrender. Surrender into the drivenness. Feel it intimately. Now, this involves not getting lost in the story, the story about. When we become a character in our tragic story, we alienate ourselves from the intimate touch of the drivenness. It's like the drivenness is behind us, pushing us forward, and our attention is to the front—to what we're obsessing about, what we think is our problem, and what we think will solve our problem. But what we need to do is fall back into the drivenness and surrender into it. So intimacy, which of course is affective.

And secondly: be watchful. This brings us to what the Buddha calls equanimity, *upekkhā*, which he associates with the maturity of mindfulness. *Upekkhā* is a very important quality for the Buddha. The word itself is derived from the Sanskrit root *ikṣ*, to see, and the prefix *upa*, which denotes nearness, close touch, intimacy again. So equanimity involves seeing, witnessing, but intimately. I translate it as intimate witnessing. There is witnessing, and so some degree of detachment. But the witnessing is intimate—from very, very close by. Equanimity represents the unity or integration of the cognitive and the affective: wisdom and feeling. It allows us to experience a storm while maintaining balance throughout it.

So be intimate, be watchful. And finally: don't throw logs onto the fire. The storm rages, but it blows itself out. The fire burns, but it burns itself out. When we surrender and when we intimately witness, we allow the storm to blow itself out. We allow the fire to burn itself out.

Now, the going out of the fire—this is a very famous image the Buddha uses to represent Nibbāna. Because Nibbāna means the going out of the fire. And the point about this image: it doesn't mean we put the fire out. When I first read about this image, I imagined the meditation practice like your local fire station. There comes surging up sirens, raging, a huge hose—blast that fire with water and put it out. But that's not what it's getting at. It's not putting it out; it's allowing things to come to their own natural end.

So it's not that we're doing something to get rid of the drivenness, the fire. Rather, we are allowing the drivenness to fade by not doing anything to feed it. We don't put the fire out—we stop throwing logs on it. And if we stop adding fuel, it will go out. It's just built in.

So we're allowing drivenness to fade by not doing anything to feed it, and then we allow nature to return to its natural balance. And of course we feed the fire every time we identify with it—this is me, this is mine. Every time we drop that identification, in that moment we're not throwing another log on the fire. And it will go out. So this is the third truth: cessation.

Then we get the fourth truth, the path. This is the Noble One's truth of the way leading to the cessation of dukkha—the eightfold path of right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

We've already talked about the path as indicating a state of dynamic balance. Here let's talk about another couple of aspects. First, this image of path implies that someone else has been here before. We are not the first to do this. In fact, this particular path has been walked for over two millennia, and we are just the latest group of travellers. Others will follow us.

In other words, meditation practice, Dharma practice, is a community activity. We do it together. We owe a debt to previous generations because they're the ones who ensured that the path was available for us when we turned up. And we have a responsibility to future generations—will the path be available to the next generations? This is one of the reasons why we have that little bit of ceremonial at night when we chant in Pāli, why we follow the traditions of Theravāda Buddhism. We're reminding ourselves that we are part of a community that extends from the present into the distant past, and from the present into the deep future.

Secondly, the path involves more than just meditation—it involves a lot more than just meditation. In particular, it involves ethics. In one discourse, the Buddha was asked by a non-Buddhist what he taught, and the Buddha said, "I teach two things: ethics and understanding." It's interesting that he didn't even mention meditation. Ethics involves the choices that we make, and therefore the kind of life that we lead, while understanding is our depth of appreciation of what's really going on. The Buddha said that each one is like a hand that washes the other. You can't clean one hand; you need both. This is the relationship between ethics and understanding—like two hands washing each other, or two feet washing each other. The Buddha was barefoot, so the washing of feet would have been a daily occurrence. Meditation is the interface between the two.

So that's a brief summary of the four truths. Let's see how we can apply ethics to the meditation practice itself. Let's say I'm meditating and my mind throws up obsession, which appears as what I would call distraction. What do our obsessions show us? They show us our self-reference, our self-enclosure. We may be sorrowful for the sorrows of the world, but we are most sorrowful about our own sorrows. This is the nature of the self.

So I find myself in some kind of obsession. I recognize it, and then I'm faced with a choice. I could drop it, or I could keep going with it. This is an ethical choice. If I drop the distraction, the obsession, and step back into presence, this is a decision to step outside self-enclosure and be open to the reality of the world. Whereas the decision to keep going with the distraction is a decision to feed self-obsession, self-enclosure, and cut myself off from the world. This is ethics—the ethical choice at a very intimate level.

So these are the four truths, and the sutta goes on: "This is what the Blessed One said, and the group of five rejoiced in his words." They like it.

They were converted, you could say. And when the group of five rejoiced in his words, what did they do? "Sadhu! Sadhu!" That's where it comes from.

And as this teaching was being given, the perfect and stainless vision of Dharma arose in Venerable Kondanya. The vision of Dharma—*dhamma-cakkhum*—stream entry. And how he expressed his understanding was this: "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." This little verse pops up again and again throughout the discourses.

So Kondanya woke up to the dynamism of the world. He was caught in the stream of Dharma and suddenly, unexpectedly, he was swept along by it. He directly experienced the middle way that the Buddha was talking about—the absence of any fixed position. And he attained the first stage of awakening.

The discourse then continues: "When the wheel of Dharma had been set in motion by the Blessed One, the earth-dwelling devas cried out: 'At Varanasi, in the deer park at Isipatana, this unsurpassed wheel of Dharma has been set in motion by the Blessed One. It cannot be stopped by any samana or brahmana, or deva, or Mara, or Brahma, or by anyone in the world.'"

Hearing the cry of the earth-dwelling devas, the devas of the realm of the four great kings cried out. So the rejoicing goes up and then up and up—the Tavatimsa devas, the Yama devas, the Tusita devas. Tusita heaven, by the way, is where the Buddha's mother was residing, and it's where the bodhisattva will reside before being reborn on earth as the next Buddha. Then the Nimmanarati devas, the Paranimmita-vasavatti devas, the devas of Brahma's assembly—all cried out: "At Varanasi, in the deer park at Isipatana, this unsurpassed wheel of Dharma has been set in motion by the Blessed One. It cannot be stopped by any samana or brahmana, or deva, or Mara, or Brahma, or by anyone in the world."

"And so at that moment, at that instant, the cry spread as far as the Brahma world, and this ten-thousand-fold world system shook, quaked, and trembled, and an immeasurable glorious radiance appeared in the world, surpassing the divine majesty of the devas."

Now, I don't know if you really believe any of that, but the point is clear: it's important. Something happened of deep significance, even cosmic significance. The wheel of Dharma has begun to roll.

And the Buddha is affected by this. "Then the Blessed One cried out in inspiration: 'Kondanya understands! Kondanya understands!'" This is how Venerable Kondanya acquired the name Añña-Kondanya—"Kondanya who understands."

The Buddha is very happy. Basically, he leaps up, dancing for joy. "Yes! One of the five got it. He actually got it." He's just delighted. And it's the only discourse in which the Buddha behaves like this. Later in his career, when the Buddha is teaching, five hundred people become fully awakened, and the Buddha's response is essentially, "Yes, that's nice. I wonder what lunch is today." But for just one glimpse of understanding, he is delighted.

And this is the rolling of the wheel of Dharma. When the Buddha was awakened, it was the wheel of the Dharma, but it was still. Kondanya got a glimpse, and the wheel starts to move. It starts to roll. And no one and nothing can prevent it from rolling on.

In other words, the Buddha now knows he can teach. The Dharma has a future after him. This begins his career as a teacher. And of course, as a result of that wheel turning, here we are.

That's it for tonight. Any questions?

"I just love this conflicting information. On one hand, Buddhism is going to last five thousand years. On the other hand, it's going to last forever."

Exactly. I think you summed it up correctly.

"Are you going to leave me with that?"

This Buddhism will go. But another Buddhism will arise. The Dharma wheel will arise and turn again. It will stop, and later on, it will pop up and roll again. So perhaps in that cosmological sense, once you start it, you can't stop it.

But in the more existential sense, the wheel doesn't simply roll by itself. We are giving it a push along. And as long as we give it a push along, it will keep rolling.

"So us in this room, doing this practice—is it money? Is it time? Is it energy? What is it that needs to be pushing along?"

Well, basically it's commitment. And if there's commitment, then the money and the time and the energy will be found. If there's not the commitment, then it won't be found, and the whole thing will die.

This is a big challenge of lay Dharma practice. The Dharma has survived for two and a half millennia. Why? Because there's a dedicated community of monks and nuns who have been carrying it along. But can the lay people carry it along? This is what they wanted to do in that reform movement in Burma. But can it work? We don't know. This is a historical experiment.

It is more difficult for lay people to keep it going because we've got lots of other things to worry about. In the discourses, when the Buddha was teaching a lay person—let's say the lay person gets it and they have some measure of awakening—sometimes the discourse ends when the lay person says, "And now, Bhante, I must go. I am busy and have much to do." And off they go. Because they're busy. Because they're laypeople. Because they can't just hang around.

But you never have a monk or a nun say, "And now, Bhante, I must go. I am busy and have much to do." Because they're not busy. They don't have much to do. That's why they ordain. So they've got the leisure as well as the time, the opportunity to throw themselves completely into it. But we, on the other hand, have got other things to do as well. So it's more difficult for us. Not impossible, but more difficult. That's my take.

"Talking about the drivenness aspect and what we're doing here—I would argue that to do a twenty-eight-day retreat takes a certain amount of drivenness. And then the irony is, you need that drivenness to get to the point of freedom where there is no drivenness."

Basically, that's the paradox. Without the drivenness, you'll never start. Without letting go of the drivenness, you'll never arrive. And that is the paradox.

Okay. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 52

Origins 4: On Truth

Patrick Kearney · 46 min

In this fourth talk of the Origins series, Patrick Kearney examines the nature of truth itself through a detailed exploration of the Caṅkī Sutta (MN 95). The discourse recounts a debate between the Buddha and Kāpaṭika, a talented young Brahmin student, set against the backdrop of the historical tensions between the Buddha and the Brahmanical establishment over caste hierarchy and ethics.

The Buddha systematically deconstructs five grounds for belief—faith, endorsement, inherited tradition, rational consideration, and reflective acceptance—showing that any of these can lead to either truth or falsehood. He distinguishes between 'guarding truth' (acknowledging the limits of one's beliefs) and 'awakening to truth' (direct realization through practice). The teaching emphasizes that truth is discovered not in abstract doctrines but in persons whose conduct reflects purification from greed, hatred, and delusion.

The practical implications for meditators are profound: truth is embodied, realized 'with the body' (kāyena) through the six sense doors. The path to truth involves studying with a trustworthy teacher, arousing desire for liberation, committing to practice, and ultimately realizing supreme truth through direct experience. This talk illuminates how the early Buddhist approach to truth anticipates modern epistemological concerns while remaining grounded in the transformative potential of ethical living and meditative practice.

Yesterday we finished off the Dhammacakkappavattanasutta, setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma, and we had a look at the teaching of the four truths that constitutes the basic framework of the Buddha's teaching.

Tonight we're going to do a bit of a sidestep and look at truth in general—how the Buddha understood truth and what exactly it is. We're going to do this via the Caṅkīsutta, which is Majjhima Nikāya number 95. Here we have a discussion on the nature of truth.

The heart of the discourse is a discussion between the Buddha and a very talented sixteen-year-old Brahmin student. Brahmin in English, Brāhmaṇa in Pali and Sanskrit. His name is Kāpaṭika. He's a junior member of a group made up of a number of senior Brāhmaṇas from the village of Opasāda in the kingdom of Kosala. The Buddha's wandering around, he comes to this village, and the senior Brahmins have come to check

out the Buddha. If you imagine the scene, the Buddha's in the front, the most senior Brahmins are close by, and the crowd goes back, with the more junior ones at the back. So Kāpaṭika is at the back.

They begin to have a discussion, and then Kāpaṭika interrupts the discussion between the Buddha and the elders. The Buddha rebukes him for interrupting. But the leader of the Brahmins, Caṅkī, after whom the discourse is named, intervenes and says that Kāpaṭika is worthy of joining this discussion, despite his youth, because he's extremely talented. If he's got something to say, it'll be worth listening to.

The subtext reflects that this whole scene, this whole interruption, and Caṅkī's response, is actually pre-planned—the Brahmins want Kāpaṭika up on stage, having it out with the Buddha. So the Buddha decides to play along.

Again, the context: this is a Brahmin village, and from the description it sounds like it's a centre for study. The Brahmins were, part of their function, scholars. Therefore the Buddha is actually in enemy territory, and he would know this very well. The Brahmins were the most stubborn opponents of the Buddha and his teaching. One of the reasons they couldn't accept him was because of opposing views on the class structure of India at the time.

In the Ganges Valley, there were four recognized classes. In Sanskrit, these are called the varṇa. So you have Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra—these are the four.

The Brāhmaṇas, or in English the Brahmins, are the Vedic scholars. They're priests. They offer the sacrifice, and they are teachers. This is what they specialise in, although they spun off and did other things as well. Then you have the Kṣatriya—these are the rulers, administrators, warriors. Next are the Vaiśya, the merchants or farmers. And finally the Śūdra—artisans, labourers, servants.

First of all, notice that this is a class system. It's not a caste system. Sometimes you hear people say, "Oh, the Buddha opposed the caste system." The Buddha never heard of the caste system. Caste is a Portuguese word that translates the Sanskrit word jāti, and this system developed long after the Buddha's time. Here we're talking about a simple fourfold class division. Although there was not much social mobility, people could move up and down, depending on circumstances.

The listed order—Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, Śūdra—is the standard way you see it listed: first the Brahmins, then the Kṣatriyas. The Buddha had no argument with the class structure. He accepted it. What he disagreed with was, first of all, the question of

who was on top. The Brahmins thought the Brahmins were on top. The Kṣatriyas thought the Kṣatriyas were on top. This position at the top was still being contested, and it took some time before the Brahmins won.

And of course, what class was the Buddha? Kshatriya. No surprise.

So eventually the Brahmins won the war of prestige, but it was still a matter for debate in the Buddha's time. The other part of the conflict, and this was the much deeper part, was the fact that the Buddha denied the sacred status of Varna, of the class system.

Now the Brahmins were the top religious people. They were taught, because they were very closely allied to the kings and the rulers, that they were on top of the class system because the gods put them there. So to oppose this system was not just to be bolshie, but it was also to be sacrilegious. It was an offence against the religious order.

The Buddha would not go along with this. He insisted that first of all, all social structures are the creations of human decisions, and so they could be otherwise. There's always an alternative. In other words, people can change what they see as an unsatisfactory social structure.

When you think about it, this is really radical. When economic neoliberalism swept the world in the 1980s, the great slogan of the evangelicals who imposed this system was TINA: There Is No Alternative. And any social structure where someone makes that claim, the Buddha would, I think, shake his head and say, of course there's an alternative. There's always an alternative.

Secondly, he had fundamental disagreements on ethics. The Brahmins taught that ethical demands—how we should live—are relative to one's social status. If you think about the Bhagavad Gita, very famous, at the centre of it is Arjuna, who is Kshatriya, and his relationship with Krishna, who is God incarnate. Arjuna is about to embark on a major battle in which he's about to slaughter large numbers of people, and Krishna is his charioteer. But Arjuna has a crisis of conscience. He says, "I can't do this. This is appalling. Not only am I going to kill a lot of people, but many on the other side are my relatives, my teachers." And Krishna persuades him to put aside these scruples, go out there and kill—because Arjuna is a Kshatriya. It is his dharma, his duty, to fight and to kill. That's the ethical thing to do.

The Buddha had a very different view about ethics. He thought that the ethical imperatives were exactly the same, regardless of which class you belong to. In one discourse—I didn't actually have time to track it down—a general comes to see the Buddha and asks, "I've been taught by my teacher that soldiers, warriors who die in battle go to a particular heaven reserved for warriors. Is this true?"

The Buddha doesn't answer, which means he's very reluctant. He does not want to respond. He does not want to get involved. But the general persists and asks a second time. For the second time, the Buddha is silent. The general asks a third time, and the Buddha has to respond. The number three, again, is quite significant—three refuges, three times we chant the Vandana, and so on.

So the Buddha says, "Okay, I'll answer." He says the most likely rebirth for anyone who dies in battle is hell or the animal realm—which you can imagine was a shock to the general.

Where the Buddha was coming from was this: if you're in a battle trying to kill as many people as possible, well, as many people as possible are trying to kill you. And you are in fact mortally injured. What would be your state of mind? You would most likely be possessed by either aversion or by confusion and delusion. If your mind is dominated by aversion, you'd be reborn in hell. If your mind is dominated by delusion, you'll be reborn in the animal realm. In other words, your special status has got nothing to do with it. It's the state of your citta, your heart-mind. That's what decides what goes on.

This understanding of ethics the Brahmins couldn't stomach, because they were so wedded to the absolute hierarchy.

And finally, the Buddha had an attitude and a policy that anyone of any class whatsoever could enter his community, and once in it, each member is equal to everybody else. Everyone who practices the Eightfold Path is either Arya—cultivated—or, another translation could be aristocrat, refined, noble. Everybody who practices the path is Arya, and therefore everybody who practices the path is worthy of respect.

So it is not one's social status that ennobles a person. It's the path that ennobles a person. It's their ethical status that ennobles a person. And again, the Brahmins couldn't quite accept this.

So there's a certain amount of competition here. When the Buddha comes and sets up camp outside this Brahmin village, he knows there's going to be trouble. It's just a question of what form it will take. And at this point, it's become clear that the spearholder for the Brahmins is Kapatika.

He's staying in what you could call, in modern terms, a municipal Dharma center. Every town would have a place outside the town, convenient to get to, with water supply, shelter, and cooking facilities, where visiting teachers could set up camp and people could come listen to them and practice whatever they're teaching. I think it's a wonderful idea, and I think you should write to your local member.

The discourse begins when word spreads throughout the village that the Buddha has turned up and he's got this very good reputation. There's a whole section of praise for the Buddha. But then there's a debate. The Brahmins start heading out there and Kanki sees them and thinks, I should go too. The senior Brahmins say, you can't go—you can't make him respectable like this. There's a little to-ing and fro-ing, and then eventually they all go out.

So Kapatika begins. He says, "Mr. Gotama"—you notice he doesn't call him Bhante, it's Mr. Gotama—"Mr. Gotama, in regard to the ancient chants that have come down through oral transmission and the passing on of the teachings, the Brahmanas come to the categorical conclusion: only this is true, anything else is wrong. What does Mr. Gotama say about this?"

So this is just hurling the challenge down. We're in the right. If you disagree with us, you're in the wrong. So what do you reckon? What do you say? What are you prepared to do about it?

And the Buddha responds. He says, "Well then, Bharadvaja." Now he calls him Bharadvaja because that's his clan name. Kapatika is one person whose personal name we actually know, but it's polite to use the clan name. Bharadvaja means "twice born," by the way, which is a Brahmin clan.

"Well then, Bharadvaja, is there even a single Brahmana who says, 'I see this, I understand this—only this is true, anything else is wrong'?"

Now what the Buddha was saying: when I see this, I understand this—the seeing is the direct firsthand experience. The understanding is how you interpret that direct firsthand experience.

And Kapatika says, "No, Mr. Gotama."

Now we get a sense of Kapatika's character. He's honest. And maybe this is one of the reasons why the Buddha thought, yes, I will debate this guy. Because he saw his potential.

So you notice the Buddha's first move: What is the experience that this or any belief is based on? First, clarify the experience, then form an opinion. This is what the Buddha is saying. For the Buddha, the ultimate foundation for belief is experience. And of course, when we talk about experience and we're looking at what this practice that we're doing is all about—it's all about clarifying experience, a continuity of awareness. Why? We want to be clear about the nature of the experience.

So then the Buddha goes on to ask the same question regarding the teachers of the Brahmanas. Is there any one of the teachers of the current generation Brahmanas who sees and understands?

And he goes back to seven generations. Number seven again. And then he asks the same question regarding, quote, the ancient brahmana seers, the creators of the chants. And chant in Pali is manta, in Sanskrit mantra. You probably recognise that word. And in each case, Kapadika has to admit, no.

And the Buddha concludes, suppose there was a line of blind men, each in touch with the next. The first one does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see. It appears that the brahmanas are like a line of blind men. The first one does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see. What do you think, Bhadradvaja? That being so, does not the faith of the brahmanas turn out to be groundless?

So the Buddha's coming back with a bit of biffo. And Kapadika finds he has to shift ground, because you notice that Kapadika's opening line, his opening attack, shall we say, was based completely on faith.

So Kapadika shifts ground and says that the brahmanas honour this not only out of faith, Mr. Gautama, they also honour it as inherited tradition. In other words, what's been passed down in your culture, in your nation, what everybody around you accepts as "this is what's going on." There are some foreigners over there who have different opinions, but, you know, they're foreign. So we won't take any notice.

And then the Buddha replies, these five things, Bhadradvaja—and here he's starting to open the discussion up. He's starting to take hold of the debate and move it in the direction that he wants it to go. These five things, Bhadradvaja, can be seen to turn out in two different ways. What five? Faith, endorsement, inherited tradition, rational consideration, and acceptance of a view after thinking about it—these five things can be seen to turn out in two different ways. Something may be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false. Something else may not be accepted out of faith, and it may be factual, true, and unmistaken.

And again he goes through: something may be fully endorsed, well transmitted, well reasoned, well reflected upon, and yet it may be wrong. Something may not be fully endorsed, well transmitted, well reasoned, and well reflected upon, and yet it turns out to be true. You never know.

Therefore it is not proper for a wise person who guards truth to come to the definite conclusion that only this is true, anything else is false.

So faith, tradition, reason—we all have different reasons for justifying our beliefs. But the Buddha is saying there is always a possibility that we might be wrong.

Now the discussion shifts further to guarding truth. The Pali word could be translated as guarding, preserving, protecting. But here I've chosen guarding.

So Kapadika asks, in what way is there the guarding of truth? How does one guard truth? Now you notice that one of the things that's happened here: the conversation began about belief. Now it's moved on to truth. There's been a shift in the content.

If a person has faith, Bhadradvaja, he guards truth when he says, "This is my faith." But he does not yet come to the definite conclusion, "Only this is true, anything else is wrong." In this way, truth is guarded. In this way, one guards truth. In this way, we describe the guarding of truth. And then so on through the other ways for things that can be seen to turn out in two different ways. So if this is the way you've reasoned, you're guarding truth if you say, "This is how I reasoned it." But you're not guarding truth if you jump to the conclusion, "Only this is true, everything else is false," and so on.

By the way, just notice how modern this approach sounds.

And then the Buddha says, but as yet, there is no awakening to truth. So guarding the truth is about accuracy.

And this accuracy is not so much aimed at the condition of the world—"only this is true"—but at the condition of the person who believes in something. So: "My faith is thus."

The Buddha is saying, first be clear about the distinction between my state of mind—what I think to be true, what I want to be true, what I fear to be true—make that a clear distinction between that, which is the state of one's mind, one's citta, on the one hand, and the state of the world on the other. These are two different things. Don't confuse one with the other.

I'm always reminded of something that Noam Chomsky said. In one of his books published a long time ago—his collected writings and so on—there's one section where he's giving a talk to activists. And the activists ask the question. They say, "Look, you've been doing this social activism business for a long time, and there doesn't seem to be any sign that things are getting better. If anything, they appear to be getting worse. How do you maintain your optimism?" This is a question which a lot of people involved in social activism are very much concerned about. But what Chomsky said was really interesting. He said, "My optimism and my pessimism tell me nothing about the world. They tell me about my state of mind. They tell me nothing about the world."

And the Buddha is making this same distinction. But, he says, as yet there is no awakening to truth. So Kapatika asks, "In what way is there awakening to truth? How does one awaken to truth?"

Now notice that Kapatika is being drawn into a discussion he did not originally plan. It's a classic case of the best laid plans vanishing the moment battle begins, on the first sight of the enemy. And this has happened to Kapatika. He's moved from guarding an already existing truth—which at first is assumed to be his own tradition—to awakening. And the suggestion here is that it's awakening to a new truth, something one had not previously imagined.

At this point we come to the heart of the discourse. How does one awaken to truth?

The Buddha says, "Here, Bharadvaja, a bhikkhu may live depending on some village or town." And that is the role of the bhikkhu and the bhikkhuni, of course—beggars. They live off the generosity of supporters. "Then a layperson goes to him and examines him in relation to three kinds of qualities: qualities based on attraction, qualities based on aversion, and qualities based on delusion." Attraction, aversion, delusion—lobha, dosa, moha—greed, hatred, ignorance. These are the three classic roots of the unwholesome.

Notice that awakening to truth starts with skepticism. People say, "This person has a good reputation. I'll go and visit." But you don't go and visit, fall at their feet, and say, "Friend, I'm yours." You go and visit them and you check them out. You check out their behavior carefully. This is the advice that the Buddha gives. If you're wondering, "Should I take this person seriously? Should this person be a teacher?"—these are the questions to be asked and answered.

"Are there, in this venerable one, any qualities based on attraction—desire, greed, obsession, and so on—such that with his mind obsessed by them, while not understanding, he might say, 'I understand,' or while not seeing, he might say, 'I see,' or he might urge others to act in a way that would lead to their harm and suffering for a long time?"

So the second part concerns whether I see any indications of unethical behavior. But the first one is: Is there anything this person is saying that would appear to affect himself to the point where he would make a false claim? Is there anything about him which would make one suspicious that this person is going to blow his own trumpet?

to the point where he's going to say something which is false.

As the layperson examines him, he comes to understand there are no such qualities based on attraction, aversion, or delusion. So he goes through all three of them in terms of the question. There are no such qualities based on attraction, aversion, or delusion in this venerable one. His physical and verbal behaviour are not those of one affected by attraction, aversion, or delusion. And the Dharma he teaches is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. This Dharma cannot easily be taught by one affected by attraction or aversion or delusion.

So if one is looking for truth, how do you start? Can you see a tendency towards desire, aversion, or delusion? And can you see any way in which these tendencies might be translated into action? In other words, truth is found not in our beliefs, but in how we respond to the world. You could say that truth is found in a person and their way of life, rather than some abstract belief that exists somehow independently of us. The quest for the discovery of truth is not one of a discovery for a certain kind of belief, but for a certain kind of person.

Truth is embodied, and it's embodied in actions of body and speech, because these actions directly reflect the state of one's mind. Of course, if we meet someone, we can't look into their minds. How do we make a judgment about them? We look at what they do, and we look at what they say. And the suggestion here is that we do this over a period of time. We check them out thoroughly.

The Buddha is suggesting that if the mind is clean and if the heart is pure, then what can be expected would be the demonstration of truth. Such a person can be trusted, and therefore her truth can be trusted.

Remember when we looked at the four truths? In Pali, *ariya saccāni—saccāni* is truths, so what is normally translated as "noble truths" is perhaps more accurately translated as "truths of noble people." Because the focus is on the person.

The Buddha goes on: when he has examined him and has seen that he is purified from qualities based on attraction, aversion, and delusion, then he places faith in him. Filled with faith, he visits and pays respect to him. After paying his respect, he listens. When he listens, he hears the Dharma. Hearing the Dharma, he memorizes it.

This is our tradition—nothing written down. I think I mentioned that Burmese monastics to this day do an immense amount of memorization. The first resident teacher here, Sayadaw U Pannyatami, who's now living in Sydney, had one of the people at the centre who taught English as a second language. This person had a big thick manual and used to carry it around with him. One day the Sayadaw said, "Why do you keep car-

rying this book around?" The person explained, "Well, I need this for my work," and so on and so forth. The Sayadaw looked puzzled and said, "Why don't you just memorize it?"

So, hearing the Dharma, he memorizes it and examines the meaning of the teachings he has memorized. Thought. The Buddha doesn't dismiss thought. It's important. It's part of wisdom. It has its role.

When he examines the meaning, he gains a reflective acceptance of those teachings. Reflective acceptance—they make sense. When he has gained a reflective acceptance of these teachings, desire is born.

Now, of course, the Buddha has a reputation for thinking that desire is a bad thing. But here he's talking about how the movement toward Dharma, towards truth, begins with desire, a movement of the heart. When desire is born, he commits himself. Makes sense, doesn't it? If I want something, then I'll do something about it.

Committing himself, he explores. Exploring, he works. And "exploring" and "working"—these are code for meditation practice at this point. Resolutely working, he realizes with the body the supreme truth and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom.

This is a very brief kind of summary: he does the practice to the point of awakening.

Notice the expression: he realizes with the body the supreme truth.

This kind of expression appears a number of times with the Buddha. It's a very interesting one. It's literally "with the body"—*kāyena*. But there's debate among scholars: is this to be taken literally, or is this an idiom? It may well be an idiom. Sometimes you see it translated as "personally" or "for oneself," and I think that's a valid translation, provided we keep in mind that the person is physical. It's a sentient body that realizes the truth. There is a physicality to this which comes out in the early tradition, in the Buddha's own teaching, but in the later commentarial tradition gets written away and quietly buried.

Actually, one could say that "with the body" refers to the senses—a direct experience through all six senses, including mind. Absolutely. That's exactly what it's about. All six senses, not just mind.

"In this way, Bhaddra, there is awakening to truth. In this way, one awakens to truth. In this way, we describe awakening to truth."

So we begin to discover truth in people rather than beliefs. The community and its way of life come first, not the doctrine. The Buddha describes, first of all, a course of study: listening, memorizing, examining, reflectively accepting. And then from this comes a course of action: commitment, exploring, working, realizing. Again, you notice the centrality of thinking. The Buddha does not reject thinking and reason. He regards them as essential to the path. But he wants to see them grounded on experience or confirmed by experience.

So we study to get an idea of what's going on and what kind of thing we need to do if we're going to attain truth, and then we embark on a practice and see if it works. Further study can clarify experiences as we go along, and deeper experiences can assist us in intellectual understanding. They go together.

Now, the turning point that leads from the intellect to the practice is the awakening of desire. Without desire, we won't do anything. Unless the heart is moved to do something, all we have is a concept, which may be interesting but not anything that could challenge our existing way of life. You get people who are very interested in Buddhism—they might even say they are Buddhists—and they collect big libraries of books on Buddhism, but they never quite get around to doing the practice. Because the desire has not arisen. The heart has not moved.

What's important for the Buddha is always our way of life. How do we live? If we're looking for truth, we're looking for a way of living. And again, notice that the supreme truth is realized with the body—the sentient body that awares and that feels. There is an inescapable physicality about this tradition. Truth is not something abstract. It's not something removed from our messy physical world. Truth is found here, in this action, in this body.

We won't go on to the end of the sutta. I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that everybody's converted—there's good news all around. At least Kapaṭika is converted. But again, it's all about truth. Truth emerges in a course of study and practice that transforms a life. Truth is found in a way of life.

You notice that in this model, where the layperson hears about the practitioner, we often first notice this way of life in others. After getting to know this way of life from outside, it arouses desire, and then one realizes it for oneself by embarking on the path. This realization and practice takes place intimately in the body. Truth is embodied.

As a side issue, you get a sense of this in the word for truth in Pali and Sanskrit. In Pali it's *sacca*. In Sanskrit it's *satya*. And it comes from the same verb: to be, to exist.

So truth is what points toward the felt actuality of our situation. The just thisness. Remember we talked about just thisness? The rain is wet. This is what gives truth the power to transform our life.

From the Buddhist perspective, unless we are moved by truth, we have not actually experienced truth. We might think something is true, but not be struck by the actuality of the situation. And so we might not do anything about it. We might not respond in any real way. Truth is found in one's own way of life, in one's own body and mind.

Question from the audience about the revival of the bhikkhuni ordination in Western Australia

It wasn't actually the monastery that reinstituted the order of nuns. It was the nuns who reinstituted the order of nuns. But it was with the support of the monks in that monastery. This reflects the tradition that you need both sanghas to come together to agree.

This situation is a classic example of Buddhist dogmatism. There were people for whom, in their tradition, there were no bhikkhunis. Therefore, there must be no bhikkhunis until the next Buddha, who can re-establish it. On the other side, those supporting the bhikkhunis had done extensive research in the Vinaya, the legal code. They came up with ways that would satisfy the legal requirements for resurrecting the nuns' ordination. And of course, there was the moral argument—that even if it was legally impossible, it's a moral imperative that it should be done.

But then you've got people who are fixed in their view: we don't have it, therefore we can never have it. It was significant that the monastery in Western Australia took that stance. Their lineage split as a result, and it's still split to this day.

Now there's a flourishing female monastery out in Western Australia. There's another one in New South Wales, at Bundanoon, though that one hasn't flourished in the same way—they haven't had equally effective leadership. To be the head of a monastery or nunnery, you need to be reasonably enlightened, a very good practitioner, a very good communicator, and a very good entrepreneur, all in one person. It's a hard job, especially when you're starting out.

Ajahn Brahm was the one who had the clout to take the lead. And he just did it. He doubtlessly lost decades of friendships doing this, because there was a major split. The Sri Lankan sangha had already revived the ordination, but certainly not the Thais. And of course in Mahayana Buddhism, they've always had the bhikkhunis.

So in Taiwan, most of the sangha are female and they're fully ordained bhikkhunis. The one I'm familiar with is Korea. I don't know what the proportion is, but they have fully ordained bhikkhunis and they're pretty tough women—quite formidable. You don't mess with the bhikkhunis. It's not a good idea.

The last movement Burma made toward, not quite equality, but reducing the inequality, was in 1920, when they made a decision that women could study. Women in Burma can only be ordained up to the level of samaneri—novices with ten precepts—which is better than Thailand. But in 1920 they were admitted to the monastic education system and can study up to the degree of Dhammacharya, teacher of Dharma. This means they can become dharma teachers in their own right and be publicly accepted as such. So now you've got female teachers and monasteries. But they're noticeably poorer than the men's monasteries.

The Mahasi Center is, strictly speaking, a combination. It's got a sima, an ordination hall where official acts of the sangha can take place, so it has a monastic component. But it's a meditation center owned and operated by a lay organization, not by the monks. The sayadaw is the head teacher, but he doesn't own or control the center. The lay organization does. So you have a separation between church and state.

And, should I say this? I did witness, back in the eighties, a clash between church and state when Upandita was the head teacher. Once a fortnight, the monks gather for their formal assembly, and there's a brief talk among other things. Usually the talk is about Vinaya, about the way of life and the rules. One day, Upandita said that the way the food is offered in the dining hall was not acceptable. There's a rule—which I suspect is late, but anyway—where if you offer something to a monk, it's got to be capable of actually lifting up and handing over. If it's too heavy, you can't do it.

At the Mahasi Center, there are hundreds of people, and all the food is offered. According to the Vinaya, you can only begin to eat at dawn. They have one monk every morning stationed looking toward the east, and he gives the signal as soon as there's light. Eating time is ready. Then a select band of monks go off to the dining hall and the food is offered to them.

It's a big hall and they have these really heavy tables, very low to the ground because you're sitting on the ground to eat. Each table is piled high with dishes of various kinds of food—quite good food, actually. A monk sits down in front of the table. The staff come. They lift up the table. He touches it. It goes down. Everything on that table is offered. Then they move to the next table. Boom, boom, boom, boom—in a few minutes, everything's offered. By this time, people are coming in and they don't have to worry about it. Everything's been offered.

But Upandita was suggesting that this wasn't legal, which would mean they'd have to offer every dish separately, or use trays or something. It was obvious at that point that war had just been declared. It was equally obvious, as the days rolled by and the staff continued to offer the food in exactly the same way, that Upandita had lost. It was not surprising to anybody that sometime after this he announced he was leaving and setting up his own center.

So you do have the argy-bargy sometimes—in a very civilized Buddhist way, of course.

I think we've gotten off the point, haven't we?

Yes, sir. Thank you.

CHAPTER 53

Origins 5: Not-Self Part 1

Patrick Kearney · 54 min

In this discourse from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney begins a two-part exploration of the Buddha's teaching on anattā (not-self) through the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the second formal teaching delivered to the five ascetics after they had all attained stream entry. Kearney establishes the historical and philosophical context, explaining how the Buddha's teaching directly challenged the Upaniṣadic doctrine of ātman—the permanent, unchanging, blissful self that was culturally familiar to his audience.

The talk examines why the Buddha systematically demonstrates that none of the five aggregates (khandhas)—body, feeling, perception, constructions, and awareness—can qualify as self. The key criterion is control: if something were truly self, it would not tend toward affliction (ābādha) and would be subject to our command. Yet each aggregate changes in ways beyond our control, making it anicca (impermanent) and therefore unreliable. Kearney illuminates how the Pāli term 'anicca' implies not just impermanence but fundamental unreliability—what will eventually disappoint and fail.

The discourse then unpacks how identity construction operates through three movements: craving (taṇhā) as 'this is mine,' conceit (māna) as 'I am this,' and view (diṭṭhi) as 'this is myself.' Through vivid examples—from mirrors to meditation retreats, from family gatherings to hanging laundry—Kearney shows how we continuously construct a self through possession, separation, and narrative. This teaching prepares practitioners to recognize that while self feels utterly real and compelling, it cannot be located in any direct experience—setting the stage for understanding how not-self is realized rather than merely understood intellectually.

Tonight and the following Monday night, we're going to talk about not-self. We're going to do it by looking at the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the discourse on the not-self characteristic, which is the second of the Buddha's formal teachings.

So we continue with our look at the origins of Buddhism. As we talked about, the Buddha attained awakening on the full moon of Vesākha, roughly May. His first teaching was delivered two months later on the full moon of Āsāḷha, roughly July. He taught the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Setting in Motion the Dharma Wheel. He delivered this to his five former companions, who he had split with when he realised that his practice was failing. What he taught was the middle way and the four truths.

During this teaching, in particular during the teaching of the four truths, one of the five, Añña Koṇḍañña, understood what the Buddha was talking about. He saw the Dhamma. This is the dhammacakku, and of course this is the first stage of awakening, also known as stream entry—entering the stream of the Dhamma. He expressed his insight with this brief saying: "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." This verse encapsulates the dynamism of experience when it's seen through completely.

After that comes the first Buddhist meditation retreat. It lasted five days and it was taught by the Buddha. Two of the students, Vappa and Bhaddiya, were reasonably quick and were the first ones to attain the first stage of awakening. But I regret to say that two of them, Mahānāma and Assaji, took five full days to attain the first stage of awakening. I mean, can you believe it? But eventually they all made it.

Once the Buddha had an audience made up entirely of people who have attained the first stage of awakening, who have seen the Dhamma, then he introduces the subject of not-self. Up to now, he had not mentioned it. It had been in the background—it's kind of the basis for everything—but he hadn't actually talked about it until now. He talks about it with the intention to take his audience from that first glimpse into reality all the way to full awakening.

All this suggests that anattā, not-self, is an advanced teaching. In part this is because anattā is not a doctrine to be understood. It can be studied philosophically, but you can't understand it intellectually. It's an experience to be realised. It's something that we get or we don't get. It's like the punchline of a joke. You either get the joke or you don't get the joke. You can't explain your way to a joke.

This is one reason why I like to give the spoiler alert that if you listen carefully to my talks on not-self, I can guarantee that at the end of it you will not understand not-self. So don't be frustrated if you don't get it, because you can't understand it. You either get it or you don't get it. As it happens, during this retreat all of the five got it and they all attained full awakening.

The background is that the Buddha is preparing his students to reject the teaching of ātman. This is "self" in Sanskrit rather than Pali. The doctrine of ātman is very important in the tradition of the Upaniṣads, which the Buddha himself had trained in, and presumably his five companions had also trained in.

If we ask, "What is this ātman that they talk about, that the Buddha was trained in and taught about?"—ātman is permanent, unchanging, and therefore blissful. To get a sense of it, think about your meditation experience when your mind settles and be-

comes relatively still. Is this pleasant? Is it a pleasant experience? Could it be that this pleasantness is associated with the fact that there is less change apparent when the mind is still? For the Indian tradition, stillness of mind is blissful. If the mind is completely still, that experience is blissful.

Ātman, self, is free from any change. It's therefore permanent and therefore blissful. This is the background that the Buddha and his audience are coming from.

If they were trained in that Upanishadic tradition—and we don't know for sure that they were, but they probably were—then that's what that tradition was about: training them to realize Atman. And they equate Atman with Brahman. Then it gets very theological, and we won't go there. But essentially, that's what they're after: the experience of Atman.

So where do we find Atman? Where do we find self? Self sits behind experience as the one who undergoes the experience, the one who owns experience, the one to whom experience is happening. For example, this experience you're having right now—to whom is this experience happening? Isn't it happening to me? And this is self, atma. We can take it further. What is this experience for? Isn't it for me? Whose experience is this? Isn't it mine?

What the Buddha is saying is that if we directly see the Dharma, if we encounter the middle way, this way of looking at things doesn't satisfy anymore. So let's see how the Buddha explains it.

This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living at Baranasi in the deer park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five bhikkhus.

"Bhikkhus."

"Bhante," they replied.

The Blessed One said, "Body is not self. If this body was self, it would not tend to get sick, and I could make it become what I want. But because body is not self, it does tend to get sick, and I cannot make it become what I want. Feeling is not self. Perception is not self. Constructions are not self. Awareness is not self. If this awareness was self, it would not tend to get sick, and I could make it become what I want. But because awareness is not self, it does tend to get sick, and I cannot make it become what I want."

So he goes through the five aggregates, the khandhas. When the Buddha speaks about self, atman, and not-self, he always talks about it in terms of these five aggregates associated with clinging, which we saw before as the deepest level of dukkha. Remem-

ber when he was analyzing dukkha and said constructing dukkha is the deepest layer? He said, "What is this dukkha? It's the five aggregates associated with clinging." And now he's laying out what these are, what he means by this.

So let's go through them. There's body, feeling, perception, constructions, and awareness.

Body is all physical experience.

Feeling, as we've talked about, is the affective aspect of experience—that which moves me, that which stimulates a response. I am moved to hold on to, to become intimate with what is pleasant. I am moved to distance myself from or reject what is painful. And I am moved to ignore or to be doubtful and confused about what is neither painful nor pleasant.

Then we get perception. This is the recognition or interpretation of any given experience—what gives familiarity and meaning to an experience. For example, I step into this hall and I recognize, "Oh, this is the meditation hall at the Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre." That recognition is perception.

Then we have constructions, which here means all choices or decisions to act. This takes us to the teaching of karma.

And finally, we have awareness, the pure presence or witnessing of any experience.

If we ask what role these five aggregates play, essentially they are the experiences that we use as raw materials to construct an identity. So: I am my body. I am the one who experiences the distinctive pattern of feeling and responses that govern my life. I am the one who perceives the world in this particular way. I am the one who makes the decisions that guide my life. And most intimately, I am the one who is aware of all of this.

The five aggregates constitute that which can be clung to, or that which holds the potential for clinging, because they constitute identity. Me. And therefore, they are what we find irresistible. The aggregates are attractive—not attractive in the surface sense of being pleasant, but in the deep sense of being what preoccupies us the most. Consider, for example, our relationship to mirrors. Whether I like what I see or do not like what I see, I have to look.

Our deepest pain is attractive in the sense that it attracts our attention. We cannot let it go. We cling to it ferociously. And why do we do that? Because clinging results in an identity. When we cling, we know who we are, we know what we are. Identity gives us

certainty, and we certainly crave certainty. Why is despair so seductive? Because when I'm in a state of despair, I know who I am. I am the one in a hopeless situation, and there is a security in that recognition.

Now the Buddha says, "If this body was self, it would not tend to get sick, and I could make it become what I want." And he goes through the same reasoning for all five aggregates. For the first one, body, this kind of makes sense. But what do we mean by awareness becoming sick? Or perception becoming sick?

The word that I translate here as "sick" is *ābādhāya*, a term that indicates sickness, oppression, affliction—it has a collective meaning. So you could say, "If this body was self, it would not tend to be afflicted, oppressed." In other words, it would not be subject to pain, essentially.

If it was self, why wouldn't it be subject to pain and affliction? Remember that this teaching is coming out of the Upanishadic tradition. In that tradition, Ātman does not change and is therefore blissful. This is partly because of the bliss of stillness, but it's also partly because change is incompatible with Ātman, with self, because things change in ways that are out of our control.

Does the body change? Yes. Does the body change in ways that are out of my control? Yes—therefore it is not self. If I'm looking for Ātman, I won't find it there.

Atman, yes. This is one of the difficulties of understanding what's going on, because there is this cultural background that the Buddha and the people around him just take for granted. But we don't. One of the reasons why I raise this is to establish the context—this is why he's talking about it in this way. But it does fit psychologically as well, which we'll get into. It's a really helpful concept.

So body and the other aggregates are not self because they change. And the ways that they change, I cannot control. The central aspect of dukkha, as outlined in the Four Truths, is the pain of change—viparinama dukkha. Change that is beyond my control. I am changing because I'm getting older, and I'm subject to the pain and the weaknesses of age. Now, does this happen because I want it to? No. In fact, I'd rather it didn't. Does it just happen? Am I its unwilling victim? If any aspect of myself is subject to change and pain, then it is not atman in the Upanishadic sense, the sense that was familiar to the Buddha and his audience at that time, what was culturally familiar to them.

But it also applies to what we might call the psychological self. Let's say I'm constructing an identity, who I think I am. To construct an identity, a self in the psychological sense, what do I need? What's necessary to do it?

Well, first of all, I have to be separate and distinct from other selves. Separation is fundamental to my sense of myself. There cannot be self without others. And if there are others, well, there must be me. But I'm not those others—I'm me. If there are others, then there's me. If there's me, there are others. They always go together.

So to be separate and distinct from other selves, it's necessary to identify some unchanging characteristics that provide a stable sense of identity, of stability in the identity. This is the person that I remain throughout all the ups and downs of life. For example, I know things change—it's pretty obvious. I know I'm getting old and I know the world is changing. But all of that perception rests on the assumption that there is some permanent underlying "I" that is subject to these changes I complain about and in essence remains the same.

I remember a lightning flash of realization when I was quite young, at university. I lived in a student household in Sydney, and one of the people living there at the time was this young woman who was quite slender. I remember her as tall, although that could be a visual misperception because it just meant she was taller than me—and that's most of the population. I remember explaining to her one night that I was lean and tough as whipcord. She looked down her nose at me and said, "You're not lean, Patrick. You're pudgy."

At the time I wasn't pleased with this perception. But sitting up here now, I'd be really pleased to be pudgy again. So there was this young bloke who was pudgy. Now there's this old bloke who's fat. But to me, it's the same person. That hasn't changed. Everything else has changed, but what hasn't changed is that was me back then—the same me who's sitting here tonight.

So identification requires some unchanging characteristics that provide the sense of identity. We need that for ourselves. And we need to possess something subject to the control of this identity. This includes possessions in the normal sense of the word, such as my watch. But there are also aspects of myself to which it makes sense to refer to as "mine." For example, my body. That makes sense, doesn't it? My thoughts.

my feelings. And this sense of possession extends to our social identity—my relationship, my job, my reputation.

The Buddha is undermining our assumption of permanence, permanence in the sense of lasting unchanged over time, and he's undermining our sense of possession. He's saying that we cannot find any aspect of ourselves that lasts unchanged over time, and we cannot find any aspect of what we claim as mine which we actually control.

For example, if any possession of mine is characterized as being under my control, then who here possesses their own meditation practice? And yet, don't we call it "my practice"? You notice it doesn't quite work?

So the Buddha is undermining our assumption of permanence. And then he moves on to examine the relationship between change and pain. He says, "What do you think, bhikkhus? Is body permanent or impermanent?" "Impermanent, Bhante." "And that which is impermanent, is it painful or pleasurable?" "Painful, Bhante." "And that which is painful and subject to change, is it appropriate to regard it in terms of 'this is mine, I am this, this is myself'?" "Certainly not, Bhante."

You do get the impression that the bhikkhus were yes-men. Let's assume they meant it.

So this is the second argument that the Buddha presents. Experience is impermanent. It is anicca, changing. Whatever experience we identify with as "me" turns into something else. And so it cannot be me, because that means that with the disappearance of that experience, I die. And more than that, anything which is impermanent is unreliable.

Here we come to the Pali word which helps us understand what's going on. The word that usually gets translated as "impermanent" is anicca—where the "a" is the negative prefix. So, not nicca in Pali, or in Sanskrit not nitya. Now, nicca or nitya, in ordinary everyday language in the Buddha's time, refers to that which is permanent and therefore that which is reliable. This is a central aspect of the meaning which we miss in the abstract term "impermanent."

Let's say that a city has a permanent water supply. That means it's got a reliable water supply. That means its inhabitants do not have to worry about drought. They can relax, at least about this. But if the water supply is anicca, that means it will, at some time, disappoint, because it will, at some time, fail. It's not a question of if, it's a question of when. What is certain here is that the water supply will fail, and this fact is not under my control.

If something is beyond my control, and ultimately, because of its failure, a source of distress, then for the Upanishadic tradition, it does not qualify as atman, as self. What the Buddha is saying is that every experience we track changes. So no experience qualifies as self.

But if identity—who I deeply think I am, who I deeply feel I am—is not atman, not self, then what is it? For the Buddha, identity is a construction project. And it's a construction project which is never completed. In that sense, it's rather like a lot of home renovation projects. I speak from bitter experience.

So it's not something already given, already here. It's something that is under construction. And this project of self or identity construction has three fundamental movements, according to the Buddha: craving, conceit, and view.

Let's look at these three. The first one is craving, which we've talked about—drivenness, tanha—which we're familiar with from the Four Truths. This is the movement "this is mine." It can be seen here as the drive to possess. We talked about the Buddhist teaching concerning dukkha, which is a painful emptiness, a sense of lack at the core of our being. We feel we are missing something, and we're driven to fill that gap.

So tanha represents the affective drive that fuels our delusion and attachments, expressed in things like narcissism and consumerism—the craving to possess, "this is mine." And of course, this is what the advertising industry is built around.

We can see it broadly in the drive to production and consumption, but we can see it more subtly in ourselves as the drive to possess experience. In other words, my relationship to experience is always colored by the sense of, "What can I get out of this? What's in it for me?"

Even when we're doing the meditation practice—this is *my* meditation experience. Or when I'm sitting, doing a meditation session, do I have a sense that it's going well? Doesn't that mean that I feel I am getting something out of this? Isn't it the drive to possess? Or if you do a meditation retreat and you're very happy with it, very satisfied, feeling you're very close to attaining full awakening, you might be tempted to say, "I got a lot out of this retreat." And again, it's this drive to possess.

If we ask, "What is a possession?" we find that if something is mine, it's part of me. It's not just an object in the world. If we ask, "Where is the boundary of the self?"—we might say the edges of the body, that seems obvious. But when we look more closely, we can see that the self actually extends beyond the body into what is mine, my possessions.

For example, my watch, which I'm wearing tonight. What makes my watch unique? Thousands have been manufactured, all of them identical. But this watch is special, different, unique—because this watch is mine, which makes it part of me.

And for the Buddha, if this is mine, then I should be in command of it. But does my watch obey my orders? Often it does, so I can take it for granted as mine and it confirms me and my project. But sometimes it misbehaves. It shows the wrong time. Or the battery runs out. Or the light is too poor to see the hands. Or my sight is declining so much that I can't read it. Or I lose it. Or someone takes it. And then the limits of my control become evident, along with the futility of depending on this possession for my sense of identity. What's true of the watch is true of every relationship of "this is mine."

The second movement is in English called conceit, and it has the form "I am this." Now, what gets translated as conceit is mana. It's not a good translation. Literally it means measuring. When we measure something, we define its boundaries—we define the border where this thing ends and other things begin. So mana, usually translated as conceit, appears as a sense of separation and therefore comparison.

Separation creates borders. It creates a fundamental duality of identity and difference in all of its forms. It creates the world of this and that, here and there, near and far, good and bad, better and worse, and so on. Separation also creates identity as "I in here" and "you out there," which are different. And one way we can see how this mana, this conceit, this measuring appears...

is as a sense of what is important to me. I and mine are here and important. You and yours are out there and not so important. Them and theirs are way out there and so even less important. The more distant, the less important.

And this is not necessarily the distance of geography, but of identity. For most Australians, for example, Asia is further away than Europe, despite being actually a lot closer in terms of physical distance. Asia is more distant, more separated in culture, history, relevance. We do not construct a collective identity as Southern Asians. Our collective identity is as Europeans living on the wrong side of the world. So this sense of distance is more psychological than geographical or physical.

This is conceit: "I am this."

And finally we arrive at view, *diṭṭhi*: "This is myself." Craving and conceit are bound together. Craving energises conceit. We are driven to possess and to identify as something—"I am this." It's not enough to be other, to be separate. We want to be something, something specific. And we find this something through view.

This is the most surface, the most visible of these three movements. One way to recognise it in action, which you've seen throughout this retreat, is how the creation of self culminates in a story—the story that defines myself to me and to others. We define ourselves through stories. We remember through stories. We construct a future through stories. In a fundamental sense, we *are* stories.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett, way back in the last century, wrote that we do not tell our stories—our stories tell us. I think that sums it up very nicely. The self can be seen as the centre of narrative gravity, the foundational stories we come back to again and again.

This is the view of identity, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, which we've mentioned, abandoned only at stream entry. It's bound up with narrative, with story. Craving and conceit operate at more basic levels, beneath the story. But view bursts above the surface as a story of a self within a social world.

This is one reason why tracking the thought stream can be such powerful practice. When we see the emptiness of our thinking, it's a gateway into recognising the emptiness of the self.

Story is significant because stories give us meaning. They're the ways in which we create the meaning of our lives. And the stories within which I live are actually more real to me than the physical world I inhabit.

Consider the simple activity of hanging out the clothes. Externally, from an observer's perspective, if we ask, "What is this person doing?" it's pretty obvious—they're hanging clothes out on the line. But from the actor's perspective, from inside the experience, the activity may be thinking, creating a reality by telling a story. A story which is more real and more compelling than the physical act of hanging out the clothes. The routine physical activity does not grab, because its narrative power is weak, even if its direct sensate quality is strong. Still, we easily forget that and slide into the world of the story.

This is why thinking is so seductive. Thinking creates meaning. And with that, it creates a self within a world.

So that's an internal self bound up with stories. But we also have the social self, which is likewise bound up with stories—but here it's the stories that other people tell about us.

Let's say I meet with family on some special occasion, Christmas or whatever. To my shock, I realise why I don't like these gatherings: I realise that they're relating to me as the person they knew twenty or thirty years ago, rather than the person I am now. But what's even more alarming is that I find myself relating to them as that person of thirty years ago. Somehow they have the power to define my own identity, which is quite unsettling when it happens.

This is view, the most surface aspect of the construction of self.

But basically, for the Buddha, what we're doing all of the time is creating a self which is real—but real only as a construct of the mind, a network of concepts and feelings. Yet we are convinced that there is more to it than just concepts. We believe that the self creates the concepts and that our concepts point back toward the self. But when we look for the creator of the concepts, the writer of the stories, we can't find it.

And when we look for the one for whom these concepts are created, the audience of our thoughts, we can't find him. We can't find anyone. So we're convinced that there is someone here, but the self that seems so real, so important, that it dominates the way that we live, is also so ephemeral that we cannot pin it down in any experience.

So this is an exposition of how the Buddha sees self as a construction project. And in the next talk, we're going to describe how the Buddha explains the deconstruction of self and how the understanding of not-self emerges.

Question: Occasionally you have said that you choose to go and be monks or this or that. And then you've said that we are just a sensory flow of information. I have talked to masters and they have assured me there is choice. I can't see a choice. I was wondering what Buddha's view is on choice.

This is one of the tricky questions for the Buddha's teaching, because he says choice is real but there's no one making the choice. So choice is conditioned. But this system of conditioning which he calls dependent arising is a very complex, non-linear system, and it's possible for us to influence it, to change its direction. So he doesn't teach determinism.

For him, choice is conditioned, but we can do things that change our relationship to choice. A lot of the choices that we make are habitual, and so we simply do not see them. And if we do not see them, we don't think that we're making a choice. If we can see ourselves making a choice, then there's an opportunity to influence it. It can be conditioned by desire, aversion, aspiration, whatever.

So choice is very important, and for the Buddha, choice is karma. Karma is very important. But for the Buddha, if you ask what is karma, it is choice.

Basically, in practical terms, he says, look, there's a lot of our experience which is already given. Let's say you come along to a meditation retreat and at some point in the retreat you think, "I really wish I hadn't come. I just want to get out of here." I'm sure no one in this room has ever had that thought. But when that thought arises, you realise, well, there's a sense in which I'm stuck. I'm already here. And my past conditioned me in all sorts of ways which ended up with me here, now. And this is a given.

So the question is: okay, what do I do about it? And this is where choice comes up. Well, I could leave, or I could stay. So suddenly there's an opening out. And the Buddha says this area where we have an opportunity to influence the flow of events is crucially important. He insists that we do have that ability.

Follow-up: I don't see it because, for example, with your example of the retreat—I would probably say that for me personally, I've never left a retreat. I hardly lose my record, or a certain stubbornness which is innate to my personality. Or someone may think, "I don't want other people to think something of me if I leave the retreat," so their personality, which they haven't chosen, is determining the outcome rather than a choice.

So you can say that there's the appearance of a choice, but in reality it's being conditioned by past events. This is a teaching which certainly was around when the Buddha was around, and there's one discourse in which he explicitly rejects it. He says there are three views that he rejected, if I remember correctly, even before he became the Buddha. One is that everything that happens, happens as a result of previous causes—which I think is the view you're suggesting. Another is that everything that happens, happens as a result of fate. And the third is that everything that happens, happens because of the will of God.

He laid out these three views, and he rejected all of them. But interestingly, he didn't reject them because he thought they were wrong—although I suspect he did think they were wrong. He rejected them because he said, if you actually believe, genuinely believe, any of these three doctrines, you will give up. And that's the worst thing to do. So it's better to believe that there is a choice, even if it turns out there isn't. Because then we won't give up. We'll keep going. And things will happen.

Someone raised the point that this connects to the whole idea of reaching an unconditioned state—that as you become more unconditioned, you have more genuine choice.

Yes, that opens up a whole new can of worms when we start talking about the unconditioned. I think you're right, but I don't want to go there, because I think we could be here all night.

This is part of the idea behind pragmatic truth. This isn't the Buddha specifically, but there is a school of philosophical reasoning about truth which argues that what's central about truth isn't whether or not something actually is factual, but whether it is useful. Does it work? And I think the Buddha would have had sympathy with that kind of approach, because his basic project wasn't philosophy. He wasn't doing philosophy. What he wanted was the reduction of suffering. So how can I help people work towards less suffering? Well, if they believe they have a choice, that'll make it easier. So why not believe you've got a choice? I suspect that's where he was coming from.

Someone mentioned the sense of momentum in the mind—how did they end up here, finding the Dharma, practicing, having the inclination toward it? Why me?

Yes, there is something quite mysterious about it, which I don't think gets captured in any philosophical discussion or doctrine. I think the Buddha's approach was basically very pragmatic. Does it work? Does this take me towards less suffering or more suffering? I think I'll go for that one. Which is a choice. Which I'm not making because it's already been made. This is where it just spins around and around and around.

Even with all those conditions we were talking about, you could still walk out. You wake up in the morning, have a nice sleep, and just walk out. It's still possible. Anything is possible, but the question is where does it come from? I don't think there's any answer to these kinds of debates—not philosophically. Existentially there's an answer. Am I going to make a choice or not? But philosophically, I think it just goes around and around forever.

Then someone asked about stream entry. They were confused because three of the ascetics—actually, all five of them—achieved stream entry before they learned about not-self. But isn't the marker of stream entry the perception of not-self?

Yes, but that's a way of reading what happened.

So the doctrine of not-self is a way of reading experience. It's a conceptual overlay we put on top of experience. And apparently the Buddha hadn't introduced that until after they all attained stream entry. He was very careful. For example, he talked about the middle way first—and the middle way implies not-self. So he had already introduced it in that form, the form of practice. Finding the middle way of practice, but without challenging the Upanishadic doctrine directly. He waited until he felt they were ready.

The fact that the Buddha taught *anātman*, not-self, was controversial in his time. He did cop flack for doing it, and he cops flack to this very day. There are Indians who would say, "Oh, Buddha was a Hindu. He's part of our proud Indian tradition. And while there are heretics who claim he taught not-self, really he taught self—just a more subtle form of self." Because they can't quite accept this not-self. When I was teaching retreats in India, it was interesting how many students were quite disturbed at this idea of not-self and me saying it's important. "What? But we're talking about the Buddha, aren't we? He's the great Indian sage." So we're talking about concept and the clinging to concept. He was careful not to introduce that concept until he was quite sure everybody was ready for it. But then, once it was out of the bag, it was out there.

Student: Just to clarify, in this sutta the Buddha is talking about what self is not. But he's not challenging the self itself. He's saying the factors known as contributing to self are not self, and he explains why. He's not actually saying self exists or self doesn't exist.

Teacher: He never says self exists. He never says self does not exist. Bingo. He says, "This is not self. This is not self." He's always explicit. In other words, he's always interested in this experience.

Student: So that still leaves the question mark—is there self or not? We're just not talking about it?

Teacher: Let's go into this later on. It's a very interesting point. We'll explore it.

So the aggregates are conditioned by other things. The self we perceive is made up of non-self elements.

Student: When you go into the discourse about stream entry and once-returner—if there's a once-returner, who returns?

Teacher: This is really a question of language. Let's say you're living with an enlightened one. And let's say you decide it's time for a nice cup of coffee. The enlightened one, full of compassion, gets up, goes to the fridge, and says, "Oh, there's no milk. Don't worry, I'll just nip down to the shop and bring back a bottle." Would you be horrified and say, "How could you say that? You know there's no self!"

So should the enlightened one say, "In this infinitely complex universe, innumerable dharmas arise and cease. Arising in this particular *citta* located approximately here is the decision to move this physical apparatus in the direction of what would appear to be a shop"? And after five minutes of explanation, finally manage to communicate that they're going down to the shop to get a bottle of milk.

This is conventional language. The Buddha uses conventional language, but he's not suggesting there's a direct experience that corresponds to that language.

So this is the difference between the world of direct experience, the world of the dharmas, versus the world of concept. But the world of concept is necessary, otherwise we'd be paralyzed, we couldn't function. So the Buddha uses this kind of language, but knowing that fundamentally it's not true, but it's useful.

Of course, in the tradition, as Buddhism becomes a mass religion, most of the people have not realized. So they get caught up in the language. They assume that the "I" of the language is real. "I will be reborn," for example. But just for entertainment's sake, in a few days' time we're going to have a talk on rebirth, and we'll go into it then. Should stir things up.

Question from student about the phrase "it happened for a reason" being common in Australia.

I like to write things on my window in the back of the car. I have yet to get my tire slashed. But what I've got is: "It happened for a reason" — and I crossed out "for a" and put "because of." I invite anybody to write that on the back of your window.

Very good.

CHAPTER 54

Origins 6: Not-Self Part 2

Patrick Kearney · 46 min

In this continuation of the exploration of the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, Patrick Kearney examines how the Buddha guides practitioners from seeing the construction of self to its deconstruction. The talk draws a fascinating comparison between the Buddha's radical empiricism and the Upaniṣadic teacher Yājñavalkya's teaching in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad—both agree that we cannot experience the self directly, yet the Buddha uniquely refuses to infer a metaphysical self behind experience.

Kearney illuminates the crucial turning point of nibbidā (disenchantment)—not disgust, but a profound 'finding out' that is both cognitive and affective, moving the heart to say 'enough.' This leads to virāga, the gradual fading of obsession likened to cloth slowly losing its colour through washing, representing the natural maturation of the citta. The talk clarifies the relationship between vimutti (liberation)—a sudden, arrow-like release of awareness—and the gradual understanding that follows and integrates the experience into life.

The discourse culminates in the phrase 'there is no further becoming,' which Kearney interprets not merely as referring to future lives but to the self's need for time to complete its construction project. When becoming ceases, what remains is pure presence—'suchness' (tathatā)—the intimate experiencing that is always with us yet hidden precisely because it is so close. Through the memorable story of two fish asking 'What is water?', Kearney points to how liberation is found by going deeper into our own subjectivity, discovering what is most obvious yet most concealed.

Last night we went through the opening of the Anatta Lakhana Sutta, the second of the formal discourses given by the Buddha. We pointed out how the Buddha introduces the subject of not-self explicitly. It's implicit in what he's done so far, but he talks about this explicitly only after his students have attained the vision of Dharma—the first stage of awakening. He then uses the not-self teaching as a guide to full awakening, which indicates that anatta is an advanced teaching. So don't be too quick to try to understand it, and don't be discouraged if you feel that you don't.

We talked mostly about what we could call the psychological self, and in fact this is the Buddha's main emphasis—the self who we deeply think we are, who we deeply feel we are. Of course, when the Buddha was teaching, the social context included the popularity of the doctrinal self, the Atman of the Upanishads. This may have been a reason

why he delayed before talking about it. This doctrine of Atman would be what his audiences took for granted as part of their belief system, especially the learned audiences, the people who had studied to some degree. But our interest is not in the philosophical, doctrinal sense of self. We're interested in the psychological self, because this is the self that we engage with in our practice.

Last night we saw how the Buddha introduces the subject of not-self by showing that our experience is not under our control, and therefore should not be related to as me and mine. Control is inherent to selfhood. If I'm a self, I get to choose what I do. If I'm a self, then I possess body, mind, possessions, social status, and so on. And if they're mine, I must be in charge of them. I must be able to control them. So when the Buddha starts to undermine our sense of control, he's undermining our sense of self.

He points out that self is not some metaphysical entity. It's an activity. It's a construction project—the construction of a self-concept based on three movements: craving, conceit, and view. Craving appears as the movement "this is mine." Conceit appears as "I am this." And view appears as "this is myself."

As we mentioned last night, you notice that at no point in this discourse has the Buddha said the self does not exist. In fact, I don't think he ever says that. Nor does he ever say that the self does exist. He's not getting entangled in these philosophical debates. What he's saying is that we never experience self. Whatever we experience turns out to be not-self. This is one reason why he keeps saying "this is not self"—this experience isn't self—rather than "there is no self."

In this he agrees with Yajnavalkya. He was a founding teacher of the Upanishadic tradition who lived about two or three centuries before the Buddha in the Videha kingdom. This is the area in what is now northern Bihar state that the Bodhisattva first went to after he left home, where he practiced meditation and studied Dharma under at least two teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddhaka Ramaputta. Yajnavalkya came from this area, and his tradition was still quite strong. He was the creator of the Brihadaranyika Upanishad, one of the early famous Upanishads. He either composed it or it was composed by his students looking back to his memory.

So let's look at a brief teaching on self given by Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyika Upanishad. Yajnavalkya says: "You cannot see the seer from seeing. You cannot hear the hearer from hearing. You cannot think the thinker from thinking. You cannot know the knower from knowing."

Now this is a very interesting statement, because who is the seer? Who is the hearer? Who is the knower? It's atma, it's self. So Yajnavalkya is agreeing with the Buddha that everything we experience is not self. He and the Buddha are in full agreement on this point.

But Yajnavalkya infers that there is a self, because there is experience. And for him, self—atma—is what lies behind experience, what undergoes experience, what makes experience itself possible.

To get a sense of his argument, which is quite interesting, let's consider in ordinary, mundane, non-philosophical terms the question: What is the one thing I can never see? The one thing in the visible world that I can never see. And the answer is obvious: my own eyes. I cannot see my eyes because I see from my eyes. Now I can see the reflection of my eyes in a mirror, but I cannot see my own eyes directly.

So let's say I was a strict empiricist. I've never seen my own eyes. It's perfectly clear to me I don't have eyes. You have eyes, and you have eyes, and you seem to have eyes, but I don't—because I've never seen them. Well, it's not very convincing, is it? Obviously I've got eyes because I can see.

This is what Yajnavalkya is getting at. Obviously there is an Atman, there is a soul, because there is experience. There is knowing, so there must be a knower. But because we know from the knower, we cannot know the knower. Yet we know there is one because we know.

What makes the Buddha unusual at the time, if not unique, is that he refuses to make that move. He refuses to infer the soul. If we try to pin down the Buddha philosophically, we could call him a radical empiricist. He's an empiricist because what he's interested in is human experience. He's radical because that's the entirety of what he's interested in. He's not interested in anything else. If something is beyond the range of our experience, he doesn't want to say anything about it. He doesn't want to say it exists. He doesn't want to say it does not exist. He refuses to move beyond actual felt experience to speculate about what might or might not exist beyond the range of human experience.

And he's consistent with this throughout, including when he talks about life after life, when he talks about deva realms and all this sort of stuff, because he's experienced these things. As far as he's concerned—there might be members of the audience who grimace and say, "No, I don't think so"—but this is what he thought and believed.

Now what we do, of course, perhaps even more than Yajnavalkya, is that we move beyond our actual experience in order to make sense of it, to navigate it, by creating a concept of a self within a world. And this construction project, the Buddha says, is driven by craving and results in dukkha.

In the first part of the Anattalakkhana Sutta, the Buddha reveals how the self concept is constructed, and this allows us to see self as an activity rather than an identity. You get the term "selfing" in there. When we're doing this practice, much of what we're seeing in real time is selfing—creating a soul operating within a world.

In the second part of the discourse, he goes on to explain how this self concept is deconstructed. The first aspect of this, of course, is to see it being constructed. You can't begin to deconstruct it until we see it as a construct.

But let's take the next step. The Buddha says—and remember that when he talks about self, he talks about it in terms of the five aggregates: body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness—he says: "For any kind of body, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, superior or inferior, near or far—all body should be regarded with penetrating understanding, realistically, in this way: This is not mine. I am not this. This is not my soul."

You notice the focus is on experience. This experience here and now is not self. No grand philosophical conclusions. Just this is not so.

For any kind of feeling, for any kind of perception, for any kind of construction, for any kind of awareness—past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, superior or inferior, near or far—all awareness should be regarded with penetrating understanding realistically in this way: This is not mine. I am not this. This is not my soul.

So here we've reached the heart of the discourse: the practice of tracking not-self.

Now, what kind of experience do we apply this practice to? Well, the Buddha says any experience that can be characterized by its location in time, space, or quality. Time: past, future, or present. Space: internal or external, near or far. Quality: gross or subtle, superior or inferior.

In shorthand, what this is basically talking about is any experience subject to *māna*. Remember we talked about *māna*, usually translated as conceit, literally "measured." It appears as the fundamental sense of separation that enables an event to be experienced as this rather than that, here rather than there, then rather than now, painful

rather than pleasant, and so on. Important rather than trivial. These are the categories that provide the meaning of everything we undergo. And at the heart of this is *māna*—measuring.

Notice again that throughout this teaching the Buddha is pointing to what body, feeling, perception, constructions, and awareness are *not*. He makes no attempt ever to say what they *are*. He's not giving us a theory to fill the gap. He's not going to tell us what's going on. Why not? Needless to say, I'm not going to answer that—at least not now.

So the Buddha goes on: "Seeing in this way, the trained, cultivated student is disenchanted with body, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with constructions, disenchanted with awareness. With disenchantment, obsession fades. And from the fading of obsession comes liberation. With liberation comes the understanding of liberation, along with the knowledge: birth is exhausted, the highest life is fulfilled, what should be done is done, there is no further becoming."

Let's go through this translation in two small paragraphs. First of all, it's all about the trained, cultivated student. This is, in other words, a mature practitioner. Again we have an indication that *anattā* is something that can be appreciated only by someone mature and developed in their practice.

The turning point in this is disenchantment. In earlier translations—and you still tend to see it sometimes today—this gets translated as something like "disgust," which is absolutely ridiculous given that disgust is an emotion fueled by aversion. The Buddha is definitely not talking about this. He's talking about something quite different.

The term I translate here as disenchantment is *nibbidā*. It comes from the root *vid*, to experience, to find, also to feel. In front of it is the prefix *nir*, which in Pali becomes *nib*—so *nibbidā* is a finding out, a discovery of something. Enchantment always implies *avijjā*, delusion. We're enchanted with something only when we don't really understand it, when we are intoxicated by it.

For example, dare I say, the delusions of romantic love. Nibbida also implies a moving out, away from our normal experience to something quite new. So when we really discover what's going on, our relationship to it changes. We're moved to a new response, a different response. For example, over time, the movement from romantic love to a much more stable love, based on mutual care and friendship.

Now, classical examples of nibbida. One is Gotama's disillusionment with domestic life when, as a young man, he first realized dukkha, and then left home in search of awakening. Disenchantment—he was disenchanted with his way of life. Another is Got-

ama's disillusionment with asceticism, when he realized it was completely futile and abandoned it in search of a new way of practicing. These are classical examples of nibbida that the Buddha would have drawn on from his own experience.

Nibbida, disenchantment, embraces the entire human condition, both cognitive and affective. It is affective in that the heart is moved to say "enough." And it does that through an intimacy of experience, becoming intimate with the experience. For example, we find ourselves obsessed with painful stories, endlessly recycling them. When we meditate, they just come up as ambushes, endlessly recycling. When they stop is when, quite genuinely, we've had enough. When we've had enough, we stop. And if the stories are still circulating, it's because we haven't had enough yet. This would suggest we haven't been intimate enough yet.

So nibbida is affective, but it's also cognitive. It's a finding out, a discovery, an understanding that arises—a new understanding that arises as part of that response. The heart has changed. What previously seemed desirable is not anymore, because the heart has changed and our desires have moved on to focus on something else that has become interesting, stimulating, necessary. And again, it's cognitive because from the change in the heart, the world is now different. What was previously hidden from us is now obvious. We find ourselves living in a different world.

So this is the turning point. Nibbida.

Actually, I'm reminded of a Sydney barrister—the man who developed that ABC series about the rake. Do you remember *Rake*? The eccentric barrister? Well, the person who invented that character was himself a Sydney barrister and was an alcoholic. He used to write columns, and in one of them he said, "I wish when I was young that somebody had explained to me that there is only so much alcohol a human body can consume in a given lifetime. Because if I'd known that, I wouldn't have used up my share by the time I was forty." It's quite interesting because clearly he had an experience of limit. One day he decided, "That's enough now." And that's when you stop.

So the Buddha says, "With disenchantment, obsession fades. And from the fading of obsession comes liberation."

Obsession fades. This is viraga. And this indicates a natural process of maturity. I think we've mentioned this before. Viraga is the opposite of raga. Raga literally means "colour." So viraga is the fading of colour.

And the image is that Indians liked brightly coloured clothing. So let's say you buy a set of robes, because they wore robes rather than trousers, and it's a beautiful colour. You wear it, and it gets dirty, so you wash it. After it's dry, you look at it, and you realise this is good quality dye, because it looks exactly the same. And so you continue to wear it and wash it, dry it, wash it, dry it, wash it, wash it, wash it.

And that colour really holds. It's really good quality. And one day, when you put it on, you realise, actually, it's not the same colour. It's fading. This is viraga. And you notice that it's slow—so slow that you don't notice it from day to day, week to week, even month to month. So it's a natural process of maturity where desire changes.

Actually, one time I was talking about this, and I used to give the example: it's like if you're ten years old and you're completely obsessed with certain toys and activities, and by the time you reach adulthood, you've not only left all these behind, you've completely forgotten about them. Because your desire has moved on to something new. And there was one fellow in the audience, English originally but living in Australia, and he cried out in objection, "Except football!" I have to admit, that might be an exception.

Anyway, so this indicates a gradual, natural process of maturity of the citta. The world is different. We're not so driven. We have some distance. So the heart moves, but we have a different attitude. It's like watching a really good drama on television. If the script is good, the production value is good, the acting is good, we get really drawn in. As the characters go through their drama, we feel an emotion that comes up and flows along with the story. The story moves us. So the emotion we are feeling is real, genuine. But while this emotion is real, we can clearly see that the situation is not real. It's a created narrative. And we can see that in real time.

So this is the kind of relationship to experience that begins to emerge. One way of looking at it is that we could say the experiencing itself is more real than what we think we experience. The experiencing itself is what's real. Which means we're no longer so bound up in our affective responses and our conceptual view, because we can see them as part of a wider network of conditioning, and these conditions come and go.

And then the Buddha says, with liberation comes the understanding of liberation. Along with the knowledge: birth is exhausted, the highest life is fulfilled, what should be done is done, there is no further becoming.

So with disenchantment, obsession fades. From the fading of obsession comes liberation. Liberation translates vimutti. In Sanskrit, this is vimoksha. Now it comes from the verb munjiti, to release. In everyday language, this verb is also used to describe the release of an arrow from a bow. When an arrow is released from the bow, it goes—sud-

den. And liberation implies a sudden movement of awareness, even a shock of awareness. Suddenly we know something new, something different. Perhaps not yet defined at that moment. We don't necessarily put it into language. But we know—bang!—something just happened. Beyond any previous perception of normality.

And liberation is essentially affective. The heart is moved and changed. So with liberation comes the understanding of liberation. The understanding is more cognitive and implies a reflexive distance, a looking back upon the situation.

So we know ourselves to be different. We know the world to be different.

Now, without understanding, the experience of liberation might fail to become anything more than a memory with no particular significance—no significance for the way that we live. It's like in meditation, for example: we may have a new, unexpected experience, but we don't know what it is, and we don't know what it means. And so it fails. It's just an interesting memory. But if we understand it, if we can fit it into a context, then the experience itself is completed. It becomes part of a new normal and is integrated into our lives.

Liberation is like a sudden flash. Suddenly something happens that changes our relationship to the world, and it seems to come from outside, from beyond ourselves. While understanding, in contrast, comes gradually. It matures over time. And we don't know the unit of time. It may be a day. It may be a month. It may be a year. It may be a decade. It may be fifty years. But who's counting? What does fifty years mean when time is just a concept?

But something starts to happen, and we now can put this experience into a context.

Just to give an example: when I was at the Mahasi Centre, I had ordained, and a close friend of mine, who I practiced with, was a young monk, originally from the US. He began his meditation practice when he was about twenty. He went to a retreat run by a very well-known teacher, and he jumped right into it. Towards the end of the retreat, something happened. Click. Which was clearly significant. And he went to interview. He said what happened. Now, he said his memory of this was not entirely guaranteed clear, because it was at least ten years ago and it happened very quickly. But it was like the teacher did this really quick double take and muttered something like, "Nah, couldn't be." And then said, "Don't worry about it, calm down, everything's okay." And sent him off.

And he was okay. The retreat ended, he left, he went home, and his whole world collapsed. He was thrashing about. But he had the—in Buddhist terms—the *pāramī*, the affinity with the Dharma, not to give up on this. It impelled him into serious meditation, into spiritual quest.

So we're standing on the veranda of the foreign male guest house at the Mahasi Centre. He had just come out of his room, and I was in the corridor. I said, "Venerable Sir, you look like the cat who's just swallowed the fish. You look very pleased with yourself. What happened?"

So he tells me this story. And I'm wondering, why is he telling me this long story? He finishes by saying, "About five minutes ago, I had that same experience. And this time, the response was: 'Ah, that's where it is.'" Completely different response. That's where it is. I understand it now. And it's not a problem.

The Buddha speaks of how this understanding matures into full awakening. With liberation comes the understanding of liberation, along with the knowledge: "Birth is exhausted, the highest life is fulfilled, what should be done is done, there is no further becoming."

Now, this last sentence actually jumps to the end of the story, to when the practitioner becomes an Arahant, fully awakened. So we're just going to jump to the end, with the final—

understanding there is no further becoming. This is one expression the Buddha uses to describe full awakening.

Now, the further becoming—if there is further becoming—by the way, this expression is sometimes translated to mean life after life, there is no future life. But it actually doesn't mention life. It's just literally "further becoming." Sometimes you see the expression "further becoming in the future," and this is interpreted as meaning the Buddha's talking about future lives. He doesn't mention them. He just says further becoming, sometimes in the future—like the further becoming when you leave this hall. That's further becoming in the future.

If we talk about further becoming, what we're talking about is the self, basically. Because the self exists as a trajectory that takes an identity constructed now from the past into the present, and from there to the future. The self is always associated with this trajectory through time because the self needs time. It's a construction project, and the self needs time to complete the project. So the classic objection: "I can't die today, my

life is still unfinished. There's still things I need to do." Time is built into the self. Further becoming is built into it. We need time to locate ourselves as someone permanent, someone who exists unchanged throughout our life.

So if you take away further becoming, what are we left with? Well, what we're left with is this, now—but not any story about this now. Any story we tell ourselves takes us back into time, back into further becoming. So when we let go of becoming, what we arrive at is pure presence. And this is the place where we began, and which we can recognize only when we drop all our manipulations and agendas, all our attempts to improve ourselves and improve our world so they finally become satisfactory to me.

Presence entails intimacy. When we drop our manipulations and our agendas, we become intimate with experience. And liberation takes place within this intimacy.

Another term that the Buddha uses to talk about this is suchness, which we've already discussed. Remember Ajahn Buddhadasa. The rain is pouring down. The meditators are completely sodden. And Buddhadasa says, "You think the rain is bad. On the other side of the hill there are farmers dancing in their fields because the rain means they can feed their families for another year. So they think the rain is good. You think the rain is bad. You're both wrong. The rain is wet. That's it."

This is suchness. This is intimacy. And where can we find it? By going deeper into our own subjectivity. This is the journey of the practice. And it's our own subjectivity which is both what is most obvious to us, but also what is most hidden. Suchness, for example, is obvious because it's with us all the time. It's with us in our experiencing, which is already happening all of the time. And suchness is hidden

Because our attention is usually directed away from our experiencing towards what is being experienced. Our attention goes there to grasp hold of what we are experiencing in order to judge it, measure it, manipulate it according to our projects and concerns.

But how I experience is more intimate than what I experience. And being more intimate, it is also hidden. It's so close to us that we cannot recognize it. It's like looking for something which is right in front of our eyes—and that's precisely why we can't see it.

When I first heard this story, I thought it perfectly illustrates this predicament. The story goes like this: Two little fish are calmly minding their own business, swimming in the water. In the distance, they see a big, mean, nasty fish swimming towards them. At

first, they're in a bit of a panic. What do we do? There's no point in trying to hide. We can't get away—he's already seen us. He'll notice that we're running. We've just got to swim past. Just ignore him.

So they swim very nervously. And the big fish swims past them. But as he's swimming past, he says, "Morning, boys. The water's beautiful today, isn't it?" And off he goes.

The two little fish have just gotten away—made it this time—and they're swimming off to a safe distance. And then one of the little fish says to the other, "What the hell is water?"

This is the situation we find ourselves in most of the time.

So the discourse ends. "This is what the Blessed One said, and the group of five bhikkhus rejoiced in his words. As he was speaking, they were fully liberated from the influences." Then there were six arahants in the world. The five of them became fully awakened, and from one arahant, one fully awakened one, we now have six. Things are pretty good.

And on that good news, we'll end the talk. Any questions?

What was your friend's insider experience?

I don't know. He didn't tell me. It was devastating to his worldview, that's for sure. And such experiences do happen. They can happen quite naively, in the sense that people are far from ready for such an experience. They can happen outside the context of meditation practice entirely—it could be in ordinary life, it could be a drug experience. Anything can happen. And suddenly you realize the world isn't what you thought it was.

And then what do you do? Maybe you find a good psychologist. It's part of the human condition. But some experiences are stronger than others, and some of them can be quite shocking. Yet we are simply talking about natural human experience. What the Buddha provides is a way of reading the experience—to make meaning of it in a way that helps us to live better.

Can you put presence in the context of Pali, maybe the khandhas or some Pali terminology? That term in English is used quite a lot.

"Presence" and "beingness" — did I say beingness? That's a stretch. But presence, definitely. Intimacy and a certain presence. You get a sense of it sometimes when the heart and the mind really settle and you're present and there's nothing getting in the way at all.

Yes, but how does that state fit into what the Buddha taught? What did the Buddha do with that?

In the context of the practice, it's strong mindfulness — nothing getting in the way — and therefore the heart is calm. So equanimity, there is an expression. You could also see it as nibbāna, because everything is cool and quiet. But the category of nibbāna here is *tadaṅga nibbāna*, which is usually translated as "temporary nibbāna." It's when the heart completely cools.

One teacher who really emphasized this was Ajahn Buddhadasa. He said every adult human being, for sure, has experienced nibbāna on at least one occasion — probably multiple occasions. And we can prove it because they're not all locked up in insane asylums. Otherwise they would go mad. So we must have experienced it. I don't know if that's right or not, but it's a very interesting view. Sometimes you do get the experience where all difficulty just — oh, it's gone. But then it comes back. So this could be described as *tadaṅga nibbāna*. I think it's in the Zen stories they talk about this. In Theravāda, not so much at all. But it's there in the suttas. And even Mahasi Sayadaw talks about it, amazingly enough.

I'm glad you mentioned that, because I've always felt that you have no experience in the sense that you "get there" and might like attaching this notion of nibbāna upon your arrival — but surely you have the temperament of the exit along the way.

So nibbāna is, again, part of the human condition. It's not something supernatural. None of what the Buddha taught was supernatural. But the question is: how do we allow ourselves to recognize it? Often the experience itself is a kind of falling in, purely by accident. And of course, when the grasping starts up, we've fallen out of it. But when we get a sense of it, then we can recognize — it's a cooling, it's a peace, like the fires have gone out, at least temporarily.

The idea of enlightenment, particularly full enlightenment, is that this becomes the normal everyday state. That's the awakened one's normal everyday consciousness. But for most people, it's just an occasional something that happens, and invariably it doesn't last. Sometimes it ends as soon as we notice it.

That takes us away from the Dhamma into history and politics. As far as we know, there's a whole field of research into early Mahāyāna and the origins of the Mahāyāna. We do know that in early Mahāyāna in India, monks who identified themselves as Mahāyāna — and nuns — would live in the same monastery with monks and nuns who were not Mahāyāna. At the time, essentially, they were mainstream. And they lived together harmoniously, apparently, because they would share the same *vinaya*, the same interpretation of the monastic discipline.

Again, this is part of the Buddhist tradition where it doesn't really matter what you believe. You believe what you believe. But the way that we live — that's important. So you can have members of a community who disagree with each other on doctrinal matters, but it doesn't matter.

At some point, however, the people of the early Mahāyāna started to move away. They started to live in their own communities and decided that these other people who hadn't converted would be called "Hīnayāna" — lower vehicle, lesser vehicle, inferior vehicle.

And then they started to downplay what these people were saying. They claimed that the Arahant was just getting started on the quest for liberation, that they would eventually need to wake up and realize they were merely partway along the path, and then continue all the way to full Buddhahood. So you begin to see this hierarchy emerging.

But this development is fairly late in India. When Mahayana was successfully exported to other countries, however, all of this was simply taken for granted—this idea of the superiority of "us" and the inferiority of "them."

It actually rather reminds me of the caste system. Today we have people in India who regard themselves as Brahmins, and therefore pure. But they can't be Brahmins unless there are people at the bottom who are outcasts, who are impure. Because you can't be pure unless you measure yourself against the impure. And so upper caste people become really upset when lower caste people say, "You're nothing. The caste system is complete rubbish." No, you can't say that, because you've threatened them and their position. If you want to be greater, you've got to have someone who is lesser. This is where politics comes in.

But I like what Gary Snyder, the American Zen practitioner and poet, once said: "Lesser vehicle, greater vehicle—all vehicles will be towed away at owner's expense." For me, that pretty much sums it up.

There's a nice little book by Analayo called *Superiority Conceit in Buddhism*. It's about four chapters, and he goes through the superiority conceit of the Mahayanists, the superiority conceit of the Theravadans who think they're superior, and a couple of others. It's quite interesting—he just demolishes all of them.

And then, of course, there are the Vajrayanists. Well, yes.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 55

Origins 7: Not-Self and Life-After-Life

Patrick Kearney · 1h06

In this talk from the 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney examines one of the most contested aspects of Buddhist teaching: life after life (āyatiṃ punabbhava). Rather than approaching rebirth as a theory of post-mortem survival or the fate of a soul, Kearney reframes it through the Buddha's core teachings of the middle way and anattā. Drawing on the Kaccānagotta Sutta and the Pāyāsi Sutta (DN 23), he demonstrates that the Buddha's teaching on rebirth is inseparable from dependent arising—it's about the continuous flow of experience where 'something happens next,' not 'someone happens next.'

Kearney addresses common Western objections to rebirth, noting that even in the Buddha's time, life after life was contested rather than universally accepted, as evidenced by the materialist Lokāyata school. He critiques the tendency to domesticate the Dhamma by forcing it into familiar Western categories like psychology or science, while rejecting elements that don't fit our cultural conditioning. The talk explores how self (constructed through craving, conceit, and view) creates the duality of 'I am' versus 'I am not'—both extremes that the middle way transcends.

Through a personal example of encountering an old photograph, Kearney illustrates how questions of identity miss the point of present experience. The Buddha's teaching invites us to reimagine the universe as infinite in space, time, and possibilities—a cosmological framework that makes the awakening project viable across multiple lifetimes. Whether or not one believes in rebirth, the teaching points practitioners toward investigating direct experience rather than constructing narratives about an enduring self.

We're going through a series on the origins of the Buddha's teaching, looking at the first three discourses: the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma; the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, which we spent two nights on; and then we're going to start heading towards the third discourse, the Ādittapariyāya Sutta, burning.

But we're going to take a detour. We're going to continue to talk about anattā, not-self, but we're going to talk about anattā as it applies to one particular doctrine—the Buddhist doctrine of life after life, or rebirth.

Now this is a very interesting topic because it's one of the key areas where contemporary practitioners have trouble with the Buddha's teaching. This is the area that he calls āyatiṃ punabbhava, or in English, "further becoming in the future." This is what we usually call rebirth, although I prefer to call it life after life. Or one could call it death after death, because that also covers the same territory.

The Buddha is quite clear that beings live again and again and again. And he's quite clear that he sees liberation in terms of liberation from this wandering in saṃsāra—the endless series of lives that all beings must undergo until they attain full awakening. This is clearly central to the Buddha's belief structure. And this belief is almost automatically rejected by educated, rational people, because they take for granted the view of scientific materialism, which could be summarized as: mate, once you're dead, you're dead. So the teaching of life after life becomes an embarrassment, something that has to be explained away if the Buddha is going to be presented as the sensible fellow that he otherwise seems to be.

I've come across two kinds of attitudes about this. Some teachers even dismiss the teaching of life after life as some kind of cultural belief that was universally accepted in ancient India—all those miserable, superstitious peasants, what to do. And it was added to the Dharma, but it's not essential to what the Buddha's talking about, so it's an optional added extra. Some have even suggested the Buddha himself did not believe in life after life, but he included it in his teaching because it was taken for granted by everybody else, so he didn't want to pick any unnecessary fights.

There are a couple of problems with this kind of approach. First of all, this move assumes that the Buddha lied to increase market share. If he behaved like an advertising executive, why would we trust anything that he says?

But also this assumption, which is quite common—that in the Buddha's time everybody in India believed in life after life—there is no evidence for this. We don't know a lot about ancient India. This is India five centuries before Christ. We don't know much about it. But what we do know indicates that in terms of the intellectual life at the time, this teaching of life after life was at the very least contested. It was certainly not universally accepted.

For example, there was a strong school of materialism that was one of the competing schools of thought to the Buddha Dharma. When the Buddha taught, he didn't teach in a vacuum. The Ganges Valley was a vibrant, sophisticated, multicultural society. There was no established orthodoxy. What we see as Hinduism had not yet been invented—it came later. There were whole different competing schools of thought, and one of them, which apparently was quite strong, was the Lokāyata, materialism.

We also know that in the Buddha's time, the teaching of life after life was contested. For example, if you look at the Pāyāsi Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya, there's a debate about it, where Prince Pāyāsi, who's kind of a proto-scientist, performs experiments on condemned criminals immediately before their death and immediately after their death to see if you can find any evidence of the escape of something which goes on to another life. This is science at the time of the Buddha. So it was contested. People were debating it at the time.

And it was a relatively new doctrine. According to the documentary record we have, it was first mentioned in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, which we have already mentioned, where it was introduced as a secret doctrine. The students are warned: do not mention this to people beyond this circle. In other words, clearly indicating that at the time it was highly controversial. So there's absolutely zero evidence that life after life was universally accepted at the time.

But if we are to understand what the Buddha was getting at when he taught life after life, we have to begin with where he is coming from. And as we're seeing, he's coming from the middle way and not-self, because life after life is an aspect of this teaching. It's not an optional added extra. It's built into them.

So let's begin by revising how the Buddha taught the middle way, and how he filled out this teaching with that of not-self.

We've seen that the middle way cannot be defined as the opposite of another way, because that would be an extreme—*anta* in Pali—not a middle. The opposite of indulgence is asceticism, and asceticism is just another extreme, and vice versa. So the middle way can only be found where there is no *anta*, where there is no extreme, where we are not stuck on anything. The middle way is found as a dynamic balance between opposites. We could see it as a place characterized by no fixed position.

And this balance can only be found in the presence. We can't find it if we're holding on to the past, and we can't find it if we're striving for the future. In the first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the Buddha defines the middle way as the eightfold path, which we saw as a system of dynamic complexity, where there's no place to stand still and where there's no ground upon which to build a position. Every time we do take a position, we've just lost the middle way, because we find ourselves in an *anta*, an extreme, an opposite—a place which is defined as the opposite of another place.

Five days after teaching the middle way, the Buddha taught *anattā*, not-self, in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*. He taught this to his five former companions, now his students, only after they had attained the first stage of awakening. And he did this by applying the middle way to their practice. It's these teachings that provide the context for understanding life after life.

So let's go back to self—what the Buddha thinks is self. For the Buddha, self is a construction project, and it's made up of three basic moves: craving, conceit, and view. Craving is the move "this is mine." Conceit is the move "I am this." And view is the move "this is my self."

We've looked at craving as the urge to possess, to appropriate—experience is mine. View is the most surface aspect, and it emerges as the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves. And underneath the narrative project, paired with craving, is what the Buddha calls *māna*, usually translated as conceit.

Craving and conceit—*taṇhā* and *māna*—work together. *Māna* is derived from the root *mā*, to measure. When we measure something, we necessarily define its boundaries—the place where one thing ends and other things begin. So *māna* appears as a sense of separation and therefore of difference. Separation creates borders, a duality of sameness and difference in all of its forms. *Māna* creates a world of this versus that, here versus there, near versus far, good versus bad, and so on.

Self is bound up in this play between opposites. We could say that self is bound up in the play between sameness and difference.

Let's start with difference. Difference creates the sense that I here am separate from you there—that's just a general example. In society we can see this in liberalism, where we privilege the individual over the collective.

Sameness creates the sense of identity between apparently different experiences. This thought or perception or feeling is a continuation of a thought or perception or feeling that was experienced yesterday, so it's the same—so it must be mine, it must be me. We can see this emphasis on sameness in various forms of collectivism, where we privilege the collective over the individual. This is a dynamic that's constantly shifting around. Self is bound up with this play between sameness and difference.

Self emerges as a sense of identity, and identity requires a sense of sameness over time. Sameness involves a corresponding sense of difference. If there is something I am, then there must be something I am not—there must be something beyond "I am" which I am not. So if there's "I am," there has to be "I am not," and vice versa.

In terms of the middle way, both of these possibilities—"I am" and "I am not"—are extremes. They're opposites. And that means, from the Buddha's perspective, they're wrong.

And this is clear from the Kacchanagota Sutta, which is another place where the Buddha introduces and talks about the middle way. He's speaking to Kacchanagota, who asks the question: In what way is there right view?

And the Buddha says: "This world is normally reliant upon the duality of existence and non-existence. To one who sees the arising of the world realistically, with complete understanding, there is no sense of non-existence regarding the world. To one who sees the cessation of the world realistically, with complete understanding, there is no sense of existence regarding the world. 'Everything exists'—this is one extreme. 'Everything does not exist'—this is the other extreme. Avoiding both these extremes, a Tathagata teaches Dharma by means of the middle." And on he goes.

So here we have the middle way presented as the balance between existence and non-existence. In less abstract language, between "it is" and "it is not."

Now most of us create and live in a duality between these two. Something either exists or it does not exist. This is the natural and obvious way of relating to the world when we're doing it from inside the construction project which is self, or identity. From inside identity or inside self, this duality makes perfect sense. Either this is me, or it's someone else. Either this is mine, or it belongs to someone else. Either this is right, or it's wrong.

But if we want to understand what the Buddha means by life after life, we have to look at it from his perspective of the middle way. And that means we have to give up our normal concepts about life after life, because our normal concepts all belong to a view that assumes the reality of self.

So let's look at this teaching from inside self. Why is the question of whether or not there is life after death interesting to us? Why do so many people get excited about it, talk about it, take positions about it? Because we assume it's all about me. When the Buddha speaks about life after life, we assume what he's saying is: I am born here, and then I am born there, then I'm born somewhere else, and then dot, dot, dot, dot. In other words, we think it's about what's going to happen to us. And we do this because we naturally think in terms of self.

And so we think about a being. If you're talking about life after death, we're thinking in terms of a being moving through death from one body to another. That's the obvious way in which to think about it. And when we think about a new birth after death, our attitude to it is very simple. Either this new birth is me, or it's not me. Either sameness or difference.

When we perceive and think from inside self, we naturally perceive and think in terms of our own identity and its fate. So we assume that either I will survive death or I will not survive death. If I assume that I will survive death, that this is what the Buddha is talking about, then we have identity, sameness, existence. If we assume that I will not survive death, regardless of what the Buddha is talking about, then we're thinking in terms of non-identity, difference, non-existence.

Now of course, if I am the one who survives death, if I am the one who is reborn in some way or another, no matter how vaguely or cosmologically, then I'm interested. This is important. This is important to me. For me. But if I think in terms of I am the one who does not survive death, then I'm definitely not interested, because this is really not important to me.

And it's perfectly clear that this perspective on the fate of the self is based on māna. It's an expression of māna, the fundamental sense of separation and comparison which is the building block of self. So when I'm in māna, as it were, I'm taken outside the felt flow of experience to the "I am,"

who appears to sit behind the flow of events, commenting upon the flow of events, watching the self move from one scene to another, like an actor seeing himself perform in a movie. And both commenting and watching occur necessarily from beyond the felt flow of experience.

We get a sense of this when we're doing the meditation practice and we find the flow of our experience is partnered by a commentator explaining it all to us. Have you ever had that experience?

Now, this is how I think about life after life from inside self. It's a flow of movement from one life to the next, as if I'm the audience watching a character move from one scene to the next. So the question is, who is that character? Is it me? Is it not me? This is the question that we're interested in.

So this is how we approach life after life from inside self. But what if we approach it from beyond self?

Not-self locates me within the flow of events. There's no external vantage point from which "I" can witness and comment on my life. There's just the intimacy of the flow itself. Even the concepts that I create about the flow of experience—for example, in the form of the commentator—is just another event, another experience, within the flow of events. And within the flow of events, there's no overarching vantage point from which to look upon this flow and make any kind of judgment about it. There's only the flow itself, encountered now, as it moves from one experience to the next.

And this gives us a very different perspective.

So, for example, when I think about life after life from inside self, the question that I want answered is: who lives after death? Now, this question is necessarily unanswerable, except for speculation. I mean, how can we know?

But let's think about a question more intimate, closer to us, closer to the actual flow of experience. Who leaves this hall after the dharma talk?

Right now, this question is also answerable only as a concept, because it refers to something that cannot be known, cannot be encountered in the present. But what we do know is that if we pay attention over a period of time, we have a chance of answering it. We can answer it in the very act of leaving the hall.

And the point is that for the Buddha, these two questions—who lives after death, and who leaves the hall after this talk—are essentially the same question. And they have essentially the same answer. The only difference is the time span involved, hopefully. Hopefully nobody's going to fall over from a heart attack before the end of the talk. And of course, time, again, is a concept. But what is central from the perspective of the experienced flow of experience is that they are the same question with the same answer.

So how can we answer this question?

Here I'd just like to give an example of something that happened to me years ago now. When my mother died, we got together to clear out the house, and the family had lived in that house for fifty years. So there was a lot of stuff there. And going through, sorting through the stuff, I came upon a photograph of a young boy, I would say about fifteen.

And of course I'm looking at it, and the question is: is that me? Or not me? Someone else?

Now, both questions place me, here, looking at that, there. And whatever answer I give—yes that's me, no that's not me—results in a concept which is in the form of an identity created by a conceptual narrative arc that goes through time and space from the past to the present. The past portrayed in that photograph to the present, me looking at it. And this narrative arc creates a permanent identity—the one who has survived through time. Me.

And once this permanent identity is established, then I can address the question: is that an image of me or someone else?

But the problem is that neither answer sheds any light at all on the lived experience of the one now looking at this image. Neither answer addresses the fundamental question: who is looking at this image now?

So the answer "this is me"—it doesn't quite work, because I am not that boy. I look very different, and I have very different thoughts and feelings. And also, I would never make the mistakes that that boy made. And I'm certainly not as driven and not as confused as he was.

But the answer, "this is someone else," doesn't work either. If this image is not me, then how can I be so intimate with what that boy was going through? How can I be confident that I understand his thoughts and his feelings, that I understand the situation he was living in at that time?

So questions and answers framed in terms of identity—what do they actually accomplish? They feed narratives, they feed stories, but they don't shed light on this experience situation now. They result only in the construction of further identity narratives.

But answers based on the flow of events as they are experienced now—answers based on the middle way, not-self, dependent arising, emptiness—these answers shed light on what is happening in this situation and how this present situation is constructed, how it's felt, how it moves.

For example, as I'm speaking right now, it's quite clear to me that the decisions made by that fifteen-year-old boy continue to shape the experience situation. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if that fifteen-year-old boy had made different decisions, this talk would not be happening and you would not be sitting in this hall. This experience situation that we have right now is largely shaped by decisions made before. And in turn, it is now shaping another situation.

Just as this situation right now emerges from past conditions, so does the next situation, and the next, and the next. Each situation that we experience emerges from the past, which shapes it, and in turn shapes a future that replaces it. This, of course, is the teaching of kamma vipāka—action and its ripening. We could sum it up as: something happens next. But notice we are not summing it up as *someone* happens next.

This is looking at the issue of identity and difference from outside the self—from not-self, emptiness, and so on. What we have is a flow of experience, and one of the things that characterizes this flow is that something happens next. This is the arising and cessation. If you're tracking your experience over these weeks, is it true that something happens next? Yes. And it's got nothing to do with the stories about who's who. It's just in the nature of experience itself. It arises, it ceases. It arises, it ceases. Something happens next.

So what would end this flow? What would bring it to a crashing halt? The Buddha sees no reason whatsoever to assume that it would be ended by death, because death is just another event. It arises and it ceases dependent upon conditions. And just as death succeeds birth, so birth succeeds death—from his perspective.

Then why is death so central to our fears and our vulnerabilities? It's because we think of death from outside the middle way, from inside the self. We think of death in terms of the extremes of sameness versus difference, existence versus non-existence, self versus other. I think of death in terms of *my* death, *my* annihilation, *my* possible resurrection, impossible resurrection, whatever. Or I think in terms of someone else's death, someone else's annihilation, someone else's resurrection.

When we think of death in this way, we're thinking of it from inside self. And this self is located outside the felt flow of experience. In order to check whether that death is my death, and whether that would be me alive afterwards or someone else, I have to step out of the river of directly experienced phenomena and step into the river of stories.

We could sum it up by saying that when we examine the flow of our own experience, we can see: something happens next. And what is important about this something is not identity—not the question, "Is this me or not me?" That is not important. What's important is cause and effect. How does this action ripen? That's coming at it from a completely different angle. And the death of an assumed sense of self does not eliminate the ripening, because that death is just happening in the river of stories.

So, in brief—and this is perhaps a touch controversial thing to say—the Buddha's teaching of life after life is not a theory of post-mortem survival. The Buddha has no interest in the fate of the soul. None. He's interested only in how we live now, and life after life is part of that project, because it is the flow of experience.

We have difficulty coming to terms with this teaching of life after life essentially because of the power of our cultural conditioning. Our cultural patterns of clinging tend to blind us to what the Buddha is saying. And this is what I call the problem of domesticating the Dharma.

One problem we have is that we tend to view this issue of life after life in scientific terms. If we want to believe it, we might look for some scientifically respectable way to speak about post-mortem survival. And so, of course, the problem is that the Buddha is not talking about post-mortem survival. He's talking about the structure of experience, how one event succeeds another. But we're determined to seek a scientific explanation. And if we don't have one, we can't take it seriously.

This is part of a broader tendency to domesticate the Dharma by reading it in terms of our own cultural categories. We place the Buddha's teachings into preconceived, familiar categories like psychology, philosophy, science, religion, mythology. And we reject those parts of the teaching that we see as fitting categories we do not approve of, while we accept those aspects of the teaching that fit into categories we do approve of.

For example, we don't approve of such things as religion and mythology, so we chuck out those bits. But we do approve of such things as psychology, or philosophy, or science, so we keep those bits that seem to fit into those categories. Now this practice domesticates the Dharma, and it makes it easier for us to accept it, but it also blinds us to the radical nature of what the Buddha was actually saying. In other words, we're approaching the Dharma on our terms, not the Buddha's terms—which is a perfectly natural thing to do.

As I mentioned before, the Buddha did not teach psychology. He did not teach religion. He did not teach science. He taught Dharma. But Dharma is not a European cultural category, so we literally don't know what it means. But that's what he taught. Not these other things.

This brings us to the challenge of imagination. Part of any tradition—be it scientific, be it religious, whatever—part of any tradition is imagination. Even in our science-based culture, we find a large body of teaching that people subscribe to on the basis of faith and without any empirical foundation. In other words, it's the attitude: if the sci-

entists say it is so, then it must be so. We assume our authorities must be right, like every other culture. It's just that in our culture the authorities are scientists rather than priests.

Every culture is conditioned to imagine the world in certain ways. And we tend to resist the suggestion that we could learn to imagine it in different ways from those with which we are familiar. Life after life is part of a broader package. It includes dependent arising, not-self, emptiness, the middle way.

It's a broader package that imagines the universe very differently from the ways we're accustomed to. The Buddha, for example, imagines the universe as infinite—in space, in time, and in possibilities. This is what makes it an optimistic vision. The teaching of life after life is one aspect of this infinity, especially in terms of the possibilities available to us.

Our culture, Western culture, is used to very limited ways of imagining the universe. For centuries, the traditional Western universe consisted of a flat earth topped by a dome—the sky—that had holes in it through which shone divine light, which we perceive as stars. And God lived above all this. This was the orthodoxy for centuries. One thing you notice about it is that it's a rather small universe, in total contrast with the universe as imagined in ancient India, which, as I said, is infinite.

Today we imagine a much bigger universe. Some people would say it began with a Big Bang, about thirteen or so billion years ago. And in this universe, awareness or consciousness is some kind of local accident. Now, that's an interesting belief. The Buddha would ask: what experience is this belief based on?

Remember the Canki Sutta, where the Buddha investigates the nature of truth. He was debating the Brahmin youth Kapatika, who presents his Vedic orthodoxy as authoritative. "This is what's true." His confidence is largely based on the fact that what he's presenting is the consensus among learned Brahmins. But the Buddha wants to know: have any of these learned Brahmins actually experienced what their tradition is talking about? And if so, what is that experience?

If we apply this to the Big Bang—was anyone here around for that? Obviously not. But we know the universe began that way through our imagination. We imagine a universe that conforms to the principles of modern science as we understand them. But of course, built into the scientific method is the assumption that what we understand today is going to be replaced tomorrow by new knowledge. So strictly speaking, what we understand today is wrong.

The point we're making here is that fundamentally, the scientific image of the universe is a product of our imagination. And if we have to use our imagination to engage in an understanding of the universe, why not begin to reimagine it on the principles of Buddha Dharma? Of course, it is an act of imagination—no doubt about it.

Sometimes people who deny life after life do so on the grounds that we in the West are scientific, and we cannot be expected to subscribe to a non-scientific teaching. That's it. But really, isn't this just another form of dogmatism? Isn't it a way of justifying closing off our imagination, just refusing to consider other possibilities? Why should we not learn to imagine the universe differently?

It is interesting that those who deny life after life also tend to deny awakening. The two views go together because life after life grants the time and the cosmological space that make the awakening project viable.

I don't know how many years any one of you have been doing this meditation practice, but given the normal human lifespan, given your experience of how long it's taken to make whatever progress you've made towards full awakening—how optimistic are you that you're going to make it in this lifetime? Or do you need more time?

This is the sales pitch, isn't it? It is. This bit about imagination is definitely the sales pitch. We'll give you time. Life after life provides us with a world in which awakening is possible, a genuine goal worth aspiring to. And this becomes part of our imagination.

So what would it be like to imagine the universe as infinite, and ourselves as part of a universal network not limited by any kind of self-identity? What would it be like to live in that kind of universe? How would it affect our way of life?

It might, possibly, encourage us to open up to more possibilities—possibilities that our sense of normality, in other words our habitual self, has learned to dismiss as impossible.

How do we know the limits of nature? And why are we so quick to reject possibilities that are beyond our habitual cultural conditioning? Perhaps it's possible that if we opened up to the real possibility of something entirely new and entirely unexpected—like, for example, awakening—then we might find ourselves in territories that we never thought possible. How can we know in advance? And why should we, like the Brahmins of the Buddha's day, shut off this possibility simply because it's not part of our inherited cultural tradition?

Question from audience about the similarity between Buddhist teachings on rebirth and the Vedantic concept of Atman—a part of the self that lives after the body dies, stripped of memory, personality, preferences, emotions, and thoughts, with only karmic momentum remaining.

It's essentially a karmic potential, a samskara. I've always seen the Atman described in various ways, but after what I've explained, the questioner isn't sure they see the difference between those Brahmanic faiths and the Buddhist understanding of momentum that isn't disrupted by the death of the body.

I'm sure there are great similarities, because all philosophical and religious systems are products of human invention. They share similarities and they have differences. But I think from the Buddha's perspective, and from the yogi's perspective in different traditions, the main issue is: does it work? Does it take me in that direction?

For some people, imagining the world in terms of Vedanta helps them follow that direction towards awakening. For some people, imagining the universe in terms of the Buddha Dharma helps them follow. For some people, imagining the world in terms of Christianity helps them move in that direction. Because all of these teachings are just another human construction. The question is, how do they work? So it's really a matter of finding out what works and then doing it.

But here, the main project is to get a sense of what the Buddha was talking about when he spoke of life after life. That's the context of what I've been exploring. And I think the way our culture thinks about it is not what he's talking about, because we think about it in terms of self, and he did not.

The Buddha apparently had the direct capacity to see death and rebirth in real time as part of his awakening. There are, I think, true explanations or descriptions of how he attained awakening, and one of them is through the three vijjās, the three knowledges, that occurred throughout the Night of the Awakening.

The first one was that he remembered his own previous births. If you read it in the sutta, it says he remembered he was of such and such a name, such and such a clan, ate such and such food, and so on. He remembered multiple lives. So in his memory, he went through multiple identities over a long period of time. And all the things that are mentioned are identity markers in ancient India—clan, class, name, and so on. He remembered innumerable previous identities, or rather, things that would create identity.

Then he saw beings die and be reborn in real time. So the first knowledge is going through memory, through his own mental stream, back into the past. The second one opens up—he sees all beings coming and going within the universe, death and birth, death and birth. And the third was the actual awakening through dependent arising.

This is part of his own experience. One of his titles is "Teacher of Gods and People." And "teacher of gods" is not rhetorical flourish. He set aside a certain period of time each night to teach devas. They would come to him, and he set aside that time so it wouldn't interrupt his other work. Apparently, for a deva to come to a human teacher, they've got to be quite determined, because people stink—and devas have very sensitive senses. So they're making a real effort.

There are various stories about the Buddha's disciples who travelled to this deva realm or that deva realm, and there were various meditators who would talk about travelling to different realms in their meditation. So it was all based on experience.

Now, you may conclude that if the Buddha really thought that, he must have been a bit of a nutcase.

That's fine. We can think that. But it is based on his experience. It's not a dogma that he inherited or imposed.

Someone asks whether this is one of the things the Buddha would have said, or actually said. Some years ago, we had a conversation about keeping track of all the things the Buddha said. And there were some scholarly efforts going on to identify which teachings the Buddha would have actually spoken, distinguishing them from later additions where the timing was clearly off – he was already dead when certain texts appeared.

This represents the earliest tradition. All we can really know is what we can conclude about what constitutes the earliest layer of the teachings and what's contained in them. That's the best we can do. We can't go back in time to meet him, so who knows – maybe somebody made it all up. People do suggest that, that the Buddha was really a committee. There is that theory.

Stephen Batchelor very interestingly opposes that theory, because he points out that the characters who appear in the suttas, the early suttas, are characters. You can feel them as actual human beings. Whereas if you go to the later Mahayana discourses, the Buddha is kind of a prototype, a godlike but not really living character. The same with the Great Bodhisattvas. They're like actors on a cosmic stage. But in the early discourses, you've got actual people that you can feel were genuine people.

There's one story – I don't know if it's true or not – but one time Christopher Titmuss was urging his students to study the suttas so that they would know the Buddha's words. And somebody said, "Well, how can we know they're the Buddha's words?" And he said, "You get a feel for it when you read it."

He gave an example. He said one time he was talking to a fellow Dharma practitioner who said, "The Buddha said such and such." And Christopher said, "Nah, he didn't say that." The person said, "Yes, he did." Christopher says, "Nah, he wouldn't have said that." The person says, "I'm telling you, I read it in a sutta. The Buddha said it."

So Christopher said, "Can you bring me the sutta? Show me." The fellow goes off and researches and comes back. Puts it in front of him. There it is – the sutta. And Christopher looks at it and says, "Yep, it wasn't the Buddha who said that, it was this senior disciple. I knew the Buddha wouldn't say that."

I've got no idea whether he was having us on or not. But you do get a sense of the characters, of the living beings in the early discourses. So that is one reason why people think it's probably genuine. But strictly speaking, it's impossible to know. There's no way we can actually find out.

So the real question for the practitioner is: does this work? That's really, for practitioners, the only important question.

I spent some years in a cemetery practice, and there was a certain amount of discontent all along. Then one day, somebody handed me a book on Buddhism. I can't remember the title, unfortunately. I think the word Zen was in it, but I'm not sure. And the very last line in the book, all the way through everything, the very last line said: "I'm going to wait to check it out for myself." That's a very good idea.

And that's why it's important to die well. You've got to be present for it. One thing I think the teaching of life after life can stimulate is curiosity about the death process—and therefore to be interested and engaged in going through it. To find out. Does something happen next? We'll find out.

Someone mentioned hearing an old Ram Dass talk where he suggests that rebirth was present in Christian faith and Judaism, especially in Christianity, but was removed around the time of Constantine because it was easier to control the congregation if people didn't get another chance at it—if it was one shot only. There was one early Christian teacher from Alexandria, which was a hotbed of theological speculation, called Origen, and he taught life after life. But there's no record of anybody else teaching it. It seems to have been his idea, and it was rejected by the council, so it's not orthodox. But it is there somewhere, kind of buried in the Christian tradition. If you go

through the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, they're not interested in what happens after you die. They say almost nothing about it. There's just no interest in it. And even if you look at the New Testament, Jesus throws out a couple of images, but he doesn't really talk about it much. The biblical tradition is much more focused on how to live this life.

Someone asked about enlightenment—how does that marry into experience rather than focusing on what happens next? How do they intersect? That's a big question. Just to say, if you're looking for that answer, you've got to go to suchness. Thus-ness. Just this-ness. That's where you'll find that answer. But what exactly "deathless" means—people have all sorts of debates about it, and it's too big a question for me to approach without being prepared.

Someone mentioned that in the sutta we read last night, the Buddha criticized the Brahmins for taking secondhand all these things passed down, so wouldn't that suggest we also focus on what works? Absolutely, I agree. But all I'm suggesting is that there is a resistance in our culture to taking something culturally unfamiliar, especially from Asia, and quickly deciding, "Oh, that's not our culture, that's not scientific, chuck it out," without ever really considering it. It may well be that if we open up to views of the universe which are not Western, quote-unquote, we may actually learn something, and it may actually do us good.

Someone observed that life after life hasn't really made much sense from an intellectual point of view when you just ruminate and think about it. But it starts to make sense from practice and experience through meditation once some of the stages of insight are realized—like cause and effect, the three characteristics. Something starts to shift, perspective changes, and it starts to make a lot more sense. I think that's entering that world where we can see where it fits and why it's there. Definitely.

Someone asked whether the way the Buddha taught life after life could be compatible with reports of people now who say they remember past lives—there's been research into cases of people who remember details of names and places and how they died. Yes, that's one of the things. In cultures that do not jump upon any suggestion of a previous life and say, "You're just imagining that, don't be stupid," it is quite known for children to spontaneously remember a previous life. Usually it's the immediately preceding life, and usually that memory vanishes with puberty. By the time they pass puberty, what they remember is having had a memory, but the memory itself has disappeared. So it seems to be restricted to children.

If you talk to Thais, Burmese, and so on, they tend not to discuss it with Westerners because they don't want to be looked upon weirdly or told, "Oh, you're just imagining all that." But if they trust that you can actually accept their viewpoint, people come up with surprising stories about their own memories and stories about their family and friends. And they'll tell you this not as some momentous revelation—"Wow, life after life really happens!"—but rather, "Yeah, that happened to my sister," and so on. It's just ordinary.

It's just accepted. But in our culture, we don't accept it. So if your mother is walking with her little child down the street and the child says, "Oh, Mummy, were you still in there?" what would be the response? "Oh, don't be stupid." We dismiss it. But in another culture, the response might be, "Oh, really? What did you see in there?"

Bhikkhu Anālayo has written a book on rebirth in Buddhism, which is very good. He goes through the whole thing with his very forensic mind. It's quite well worth looking at. He examines the research, the Western research. Professor Stevenson did a lot of research on this. There's a lot of material on YouTube, actual interviews with these children. There's substantial material about it.

Some teachers say there's no birth, there's no death, there's no self—that continuation exists in the various parts of what is left: impressions we leave on other people, our deeds, our DNA, and that sort of thing, and that this is recycled infinite times with all the elements in the atmosphere. In the Abhidharma, they talk about exactly what continues—like the actions and decisions, but also the bhavaṅga, the stream of consciousness that continues, which again is a different commentary. So there's more than one approach.

Yes, there are lots of different ways in which people have talked about it and conceptualized it. The bhavaṅga, the Abhidharma approach, comes after the Buddha. Possibly. But the Buddha himself never talks about what we could call mechanics—like how it happens. He just talks about it in terms of dependent arising: when this is, that is; with the arising of this, that arises. So when scholars try to work it out, they tend to look for the mechanics, how the process actually works. But the Buddha doesn't do that. He's much more general about it. He just gives general principles. But you do get different explanations in the different traditions, for sure.

As for secular Buddhism, why not adopt what we were talking about the other night—a true agnosticism? If it is genuinely agnosticism, that would be interesting. But in my experience, most secular Buddhists I've met are dogmatic—they're just dogmatic about scientific materialism. They take that as absolute truth and aren't open to anything else.

To actually maintain a genuine agnosticism, a position of no position, would be a very interesting stance to take. It would be hard. But it's very useful, I think, for the practitioner simply to have the question and then direct the mind to find out.

The thing about this is, you don't need to believe in life after life to do the meditation practice. You don't need to believe in life after life to get the benefits of the meditation practice. You don't need to believe in life after life to think of yourself as a Buddhist or not. None of this is actually necessary. It could be useful. Maybe. Possibly. Under certain circumstances. I can feel myself backtracking rapidly.

CHAPTER 56

The Mirror of Dharma Part 3: Dukkha

Patrick Kearney · 50 min

In this profound dharma talk from the 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney examines dukkha—the Pāli term often translated as suffering but more accurately describing the complete range of dissatisfaction from subtle to gross. Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, he explores how the three universal characteristics (anicca, dukkha, anattā) are always listed in order of subtlety, with dukkha emerging from our deepening perception of impermanence.

Kearney unpacks the Buddha's three-level analysis of dukkha: ordinary pain, the pain inherent in change (viparināma dukkha), and constructed pain (saṅkhāra dukkha)—identified as the five aggregates associated with appropriation (upādāna). The key teaching is that insight into dukkha involves a movement from the personal to the universal: from "I am in pain" to recognizing that pain is an inherent aspect of sentient existence. He illustrates this with a moving account of his teacher John Hale, who faced motor neuron disease for seven years with the simple practice of "not taking it personally."

The talk explores how the perception of dukkha manifests in practice—the sense of groundlessness, anxiety, and the realization that no escape within the constructed world is possible. Yet as understanding deepens alongside samādhi, not-self (anattā) begins to emerge, revealing that our fear and pain are equally groundless. Kearney emphasizes that we cannot "do" dukkha or anattā as practice techniques; they arise naturally through sustained mindfulness. The teaching culminates in the Buddha's instruction that the practitioner's task is not to solve dukkha but to fully understand it, whereupon the problem is not solved but dissolved.

Tonight we're going to talk about everybody's favourite topic: dukkha.

Tonight and next Wednesday, we're going to look at dukkha and anatta, although you can't really separate them because they're intertwined with each other.

Our basic text is from the Anguttara Nikaya: "These things play a part in realisation: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence, the perception of not-self in pain."

There we have the three universal characteristics—anicca, dukkha, and anatta—always listed in that order, as we'll see later on. At the centre is dukkha. Of course, dukkha is the central concept of the four truths, which provide the basic framework for the teaching. We have dukkha, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. Everything revolves around dukkha.

As when we were looking at the Anattalakkhana Sutta, we saw how the Buddha analyses this term very carefully. The word itself has no exact English equivalent. Classically it is translated as "suffering," but that's not particularly accurate. There's no English equivalent because it covers the complete range of dissatisfaction, from the most subtle to the most gross, and everything in between.

It comes from the word *kha*, which indicates an empty space, and the prefix *du*, which indicates bad, unpleasant, awful, and so on. So a bad emptiness, or a painful emptiness. *Kha* also refers to the hub of a wheel. So dukkha is a badly fitting axle at the centre of a wheel, which means that the vehicle, if it can move at all, moves only with great grind and difficulty.

The Buddha analyses dukkha into three levels. The first is normal everyday pain that we find in any human life. The next level is pain inherent in change. What this refers to, as we've seen, is that our circumstances are constantly changing, from micro to macro. The micro changes we get to study very carefully in the meditation practice, and we are not in charge of these changes. It's not change per se which is painful; it's the fact that we can't control it. That is what creates the pain.

This leads us to the deepest layer of pain, what the Buddha calls sankhara dukkha—we could translate this as "constructed pain." He identifies this as the five aggregates associated with appropriation, which we looked at when going through the Anattalakkhana Sutta. The five aggregates are those aspects of our experience that are the raw materials for creating a sense of self and identity. The construction mechanism is based on appropriating—appropriating an experience as mine. "This is my experience. It refers to me." This is appropriation: upadana, usually translated as "clinging." But this is what the Buddha gets at when he's talking about clinging. This is the context.

If we go back to the quote that we started with: "These things play a part in realisation: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence." We begin by studying impermanence—in other words, change. These three perceptions are always listed in this order: change, pain, not-self. They're listed from gross to subtle, from what is generally clearest to what is generally most obscure.

Change is clear; it's pretty obvious. If somebody said, "Well, what's Buddhism all about?" and you said, "Well, things change," they'd think, "And? So?" It's pretty obvious.

Any system of insight meditation—meditation for the purpose of generating insight—is designed to make us intimate with the fact of change. In the Goenka method, for example, scanning the body reveals different sensations: change, change, change, change. In this practice, one thing which is emphasised is seeing change in distraction. We learn to see change in the ups and downs of the practice. We learn to see change in the movements of the body. We learn to see change in the movements of the mind. As we become sensitive to change, we begin to intuit that change is universal. Nothing stays still—at least nothing we can find.

Nothing remains the same.

And this leads to the perception of pain—the perception of pain in impermanence, as the Buddha says.

So if we ask the simple question: has your experience changed today? Presumably the answer is yes. Next question: were you in command of these changes? And generally the answer for that one is, not really. So did these changes just happen to you?

As the practice deepens, we begin to realize that change is built into the fabric of the universe—of the experienced universe. And again we keep coming back to this basic point: the Buddha is teaching the nature of experience. When we say change is built into the fabric of the universe, we're talking about the fabric of the universe as we experience it. The experienced universe.

And so, as beings within this universe, we are caught up in the patterns and tides of change that we cannot control. This absence of control, when we start to recognize it, provokes anxiety. In fact, you could say that unless we're anxious about change, we haven't really seen it. The Buddha calls this viparinama dukkha—the pain inherent in change.

We begin to recognize that our experience is inherently unreliable and out of our control. Our circumstances change and we are not in charge of these changes. The mind begins to recognize—and often it begins at a deeper than conscious level; I think usually it begins at a deeper than conscious level—the mind begins to recognize we have no firm, stable foundation. There's nothing on which we can stand and say, "Here I am." There's nothing we can grab onto and say, "I can hold on to this while everything else changes around me." We keep groping to find a foundation, but we come up with nothing.

This sense of absence at the core of existence—this is what opens the way to the perception of the universal characteristic of dukkha.

If we begin to get a sense of this, what can we do about it? In the Four Truths, the Buddha talks about fully understanding dukkha. And this brings us to what the later Theravāda tradition calls dukkha ñāṇa—the understanding of dukkha, or the insight knowledge of dukkha. You might see it translated as dukkha as insight knowledge.

The key point here is that this involves a movement from the experience of pain to the experience of insight into pain. And this is essentially a movement from the personal to the universal.

When we first experience pain—let's say we experience pain naively—then we experience it personally. "I am in pain." But insight into pain is a movement from the personal to the universal. All beings are in pain.

It's a movement away from possession to release. A movement from "this is my pain, it's all about me, it's the tragedy of my life" to release, to letting go. Pain is an inherent aspect of sentient existence, and so it's not about me, and it's not about my story.

It's in this movement that insight arises.

And this makes clear the central point for our practice, especially when we're working with dukkha, with pain: when pain arises, we do not take it personally. The reason is that when we understand the nature of pain, we recognize that, like change, pain is an inherent part of nature. It's got nothing to do with me. And it's got nothing to do with the details of my personal story. Once we realize this, once we stop taking pain personally, then we can let it go.

When I talk about this, I'm always reminded of John Hale, who was one of my main teachers. He died of motor neuron disease. It took him seven years to die. The disease was concentrated in the upper chest, shoulders—this area, this part of the body. With motor neuron disease, he lost movement. And when muscles don't move, they waste away. So he had basically bone rubbing against bone.

And so it became very painful. During this period, he taught a long retreat south of Sydney, and one day the retreat was visited by a psychologist from Sydney who was a practicing Buddhist and worked with chronic pain. He was really intrigued about what was happening to John. Basically what he wanted to learn was: what's your technique to deal with chronic pain? How do you do it?

And John's answer was simply, "I just don't take it personally." That was it. That's what he said. And the thing is, he meant it. That really was how he dealt with it. He never had pain relief. He never had any kind of drug at all. He just didn't take it personally. It's quite powerful. Simple to say, but very powerful when we start to do it.

So there's a movement here. The practice begins with understanding the individual—this is what the Buddha calls dhammañāṇa—understanding the particular experience here and now. This understanding comes directly from the boot camp of the practice of being aware of whatever is happening now, or as Mahasi Sayadaw would say, noting something, whatever is happening now. Aware of this, and then aware of this, and then aware of this.

And the practice matures into insight, which is understanding the universal, anvayañāṇa—recognizing the universal patterns of experience as they play out over time. In other words, insight is always generalized. The movement from dukkha, from pain, to insight into dukkha is a movement from the particular to the universal.

When we're caught up in the particularity of pain, we take it personally. This particular pain is about me, and it's about my life. And when pain is personal, then we have reason to feel that while this situation is painful, maybe that one isn't. An escape from the pain seems possible. Has anybody contemplated escaping from this meditation center? Going over the wall? I have to confess, I have. Not so long ago—in fact yesterday, I think.

It appears, in other words, that an escape from pain, from dukkha, appears to be possible within the realm of the impermanent—within the realm of the normal. We feel that there may be an alternative that could work, so we have reasons to pursue it. And it might be as simple as, "I'll just get out of this hall and head up to the veranda and have a nice cuppa."

One thing that quite intrigues me is that sometimes when we're doing intensive practice—and maybe this is just me—we find ourselves sometimes living alternative lives. Have you ever done that? It's very entertaining. "If only I had done this in the past instead of that, my life would have been satisfactory." Or we imagine an alternative future: "When I get out of here, things are going to be very different." Or we even imagine an alternative present: "Right now I'll take a break and then things will be better."

These fantasies seem real and they have power because our understanding of dukkha, of pain, is still particular rather than universal. We imagine that if we just rearrange the board, then we can play a blinder. In other words, one indication of insight into dukkha—the universality of dukkha—is the realization that there is nothing we can do to solve our problem. Absolutely nothing.

And why is this? Well, firstly, the very need to resolve the problem is part of the dukkha. What we're doing is rearranging our dukkha in order to end our dukkha.

Think of rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

But the other thing is that any solution we find does not last. It has to be replaced by something else. This is impermanence. And I remember that generally the understanding of dukkha emerges when the understanding of change is reasonably well established.

So any solution we find has to be replaced by something else, which has to be replaced by something else, and so on and so forth. Whatever solution we find to our problem, the situation we're in has to be renegotiated. And then that situation has to be renegotiated. And then that situation has to be renegotiated. Have you ever come to a point in your practice where you thought, "Okay, I've done it, from now on I can just cruise"?

Now notice the point here. We can do nothing to resolve our problem. This is because, from the Buddha's perspective, fundamentally *we* and *our* is the problem. But when we give up on us and our problem, then there's a possibility that something else might happen.

The first time I came across this—well, at least I'm reminded of it—was way back when I was a student of Robert Aitken Roshi. He was a Zen teacher, and the meditation practice they do is zazen. One time he told us, and I always remembered it, because here I am talking about it decades later, he said: "Do not use zazen to solve your problems. If you commit yourself to zazen, your problems will be resolved. But do not use zazen to solve your problems."

I think that's very good advice. Despite the marketing, mindfulness is not about solving problems. Mindfulness is about revealing the problems, because that's the way through.

So if we look at how this relates to our meditation practice: as we mentioned, when the Buddha talks about the three universal characteristics, and when he talks about insight—that's what he talks about—he always lists them in the order of anicca, dukkha, anatta: change, pain, not-self. In other words, he lists them in order of subtlety.

Anicca, change, is the easiest characteristic to notice. And it's also possible, in a sense, to "do" change. We can structure our attention via the meditation method to bring change to our notice, to practice impermanence, in a sense. What we've been doing in this retreat is approaching this by becoming interested in distraction. I'm with my meditation object, all is well, and then suddenly—I'm not. Change. The experience of distraction teaches us a great deal about impermanence. This is why one should never dismiss one's distraction. Distraction is our teacher.

When we take distraction personally, we think, "Well, I can't meditate because I'm distracted." We don't realize that distraction *is* the meditation. That's the meditation object. And it's a very good one.

This is one way—the way that I think Mahasi Sayadaw, in particular, brings people's attention to the fact of change. In the lineage, we talk about it in terms of primary object, secondary object. You move from one to the other. Change, change, change, change.

So anicca, change, is the easiest to notice. Dukkha is more subtle, and it's harder to see—at least the universality of dukkha is harder to see. Because in order to see it, we have to recognize that it's not personal. There's a sense in which we can "do" change; we can do anicca. We cannot do dukkha.

Sometimes you see people trying to do it by making part of their meditation project the endurance of pain. "If I'm sitting after half an hour, it starts to hurt. So I'll sit for two or three hours. That'll really hurt. And that'll get me into dukkha." But if it develops anything, it's more likely to develop endurance rather than insight. And it's more likely to result in taking both the pain and any relief we feel from the cessation of pain personally.

"I did that. That was a great sitting. It really hurt, but it was great." Come to think of it, I don't really like sitting meditation. I think I might go away for a while. And when we take it personally, then we're stuck. So we can't actually do dukkha in terms of the characteristic. It's something which emerges, or doesn't, as the case may be.

Anattā, not-self, is the most subtle characteristic and the most difficult to see. This is in part because it's so counterintuitive. What do you mean, not-self? No self? You're saying it, and you're a self, and I'm hearing it, and I'm a self. So what are you talking about? It's very counterintuitive. But in part, it's difficult to see because it's fundament-

ally an absence. Something is missing rather than something is present. We assume a self is present, lurking in the background. And it can take a while before we notice that actually it isn't. It's harder to notice something which is absent than something which is present.

I don't know how many of you are Sherlock Holmes fans, but if you remember "The Adventure of Silver Blaze," it took Sherlock Holmes to ask what became the obvious question: why didn't the dog bark last night? He noticed the absence. But nobody else did. And of course, finally, we certainly cannot do not-self. There's nothing we can do. Because if there's someone doing it, then we have a self in charge of a project—the project of recognising not-self. What we don't have is the universal characteristic of not-self.

So these are listed in order of subtlety. However, again, when one arises, all three arise. All three are already happening, because this is just the way nature works. It's a question of whether we notice it.

And what brings order into this system, to some degree at least, is samādhi. Classically translated as concentration, but we could translate it as unification, integration, immersion. I noticed Bhikkhu Sujato translates it as immersion, which is very interesting. Samādhi is what we're cultivating as we practice. And as samādhi develops, our view of experience gradually deepens over time. What we see is necessarily influenced by the depth from which we see. The deeper we go, we see a different aspect of the landscape. The quality of our awareness affects the object of awareness. The deeper we go, the more subtle the view, and the more likely we are to recognise what is really going on.

But again, it's important to remember that the three characteristics arise as a single package. Where there is one, there's all of them. And for practical purposes, this means —one implication of this—that a student's experience may not follow a tidy progression through these characteristics in due order. Sometimes it happens, but sometimes it doesn't. Some students stumble into experiences that they have no business being in at all. And this can cause difficulty. So it's important not to cling to the descriptions we find in the texts and expect that we're going to march through them in an orderly way. For some people it happens, but for others it's much more chaotic.

Now, when this perception of dukkha becomes predominant in our practice, we tend to be discouraged and even confused. This comes about in part from our cultural conditioning. We are conditioned to believe that pain is bad. We have expressions like labelling an experience positive or negative, where positive is clearly good and negative

is definitely bad. But when we actually look at these words, positive simply means pleasurable, and negative simply means painful in most cases. So when we undergo negative experiences in our practice, we assume that things are going wrong.

When in fact, these experiences could be a sign that things are going right. Again, it's counterintuitive. It's one of the things that makes meditation for insight so difficult to grasp.

So let's look at how the segue from the perception of change to the perception of pain may be experienced. When we say that things are impermanent, or experiences are impermanent, we're saying that they begin, they endure, and then they end. Our view of impermanence depends on the perspective the mind takes when aware of change, and there are all sorts of different experiences that can indicate the perception of change.

But when the perception of change or impermanence matures, the mind sees predominantly the endings of things, the cessation of events, of whatever we experience. In a weak aspect, this understanding can take the form of the practitioner apparently losing their ability to focus on anything. The attention keeps sliding off. Whenever they move towards a meditation object, it's like the awareness just slides off it. It's like trying to grasp something that slips out of your hand the moment you take hold of it. That's one possible experience.

In a strong aspect, practitioners might have an alarming sense of the groundlessness of experience. They feel like they're on the edge of an abyss, or even falling into it. And when they look to see what's going on, there's nothing. They feel like they might be sucked into that nothing and disappear into it.

Now the result of these kinds of experiences—and there's a whole range of them that can take place—is the emergence of fear or anxiety. In a weak form, this can be just a sense of existential unease, a sense of things not going right, or a generalized sense of anxiety. In a strong form, this can manifest as panic. There may be a felt sense that I am not in control of my life. There may even be a sense that there is nothing I can do to improve my situation. And as the practice matures, this sense of the impossibility of improving the situation can become stronger. It becomes clear that there's no refuge from this groundlessness. There's nowhere to escape to. There's nothing we can do to resolve the situation we find ourselves in.

Of course, we generate fantasies of escape. But when we do that, we recognize that the fantasy of escape is exactly that—a fantasy. What I would like to believe in, but at this point, I can't.

This kind of experience shows us that at a deep level, the heart-mind is intuiting the universality of dukkha. Hence the sense that no escape is possible. But as the understanding of dukkha develops—and again this is accompanied by deepening samādhi, deepening immersion or concentration—so too does our understanding of not-self. At first we haven't noticed it. It's like an underground stream. But it may begin to be noticed in the clear perception that what one is experiencing is not personal. For example, the practitioner may realize that things are coming and going according to natural conditions and are not under anyone's control. It's not about me. It's not that I can't control my experience. It's just the fact that experiences come and go according to nature, according to natural conditions. They just move according to nature. In other words, this absence of control is not about the practitioner and her life. It's just nature. That's all.

It's rather like if you're driving a car, enjoying the scenery, and then suddenly you realize that you're in the front passenger seat. Somehow you've teleported from the driver's seat to the passenger seat. And you think, this is a bit odd. You have a look, and you realize there's no one in the driver's seat. Now at this point, one is tempted to panic. But then you realize that there never was a driver. Yet the journey has worked out reasonably well up to now. So why not relax and settle back and enjoy the view?

This is a kind of image for the segue from dukkha into not-self, into anattā. And there's a strange realization that while the fear that grips me is real, it too is not personal.

So there's danger, apparently, but there's no one who is in danger. It could be compared to watching a scary movie. Fear arises, but even as the fear is present, there's also the understanding that the situation inspiring the fear is not real. And so fundamentally, the fear itself has no ground. There's no need to fear it.

The essence of the perception of dukkha is the sense of groundlessness—that there's no solid foundation to our experience, and therefore we feel that we can be swallowed up at any moment. But not-self emerges here as the perception that this groundlessness is also groundless. And our fear is equally groundless. And the pain that we're going through is equally groundless. And so fundamentally, it's not a problem.

I remember one time I was describing an experience, which was quite alarming, to Christopher Titmuss. I said it was like free fall. And he immediately responded, "What would it be like if you removed the fall from the free?" It's free. Why do we have a sense of fall? Because we assume somewhere down there, there really is a ground, and I'm going to hit it—splat. But once I realize there isn't one, then from free fall to free. This is the segue into the perception of not-self.

And the turning point, as the Buddha says in the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, is disenchantment—nibbidā.

So we're continuing the practice, and at some point we hit pain, dukkha. And as the perception of not-self develops, we begin to see that our identification with the pain is weakening. As this happens, we no longer feel so threatened by it. After all, what do we let go of? We let go of what we no longer want, what we have given up on. In other words, once we've had enough, we stop. Once we've had enough of the dukkha, we stop. Because that's enough.

So this is surrender, where we let go of the struggle to construct an experience that is free from dukkha. We've had enough of trying to make things right. And we stop. And when we stop, the clinging stops, and the dukkha stops.

All this occurs because at a deeper than conscious level, the practitioner—using the classical terms—has become fed up with the endless rat race of saṃsāra. And as this is happening, the flip side of this fed-upness emerges, and this is a yearning for deliverance—a deliverance from the whole saṃsāra, from the whole mess.

So this is not an escape from this or that unpleasant situation. It's an escape from the entire rat race. And in classical Buddhist terms, this means the practitioner yearns for nibbāna, the cessation of dukkha. And she does this even if she has never heard of nibbāna. This movement in the heart occurs anyway.

And again, to encourage the arising of disenchantment with dukkha, with pain—never take it personally. Again and again we come back to this. Keep reminding yourself: this is not personal. And of course this is built into the practice of what Mahasi Sayadaw calls noting. This event is just this event. Even when it's painful, even when it's threatening, this event is just this event. It's not me, it's not my event, it's just this event.

So never take it personally, and be interested in the flow of events. These dukkha-flavored events may be painful and discouraging. They may even make the practice impossible. But you don't have to practice. That's not required. What's required is simply to be interested in what makes your practice impossible. Just be aware—which is what we're doing anyway.

Sometimes we can only be aware from a distance. We have to back off, give it space. Sometimes we can only be aware by distracting ourselves from the pain—by going for a walk, perhaps, or whatever works. But throughout all of this, we remain interested in the flow of events.

Now notice that in understanding dukkha, what is central is affect, which we've been talking about before. What is it that moves the heart? We're moved by what the Buddha calls sukha or dukkha—by pleasure or pain. And here we are moved by dukkha, we're moved by pain. The realm of affect is expressed in our desires and our aversions: what we want, what we really want, and what we are desperate to escape from.

From the Buddhist perspective, the fundamental question is whether or not we desire the sankhata, the constructed, that which brings us pain—or do we desire the asankhata, the unconstructed, that which brings us the cessation of pain.

Our habit is to desire the constructed. This is the world that we are familiar with. This is the world we take as normal. This is "the real world" that people on meditation retreats sometimes talk about in contrast to what's going on in the retreat. Our habit is to desire the constructed, and this is quite reasonable because we don't know anything about the unconstructed. We might not have even heard of it. So how can we desire it?

But when we become disenchanted with the constructed, because we've learned to understand it thoroughly, then we learn to desire something else. At first, this something else may be entirely mysterious. We may characterize it entirely negatively: what I want is not all of this. Even when "this" is what I've always experienced and what I imagine I will always experience into the future, I just know I don't want this. Perhaps this is the form in which it first emerges.

But still, what is it that I desire? This creates a genuine problem for the practitioner. If I'm in a practice tradition, then I may have a theoretical sense of what this might be, even if it's only rather vague. I can feel encouraged in my disillusionment because I understand, at least intellectually, that there is something—however mysterious—that is better than this. There is some alternative. In other words, I have a sense of direction, although it's defined negatively: not this.

And of course, if I have teachers, if I have senior practitioners that I can look up to—what the Buddha calls the kalyanamitta, the good friends—then I may have a lived sense of what lies beyond the familiar. I see these people, I meet them, I mix with them. In my case, I was very lucky to know and become friends with and practice as a companion with John Hale. He showed me what enlightenment looks like in a human being, which is very powerful.

But let's say I'm living in an entirely secular context. Let's say in this world, mindfulness is practiced for self-improvement or for a more comfortable life. If that's the purpose of the practice, then I might be tempted to despair and give up, walk away from

the whole project. This is one reason why the tradition is so central to this practice—because it holds us when things get rough. And sometimes things getting rough means we're going deeper. We're doing well.

I remember at one time I was in Burma at Chami Ayikta, the men's meditation hall. It was dominated at the front by a kind of stage, like a theatre, and at the back was this enormous statue of the Buddha teaching the first discourse. They had images of the five companions, with deer in the background, forest, and so on. On the stage is where the monks sat, because they're higher up in the hierarchy, and meditators sat on the floor of the theatre, as it were.

One of the meditators was this old fellow who would come in and plonk himself down and sit for goodly periods of time, completely still. As I watched him, it became clear that he was a pretty good practitioner. The thing is, he would plonk himself on the floor right up in front of that enormous Buddha. Bang! Eyeball to eyeball. And he always chose that spot.

I was there meditating, full of anguish and pain and misery and all these good things. Every now and again I'd have a look at him. And I'd think: this guy does not have a problem. It doesn't matter what happens to him. He doesn't have a problem.

Because he knows he's being looked after. He just knows it. And I really envied him because I didn't know it. And it made the whole thing much more difficult.

So this heart connection with the tradition is really important. Because again, dukkha is affective—it's of the heart, it moves the heart. So to be able to go through it and come out the other side, it's via the heart.

Let's go back to where we began. These things play a part in realisation: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence, the perception of not-self in pain. As we move through the experience of dukkha, there's a growing understanding of anattā, of not-self, and this is matched in the heart by growing equanimity, which is essentially balance. The heart becomes wide and it becomes balanced. And this develops throughout the exploration of dukkha, provided we can maintain mindfulness. This is the key point. We remain interested in the experience, not necessarily doing any special meditative things—sometimes we can't—but simply being interested in what's going on and reminding ourselves that whatever it is that's going on, it's not personal.

When equanimity matures, we enter into what the Theravāda calls saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇa—the understanding of equanimity regarding all constructions. In other words, all experience. At this stage, the practitioner is pretty clear about the

nature of not-self, and her heart is dominated by mindfulness and equanimity. In this balance, there is no problem because there's no clinging to a problem. And so there is no one who has a problem.

The heart is so wide, so stable, so balanced that nothing can upset it for long, because whatever is experienced is already changing into something else—so why get upset with it? Whatever is experienced is unsatisfactory—so why waste energy struggling against it? Whatever is experienced is not-self—so it's not my problem. It's no one's problem. It's just nature.

And this transforms our relationship with dukkha, with pain. We recognise it as an inherent part of the human condition. And there's even a beauty within it to be appreciated. It's like recognising that part of the beauty of youth is its inevitable transitoriness, the fact that it will disappear.

So, to wrap up, we've seen that in the first truth, the Buddha is quite clear that the practitioner's job is not to solve their dukkha, but to understand it. And when we fully understand our dukkha, our pain, we realise there is no "we" involved. As the Buddha explains to Venerable Kaccānagotta, who was a mature practitioner, the Buddha says a mature practitioner, quote, "has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only dukkha arising. What ceases is only dukkha ceasing."

Notice what he's saying—only dukkha, not someone who suffers from dukkha. Once we give up the "me and my problem," my problem is not solved. It is dissolved. And this is not just Dharma marketing. The Buddha means this, and in practice it actually works.

So we could say—we want to end optimistically—that the Dharma teaches us we are never going to find the right story that will turn us into a person with no problems. Or, as one verse maker put it: What's One More once created what he called a "spiritual theatre," and it was full of exhibits and paintings on the walls. There was one small painting I quite liked, and every time I visited I would gaze at it. It showed a very fat Chinese-style monk doing a qigong stretch with a big smile on his face, and underneath it, in Thai with an English translation, was this little verse: "Oh boundless joy! Now I see there is no happiness in this world."

And this is the paradox of the full understanding of dukkha.

I think that's enough for tonight. Any questions?

And yes, it's called functional myopia. So I went and had the surgery. Everything was fine. I went for the second one. Everything was fine. And off I went. It did what it was supposed to do. One of the side effects is it brought my ocular pressure down, so I never have to worry about that again. All is well.

So off I go. And then yesterday, I'm standing out on the deck, looking down at the parking lot, and I thought, "Hey, that tree doesn't look right"—because of the distance between it and the next tree. And then I started looking around, and everything all of a sudden changed. It was like going from a regular movie to one of those 3D films where you have to wear the glasses—it was that much of a change. Now the reality is, and by the way, I've been looking at everything because now everything is different—the reality is that the lens was put in to make that change four months ago. But I didn't see the effects of it until yesterday. So it took four months for my brain to catch up with the change.

And how many other times does that happen during practice and all that we do? You make a change, but you do not see the results for months.

This can definitely happen—something can shift in the practice, something is different, but we don't notice it. We don't notice it. And it can be days, weeks, months, years, until something clicks and we realize, "Oh, it's different. It's different now." And we can recognize that the change actually started way back when. It does happen. Perception can take a while to catch up.

Any questions from Zoom? Ah, Serena.

If there's no self, then who or what is awakened?

The question is: if there's no self, who or what is awakened? The Buddha doesn't actually say "no self"—he says "not self." So he says we can't actually pin it down. But what's awakened, I suppose, is nature itself. This is not something that in the Theravāda you hear discussed much. There are certain streams of Mahāyāna that will talk about this. But the world itself awakens. That's one way of looking at it.

Okay, thank you very much.

CHAPTER 57

Origins 8: Burning (Ādittapariyāya Sutta)

Patrick Kearney · 55 min

In this eighth talk of the Origins series, Patrick Kearney recounts the dramatic story of how the Buddha converted the three Kassapa brothers and their thousand fire-worshipping ascetics before delivering the Ādittapariyāya Sutta (SN 35.28), his third discourse. The narrative follows the Buddha's deliberate journey to Uruvelā, where he engages in a month-long display of shamanic power with the Nāga serpent and the fire element, ultimately shocking the elder Kassapa into recognizing his own lack of awakening with the direct words: "You are not an arahant."

The discourse itself represents a masterful reversal of Vedic fire symbolism. Where the Brahminical tradition revered fire as sacred and divine, the Buddha teaches that everything is burning—the six sense fields, contact, and feeling—with the unwholesome fires of obsession (rāga), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha). By taking the ascetics away from their sacred river to a barren hilltop, the Buddha demonstrates that awakening requires no special equipment, sacred places, or seasonal rituals. The practice is portable and universal, centered on intimate awareness of sensory experience here and now.

Kearney emphasizes that this teaching directs attention to the felt immediacy of contact (phassa) and feeling (vedanā) through the body, rather than the conceptual narratives of mind. While the mind tells stories that are often false, the body never lies. The discourse concludes with all thousand bhikkhus attaining full liberation—the largest mass awakening recorded in the canon—demonstrating the profound effectiveness of the Buddha's teaching just months after his own enlightenment.

So over past nights we've been going through the early days of the Buddha's career. We're looking at the months in which he basically invents Buddhism. Tonight we come to the Āditta Pariyāya Sutta, or simply "Burning." This is the third teaching, the third discourse, completing the trilogy that began with the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta—rolling the dharma wheel, his first discourse—then the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the not-self characteristic. These two first discourses were taught at Isipatana, just north of Vārāṇasī. This third discourse is taught south of Gayā, about 255 kilometers to the east, on a hill called Gayāsīsa, or Gayā Head.

Before we get to the discourse, we have to understand how the Buddha got there and who his audience was. So tonight is partly story time.

The Buddha delivers his first two discourses, and at the end of it he's got five fully awakened students—these are the five bhikkhus. He and his students spend some time at Isipatana, which is just north of Vārāṇasī, a major commercial center. Over this time the Buddha teaches a number of people and converts them, and more importantly, they start to get enlightened. Lay people begin to hit the first stage of enlightenment. It's here, when he's working with the Vārāṇasī merchant class—they all seem to be basically the capitalists—that the Buddha develops the template that has become known as the gradual training. He works out a basic template for teaching in which he can lead people from the beginning all the way to awakening.

After some time there are sixty bhikkhus in the Saṅgha, and all of them are arahants. All of them are fully awakened—good standard. Then the Buddha decides it's time to move on, and he sends them out into the world to spread his message. He says, "Go wandering for the welfare and happiness of humanity, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of devas and people." Notice the devas. Does he mean it? Maybe, probably. "Each of you travel by a different way. Teach the Dhamma, which is lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely in the ending, in both its essence and its letter."

It's interesting that we began with the newly awakened Buddha thinking, "I won't teach because no one is going to get this." Really only a matter of months later, he's not only got sixty fully awakened students, he's sending them out into the world to convert the multitude. He's got such confidence in them that he sends them out alone, to operate and teach as they individually see fit. A tremendous amount of confidence.

But as for the Buddha himself, he's got his own plans. He says, "I shall go to Uruvelā, to Senānigama, to teach the Dhamma." He's got a specific destination in mind. Uruvelā is to the southwest, on the near side of the Nerañjarā River, while Gayā is on the far side. This is the Buddha's old stamping ground—this is where he practiced asceticism. He knows this area, and he knows the people in it, particularly the ascetics. And of course the ascetics know him. But they know him as a kind of champion ascetic. They don't know him as a Buddha. So the Buddha is heading there on a missionary journey, and he's very clear in his target. He's got someone in mind whom he wants to convert.

The Buddha heads off there and enters into the territory of the three dreadlock wearers. These are the jaṭilas, dreadlock-wearing ascetics, and they're also brothers. They're all called Kassapa, which indicates they're Brahmin. There's Kassapa of Uruvelā, head of 500 ascetics; Kassapa of the River, head of 300 ascetics; and Kassapa of Gayā, head of 200 ascetics. Three brothers at different points on the river, each with their own community. Now the numbers are not to be taken literally.

In an oral culture, numbers are symbolic. Five hundred simply means a great many.

So the Buddha begins with Kasapa of Uruvela. He's geographically the closest, being on the same side of the Nairanjara River. He's also the most important, and this is marked by the fact that he's the eldest brother with the largest number of students—five hundred. His hermitage is located at Sena Nigama.

The Buddha arrives, approaches Kasapa, and says, "Kasapa, if you have no objection, I should like to spend one night in your fire chamber."

Now the fire chamber is the center of their rituals, and of course fire is very important to these people. This request would have created some surprise, but Kasapa keeps his equanimity. He replies, "I have no objection, great Samana, but there is a savage royal naga living there. He has supernormal powers. He is venomous, fearfully poisonous, and quite capable of killing you."

The naga is, of course, a serpent—a powerful serpent spirit who is in a sense the patron spirit of this community. So Kasapa is basically giving the Buddha a clear warning. You notice he calls him "Great Samana," so he knows him at least by reputation. But he doesn't know him as Buddha. He knows him as a fellow ascetic. Kasapa is giving a clear warning: mess with our patron spirit at your own risk.

And the Buddha says, "Suits me," and heads into the fire chamber, where he spends the night meditating.

Now the Naga Raja, the royal serpent whose residence this is—in other words, the Buddha is essentially a gatecrasher—is a powerful spirit associated with the elements of earth, fire, and water. He's also a shapeshifter. And the serpent is pissed off with having his living room invaded. He produces smoke and flame to show his irritation.

And the Buddha produces smoke and flame. The naga can produce smoke and flame; the Buddha can produce smoke and flame. But he does it very carefully in such a way that the naga is not harmed. In other words, the Buddha is again a powerful shaman, but he acts only out of metta and karuna—love and compassion.

The naga sees this as an escalation. So he escalates and angrily blazes up in flames. The Buddha enters into the fire element and he too blazes up in flames. Our text says, "With both of them ablaze, it was like the fire chamber itself was in flames, burning and blazing."

So what's happening outside? Basically, all the dreadlocked ascetics are gathered around watching the show. Nothing so entertaining has happened for months. They say to each other, "The great Samana, who is so beautiful, is being destroyed by the naga."

Notice how the Buddha is perceived by others. Apparently he was very good looking. A number of different people commented on his good looks and also the shine of his skin, the color of his skin. There's a community in Nepal who are Shakyas, who claim to be descendants of the Shakya clan that was wiped out—the Buddha's clan that was destroyed after his death. The refugees fled upcountry, so in the Kathmandu Valley you find these people. They're known for the golden sheen of their skin. Apparently, if you go there and look at them, you get a sense of how the Buddha himself would have looked.

Anyway, the place is burning all night. Dawn comes. No more fire. The Buddha walks out with his bowl, approaches Kasapa, and seems perfectly fine. He lifts up the lid of the bowl. Kasapa looks in and there's this tiny little snake curled up inside. The Buddha explains how the naga's fire was exhausted by his own.

And so Kasapa is pretty impressed. He thinks, "Wow, this guy is really powerful." But he also thinks, "This fellow is not an Arahant. He's not awakened like I am."

So the Buddha is essentially displaying his shamanic power. He's showing his mastery over the fire element. He has challenged, quite deliberately challenged, the Naga to a battle and won it. And now he's challenging Kasapa. Kasapa's practice revolves around the elements, and the fire element in particular. Essentially what the Buddha is saying to him, without using the words, is: "I am more powerful than you, and therefore superior." In other words, he's showing himself to be a master of one-upmanship.

But Kasapa feels that power is one thing, awakening is another. So he respects the Buddha's power and apparently welcomes him into the community as a kind of distinguished visitor, because he lives in a grove just off the main area. But Kasapa does not take the demonstration of superior power as evidence of awakening, and therefore as evidence that he's got something to learn from this person.

Kasapa is showing a stubbornness in his attitude which is very similar to that of the Buddha before his awakening. But Kasapa also shows a very good instinct, because he's absolutely right that power and awakening are not the same thing. They are different. And many a cult member has come to grief not realizing that, thinking that power equals enlightenment. It's this insight, this understanding, which may give us a clue as to one reason why the Buddha was interested in Kasapa. He sees his potential. Yet Kasapa is deluded insofar as he's convinced that he is awakened when he isn't.

So the Buddha hangs around, basically, for about twenty-four days—almost a month. He's the guest that never leaves. And over this twenty-four-day period, he performs more spectacular miracles, each miracle more spectacular than the last. He's a real showman. And each time this happens, Kasapa admires his power, but he comes back to the same thought: "There's no reason to assume this person is awakened."

Finally, the Buddha changes tack. He thinks, and I quote, "This foolish fellow will continue thinking like this for a long time." So he's got to change direction. He decides to shock Kasapa into waking up to what's going on. And the Buddha says, "Kasapa, you are not an Arahant, and you are not on the way to becoming one. There is nothing in your practice by which you might ever become an Arahant, or enter into the way of becoming one." It's like—bing, pow, bang.

And Kasapa is convinced. Now why would he be convinced? Because over the past twenty-four days, the Buddha has made it perfectly clear that he knows and understands what Kasapa's practice is, and he's better at it. So if anybody knows where this practice leads, it's got to be this unwanted visitor. This also demonstrates that Kasapa must have been sincere in his aspiration. Because although he had convinced himself that he was awakened, he was ready to hear otherwise. He was still capable of learning.

So Kasapa surrenders and converts. But first he says, "Look, I need to consult with my students. I've got responsibilities." He consults with his five hundred ascetic followers who have been watching the show all this time. And they say, "We have long had faith in the great Samana. If you lead the highest life under him, we will do likewise." In other words, in this community, the last person to understand what was going on was Kasapa. And in this, I think, he demonstrates that he's a typical leader—the last to figure out what's going on.

And so then everybody converts. The text, which is by the way the Mahakhandaka of the Vinaya Pitaka, tells us that the ascetics, and I quote, "took their hair"—so they shaved their heads—"their dreadlocks, their belongings, and their implements for the fire sacrifice, and they dropped them into the water to be carried away." What they're doing is abandoning a way of practice which they see as incompatible with the Buddha's way of practice.

But why do they throw their implements into the river?

It's easy to think they're simply throwing them away—that now they're rubbish, so they just get rid of them. But I don't think so. I think what they're actually doing is making an offering to the devas. For them, the devas live in the river, in the water and in the fire. The river is sacred. Remember in the European tradition, we have King Arthur,

who received his sword Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake. And when he died, he returned the sword to the lake. I think this is what's going on. In other words, the ascetics are not abandoning their gods. They're just changing the way they practice.

And this is very typical of the way Buddhism spreads. Buddhism does not simply reject. It absorbs. Whatever seems to be working in the community, it just takes on board.

Anyway, all this abandoned equipment flows downstream, and it's seen by Kassapa of the River, whose community is downstream. When he sees all this, he fears disaster has overtaken his older brother, and he hurries upstream with his followers, only to realize that they've all converted to this other thing. He says to Kassapa a very sensible question: "Is this better, Kassapa?" And Kassapa says, "It is." So that group of ascetics converts.

Then at the bottom, further downstream, is Gayā Kassapa and his followers. They come up and do the same, and the same process occurs. So now the Buddha has a thousand converts, and they're ready for the teaching.

So what to do? He takes them away from the river and goes to the hill, Gayā Sīsa, where he teaches the Āditta Sutta, the discourse on burning. Gayā Sīsa is the only hill in the area—it's a flat plain and there's this one hill. They go to the top, and this is where it all happens.

So here's the discourse. The Buddha says: Everything is burning. And what is this everything that is burning? Eye sensitivity is burning. Visual forms are burning. Visual awareness is burning. Visual contact is burning. And whatever feeling arises dependent upon visual contact—whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant—that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. Burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

Ear sensitivity is burning. Nose sensitivity is burning. Tongue sensitivity is burning. Body sensitivity is burning. Mind sensitivity is burning. Phenomena are burning. Mind awareness is burning. Mind contact is burning. And whatever feeling arises dependent upon mind contact—whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant—that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. Burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

So let's have a look at what the Buddha is saying. First of all, again, let's go back to context. The Buddha lives at the end of what is now called the Vedic period, which runs roughly from 1500 to 500 BCE. This is a time when the tradition of the Brahmins, the

Brahmanists, the Vedic tradition, had not yet developed into what we call Hinduism. This is pre-Hindu. And Vedic orthodoxy did not include ideas like karma, reincarnation, personal enlightenment, and so on. Those were borrowed from the traditions of the Ganges Valley.

So the Vedic tradition begins in the northwest, what is now Pakistan. And as the Brahmin communities head southeast, down to the Ganges Valley, they start to settle and absorb the local indigenous traditions. What we've got there is an amalgam—a multicultural amalgam.

Vedic worship centered around the elements like fire and rivers, as well as other things: the worship of Vedic gods like Indra, chanting, sacrifices. All Brahmins kept three fires burning in their houses. One to cook food, one to receive the offerings that were sacrificed, and one to ward off evil spirits. It was believed that the gods lived in the fires. And in fact, fire itself was a god—Agni. So fire played a really important role.

The dreadlocked ascetics were focused on fire worship and sacrifice, both of which come from the Vedic tradition, but also shamanism. Like Gautama in his ascetic phase, they believed that the path to awakening lay through generating tapas, which literally means heat. They do this through ascetic practice, but also through rituals.

Now, when the Buddha started to invent Buddhism, when he started to develop his doctrine, he took the Vedic symbolic imagery and reversed it. He taught that what was central was coolness, not fire. This comes through the concept of Nirvana, which means extinction—meaning the extinction of a fire, the going out of a fire. The image of fire was inverted, where fire became the problem and the extinction of fire, the solution. So you have the three fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. Everything is burning. But this burning isn't good—it's bad. He's reversing the imagery. And this reversal would certainly have attracted the attention of his audience and pushed them to see the world in a different way.

Now, their practice revolved around a felt intimacy with the elements, which was a very powerful, direct practice, basically centered on the body. The labor of preparing for the sacrifice, ritual bathing, including the cold of mid-winter bathing—this is one of their major celebrations—and so on. But this practice, in the Buddha's perspective, is limited by, among other things, dependence upon certain specific conditions.

First of all, you had to have certain possessions. You had to have the correct implements for the sacrifice and the rituals. Secondly, you had to be in the right place—the sacred places of the river and the forest that were home to particular, specific spirits whom they worshipped and whose power they harnessed. And of course, more

mundane things: if you're going to burn a lot of wood on the sacrificial fire, you need trees. If you need water for ceremonial bathing, you need a river. So they're limited to a particular area. This is where they can do it. They can't do it anywhere else.

The Buddha's approach to the practice is very different. First of all, no special equipment is necessary. Maximum simplicity. Now of course, when we come to a contemporary meditation retreat, the joint's full of equipment. Back in the day, it wasn't needed. People were raised on the ground. People didn't have furniture. So they didn't need special furniture for meditation. They just, at best, needed a mat. But even then, they often would simply create a mat out of leaves and shrubs that were available. So no special equipment.

But also, the practice is not limited to any particular place. One is free to move anywhere at all and do this practice. In other words, universalism. The tradition is portable. And in fact, what the Buddha was doing, without knowing it at the time, was inventing possibly the first world religion.

So the Buddha wants to shift these ascetics out of their normal ways of viewing the world and out of their normal practices. He takes them away from the area they're familiar with, the area that supports the practice they're doing, to somewhere completely different—pretty much as opposite as he could get to their sacred places. A hill far away from the river. What he's doing is telling them: you do not need your sacred spaces. You do not need your special equipment.

And then he teaches them a practice, again centering around the elements, but based on intimacy with the elements, here and now, through the relationship with the six sense fields. So in other words, he's saying the elements are already available. There's no need for special circumstances. You don't need special devas and spirits. You don't need special sacred places. You don't need particular seasons. All you need to do is become intimate with the elemental qualities of your own experience, here and now, wherever you are.

And this connection, this intimacy, is cultivated through vedanā, the realm of affect. And this intimacy comes via the body.

If you look at the two basic schemas of the human condition that the Buddha developed—the five aggregates, which we've looked at briefly, and the six sense fields—you notice something interesting. Looking at the five aggregates: body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. Out of the five, four of them are psychological. One is physical. Now look at the six sense fields. Five of them are physical. One is psychological. So it's a

different emphasis. This second schema is more body-oriented. And the emphasis in each sense—and five of the six senses are body—the emphasis is on the immediacy of experience.

We've mentioned this before in the retreat. Phassa, usually translated as contact, literally means touch. The touch of the world on a sensitivity in the body. And with touch comes affect or influence—vedanā, feelings. This link between touch and affect, contact and feeling, is centrally important. And of course, where is contact most clear? Through the world of the body, through physicality. So if we want to get in touch with the world of affect, which vehicle would be suitable? The body, in the form of the five physical senses. This approach has a strong physicality to it.

So the Buddha says, eye sensitivity is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. The three fires, the three roots of the unwholesome, are fires. Burning with birth, age, and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. Dukkha itself is a fire. And it goes through the other senses in the same way.

The teaching involves intimacy with the elements. And this intimacy is always available. It's available right now. This teaching is designed to bring us back to the feel of here and now, rather than getting lost in concepts. It centers around contact and feeling, touch and response. And these are already happening. I don't have to do anything to make it happen. We are already responding. We are already feeling. We don't have to do anything extra to respond. It's already happening right now.

In this discourse, the aspect of experience, of contact, that the Buddha focuses on is dukkha. He's saying that at the heart of things there's a restless dissatisfaction, a sense of dis-ease, but it can be so subtle, so omnipresent, that we no longer notice it. We notice our thoughts and our feelings blowing about in the wind, but we don't notice the restless, dissatisfied quality deep within the citta, which is the source of this restless movement, where it's all coming from.

So this practice revolves around intimacy with dukkha. It's about feeling our way into whatever is happening now. The emphasis is on receptivity—especially a receptivity to what normally we would overlook because it's too close to us, or reject because it's disturbing.

Now as a practice style, this would suggest a more receptive approach rather than an active approach. In an active approach to meditation, we deliberately direct awareness to a meditation object.

But in a receptive approach, we allow the meditation object to come to us. We allow the experience to come to us.

So in the active approach, if I'm using breathing as meditation object, I send the awareness to some particular part of the body where the feeling is clear—could be the rising and falling of the abdomen, could be the nostrils, could be something else. In a receptive approach, if breathing is my meditation object, I begin with the obvious: I'm already breathing. And then I let the breathing come to me, rather than me going out to it.

The emphasis here is on the five physical senses. Mind also plays a crucial role—mind creates a sensual unity. If you consider where seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching take place, where do they take place? They take place here. This mind is here. So the practice really emphasises the here-ness of experience.

Thought and narrative take us away from the here-ness of the sentient body. Mind and concept take us to other places and to other times. But the sense fields bring us back to here—even the here-ness of mind. Where am I conceiving myself? Where am I constructing a self? Here. The mind creates worlds that are far distant from here, but where are these worlds being created and sustained? Here, in this mind.

Tracking the sense fields is not about narrative. Tracking self, as we're seeing, can include narrative—it can include the river of stories. Because when the Buddha talks about the construction of self—"this is mine, I am this, this is my self"—view is at the end, which we notice largely through the stories we tell ourselves. About me, of course.

But this practice that the Buddha is teaching here is centered on feeling, not story. It's concerned with the world defined by affect. So it's more intimate than the world defined by narrative, by story, and fundamentally more real in the sense of its felt power to move us, to define our response. Paradoxically, it's very powerful, but also can be much more difficult to notice because we take it for granted.

To track the senses, we need to get out of the river of stories endlessly produced by the mind into something more intimate—where the stories are coming from. And why are thoughts so attractive? In large part, it's because we are naturally attracted to stories, particularly when the stories we're telling ourselves are busily creating my sense of me. And the stories have the additional advantage that they allow us to try and travel through the past, present and future.

We tend to get sucked into these stories. We listen to the language of the mind, and the language of the mind is the language of stories. But in this practice, what we're aiming to do is learn to listen to the body. Because the body does have a language, but it's much easier to overlook because the body does not tell stories. The language of the body is sensation.

And of course, one thing which is interesting about this is that while the stories the mind tells us are often, if not normally, if not always, false—the body never lies. Everything it says is entirely, directly, and immediately true. Whereas the mind is lying to us all the time, the body never does. Yet we tend not to listen to the body until it shouts at us, such as when we fall sick after a long period of working too hard.

The language of the mind tells us stories that involve the reality of time, of past and future. The language of the body is always about the present. The language of the mind tells us stories about places far, far away from here. The language of the body is always about here, this place.

So this practice of the senses involves staying close, staying home to the senses themselves, and along with the senses, of course, the response.

Because sense experience is a touch, and when we are touched, we respond. So the Buddha talks about this: "Whatever feeling arises dependent upon contact, whether pleasant or painful, or neither painful nor pleasant, that too is burning."

A sensitivity is touched by a sense object. And when the sentient body is touched, it responds. This response is motivated by feeling, by vedana. And vedana is intimately involved in this. Feeling is not something that comes to the party. Feeling *is* the party.

So we're moved by the touch of the world. And the Buddha talks about the basic categories: we're moved to hold on if we register the feeling as pleasant, to resist or reject if we register it as painful, or to ignore or be confused by whatever we experience as being neither painful nor pleasant. And this is not something we have any choice about. It's just how it is.

So the discourse is directing our attention to these fundamental movements of the heart. We are already entangled in the world of the senses. We are already moved. We are responding. But the question is: what are we responding to? Are we responding to the fantasies that we create with our minds? Or are we responding to the actuality of experience, right here and now?

The aim of this teaching is to allow us to cool down. And this is the experience of nirvana. When we become intimate with the senses—but especially with emphasis on the physical senses—we recognize that the layers of meaning we construct on top of the immediacy of our experience are just that: layers of meaning added on. What we've learned to do is to live on the top levels of our conceptual skyscrapers, while this discourse on burning is inviting us to move down to the ground floor, as close as possible to what is actually happening here and now.

The discourse concludes: "As this explanation was being given, the hearts of the thousand bhikkhus were liberated from the influences by not clinging." A thousand people awakened—fully awakened. Pretty good for someone who thought, "I can't teach this to anybody." It's only been a few months since his awakening. And this is actually the largest number of people recorded to have attained awakening in one hit, which is an indication of how the tradition venerates this discourse.

So Buddhism is getting bigger. The Buddha now has a large community, much bigger than the sixty disciples he had back at Varanasi. And these are well-known and respected ascetics. What does he do with them once they're awakened? He marches them down the hill to Rajagaha, the capital of the kingdom of Magadha, the kingdom where all of this is happening. And then, basically, the Buddha engages in a bit of theatre to demonstrate to the public that he's converted all these people.

The story is that everybody recognizes the Kassapa brothers. "The Kassapa brothers and all of their followers—they've come to town! Wow, this is a big deal. We didn't expect this. Not normally, not even this time of year. And who's this fellow with them? Is he a new student or something?"

When Kassapa—the senior Kassapa—realizes that this is the gossip spreading through the crowd, he very ostentatiously bows to the Buddha. "No, no—I'm the student. He's the teacher."

What the Buddha has just done is announce himself in the most public way possible. "Boys and girls, I've arrived. It's a new era." And we start to see the Buddha as a very skillful politician and organizer. He's not just hanging out getting people enlightened. He's building something.

And the contrast again between that and just a few months ago when he didn't want to teach at all because he thought it would be too difficult. The contrast is very stark.

Any questions?

And he gives them a way in. I think that's very typical of the way he operates. You notice with the sixty—the first sixty disciples—how long has he known these characters? Not long. But he just sends them out. "You just go, everybody by themselves. You just do whatever you think you need to do." And so you can see that there's a kind of creativity here. Because again, you've got this vibrant multicultural society, and you've got the Buddha converting people from all sorts of different traditions. What do they bring with them? They bring their own way of doing things and their own way of understanding. And he gives them a different framework, but there's a lot of leeway to do things their way.

There are some things he really insists upon. You get discourses where the Buddha gets really upset because someone is misrepresenting his teaching. And the teaching that gives him the greatest trouble is the teaching of not-self. Because it's the most easily misunderstood, even by his own students—especially the learned ones.

But he's created this very open structure based on a complete faith in the awakening of his own students. There's this genuine sense of respect for them. "You just go off and you do what you think you should do, because it'll be the right thing to do." And you also get a number of discourses that are actually given by students, and the Buddha's either there, or someone reports back to him, and he says, "Yep, I would have said exactly the same thing under those circumstances." So it gets added to the canon.

But again, he's got this sense of Buddhism absorbing, not rejecting.

I was struck by what you were saying—the fact that Buddhism relies on... I mean, the way you presented it, it sounds like you feel it's confrontational and sort of dismissive of people's beliefs. But probably practically, in what you've said and how it's expressed today, it's amazing how Buddhism seems to coexist with other religions, and other religions can sort of tolerate it and take it on board.

I didn't think I was explaining the Buddha's teaching as rejecting other stuff, but what can you do? I must have misspoken. But yeah, his basic concern is what is kusala or what is akusala? What is wholesome, what is unwholesome? It's an ethical concern. And you get the practical concern: what works? If he thinks something doesn't work, he'll just come out and say so.

There's one discourse where he comes across a youth who's praying by a river. Again, water is important. And the Buddha comes up and says, "What are you doing?" And the fellow says, "Well, my father died recently and I'm performing these prayers and rituals by the river so that his soul can ascend to heaven." And the Buddha says, "Wow, that's really interesting. You see that rock over there?" The fellow says, "Yeah."

"Just throw it in the water for me." The fellow says, "Okay." He throws the rock in the water. "Now, can you give a chant or a ritual which will make that rock ascend to heaven?" And of course he says, "No, it's heavy. It falls to the bottom." And the Buddha says, "Depending on your father's karma, he's either going up or he's going down. There's nothing you can do that can make the slightest difference."

So that's an example of him going biff, pow, bang. Because he's absolutely convinced: no, this isn't going to work for you.

This is going to create more dukkha. But if he's got an entry point, if he can see something in their practice that is, in his view, wholesome, then yes, why not adapt it? Why not work with it?

It seems to me like a really unique, defining quality of Buddhism among the pantheon of religions. When Buddhists live up to their own traditions, of course. They're perfectly capable of behaving just as badly as everybody else. But that's the idea. That was his skill as a teacher.

And he also had a talent for picking the right people. He obviously knew, "I've got to get Kassapa. He's important." Personally, Kassapa had the potential, but he was also in such a strategic position. If the Buddha got him on board, there would be a significant advantage.

These are the sides of the Buddha we tend not to look at. Buddha as shaman—which he didn't use much. He never does anything again like what he did with the Kassapa brothers. Buddha as politician—two of the major kings in the Ganges Valley were his personal students. Buddha as organizer, as legislator, who created the sanghas of monks and nuns. These are the sides of the Buddha that we kind of gloss over. But without those, there would be no Buddhism. There would be no retreat happening here.

Someone asked how long it took for the legal framework around monastic life to develop. It developed as people did various things over time—people did crappier and crappier things. There's one rather plaintive discourse in which someone says to the Buddha, "Why is it that when we started, we had no rules and lots of awakened people, and now after all this time we've got lots of rules and fewer awakened people?" And the Buddha says, "That's just the way it is."

The monastics were wanderers who cycled around particular routes. They would have traveled down major trading routes because that's where the people were. If you're going to engage people, you go to certain places. If you want to be fed, you go to

certain places. Then some would head off into the forest, into the jungle to do their own particular practices. They had forest-dwelling practitioners who just disappeared for months or years at a time and then emerged.

So the Buddha sets up in Rājagaha initially, but then after a few months, he shifts to Sāvatthī. Sāvatthī is the biggest city, and he moves his headquarters there. There's a period of about twenty-five years during which basically the word is spread: if you need to find me, I will be at Sāvatthī doing the rains retreat during the rainy season. That becomes his headquarters.

He's got this loose structure with people wandering around. There would have been monks and nuns who had never seen him personally. But if they wanted to see him, they knew they could find him at one of the two monasteries at Sāvatthī during that three-month period. So that becomes the command and control center. That's how he keeps track of things.

But you have discourses where, at one time, he's traveling alone and needs shelter for the night. A potter says, "Look, I've got a shed out back and there's room in there. You can bunk down there. And by the way, there's another ascetic staying there as well." So the Buddha goes in and there's this other ascetic who is also a bhikkhu. But the two of them look the same. There's this interesting interplay between them until the bhikkhu finally realizes who this stranger is.

The young man is a bhikkhu—he's got the robes—but it would have been difficult to tell the difference between various ascetics. Some did not shave their heads. Some had hair, some didn't.

The bhikkhus and bhikkhunis shaved their heads. There might have been slight differences in the style of robes, but there would probably have been more variety in the early days than there was later on, where it became very standardized. It may not have been that easy to distinguish at sight which group a particular person belonged to.

There was such variety in those times. People travelled only by foot, and the methods of communication were similarly limited. And of course, the learning was done through memorization. You chant and memorize, and that teaching would spread out.

Even there, we know that there were variations. When the Buddha died, Mahakassapa gathered, according to legend, five hundred awakened bhikkhus to the First Council, where they chanted everything that they remembered of the Buddha's teaching to fix it, to establish the teaching definitively.

After the council, a major teacher from out west turned up. Because they were walking, by the time news of the Buddha's death reached them, by the time they heard of this council, by the time they got there, it was already over. So they arrived, and I think it was Mahakassapa who said, "Don't worry, we can recite it to you and you can memorize it." And the senior teacher said, "Don't bother about it. We've got our own recitation." And he left.

What is interesting is there's no hint of criticism in the tradition. They simply tell the story—this is what happened. So they're acknowledging that even then there were variations. Especially with an oral tradition. Because where does an oral tradition reside? It resides in a community, in human memories, and it appears when the people get together and chant. Dharma talks. Teaching. Interpreting what it all meant. And then the different meditation practices built around that.

Debate was really important in that tradition. It's like in Tibetan Buddhism today, where debate is central. Debate was central to all of the traditions. Questioning and interruptions and debate—that was all part of the deal.

Among the original five ascetics, Assaji we hear about, because he later composed a famous verse which converted Sariputta, and therefore Mahamoggallana. But the others I can't think of offhand, though they may well be mentioned elsewhere. Malalasekera's Dictionary of Pali Proper Names would tell you—he's got the names, and he gives you all the stories. It's online now.

I do enjoy telling stories myself. But remember the fundamental Irish principle of telling stories: if it's a good story, never question whether it's true. That would be incredibly disrespectful.

CHAPTER 58

Vacchagotta and Fire Part 1

Patrick Kearney · 34 min

In this first part of a two-part exploration of the Aggivacchagotta Sutta (MN 72), Patrick Kearney introduces us to Vacchagotta, a wandering Brahmin seeker who approaches the Buddha with ten profound philosophical questions about the universe, the relationship between life force and body, and the fate of an awakened one after death. Rather than providing direct answers, the Buddha repeatedly responds 'I do not hold this view,' frustrating Vaccha but revealing something essential about the Buddha's approach to truth and liberation.

Kearney illuminates a crucial distinction between two types of view (diṭṭhi): experiential view grounded in immediate, direct encounter with what is happening now, and conceptual view (diṭṭhigata) that becomes conviction or ideology. The Buddha's concern is not whether philosophical positions are true or false, but whether clinging to them moves us toward or away from awakening. When we grip our concepts tightly, we create a false sense of stability and identity while pushing away the actual felt reality of changing experience.

This teaching has profound implications for meditation practice. By grounding awareness in immediate physical sensations—which are inherently here-and-now and carry no inherent meaning—we learn to live first-hand rather than through conceptual filters. The practice of noting helps us track experience as it actually unfolds, loosening our grip on the convictions that the conceptual mind generates. The Buddha is pointing Vacchagotta, and us, toward intimacy with what is actually happening rather than getting lost in theories about what should be happening.

Tonight and tomorrow night, we're going to look at Nibbāna—or in Sanskrit and English, Nirvana—from the perspective of the Buddha, and we're going to do it by going through one discourse to Vacchagotta about fire. We'll do the first part tonight, and the second part tomorrow night. This is, if you want to look it up, Majjhima number 72, the Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta.

So we'll start with our central character: Vacchagotta. In Pāli, *gotta*—or in Sanskrit, *gotra*—refers to one's ancestry or lineage. So Vacchagotta means something like "descended from Vaccha." It's his clan name, not his personal name. As I think we mentioned before, in the suttas we often don't get people's personal names; we just get their clan name. The Buddha's clan name is Gotama, and we actually don't know his personal

name. Later on, the name Siddhattha was given to him, but that seems to be a later addition. In the earliest tradition, outside of being the Buddha, he's just known as Mr. Gotama.

So we have Vacchagotta, and the Buddha simply calls him Vaccha. We're going to follow that example. Vaccha comes from a wealthy Brahmin family, but he's dissatisfied with the Vedic tradition, and so he's left home to become a wanderer, a *paribbājaka*—a mendicant living off the generosity of the lay people—and he has dedicated himself to the search for truth. One of the things that characterizes him, which comes up very clearly in the discourse, is that he's got a very deep intellectual and existential curiosity. He really wants to know what's going on, and he's not satisfied with the conventional answers provided in his time.

Vaccha had a number of dialogues with the Buddha, and in the Majjhima Nikāya there are three successive discourses in which you see the Buddha spending a lot of time with him and bringing him along in his Dhamma quest. This discourse to Vacchagotta about fire is the second of the three.

The place is Jeta's Grove outside the city of Sāvatthī. Jeta's Grove is one of the Buddha's two headquarter monasteries, and they're both located just outside Sāvatthī. Sāvatthī is the capital of the kingdom of Kosala, which is located in what is now close to the border of Nepal in the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. Sāvatthī is the headquarters of the Buddha's movement—but this is not the early Buddha. This is the later Buddha. He's built up this international empire, this international community. But he is a wanderer. He's just walking around like everybody else, so he can be quite difficult to find. Let's say you decided you needed to see the Buddha. How would you find him? He could be anywhere in the Ganges Valley.

What he did was make Sāvatthī his headquarters and basically announce that during each of the rainy seasons—when the monsoon is too intense to go wandering around—he would be at Sāvatthī in one of his two headquarter monasteries. He did this for over twenty-five years. So this became the headquarters of his movement, and a lot of people who wanted to track him down would come here. This is the obvious place to go.

Vaccha comes to visit him, and he's got some urgent questions. These are a standard list of the ten profound and difficult philosophical questions of the day. Vaccha comes along and he wants answers. There are questions about the universe, questions about the relationship between the life force and the body—those are questions five and six—and questions about the survival of an awakened one after death, which are questions seven to ten.

The point is that none of these questions are easy. All of them are difficult. So it tells you something about Vaccha that he cannot let them go. He's determined to crack them.

The Buddha agrees to discuss this, and so we begin with four questions about *loka*. Loka is often, if not usually, translated as "world." But that's a bit misleading, because for us, the world is the planet Earth. But Vaccha's not talking about the planet Earth—if he even knows about the planet Earth.

He's talking about something much bigger. So we could translate loka as universe.

In each question that he asks, what Vaccha wants to know is what the Buddha's view is on this particular question. What does he think about it? And the questions are: Is the universe eternal? Is the universe not eternal? Is the universe finite? Is the universe infinite? These are the same questions being asked today, aren't they? Not that I keep up with science. But in any event, in each case, the Buddha simply says, "I do not hold this view."

Vaccha does not give up, and he proceeds to two questions about the relationship between the life force and the body. The term translated as life force is jiva. Usually you see it translated as soul, although I'm not quite sure that soul quite fits. Jiva literally means life. It comes from the root jiv, to live or to breathe. So it is perhaps more accurately rendered as life force—that which gives life to a physical body, that which holds on to the body to sustain it. We might get a sense of it in our instinctive movements to avoid danger or death. Let's say we accidentally fall. We surprise ourselves by the rapid instinctive movements we make to protect ourselves. Sometimes we wonder, how did I do that? This is the jiva coming out and manifesting itself.

So there is jiva, and there is body, which here is sarira. This is body, but specifically the material body that has no life. A corpse is sarira. Bones, a skeleton, are sarira. A physical relic is sarira. By the way, the stupa up there has relics of the Buddha and of Arahants. I don't know if you can feel them pulsating, but there are two holy places on this property: that stupa and this meditation hall.

These questions of Vaccha are about the relationship between material bodies on the one hand and what gives life to them on the other. In other words, what's the difference between a dead body and a living body? How does a body come to be alive in the first place? The questions are: Is the life force the same as the body? Or is the life force separate from the body?

In modern terms, if the life force is the same as the body, this would be the doctrine of materialism. If the life force is separate from the body, this would be the doctrine of eternalism. In both cases, the Buddha says, "I do not hold this view."

Vaccha is persistent, and he moves on with four more questions. These relate to the fate of an awakened one after death. The term used for awakened one is Tathagata. Now, why is he obsessing about what happens to an awakened one after death? It sounds a bit strange. But basically, what he's really asking about is the nature of awakening itself.

According to the Buddha's teaching, when we awaken, when we gain enlightenment, we abandon the three unwholesome roots. These are the akusala mula: attraction, aversion, and delusion—or more usually translated as greed, hatred, and ignorance. They're gone. Now, given that these three unwholesome roots condition pretty much all of human experience, what's left when they're gone? Clearly the awakened one is left. The awakened one is wandering about doing his or her thing. But what happens after she dies? What's left then?

So the question is, when we strip away all the surface appearances of the physical world and all the psychological movements and inclinations of the mind, what's left underneath? This is another way of asking, what is Nibbana?

The way Vaccha puts this is he asks: Does an awakened one exist after death? Does an awakened one not exist after death? Does an awakened one both exist and not exist after death? Does an awakened one neither exist nor not exist after death?

Now, we're not going to delve deeply into these, though we would if we were studying Indian philosophy, because these four possibilities represent what in the European tradition is called the tetralemma—the four assumptions that cover all logical possibilities in Indian logic. The four possibilities are: A, not A, both A and not A, neither A nor not A. That covers every possibility logically. So if you ask the question, the answer has got to be somewhere there. And in each case, the Buddha says, "I do not hold this view."

By this time, Vaccha is getting frustrated, and quite understandably so. He wants to know what's going on. He has enough faith in the Buddha to feel that if anybody knows the answers to these questions, he does. But the Buddha stubbornly refuses to answer. And finally, light dawns. Vaccha realizes the Buddha is not rejecting or accepting these different beliefs and stances. What he's rejecting is the very idea of view.

Here we come to a distinction that is really important in this discourse. What is view? In Pali, this is *diṭṭhi*. View is very important to the Buddha—for example, the first factor of the Eightfold Path, the beginning of the Eightfold Path, is right view, *sammādiṭṭhi*. But both the Pali word *diṭṭhi* and the English word "view" have two levels of meaning, which we need to understand.

For example, I step outside looking for some fresh air. I look up and see a bright blue sky but with dark clouds roiling towards me. Suddenly there's the sound of thunder and the rain comes pouring down. I see people scatter for shelter. The traffic slows. The street fills with water. Now, what am I describing? I'm describing a view. This is what I'm seeing.

Then the rain reminds me of the strange things that have been happening in weather patterns in recent years. Extreme weather events have been increasing in number and they've been linked to climate change and potential catastrophes. So I'm thinking, what is the best strategy to limit global warming? Should we go nuclear? Or should we focus on renewables?

In all this, I am describing a view. But you see the difference between the two views. The first is confined to actual, immediate experience. The second moves away from the immediate experience and creates a complex narrative, a story based on abstract thinking. It is conceptual, not experiential. They can both be called view, but they're very different.

Vaccha is beginning to understand that what the Buddha is concerned with is the nature of view itself. So he shifts his ground and says, "What disadvantage does Mr. Gautama see that he does not take up any of these convictions?"

Notice, first of all, that Vaccha calls the Buddha "Mr. Gautama," indicating he's not formally a student. He's a wanderer coming to ask a professional colleague, as it were, a question. But also notice that his language is changing. Instead of saying *diṭṭhi*, view, he says *diṭṭhigata*, which is literally "gone to view" or "immersed in view." Here it's translated as conviction.

What *diṭṭhigata* suggests is both view in the abstract conceptual sense that we described before, and also a clinging to this view. There are both sides to it. You get different translations depending on which is being emphasized. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *diṭṭhigata* as "speculative view," bringing out its abstract nature.

And Bhikkhu Sujato translates it as conviction, which suggests clinging. And Ajahn Thanissaro translates it as position. And again, he's indicating clinging in the sense that we take our stand on our convictions and we're determined to defend them.

So you notice that the discussion is moving from what is happening in the world—for example, is the universe finite or infinite?—to what we believe is happening in the world and how we respond to it. For example, am I clinging to my belief about the universe? And this movement is really important for the Buddha because he is more inter-

ested in how we live than in what we believe. For him, our beliefs are important because they condition the way that we live. But what is central is the way that we live, not our beliefs.

So Vaccha wants to know, what is the disadvantage of holding any of these convictions or positions, regardless of whether or not they're true? And the Buddha goes through all ten, but we won't do the repetition. We'll just look at the first one.

The Buddha says, "Vaccha, the conviction that the universe is eternal is a jungle of views, a wilderness of views, a twisting of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is characterized by pain, by distress, despair, and fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, the fading of obsession, cessation, peace, direct understanding, awakening, nibbana." And so on for all the other views.

Now, you notice what the Buddha is talking about. He's not looking at whether or not these views are true. He's looking at the effect that clinging to them—or clinging to any view—will have on us and the way that we live. Does holding this view move me toward awakening? Or does holding this view move me away from awakening? The Buddha has a very pragmatic attitude towards truth.

In other words, when the Buddha talks about views, what he's really interested in is clinging—our relationship to view. And this is another reminder that although there is such a thing as Buddhist philosophy, which developed after his death, the Buddha is not a philosopher. He's a yogi. He's a practitioner.

So Vaccha is getting confused again. He thought he had it for a bit, but then this latest answer has thrown him because he's not quite following all this. He's still preoccupied with whether or not these views are correct. Are they right? Are they wrong? He's still thinking in terms of truth or falsehood, rather than thinking in terms of clinging and liberation. And he's starting to wonder if the Buddha actually believes anything at all. In other words, he's starting to wonder, is this guy a skeptic?

So he says, "Then, does Master Gotama hold any conviction at all?" Like, do you believe anything?

And the Buddha replies, "An awakened one has done away with convictions, Vaccha, because he has seen this: Such is body, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is feeling, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is perception, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such are choices, such their arising, such their disappearance. Such is awareness, such its arising, such its disappearance."

So again, the conversation moves. And this time, the Buddha is talking about the nature of experience itself and the clinging, the appropriation that's bound up with what we experience, with experience itself. You notice what he's doing is going through the five aggregates. When the Buddha talks about the five aggregates, he's talking about constructing yourself. So he's talking about clinging to a view that results in the construction of a soul and the dukkha which is involved in this.

And he's making a clear distinction between two ways of considering view. The first is "an awakened one has done away with convictions"—this is ditthigata, a conceptual view, or a conviction that if it matures, it matures into an ideology of some sort. And this ideology explains the world to me and how the world works and who I am.

Now, it might be a grand ideology or it might be really basic and simple. For example, "I am the kind of person who is too distracted to be able to meditate." It's amazing how many people say, you know, the mind is very disturbed, what to do? You might say, why don't you take up meditation? And they say, oh, I couldn't do meditation.

My mind is so distracted, it never stays still. Which is rather like saying, oh, you're not very fit—why don't you take up tennis? That'll get you running around the court. Oh, I couldn't play tennis. I've never hit a ball over the net, so I couldn't do it. Which is incredible nonsense.

But anyway, so this is a view which can turn into an ideology. And you notice this is bound up with clinging and a sense of identity. I can't meditate successfully. Why? Because this is the nature of me and the world. Which means it's always been like this, it will always be like this, there's nothing I can do about it. So this is *diṭṭhigata*—this is conviction or conceptual view that's being held to.

And then we have *diṭṭha*. The Buddha says an awakened one has done away with convictions because he has seen. And this seeing is *diṭṭha*. This represents a direct, immediate encounter with something. So it might be, as I practice, I'm with my meditation object. Then I'm swept away by thinking, and then I suddenly realize I am thinking, and I am faced with the choice whether to continue with the thinking or go back to the meditation object.

Now notice that this experiential view is not caught up with clinging and identity. It's not constructing a self out of it; it's just a situation which is happening now. What do I do about it? And again, it's not self. It's not me. And it doesn't belong to me. So this movement right now into distraction—it's not me, it doesn't belong to me. This choice now to continue with the thinking or return to the meditation—it's not me, it doesn't belong to me.

So the Buddha expresses this direct experiential nature of view by talking about the arising and disappearance, the coming and going of the body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. He's saying that an experiential view is unstable, changing, dynamic—and that's its nature. But a conceptual view appears to be stable, especially when it takes the form of an ideology or a conviction. If it changes, it changes slowly and often imperceptibly. And this is the nature of concepts.

So the world changes around us. And if we're paying attention, the world is changing all of the time. But our convictions tend to remain the same. While experiential view, in contrast, changes and flows with the immediacy of experience.

For example, some of us in this room have reached a certain age—I'm not looking at anyone in particular. And people of this certain age might be overheard complaining about how the world has changed. "This isn't the country I was born in." Now this kind of complaint is so widespread that exploiting it can become the basis for successful political careers.

From the Buddha's perspective, the foundation of this complaint is clinging to conceptual views while pushing away the actual felt reality of experience itself. The world as directly experienced is changing around us, but we deny this in favour of the stability of the world represented by our conceptual views. And when experience clashes with concept, often we side with our concepts and reject the experience. We do this because we're looking for safety, and we find safety in the stability of our convictions.

So this is the danger that the Buddha sees in these views.

And at this point we could go back and look at Vacchagotta himself and his questions. You notice that all his questions revolve around identity—the identity of the universe, the identity of the life force, the identity of the awakened one. And this means all of them are pointing toward Vacchagotta's own identity. Because why is Vacchagotta so caught up with these questions? It's not that he's sitting for an exam. He's personally invested in these issues.

Remember that Vacchagotta is a wanderer. He has walked away from home, and in his case, he's walked away from a secure and high-status life in order to resolve the existential questions that are eating him up from the inside. Does it remind you of anybody? The Buddha. And maybe this is one reason why the Buddha has a lot of time for Vacchagotta.

Vacchagotta has got a lot invested in finding the answers to these questions. If he can find these answers, then he has justified that rash decision he made years ago when he walked out of his conventional life. He can finally be at peace. He can be recognised

among his peers as someone who has successfully resolved the fundamental questions. But if he cannot resolve these questions, how can he justify the sacrifices he's made in pursuing awakening? Doesn't he just turn out to be a loser who couldn't make it in the real world?

So this is what seems to be driving Vacchagotta. This is why he's so passionate about this whole thing. And of course, it would remind the Buddha of the struggles that he went through. He has sympathy for Vacchagotta's dilemma.

But what the Buddha is doing is refusing to play Vacchagotta's game. He's keeping his focus on the deeper longing in Vacchagotta's heart. Vacchagotta wants awakening and peace—that's what's driving him. He's going about it the wrong way, but that's what's driving him. And so the Buddha refuses to engage in a philosophical discussion which he knows is going to accomplish nothing whatsoever. Instead, he's pointing to Vacchagotta's determination to cling to concepts in order to create a stable world that means something. He's keeping Vacchagotta's gaze on what is happening right here, right now—not the theories that he's learned to take seriously, not the abstractions he's come to think of as what's important.

And this comes up in the language that the Buddha uses. "An awakened one has seen this—such is body, such is arising, such is disappearance." In English we don't really get the emphasis, which is clear in the Pali. The Buddha is saying that an awakened one doesn't just see, but sees specifically *this*, right here. This sensation, this thought, this feeling. And the emphasis is contained in the "such is body, such is arising, such is disappearance." This sensation now is arising as exactly this. And now it's ceasing as exactly this.

The Buddha is telling Vacchagotta to abandon the world that he's created through his concepts and instead learn to live in a world which is grounded in the felt actuality of experience, of what's happening right now. Ground yourself in this experience right now, and learn to relate to the world of concept from that place. Don't get lost in your concepts about what is happening, but learn to be intimate with what is actually happening. And then the liberation of the heart becomes possible.

The Buddha goes on to say that's the way the awakened one is liberated—by not clinging, with the weakening, fading, cessation, and letting go of all disturbances, all constructing of identity and possession, along with the underlying potential for separation. Because remember that *māna* is one of the basic movements of the self.

And of course, this is what we're practicing here. We're practicing to be mindful. We're practicing to track experience over a period of time. We're using what Mahasi calls noting—directly aware-ing each experienced event as it comes and goes. And when we do this, we're not lost in our concepts about the world. Instead, we're grounding awareness in the immediate movements of the world itself.

And this is one reason why the role of the body is so important. Because as we've said, physical sensations are, by their very nature, here and now. And they do not mean anything at all. They're just what they are. So when we ground ourselves in the immediacy of experience, we're learning to live firsthand, not second or third hand.

This is the practice of noting and understanding. When we note, we deliberately direct awareness to whatever is happening, and we're not interested in what we might think about what is happening. We're just interested in what is in fact happening. And as the noting develops, our mind becomes increasingly sensitive, and in the background of our awareness we notice more and more of what's going on.

But again, what we're noticing is what is actually happening right now. We're not noticing what we remember as happening in the past or what we imagine might happen in the future. And we're not noticing what we think is happening over there somewhere. We're just focused on what is actually happening here and now.

And as we do this, we start to loosen our grip on our convictions that the conceptual mind generates. Which, of course, does not mean that we never use concepts to develop a wider understanding of the world. But these concepts are grounded on our actual experience as it unfolds over time. And we learn to recognize that ultimately concepts are just concepts. That's all they are.

When we live like this, when we're living in what is actually going on rather than our concepts about what is going on, then we come closer to nirvana. And how this happens, we'll look at tomorrow. We don't have time now, and besides, it's too technical. Your minds are probably already spinning and about to explode.

On the other hand, I may comfort you with what a very old meditation friend of mine once told me: you haven't really started on this practice until your head explodes.

CHAPTER 59

Vaccagotta and Fire Part 2

Patrick Kearney · 38 min

In this continuation of the exploration of the Aggivaccagotta Sutta (MN 72), Patrick Kearney examines the Buddha's masterful use of the fire simile to address Vaccagotta's persistent questions about what happens to an awakened one after death. The discourse reveals how the Buddha refuses to engage with conceptual questions that assume a stable identity, instead pointing toward the distinction between experiential view (diṭṭha) and conceptual view or conviction (diṭṭhigata).

The talk illuminates how the Buddha leads Vaccagotta through a series of obvious questions about fire—can you see it burning, what fuels it, can you see when it goes out—before arriving at the absurd question: where does the fire go when extinguished? This question exposes our habitual slide from direct experience into conceptual elaboration, the same movement we experience in meditation when we shift from present-moment awareness into distraction and imagination. Kearney connects this to the five khandhas (aggregates) as the fuel feeding the fires of identity and clinging, and explains nibbāna as the cooling or extinguishing of these fires.

Drawing parallels with Zen teachings, particularly the encounter between Lohan Kuichen and Fayan Wenyi where "not knowing is most intimate," Kearney points toward the asaṅkhata (unconditioned) as accessible through intimacy with experience rather than through conceptual grasping. The practical implications for meditation practice are emphasized: learning to recognize the subtle transition from direct engagement to conceptual elaboration, and discovering that liberation is found here and now in direct encounter with the world before we become lost in stories about it.

Last night we were talking about Vacchagotta and his discussions with the Buddha. We're looking at the Aggivacchagotta Sutta, Majjhima 72, "To Vacchagotta about Fire."

So we have two characters in this particular discourse. We've got the brahmin wanderer Vacchagotta, or simply Vaccha. "Gotta," as we said, means clan name, so essentially Vacchagotta would be something like "descended from Vaccha." The Buddha just calls him Vaccha. He is a wandering mendicant searching for truth through philosophy, investigating the most profound philosophical questions of his day. These are the ten questions which we went through last time, about the universe, the relationship

between the life force and the body, and the survival of an awakened one after death. We commented that all these questions revolve around the issue of identity. What is the real nature of the universe? What is the real identity of the awakened one?

Now, Vaccha is really focused on these questions because what he's searching for is certainty. He's trying to get to certainty by finding answers to these questions which will justify his whole career. He came from a wealthy family. He walked out and engaged in this strange world of wandering philosophers and mendicants. If he can crack these questions, then he can justify what he's been doing. Others will respect him, and he might even become a well-established teacher, like the Buddha. So he's questioning the Buddha about these issues.

But the Buddha is playing a different game. He's refusing to engage with these questions because his focus is not on theories and doctrines. What he's focused on is the felt nature of experience and our determination to push aside direct first-hand experience in favour of clinging to convictions instead. So the Buddha refuses to become entangled with diṭṭhigata, conceptual view or conviction, and instead he's talking about diṭṭha, experiential view.

He points out that when we live in a world of concepts, what we're doing is creating and clinging to a stable sense of identity within a stable, meaningful world. We do this, like Vaccha, to find certainty and security, not realizing that it's this very clinging which creates pain and insecurity.

So the Buddha speaks to Vaccha about a state of liberation where all constructions of identity and possession are deconstructed. And along with those, the underlying potential for separating from experience as the one who undergoes the experience—that too is destroyed. We talked about this when we were discussing the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta. This is māna, usually translated as "conceit," literally "measurement" or "measuring." It's the fundamental sense we have of being separate from the world: I'm in here, you're out there.

This state of liberation comes about, the Buddha says, through not clinging. So the Buddha says that's the way the awakened one is liberated—by not clinging. With the weakening, fading, cessation, and letting go of all disturbances, all constructing of identity and possession, and the underlying potential for separation. Notice how that potential for separation is underneath all of it. That's the bottom. It's when this goes that full awakening takes place.

However, Vaccha doesn't get it. He's trying to engage, but he's so caught up within himself that he can't grasp what the Buddha is talking about. For Vaccha, there is liberation of the heart through not clinging—let's agree on that. But who is the person who is liberated? And what happens to him? Vaccha believes in life after life. He just takes this as obvious. In other words, something happens next. So it's natural for him to ask, what happens next to a practitioner who is liberated in this way?

He asks, "When a practitioner's heart is liberated in this way, Mr. Gautama, where does he reappear after death?"

The Buddha replies, "The term 'reappears' does not apply."

And suddenly we're back to the same dance. Vaccha goes on to explore the four logical possibilities that we talked about yesterday.

Then he does not reappear. Then he both reappears and does not reappear. Then he neither reappears nor does not reappear. So again Vaccha goes through the four logical possibilities. This third one—both reappears and does not reappear—means that in some ways it would be true to say he reappears, but in other ways it would be true to say he doesn't. It seems a bit absurd when spoken aloud, but it actually does make sense.

And for each of these possibilities, the Buddha replies, "This does not apply." In Pali, *na upeti*. Very simple, very direct—*na upeti*. Chuck it out.

So Vaccha's problem is that he's stuck in identity. Awakening and the liberation of the heart has been achieved—but what happens to the awakened one whose heart is liberated? These are the circles we've been going around. And it's easy to dismiss Vaccha as some kind of fool. If you're coming from a superior Buddhist position, it's tempting to say, "Oh, he's an idiot." But his question is real and quite valid.

If you think about our situation in this room, each of us has come here to do this retreat. Why? Because we're looking for some kind of transformation. Each of us is, to some extent, dissatisfied with who we are now. We want something different. We want to become someone different. And to the extent that we ever think about the goal of the practice, we think about it in terms of our own identities.

So let's say I actually want to be awakened. Let's say that's the ambition. What would that look like? Who would be the awakened me? How would the awakened me live? Would the awakened me have to quit his job and float about being enlightened? Could the awakened me make a career out of being awakened? And most importantly of all, what will my friends think about this awakened me?

We all think like this. And the problem with this kind of thinking is that it continues to use the conceptual view of identity in order to understand transformation. But this is precisely the view that has to be abandoned for the transformation to take place. That's why, really, we don't want to change. We say we do, we think we do. But really, what we want is just a slight adjustment from what we've already got. Because if we actually wanted to change, we'd be willing to jump into something completely unknown.

This is why, as the practice progresses, people often report fear arising in some form or another. We find ourselves spontaneously pulling back from the unknown to return to a familiar sense of who we are and what's going on.

And this is where Vaccha is caught. He's got a glimpse of what the Buddha is talking about, but he's trying to understand it conceptually. That very attempt is smothering his insight.

When Vaccha asked the Buddha his ten philosophical questions, the Buddha responded by rejecting the particular view that was being presented. He said, "I don't have this view." But now the Buddha is rejecting the very question itself. The question itself is wrong. *Na upeti*. This does not apply.

This reminds me of a story about a local Zen teacher. Once a week he would meet with various retired academics and have wide-ranging discussions about philosophy and such. Because Zen has a certain cachet to it, people would sometimes talk about Zen, and they had a Zen teacher sitting right there. The problem was that when the Zen teacher would say something, the retired philosophers would get irritated. One person in particular got really annoyed. Finally he said, "Why can't you give me a straight answer to my questions?"

To which the Zen teacher replied, "You cannot give a straight answer to a crooked question."

And this is the situation that the Buddha is in. As far as the Buddha is concerned, the very questions are crooked. So he won't give a straight answer.

But Vacchagotta is getting more and more confused. So he says, "I don't understand, Master Gotama. I'm confused. Now I have lost the clarity I previously gained from our conversation."

At this point the Buddha has compassion on him. He explains that his confusion is perfectly reasonable. He says to Vaccha, "Look, you come from a different tradition, which is very different than mine. And what you're trying to understand is very profound and very hard to see. So of course you're confused. It's perfectly reasonable and natural."

I like this response because I think it's something we might keep in mind when we're trying to work out what exactly the Buddha is talking about. Because often we end up being very confused.

Anyway, the Buddha then explains using the fire simile. And this is where we come to the heart of this discourse.

The Buddha says, "What do you think, Vaccha, if a fire was burning in front of you, would you know?"

Vaccha gives the obvious answer: "I would, Master Gotama."

"If someone asked you, 'This fire burning in front of you, what does it depend on to burn?' what would you answer?"

"Asked that, Master Gotama, I would answer: the fire burning in front of me burns depending on grass and sticks."

"If this fire in front of you goes out, would you know this fire in front of me has gone out?"

"I would, Master Gotama."

"If someone asked you, Vaccha, 'When that fire in front of you goes out, where does it go? To the east? To the west? To the north? To the south?' What would you answer?"

"This does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burns depending on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, in the absence of fuel, it is regarded as gone out."

"So too, Vaccha, an awakened one has abandoned that body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness by which one conceptualizing an awakened one might conceptualize him."

This dialogue is what the discourse is all about. Notice how the dialogue is structured. We begin with the obvious—really seriously obvious. This fire in front of you: can you see it? The question is simple and the answer is simple. The whole thing is simple, clear, obvious. It's about what's happening right now.

And the next question: What is it burning? Again, simple, clear, obvious.

When the fire goes out, can you see that? Again, simple, clear, obvious, immediate. What's happening here and now? There's nothing esoteric, there's nothing complicated.

And then the next question—everything jams to a stop. When the fire goes out, where does it go?

Now this question is completely different.

The previous questions were about immediate experience. What's happening here and now, right in front of your eyeballs? This new question takes an immediate experience and then builds a network of concepts around the image of the fire "going out," treating this conceptual network as if it were an immediate experience. But it isn't. It's something completely different.

Can you see how this question takes us back to what the Buddha was talking about yesterday when he was distinguishing between experiential view and conceptual view or conviction? An experiential view—we gave the example last night—is the experience of a rainy afternoon, in this case a rainy evening. A conceptual view or conviction encompasses theories, beliefs, and convictions about climate change and what to do about it.

In making this distinction, it's very important to realize that the Buddha is not saying we should not have theories, beliefs, or convictions. What he is saying is that we need to be able to distinguish between these two aspects of view and not mistake one for the other. That way, we're less likely to get entangled in our conceptual views. We're less likely to be lost in ideology. And we're more likely to be grounded in our actual experience.

So the fire goes out. Where does the fire go? This question represents our entry into the world of concept, where the concept is mistaken for felt experience. They get jumbled up. And this is the world that we normally live in.

We begin with our actual experience, here and now. This is experiential view. And then we slide into concepts about our actual experience. This movement is so habitual and so subtle that we tend not to notice it. We think nothing has changed. But in fact, everything has changed.

We get a sense of this in the meditation practice—this transition, this slide. Every time we slide unseen, unknown, from direct engagement with our meditation object to thinking about ourselves and our world. That slide into distraction. Have you noticed

that at first we take this transition for granted and we don't recognize that anything has changed? Have you noticed that the world of imagination you conjure up seems at least as real as the world of direct engagement with experience? Anyone been having very real and vivid imaginations about after the retreat? When they're there, aren't they at least as real? At least. And we just take that for granted. We just don't notice it.

Now, in our dialogue, Vacchagotta notices the change that the Buddha is talking about. When this fire goes out, where does it go? He's struck by the absurdity of the question. And he responds to the Buddha the way the Buddha responded to him: This does not apply. Any answer to this question misses what's actually happening. Any answer sends us off in the wrong direction.

"This does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burning, depending on its fuel of grass and sticks—when that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, in the absence of fuel, it is regarded as gone out."

"So too, Vaccha, an awakened one has abandoned that body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness by which one conceptualizing an awakened one conceptualizes him."

The Buddha is saying that an awakened one cannot be captured by concepts. As you know, this list of body, feeling, perception, choices, and awareness constitutes the five aggregates, which for the Buddha are the raw materials from which we construct the sense of who we are and what the world is. They represent the fuel that feeds the fires of identity, clinging, and aversion.

For the Buddha, clinging and identity are very closely aligned because fundamentally we are what we think we are. If I ask the question, "Who am I?" the question becomes, "Who do I deeply feel I am?" I am this body. I am these feelings. I am whom I perceive myself to be.

I am the maker of my choices. I am the one who is aware of all of this.

But the Buddha is saying that when we directly experience these events of body, feeling, perception, choices, and awareness, all of them are just events. They come and go within the field of awareness. And even awareness comes and goes within the field of awareness. So they come and they go. How can I be any one of them?

If I am my body, then what happens to me when this particular experience of body falls away and is replaced by another one? Does this represent a new me? Or is the old me lurking somewhere behind, unseen but seeing? If I am my body, which body are we talking about? Is it the relatively slim, active version of my youth? Or is it the fat, clapped-out version of my old age? Which one? Because they're not the same.

As the contemporary sage Leonard Cohen said, "I don't trust my inner feelings. Inner feelings come and go." After all, he was a Zen student.

Now, the more we ground ourselves in experiential view, the less we can actually believe that our conceptual view is presenting us with what is really going on. The more grounded we are in the actual flow of experience, the less we take the stories we tell ourselves to be true. The stories we tell ourselves are not true any more than the fire has gone out to the west. But equally, these stories are not false any more than the fire has gone out to the east. The stories we tell ourselves are just stories. That's all.

The example I like to give, being a dedicated coffee drinker, is this: if you're fond of a good cup of coffee, and if you have a friend who has never had coffee, can you communicate to her the taste of a good cup of coffee through your stories about it? And the answer, obviously, is no. She has to actually taste it. So a story about something is not that something. It's something else.

Again, this does not mean that our stories are not useful. They can be very useful. Equally, they can be very dangerous. Because our stories help us navigate through life, we could say that although our stories are not true, some stories are more useful than other stories.

The Buddha, for example, is a storyteller. And he tells us a story that a flourishing life is possible if we are careful about our choices. This is the story of kamma-vipāka, action and its ripening. And this is more useful than a story of how I am so hopeless and the world is so broken that whatever I do will be useless, so I may as well not try. They're both stories, but one of them is actually much more useful than the other.

We may notice that the most useful stories are those that are closer to the felt flow of experience than stories that are far removed. For example, the story "Right now I am very upset, and I better be careful of what I'm about to say"—that story is probably closer to the felt flow of experience than "This person is my lifelong enemy, and I need to get my attack in first." And it's not just closer to the actual flow of experience, but it's more likely to lead to a satisfactory result in terms of the way that we live.

So this going out of the fire—this is a standard explanation for Nibbāna. In fact, if this fire in front of you goes out, that going out comes from the verb *nibbāyati*—to Nibbāna. You can actually translate that as "If this fire in front of you nibbānas, would you know this fire as Nibbāna?" Nibbāna is the going out of a fire, its cooling, the extinguishing of a fire. This image of the fire is central to the Buddha's presentation of Nibbāna, or Nirvāṇa.

So where is Nibbāna to be found? And of course the answer is pretty obvious. It's here, now, in a direct encounter with the world—before we get lost in stories about the world. And this is what we are practicing. We are practicing this encounter.

This is the practice of noting—being directly aware of one experience after another without getting caught up in concepts about the experience. And when we do get caught up in concepts about the experience, we directly experience the concepts. We note the concepts. So we're learning to live in intimacy. And this is why the Buddha calls this practice the one-way street to Nibbana.

Now, is there anything we can actually say about this Nibbana? Well, of course, heaps. In fact, people have written PhDs about it. But none of it captures this reality. I think we've already looked at one Zen story which can suggest what it's about, so let's just repeat ourselves.

Case 20 of the Book of Serenity: the encounter between Lohan Kui-Chen and Fa-Yen Wen-Yi. Lohan was a teacher at a meditation monastery where he taught the classical two three-month retreats per year. As we said, meditation monks would spend six months of the year meditating, six months not in retreat anyway, and then they would wander about—they'd do whatever they liked. They could stay at the monastery, they could go to another monastery, they could travel, they could study, whatever.

At the end of one retreat, Lohan is saying goodbye to the departing monks, but he's keeping an eye out for Fa Yen, who he knew was on the edge. He just needed a bit of a push. So when Fa Yen approached, Lohan said, "Where are you going?" Fa Yen said, "I am wandering about on pilgrimage." Lohan said, "Pilgrimage? What is that to you?" Fa Yen said, "I don't know." Lohan said, "Not knowing is most intimate." Fa Yen suddenly attained great awakening.

This is very typical Zen teaching. It leaves you scratching your head. Now, why is Fa Yen's not knowing so powerful?

Well, first of all, what's the problem with knowing? As soon as we "know" something, what have we done? We've created a story around it. And in creating a story around it, we've separated ourselves from it. We have become someone—someone with an agenda which we are imposing on the experience.

Now, at first, Fa Yen just didn't know. He did not yet understand that he did not know. Only with Lohan's teaching—"not knowing is most intimate"—did he clearly recognize not knowing. In other words, recognize what was already available. But with Lohan's prompt, Fa Yen saw that it's not about having a story about pilgrimage, or not knowing pilgrimage. It's understanding that there is no one who is intimate. There is no concept to be lost in. Instead, there's just the world where the three characteristics play out freely without us getting in the way.

And this is the world which the Buddha sometimes calls the unconstructed, the asankhata, the not-constructed. Sometimes he talks about the not-born, the not-become. But most frequently, the not-constructed. This is the world of Nibbana.

So how do we know the not-constructed, the not-born, the not-become? Well, we could approach this by asking an easier question: How do we know mind itself?

We cannot see the mind. We cannot hear it, we cannot smell it, we cannot taste it, we cannot touch it. So how do we know it? We know mind by recognizing its activities, what it does. And what the mind does, fundamentally, is aware an object. That's what it does. And in its elemental quality, that's all that it does.

But normally this awareness is obscured by, for example, upadana—clinging, appropriation. We cling to our experience, we cling to what we are aware of, we conceptualize it as something, we hold it as me and as mine. So we are lost in this familiar world of our projects and our concerns.

And when this happens, the activity of the mind is no longer free. It's stuck, bogged down in "I," "mine," "should," "should not," and so on. But when mind is liberated, when it's not dominated by upadana, by clinging, by appropriation, then it functions freely. And then the unconstructed, the unconditioned, is intimately present—but not present as something in particular. Rather, it's sensed in the freedom of its activity.

So when we're truly intimate, when we don't know and we know that we don't know, we're not swept away by clinging, because clinging is simply another activity that we're present to. The mind is not obscured, its functioning is clear, its activity is clear, and this activity, undisturbed by clinging, expresses the unconstructed. In this state, the heart naturally cools and we experience nirvana—but again, not as any particular thing, rather as the world itself when it's cooled and at peace.

So our task as practitioners is to be intimate. We don't separate ourselves by being lost in our thoughts about what is going on, but simply stay grounded in this now. And it's in intimacy that we discover understanding. We're no longer constructing a world that we're appropriating as "I" and "mine" in order to justify ourselves and manipulate the world so it suits us. Instead, we let go, and in this moment, we are released from birth and death.

And if this sounds a bit Zen, look up the Saṃmasatha Sutta, sometimes translated as "Exploration"—Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.66. SN 12 is the collection on dependent origination, so it's the sixty-sixth discourse in that section. If you go to Sutta Central and type in "Saṃmasatha Sutta," you can find it there. It was actually from Mahasi Sayadaw—that dried up old Arahant—that I came to realize this discourse is in fact talking about nirvana.

So at those moments, we drop into the coolness which characterizes nirvana. We start to open up to a new world. But we enter this new world at first as visitors, as tourists. Then we lose it again. But gradually, over time, we learn to actually inhabit this new world. And this is the world where the fires have gone out.

That's enough for tonight. Any questions?

Someone asks about social life and practice.

What I'm trying to get at is this: you do this often enough and long enough, it changes who you are. And people notice that. They don't know what to do. If you do this practice, you lose friends—this is my guarantee. If you make progress in this practice, you will lose friends. But then you gain other friends. And you also learn to keep your mouth shut.

CHAPTER 60

On Buddha: Saddhā and the Living Presence

Patrick Kearney · 1h01

> *In this profound talk from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney explores the concept of saddhā—faith or placing the heart—and how the Buddha remains a living presence for practitioners despite having died over two millennia ago. Drawing from early suttas including the Doṇa Sutta (AN 4.36) and the Madhupindika Sutta (MN 18), Kearney examines how the Buddha viewed himself and how his students perceived him, not as a god but as one who transcended the human condition through awakening.*
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> *Kearney clarifies that saddhā is not belief in impossible things, but rather a heart-connection with reality—being faithful to something that shapes one's life and decisions. He pairs saddhā with paññā (wisdom), explaining how mature faith becomes indistinguishable from understanding, as illustrated by Sāriputta's teaching on the five indriyas (faculties) in the Āpaṇa Sutta. The affective dimension of faith (touching with the body) complements the cognitive dimension of wisdom (seeing clearly through).*
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> *Sharing his personal journey, Kearney describes how a teak Buddha statue purchased in Chiang Mai in 1971 became a challenge and invitation, eventually compelling him to abandon everything and seek ordination in Sri Lanka. He addresses the modern sceptic's question—is Buddha real?—by comparing Buddha's reality to that of justice: neither can be materially proven, yet both powerfully shape our lives and provide meaning. The talk offers a mature understanding of faith as relationship rather than belief, inviting practitioners to live as if Buddha is real and thereby discover that reality.*

Tonight we're going to talk about saddhā, usually translated as faith, in particular regarding the Buddha.

We start with the question: who is the Buddha? Roughly speaking, there are two Buddhas. There's the Buddha of history—the person who wandered around the Ganges Valley approximately two and a half millennia ago. And there's the Buddha of saddhā, of faith. The difference between them is pretty simple: the Buddha of history is dead, and the Buddha of saddhā, of faith, is alive. This is what we want to explore tonight.

We'll start with the Buddha when he was alive—how he was seen by others, but also how he saw himself, who he thought he was.

We've already in the retreat talked about the encounter between the newly awakened Buddha, when he was quite young, and Upaka. The Buddha had begun his journey to find the five former companions and start the Dharma wheel rolling, and on the way he met Upaka, who was an Ājīvaka—one of the early orders or sects of Indian asceticism.

When Upaka met the Buddha coming in the opposite direction, he was very impressed. He said, "Friend, your faculties are clear. Your complexion is pure and bright. Under whom have you left home? Who is your teacher? Whose Dharma do you accept?"

The Buddha, as we've seen, responds by spontaneously bursting into verse. Of course we've got the English translation, so it's not verse. He says: "I am the one who has overcome everything, who understands everything. I am unstained among all phenomena, letting go of everything, freed by ending craving. Having understood directly by myself, to whom should I point? I am the worthy one of the world. I am the supreme teacher. I alone am Sammāsambuddha. I am called extinguished."

This is the Buddha's view of himself, who he thought he was. You notice that he's got a very clear sense of his identity. If you were feeling a bit hostile, you might almost think that he had a sense of self. He presents himself essentially as the one source of the teaching that leads out of the dukkha, the pain of saṃsāra, which is a big claim.

You notice that while he's claiming to be unique, that there's no one like him, he's not making a cosmological claim. He's not claiming to be a god, or God with a capital G. In our sense of the term, he is not claiming to be a god in the Indian sense of the term. He's human, but he's transcended the human condition. This is what makes him different. In particular, he's the one who points the way to the same transcendence for those who are willing to take him on as a teacher.

Of course, as we know, this is his first attempt to actually recruit someone, and it didn't work. Upaka says, in effect, "Yeah, whatever," and he leaves. Upaka is roundly denounced and criticized by the tradition for being so thick. But many of us share this response, don't we? We know exactly where he's coming from. After all this business about Buddha and Sammāsambuddha and cutting through saṃsāra and all this sort of stuff—it's a nice idea, but maybe we should be realistic. Maybe we should lower our expectations.

So this is the Buddha as he presented himself early in his career, in his mid-thirties. I think the tradition says thirty-six.

Later on, this comes from the Doṇa Sutta. We don't know when this happened—sometime in his teaching career. Doṇa is a Brahmin, a Brāhmaṇa. He meets the Buddha, and he's intrigued, impressed and intrigued. He goes up to him and starts asking him questions.

Drona asks simply, "Who are you?"

"Sir, are you a god? Are you a deva?"

"I am not a god."

"Are you a heavenly musician?" This is the Gandhabba in Pali, Gandharva in Sanskrit.

"I am not a heavenly musician."

"Are you a forest spirit?"

"I am not a forest spirit."

"Are you human?"

"I am not human."

"What are you then?"

The Buddha gives a lengthy answer, but we can trim it down: "Just as a blue, red, or white lotus, although born and grown up in water, rises above the water and stands unstained by it, even so I have overcome the world and live unstained by it. Regard me, Brahman, as Buddha. Like a graceful lotus unstained by water, I am unstained by the world. Therefore, Brahman, I am Buddha."

Here he's making a similar claim, but in slightly different words. Notice what he's not—he's not a deva, he's not human. He is Buddha. Which you could translate simply as "I am awake," a more direct rendering.

This really doesn't help us very much. It still leaves the question: Who is Buddha? What is Buddha?

As we're seeing, his role in the world was primarily that of teacher, and this is how people saw him. There's a lovely example of this in the Madhupindika Sutta, "The Sweet Essence."

The Buddha is staying in what we'd call a monastery, but it would have been a temporary camp with a number of his students. The routine was that in the morning people would go out on alms round, eat their meal, then scatter into the forest to meditate individually. They would return to a central meeting place in the evening for discussion before going to bed.

On this particular evening, the Buddha gives the monks a brief but somewhat esoteric teaching. They nod their heads and say, "Yes, yes, very good, fantastic." Then he leaves, and everybody turns to each other asking, "Did you have the foggiest idea what he meant by that?" No one knew what he was talking about.

So what to do? They go to Mahakaccana, who happens to be in the same camp, because he is famous for his ability to explain at length anything that has been taught in brief.

They ask him, "Can you tell us what the Buddha meant?"

Mahakaccana's first response is to scold these venerables. He says, "Though you were face to face with the Buddha, you overlooked him, imagining that you should ask me about this matter. For he is the Blessed One who knows and sees. He is vision. He is understanding. He is truth. He is the highest. He is the teacher, the proclaimer, the clarifier of meaning, giver of the deathless, lord of truth, the Tathagata."

Remember, Tathagata is this very early title that the Buddha gave himself—it means the awakened one.

So this is the Buddha seen from the perspective of his students. Buddha is the ultimate authority. If we have a question, who can answer it?

The Buddha can answer it.

And in the Theravada tradition—and I suspect also in other traditions, but certainly in the Theravada—the discourses are known as Buddha Vachana, the Buddha's words. In other words, when we read the suttas, the Buddha is speaking to us through these discourses. And Buddha himself is the teacher. Now, he's not *a* teacher. He is *the* teacher, still to this day. There is only one teacher in Theravada Buddhism. That's Buddha. And we listen to his words through the early discourses.

So this is how the Theravada sees him. And if he's the teacher, doesn't this suggest some kind of relationship? Don't we develop a relationship with our teachers? And if there's the teacher, isn't that relationship important? And shouldn't we be concerned about getting it right?

The Buddha is teacher, but he's also more than that. And this comes out especially if we think of a teacher as merely an instructor. He's got a bigger role than that. This becomes clear in the Sutta Nipata, in the story about Pingya.

Pingya was another Brahmin, himself an elderly and distinguished teacher in his own tradition. But he heard about the Buddha and went to see him, taking a whole number of his students with him. There's an entire section in the Sutta Nipata about the questions these people ask the Buddha and his responses. Pingya converts. He's bowled over by the Buddha and he converts. He was particularly devoted to the Buddha as the teacher, as the guru. But nevertheless, after the visit was over, he left and went home.

After returning home, he was asked why he had left the Buddha's presence. Now, in India, there's this strong tradition of being in the physical presence of the teacher. This is very powerful. This is darshana in Sanskrit—literally seeing or sight. And you get a sense of that in this question: Why have you left the Buddha's presence?

Let's look at Pingya's answer. Notice that Pingya refers to the Buddha by his clan name, Gotama:

I am never apart from him, even for an hour. From Gotama, vast in knowledge and wisdom, he who taught the Dharma to me—the Dharma that is visible, not subject to time, craving ended, beyond troubles, with nothing that compares. Continually in my practice, I see him in my mind's eye, both day and night. Venerating him throughout the night, I conceive myself as living with him. My faith, joy, mind and mindfulness never stray from Gotama's teaching. Whatever direction this one of vast wisdom goes, there I bend my head.

This is Pingya's sense of who the Buddha is and what kind of relationship one has with Buddha. Here the Buddha is alive but physically distant. Yet Pingya is in relationship with him, and this relationship is clearly central to his practice. In fact, Pingya sees his practice as maintaining an intimate connection with Buddha to the point that he can conceive himself as living with him.

Notice that Pingya does not say he lives with Buddha. He says he conceives himself as living with Buddha. This is an important distinction which may become clearer later on.

So these are the ways in which the Buddha talked about himself, who he was, and how other people who knew him talked about him. But of course, eventually he dies. Yet he continues to hold the tradition together. He continued to be the central point of reference. And Pingya's relationship with him becomes, in a sense, the standard—because he's not here anymore.

And this is the Buddha of saddha. This is the Buddha of faith. And this is the Buddha whose image we find everywhere.

Not just in this room, but even in gardens. There was a time—and this fashion seems to be over now—but I remember coming back from Asia at one point. I was staying with my mother, and we went off to the garden centre to buy some things. I'm following her through the garden centre, and then—whoop—there's Buddha. Right there. I thought, "Oh my God, what's he doing here?" I looked around, and there were lots of them. What's going on? Has there been a mass conversion to Buddhism in Australia since I last came?

It was fascinating. They appeared everywhere, usually in gardens. For a while, they actually seemed to replace the garden gnome. But I've seen from recent visits to Bunnings that the garden gnome has made a comeback, and Buddha has rather evaporated.

So here we are in twenty-first century Australia. We are educated and rational materialists, and our faith is in science. This faith in science is profound. Just to give you an example, I've often come across situations in which people indicate that they can trust the Dhamma, or some aspect of the Dhamma, because they feel it is supported by science. They explain that the latest brain research upholds this particular teaching, or that the theory of evolution upholds this particular understanding—and therefore it's reliable. In other words, if a Dhamma teaching is scientifically proven, then we can have faith in it. Then we can feel it's respectable. But if a Dhamma teaching is contradicted by science, then we feel free to drop it. We might call it a cultural custom, a cultural accretion, and so we get rid of it. It's not the real Dhamma teaching.

This is very much the culture in which we live. I was struck by this many years ago when Stephen Batchelor's book *Buddhism Without Beliefs* came out. It was very popular and people were talking about how profound it was. So I got a copy and read it. As far as I could see, it was chock full of beliefs—but the belief was in science and scientific materialism. There was a lot of belief. Yet it seems that Batchelor himself and many of his readers appear to be blind regarding their faith. They take a particular worldview for granted as being obvious, and so they do not see their faith commitment to it, although it's clearly there and clearly very strong.

Given this cultural context, how can we deal with the idea of a Buddha who is alive even though he's dead? And in fact, should we even try? Or should we be content with a dead Buddha who has left behind some very useful teachings? Surely that's enough.

Here we come to the concept of saddhā. If we are to approach Buddha as a living presence rather than as, say, an academic project, we have to approach him through saddhā, like Piṅgiya. So we shall begin by clarifying our terms.

We have the word saddhā. This is the Pāli word normally translated as faith or confidence. Sometimes you see it translated as trust. And again, when you see different translations for the same word, you get a sense that there isn't an English equivalent. So what's it talking about?

The Pāli word saddhā—in Sanskrit, śraddhā—comes from the root *dhā*, meaning to put or to place, and *śrad* in Vedic, or *sad* in Pāli. This *sad* or *śrad* is an old word for heart. So saddhā means to place the heart, as in what we might call putting our heart into something. Or saddhā can mean to place in the heart, as when we say that we are taking something to heart.

Saddhā is about the heart connection with what we think is going on, with reality as we perceive it. This is important to understand in our culture, because saddhā is not belief. It's about a felt connection with reality.

It's not cognitive. It's affective. It's not about the head. It's about the heart.

So this is important for us to get because in our modern world we assume that faith means accepting impossible beliefs because someone tells us to. But this is not saddha. It's got nothing to do with saddha. If saddha is faith, then it's closer to faith in the sense of being faithful to someone or something.

Let's say when we commit ourselves to a relationship with another person, we agree either implicitly or explicitly to be faithful to that person. Now this does not mean that we believe impossible things about him or her. It means that we are committed to this relationship in such a way that we allow it to shape our life. The relationship gives us a sense of direction, a sense of what is important to us and what is not so important. And therefore it becomes a basis for the decisions that we make. This is much closer to what the Buddha is getting at when he talks about saddha.

The Buddha pairs saddha with paññā—in Sanskrit, prajñā—which is wisdom or understanding. Paññā is spelled P-A-Ñ-Ñ-Ā, with the Ñs having little curly things on top, and the final A having a horizontal line, a macron, because it's long. It comes from the root ña, to know or to understand, and the prefix pa-, which acts as an intensifier.

Paññā has a wide range of applications and is very closely linked to mindfulness. When the Buddha talks about the practice of mindfulness, he sometimes uses the compound sati-sampajañña, where sati is mindfulness and sampajañña could be translated

as clear understanding. You notice that sampajañña has the ña in it, that root in it. It's a particular form of understanding or wisdom. And paññā, wisdom, understanding, is not affective—it's cognitive. So saddha, faith, is affective, it's of the heart. Wisdom is cognitive, it's of the head. Together they represent an alliance between the affective and the cognitive within a human being, to the point where mature saddha becomes indistinguishable from paññā. Mature faith becomes indistinguishable from wisdom.

This comes out in the Āpaṇa Sutta. When the Buddha was living at Āpaṇa, he was accompanied by Sāriputta. Sāriputta was one of his two chief students, foremost in wisdom. The Buddha asked Sāriputta to teach on the five indriyas, or faculties. This is a list of saddha, viriya, sati, samādhi, paññā—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom.

Now this is a list of five factors, but you notice that it's in a sense two lists. In the middle we have energy, mindfulness, concentration. Where do we come across that? It's in the Eightfold Path, the meditation section of the Eightfold Path: right energy, right mindfulness, right concentration. So we have that list, and then it is flanked on one side by saddha, faith, and on the other side by wisdom, understanding.

As you know, the Buddha was extremely fond of a good list. And the use of a list is actually quite sophisticated. Sometimes when you see a list, the important members are the first and the last. In a sense, they contain the list. And so you have meditation, as laid out in the Eightfold Path, flanked and contained by faith on the one side and wisdom or understanding on the other.

For Sāriputta, as he explains, faith is directed towards the Buddha and the Buddha's awakening. Basically it focuses on awakening, and in particular it's concerned with the felt sense—and again it's affective, it's of the heart—the felt sense of the reality of awakening. By this we mean the felt sense that there is a real possibility for me of awakening. This is a genuine possibility. And notice the sense of reality, at least in potential—not necessarily now, but potentially in the future.

What I have saddha in must be sufficiently real for me to act upon it, to do something about it.

So this is the first member of the list, saddha, which Sariputta explains. And then the last member of the list, Sariputta says, is directed towards understanding dependent arising and realizing nibbana. So faith on one end, wisdom on the other—they hold the list together until the practitioner's practice matures, when faith and wisdom merge.

And this is how Sariputta puts it. He says, "Striving again and again, being mindful again and again, unifying her mind again and again, and understanding again and again, a cultivated student's heart is firmly placed in this way. Those things that once I had only heard about, now I live, touching them with the body, seeing them cleave through. This is the faculty of faith."

So he goes through the five, and at the end of it is wisdom. And then he circles back to the beginning, to faith. But this is how he describes it here. You notice he's talking about doing the practice—striving again and again, being mindful again and again. Notice the "again and again." Got to keep doing it, got to keep doing it, got to keep doing it. A cultivated student's heart—so the cultivated student is the mature practitioner—her heart is firmly placed. This is the verb *abhisadahati*. In this way, those things that once I had only heard about, now I live, touching them with the body, seeing them cleave through. This is faith.

So "those things"—this is a translation of dhammas, phenomena. These are the experiences that come and go in the practice. And dhammas are touched with the body and seeing cleaves through. So it looks like we're being presented with two different modalities of experience. Touched—this suggests vedana, feeling. Seeing suggests wisdom, understanding. Touching suggests intimacy. Seeing cleave through suggests detachment. Touching suggests the heart, and seeing cleave through suggests the head.

So here we're presented with mature saddha, mature faith, basically indistinguishable from wisdom.

Now the verb translated here as "firmly placed," *abhisadahati*, begins with the verb "to entrust one's heart," *sadahati,* and then adding *abhi* at the beginning, which is again an intensifier. And so you notice that it's not a case of saddha now, pañña later; faith now, wisdom later; faith here, wisdom there; or, as in the European tradition, faith and wisdom at war with each other. Both are present equally, but different.

So saddha, faith, is intimate and physical, touching with the body. This is an affective relationship with reality. While pañña sees right through. This is a cognitive relationship with reality. And both are central to the path. At the end of this discourse, the Buddha approves—gives Sariputta a wombat stamp, or the equivalent back in the day.

"Patrick, that sounds like faith in the teaching rather than faith in the Buddha."

Yeah, it gets expressed as faith in the teaching because in this case, what I heard about now actually is real now. But when that happens, there's faith in the teacher because this is the person who worked this system out. And faith in reality, the Dharma itself, because this is the way things are. So you get multiple layers of meaning. And at

different times or for different people, you get different emphases. So what constitutes faith for one person may be different from what constitutes faith for another person. You get a variety.

If you look at the three treasures—Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha—Buddha can be the teacher, as in the historical Buddha or the Buddha of faith. Buddha can be seen as the potential for awakening for everyone, including oneself. Dhamma can be the teaching, but Dhamma can also be reality, what one awakens to. And Sangha can be the community of, in particular, the monks and the nuns over the centuries who have handed the whole thing on. But it can also mean the community of practitioners who support what I'm doing. And it can mean the community of all those awakened beings without space and time.

You see, these concepts are not pinned down as only one thing. They can serve different purposes.

So where does faith begin? Here I'll be personal and talk about my own experience.

Faith begins as a question that provokes a challenge—a question powerful enough to move us out of our usual sense of what is possible, powerful enough to shake us out of our normal, taken-for-granted world.

For me, *saddha*, faith, began with a figure of the sitting Buddha, which I bought in Chiang Mai on my first visit to Asia in 1971. On this tour we started at Singapore, then traveled overland through Thailand to Vientiane—which is interesting, we went to Laos in the middle of the war—and then back into Thailand, to Chiang Mai, down south, Singapore, and Bali on the way back home.

When we reached Chiang Mai, we were heading south, on the way out, as it were. And I decided I had to buy myself a Buddha image because I was in Thailand. I was bowled over by all the Buddha images, the monks, and the whole trip. I found it fascinating. I had a bit of money left over, and I thought, I've got to get myself a Buddha.

So I bought this teak sitting Buddha who's sitting on my altar as we speak. I bought him from a young fellow who was minding the shop, and after I had safely paid him the money—so I couldn't back out—he said, "Make sure you keep him high up." This is very important in Thai culture. So I said, "Okay, I'll do it, don't worry."

I came home and put him on top of my bookcase, so he was suitably high up. And then he sat there without moving, in perfect posture, just looking down at me—completely calm, serene, peaceful. Meanwhile, on the floor level, on the ground level, which is where I was, life was something of a chaotic mess, full of suffering. I was rampaging about, and every now and again I'd look up and there he was. He hadn't moved.

After some time, I realized that his stillness was a challenge. Basically, the Buddha's serenity, as pictured in a good quality Buddha image, represents a truth claim—a claim that some other way of life is possible. Because others apparently have led such a way of life, and they left behind all these records.

The figure of the Buddha attracts. He awakens desire—and in particular, he awakens desire in the midst of pain. The Buddha image is meant to evoke desire. The posture attracts.

This is particularly evident in the traditional Buddha images. Sometimes you get contemporary artists who produce an "artwork" of the Buddha, and I never find them convincing because they've lost the proportions that were worked out, probably over at least decades, if not centuries.

There used to be, in this bare corner here, a Thai-style altar which was given to the center. It looked like a series of tables with Buddha images, and at the top was the largest image. At one point, many years ago, I ran some posture workshops here in this hall on weekends when I was a resident teacher here. I was assisted by—well, I wouldn't say assisted by, actually the person who really ran it was a local yoga teacher who came in.

This teacher's approach was quite interesting. Basically, we'd have a bunch of people and he'd say to one of them, "Okay, sit the way you sit in meditation." They'd be sitting there, and then he'd tell everybody, "Now tell me what's wrong with that posture." We'd go around offering observations. He'd say, "Yes, yes, and that's wrong, and this other thing is wrong," and then he'd adjust and construct the good posture for the person.

At some point during the weekend, he pointed toward the altar with the different Buddhas and said, "Can you tell me which of these Buddhas has the best posture?" So we headed over to do the same examination. But before anybody could even arrive at the images, one young man who was doing the workshop said, "That one." He pointed to the one that was just underneath the main quarter image. Just, bang—"That one."

The teacher was impressed because he was right. The teacher asked, "How could you tell that so quickly?" And the fellow replied, "Look, I don't know anything about posture—that's why I'm doing the workshop. But I do know about art. And that's the most beautiful Buddha."

I think he was dead on. This is the beauty of the Buddha—it's designed to move the heart, for the heart to say, "I want that."

That particular Buddha, by the way, I'm actually taking home with me after this retreat. They gave it to me after they demolished the altar.

So there I was. This is in the 1970s. Thumping around, and every now and again I look up and there he is.

And it got to me. Because I realised I want that. And I want it passionately. And the longer the time went on, the more I wanted it.

But the question was, do I want it enough? Do I want it enough to throw everything else aside, everything that stands in the way of getting this, in order to chase after it? Because it's clear to me that to get this, I must throw away everything that I know and understand up until this point.

And so the Buddha's serenity throws out a challenge. Is this really possible? Can it be true? The posture of the Buddha challenges me as a truth claim.

But it's important to point out that I do not believe this claim. I'm not an idiot. And I know I have absolutely no basis for any such belief. Sure, there's lots of books, and I've collected a lot by this stage, and they all say nice things, but they're books saying nice things. So what?

I have no basis for actually believing this claim, but this claim is such that it demands my attention, and it demands that I do something about it. This is something I must find out about. I must respond.

So during this period I read whatever books are available and I discover that Buddha means "awakened one," and what he's awakened to is a condition called bodhi—awakening or enlightenment. I gradually develop some content to what all this means, an idea of what enlightenment might mean and how it might relieve my pain. But still, as the library grows, I have no way of knowing if any of this is true.

But I know that if it is true, I have to get it. Which means I have to find out if this is true. And the only way I can find out is by embarking on the practice.

So awakening or enlightenment may be an illusion. I don't know and I have no way of knowing. But I must find out whether it's true or not. And the only way I can find out is by embarking on the path and embarking on it seriously, as if my life depends upon it. Because in a real way it does.

For awakening to be a real possibility means that I must be prepared to live as if Buddha is real, even if there's no confirmation of that. So the commitment is real, the direction is real, in the sense that they move me to commit to a certain way of life, even though I have no rational basis for believing that any of this is true.

This commitment demonstrates the power of the image of Buddha. And by image, I don't just mean the statue, but the very concept of Buddha.

And so finally in 1977, I toss everything else aside and I fly to Sri Lanka and India with no idea of what might happen, terrified that I'm chasing an illusion, but knowing that even if it is an illusion, I have no choice but to go there and find out.

So I'm leaping into the darkness. And this leap is an act of faith. But you notice it's not an act of belief. It's something else.

And in this way, I enter into a relationship with Buddha, although I'd already entered into it—he was irritating me all those years sitting on that shelf.

To illustrate, a couple of vignettes. I think I might have talked about this, but when I was meditating at Chanmyay Yeiktha in Rangoon, I told you there was this hall with a big stage and a huge Buddha statue—he's teaching the five companions—and on the floor, smack in front of him, eyeball to eyeball, was this old man who used to sit in the same spot every day without moving.

And I was restless and consumed by my suffering and anguish. Every now and again I'd look at this old fellow and I would envy him, because it was perfectly obvious that it didn't matter what he went through—he knew he was being held and everything was fine. I didn't know that. I wished I did. But he was quite clear about it.

Years later, when I became a teacher, I used to teach what was called the Dharma Gathering. I don't know if any of you ever went to these. There were three teachers, and I was one of them. It was kind of half semi-retreat, semi-workshop. And one time we had a question and answer session where people could throw a question at each of the three teachers.

Somebody tossed out a question that they wanted answered by each teacher. And the question was, is Buddhism a religion? I thought, that's an interesting question. I wonder how my colleagues are going to handle it. So the first colleague said, "You know, relax, settle down. No, no, no, it's not a religion." And the second one said, "No, no, it's not a religion. Don't worry about it. Relax, calm down, it's okay." Then it was my turn, and I had no idea what I was going to say, but the words that came out were essentially this: I said, "I don't know. All I know is that I talk to Buddha, and sometimes he answers." And that was the truth, because this is the relationship that I've developed with him.

Now, all this is very well, but isn't it just pursuing a fantasy? I mean, okay, talking to Buddha? Really? Seriously? We live in a material world. How is creating a Buddha of my mind real?

So here we need to look at how the Buddha himself conceives reality. As we've been talking about over this month, the basics of this practice of mindfulness involve bringing our center of gravity away from our conceptual world into the world of our directly encountered senses, including, of course, the mind. So the basic principle is that the world of our habitual concepts—what we take to be real, quote-unquote, normal, quote-unquote—is a construct. And it's constructed from the three roots of the unwholesome, or the three fires of attraction, aversion, and delusion. We create a world of concepts centered on a self who exists, who is real, only as a network of concepts. And this is the teaching of anattā, not-self. In other words, the world is not what we think it to be. This practice is not what we think. Our concepts are not the reality that they point towards.

Now this is a really basic principle that we've been kind of hammering away at over the past month. Does that mean we reject concepts? Which brings us back to: is Buddha real?

So let's approach this question by asking a parallel question. We could ask, is justice real? Now how many of us would be happy to conclude that justice is not real because it's just a concept constructed by our culture for its own purposes? And if this is so, then surely in our scientific and material world we have no business believing in it and no business living according to its demands. Or are we happy to conceive of justice as real so that it actually can guide our actions in the material world in ways that enable us to flourish?

Justice is not real in the same sense that Buddha is not real. We cannot see justice, we cannot hear it, we cannot smell it, we cannot taste it, we cannot touch it. But our sense of justice does affect the material conditions within which we live, including how

we respond to these conditions, what kind of life we find worthwhile, what kind of life we find meaningful, satisfying. Would we be willing to surrender our ideals of justice just because they are not materially real?

So Buddha is real in the same sense that justice is real. If Buddha is real as a concept, and if this concept has a positive effect on the quality of our practice and on the quality of our life, isn't that real enough?

So how does Buddha affect our life? First of all, there's his teaching, the Dharma. And through this teaching, he gives us an ordered, meaningful world within which we live. And we need an ordered world, a world with a sense of meaning built into it. Our lived world, the world we actually inhabit, needs a principle that points beyond itself, beyond our everyday concerns, to give us a sense of an ultimate destiny, an ultimately worthwhile meaning or purpose. And this is what the concept of Buddha provides.

In my case, it was that Buddha image sitting on the bookshelf that gave me a felt sense that some other way of life was possible. And that this other way of life had meaning and purpose. And therefore it could provide a deep sense of satisfaction. So the sitting Buddha moved me to encounter the Dharma. To find out whether Buddha is real or not real.

So how do I know Buddha is real? Well, my heart and my mind have been shaped by years of practice, study, life. And what I've learned is that the way I conceived the world back then, when I put that image on my shelf, was completely inadequate. I now live in a world where Buddha is real and where he and I are in relationship. And this world is much richer and more sustaining than the world I lived in back then. I flourish within this world.

This felt sense of Buddha normally lies just underneath the surface of my everyday experience, but it pops up in unexpected moments. For example, when I practice intensively, my mind quietens to the point where sometimes, if I listen, I can hear the sound of his voice. Sometimes I hear his silence, which paradoxically can be even more powerful.

Now, is all of this an illusion? Possibly. And in fact, if someone came to that conclusion, I would not argue with it. But does this relationship enrich my life? Does it provide me with a support and a direction that otherwise I would not have? Definitely.

Can I prove the existence of Buddha? No. Impossible. But I'm content to have this relationship based on saddha, on the movements of the heart, rather than rely on the scepticism of my rationality. Because one thing I've learned over the years is that rationality is a rather thin guide to life.

So I live as if Buddha is real. Which means, of course, that Buddha is real.

That's enough of tonight. Any questions?

Someone mentioned the uproar if the Buddha statue had moved by himself. Well, I wouldn't be here, would I? It's quite possible. But I think that's getting a bit beyond—it's kind of unnecessarily weird as opposed to usefully weird. I'll stick to the usefully weird.

Someone asked about early Buddhist representations: they had heard that there didn't used to be statues, but rather this notion of just a seat, a chair, and perhaps footprints in the sand representing the Buddha's walking. It was almost like the imprints or the space that could be occupied by Buddha rather than a physical representation.

The earliest images don't show the Buddha Rupa, the Buddha figure. They show either the place where he's sitting, but that place is empty, or they show his footprints. In the discourse where Dona approaches the Buddha and asks, "Are you a god? Are you a heavenly musician?"—he approaches the Buddha because he's walking along a dirt road with the Buddha ahead, and he notices the Buddha's footprints, where you have the wheel and all the marks that you see on the images. It's that which arouses his curiosity. So the footprint was an earlier image of the presence of the Buddha.

There's some debate about Gandhara, which is the northwest Pakistan and Afghanistan area. It was an ancient Buddhist kingdom, and quite early they started to create Buddha images of human beings. There's clearly a Greek influence there. But there's also a school of sculpture headquartered in Mathura on the Ganges Plain, which has much more Indian-style images of the Buddha. People speculate whether the idea of actually having an image of the Buddha is a European import, or whether that influence was present but it was already happening in India. Nobody really knows. But the image came later.

Someone reflected that when they first heard about these early representations, it seemed connected to this notion of direct experience rather than conceptual experience. The seat represents what you inhabit as a Buddhist practitioner. Your footprints invoke that sense within you, the felt sense, rather than concept or construct. For them, it felt more aligned with how we understand Buddhism and the notion of direct experience.

That's really interesting. And of course, the Buddha Rupa also invites direct experience—the Buddha image. Technically, it's called a Rupa. Form.

Visible form. So the Buddha invisible in a visible form. Because think about what looks like the worship of the Buddha—and for a lot of people is the worship of the Buddha—actually, the aim is not to worship the Buddha, but to become Buddha. So the Buddha image gives you a visual representation of what that might look like in an idealised form, through the perfect balance and harmony that it expresses, and that a good Buddha image can express.

So if it's a good image, it's like it radiates something indefinable. I suppose this notion of the figure—or rather the non-figure—can also radiate the same thing, but more so, because the figure, as you say, can easily become, and very often does become, a thing of worship rather than an aspiration of what you want to become. It's just so easy to fall into that.

The Buddhist footprint—you go to Thailand and see Wat Pho, and you've got these enormous feet, incredible. You can see the Buddhist footprint in Sri Lanka, up on top of the mountains, ginormous, like he must have been very big. And people go up there and worship; that's the pilgrimage up to the peak, Adam's Peak. The Christians believe that's Adam's footprint, the Buddhists believe it's the Buddhist footprint. So the Christians go there as well.

What about the image of the Buddha lying down? Now that's usually taken to be the Buddha's death. He's passing into Parinibbāna, the Great Release. How old was he when he died? Eighty. And he died of food poisoning. He had bad digestion. He almost died several months before from indigestion, but he pulled himself together. Then he ate some bad food and died.

When the Buddha died, what happened next? Well, that's a big story. We won't quite have time to get into it, but it's quite radical. There's one discourse in which Venerable Ānanda, who was his attendant—this is after the Buddha died, and Ānanda is now a major teacher in his own right—was visiting the kingdom of Magadha, and he was questioned by some heavies, by the prime minister and by the main general. "So what's happened to the organisation since the Buddha died?" And the first question was, "Who has inherited his position?" Ānanda says, "No one." Then they asked, "Well, have the community of the monks got together to elect a leader?" And Ānanda said, "No, we haven't done that."

Now, these first two questions both reflect the two dominant forms of political organisation in India at the time. Monarchy—someone inherits the job. Or republicanism—someone's elected to the job. And so the next question is, "So how do you decide who's in charge?" And the answer is, "The Vinaya is in charge." The Buddha left behind a legal code, and we live according to that code. That's what's in charge.

In other words, in India, BC, you get the rule of law being presented. We live under the rule of law, not under the rule of a person. It's quite radical.

And the next question is, "So how do you basically decide who's enlightened, who can teach?" And Ānanda says, "If the community recognises someone as being well-developed in those qualities, then they're asked to teach." So the transmission doesn't come down from heaven; it comes up from the community. It was quite radical. But of course that didn't last, because you can't have a functioning republican system in an age of absolute monarchy, so it died away.

Anyway, we are digressing, and it's getting late. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 61

Sīla Part 1: Virtue Ethics

Patrick Kearney · 1h03

In this foundational talk from a 28-day Satipaṭṭhāna retreat, Patrick Kearney examines sīla (ethics) through the lens of virtue ethics, distinguishing it sharply from rule-based morality. Drawing on the Lakkhaṇa Sutta (DN 30) and Kiṃ Atthiya Sutta (AN), Kearney presents the Buddha's central ethical question: what will bring welfare and happiness over the long term? He emphasizes that sīla is about character formation through training, not obedience to precepts—a crucial distinction that reshapes how we understand Buddhist ethics.

The talk explores the intimate connection between sīla and samādhi (concentration), explaining why ethical conduct serves as the indispensable foundation for meditation practice. Kearney introduces the concept of avippaṭisāra (non-regret), showing how living ethically generates a felt sense of satisfaction with one's life that naturally gives rise to joy, tranquility, and ultimately samādhi. This psychological harmony, combined with the social harmony fostered by the five sikkhāpada (ways of training), creates the conditions necessary for deep meditation and awakening.

Particularly striking is Kearney's analysis of how the pañca sīla function not as rules to obey but as trainings that cultivate virtues fostering community harmony. He argues that any way of life generating both social and psychological harmony constitutes sīla, regardless of whether it follows prescribed rules. The talk includes illuminating discussions on the Vinaya's approach to monastic rules, the historical treatment of bhikkhunīs, and the cultural adaptation of Buddhist ethics across different traditions.

Tonight and the day after tomorrow night, we're going to talk about sīla. Here we translate it as ethics. Sīla, or ethics, is foundational to the Buddha's way of practice.

The Buddha talks about the Eightfold Path as the basic template, and in the later tradition this is divided up and classified as the three trainings of sīla-samādhi-paññā: ethics, meditation, wisdom. Ethics, sīla, serves as the foundation of the path and therefore the beginning, but also the culmination of the path—or rather, the expression of the path. How does the path express itself in our lives? It's through ethics.

We're going to talk about the Buddha's approach to understanding ethics. Tonight we're going to talk about virtue ethics, and tomorrow we look at consequentialist ethics.

We start with the term sīla, often translated as morality, but sīla is a broad term and covers a whole area which includes character, habit, way of life, human nature, virtue, conduct, and ethics. Here we simply translate it as ethics. If we ask what we mean by ethics, what ethics is all about—essentially, ethics is about how we live. That's its focus.

We could say that every human being is faced with a fundamental ethical problem or a fundamental ethical question, and the question is: How should I live? Each of us has come up with an answer to that question, and we can see the answer in the way we are, in fact, living.

This is how the Buddha expressed this universal question. He says: What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? What is praiseworthy? What is blameable? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? What, having done it, will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term?

For the Buddha, the universal question "How shall we live?" gets morphed or modified into "How can we live well and happily over the long term?" This is his central question.

The kinds of answers that he came up with could be classified into two broad approaches: virtue ethics and consequentialist ethics. Virtue ethics is focused on the personal qualities that define our identity, the kind of person we become. Consequentialist ethics is focused on the consequences of our actions—in other words, karma-vipāka, action and its ripening. Tonight we're focusing on virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics is basically all about the development of character. It's focused on who we are now and who we have the potential to become. For the Buddha, character and conduct are intimately interconnected because for him, we become what we do. We are shaped by our choices and our actions. Our actions reflect who we really are, as distinct from who we think we are or who we want others to think we are.

What's central here to virtue ethics is that it's about character. It's not about rules, and it's not about obedience to rules. These have absolutely nothing to do with it. What is central to virtue ethics is training or education, because character is something that can be cultivated, formed by training. We form our character through the choices that we make over time.

If we're engaged on the path, we have some vision of who we want to be, and we recognize when we see ourselves falling short of this ideal. Because we don't quite measure up to it, we need some way of shaping ourselves so that eventually we embody this ideal, or at least to some degree. This shaping ourselves, this system of training, is of course the Eightfold Path.

When we practice virtue ethics, we train ourselves to become a particular kind of person—a person in the broader sense who lives well and happily. We do this by learning to embody virtue, particular virtues.

That brings us to the question of what we mean by virtue, which is not a particularly fashionable word these days. Originally, virtue simply meant an excellence. It is a virtue in a knife, for example, that it has a sharp edge. If I have a knife which is very sharp, I call this a good knife.

And if I have a knife which is very blunt, I call it a bad knife. So sharpness is the virtue that we look for in a knife. And in the same way, one can be a good plumber or a good shop assistant, or conversely, a bad plumber or a bad shop assistant. These labels are basically an assessment of the degree to which a person excels at what they do.

This is virtue in the general sense, but of course it's not virtue in the moral sense. A moral virtue is an excellence that forms character, and this makes it different from other kinds of virtues. For example, I can be a good plumber but a bad person. Alternatively, I might be a very good person and a hopeless plumber.

Like virtue in the general sense of excellence, moral virtue can be cultivated through education or training. I might not be born a good plumber, but with the appropriate training, I could become one. Equally, I might not be born a good person, but with the appropriate training, I might become one. So virtue ethics contains a sense of potential—a sense of the as yet unrealized potential of the human being, the capacity to get better, to improve, to become a good person.

The Buddha believes that if we want to live flourishing lives, there are certain virtues we should cultivate. If you go on meditation retreats, one virtue you've doubtlessly heard of is cāga, although you may be more familiar with the English word generosity. For the Buddha, this is a foundational virtue, so foundational that he doesn't actually see it as being specifically Buddhist. It's universal for him.

In order to cultivate a virtue, we have to have some kind of practice, some kind of training. The practice of generosity is dāna, which literally means giving, or that which is given—a gift. The Buddha believes the cultivation of virtue is really important because it changes the way that we live. His assumption about human nature is that a generous person will flourish and will help those around her flourish, while a stingy person will wither and will make the lives of those around him wither. There's always a social element to the virtues for the Buddha, which we'll get to pretty soon.

For the Buddha, the basic training template is the Eightfold Path, which is based on the cultivation of eight interrelated virtues: right view, right aspiration, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The later tradition divides the path into three specific trainings or curriculum: sīla, samādhi, and paññā—ethics, meditation, and wisdom. The idea is that we embark on these trainings in order to cultivate these eight virtues so that they turn us into a person who will live well and happily.

The central question for the Buddha, as we quoted from the Lakkhaṇa Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya, is: what will bring me harm and suffering over the long term, and what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term? This is at the heart of the Buddha's sense of the ethical quest. The purpose of sīla, the cultivation of the virtues, is to enable human flourishing—to enable us to live happy and satisfying lives. Notice he says "over the long term." He's not interested in immediate gains, but in what builds up over a period of time.

When the Buddha teaches ethics to his lay students, the basic framework he uses are the five ways of training, the sikkhāpada. You get the expression pañca sīla, the fivefold ethics, and these are made up of five sikkhāpada, ways of training. Again, training is at the centre. This is one reason why I don't use the translation "precept." I don't like the term "the five precepts," which is another expression we've inherited from the Victorians, because a precept is a rule—basically, it's a fancy word for rule. The five rules. And a rule can be obeyed or it can be disobeyed. But a way of training cannot be obeyed, and it cannot be disobeyed.

Let's say I take up a meditation practice. Can I obey a meditation practice? Can I disobey a meditation practice? No. I can either do it or not do it. I can either be fully committed to it or not fully committed to it.

But I cannot obey it, and I cannot disobey it. Obedience simply does not apply.

So the five ways of training are precisely that—ways of training aimed at cultivating virtues. They are not rules to be obeyed or disobeyed. What characterizes the virtues listed in these five trainings is that they are virtues which foster social harmony. The focus is on the community more than the individual.

To put it in summary form: If we do not harm each other, then instead we help each other. If we do not take from and exploit each other, then instead we give to and support each other. If we do not get so caught up in sensory stimulation and excitement that we turn away from our social world and disappear into a private realm of narciss-

istic pleasure—if we are honest and truthful with each other—if we do not poison our relationships because we're pursuing personal obsessions with getting high—then we develop a community in which we can practice Dharma and flourish as human beings.

The five ways of training are basically a methodology for creating a community living in harmony. And if it's living in harmony, then the people within it can flourish.

So sila, ethics, for the Buddha is designed to promote social harmony, but also to develop psychological harmony. Here we move from the community to the individual. This brings us to the relationship between sila and samadhi in the path, where the foundation of samadhi—meditation—is sila, ethics.

Now, why does the Buddha insist on the centrality of this relationship? If you go to a Mahasi meditation centre in Burma, you're told that you must follow the five precepts and then you can succeed in your meditation. And if you don't, you won't. I have to say that when I went there, I was completely puzzled by this because the precepts were presented as rules. For the life of me, I could not understand why breaking these rules would cause my meditation to fail while obeying them would make it succeed. I won't tell anybody else, but I did conduct scientific experiments. And I was satisfied that, no, you can break them and still succeed in the meditation. So I just couldn't get it. There was never any real explanation about why this relationship exists.

But the Buddha was coming at it from a different angle because he doesn't see what we call the precepts as rules. It's got nothing to do with obedience.

So let's look at this relationship. We start with samadhi. Samadhi is sometimes used in a broad sense to mean meditation practice in general, and sometimes in a narrow sense to indicate that particular quality of the heart characterized by stillness and integration. I think we've already commented on samadhi before, but it comes from the root *da*, to put or to place. The prefix *ā* means "toward," and the prefix *sam* means "together." Samadhi: to bring together, to collect, to unify, to integrate, to unite. Samadhi collects and integrates the citta, the heart-mind.

So the opposite of samadhi is division. How do we know we do not have samadhi? Have you figured this out by now? How do you know when you don't have samadhi? Well, what we say is, "I'm distracted. Therefore, I do not have samadhi." But what is distraction exactly? It's a state in which the citta is divided, not integrated.

Part of me wants to meditate, but another part of me wants to be watching TV, and another part of me wants to be preparing for the next challenge at work, and another part of me wants to be having lunch. And maybe all of these at once. The heart-mind is divided, not unified. And when the heart-mind is divided, it is at war with itself. We're

in a state of civil war or civil conflict of some sort. The part of me that wants to meditate is fighting with the part of me that wants to be having lunch. This conflict creates a state of restlessness, desire, and aversion, which will not allow the citta to fully settle.

So if I'm not distracted, this means my heart-mind is not divided—it's unified. I am not at war with myself because all of me wants to be where I already am and wants to be doing what I'm already doing. And this state is peaceful.

And within it, the heart-mind is collected, integrated, unified, peaceful, and powerful. That is samādhi. And sīla—ethics—is the foundation of samādhi because the role of sīla is to cultivate the harmony necessary for samādhi.

Just as one example: in the Eightfold Path, sīla covers speech, action, and livelihood. So the question for the practitioner becomes: Do my speech, my actions, and my job serve to cultivate the conditions that help me develop samādhi? Or not? Or more simply: Does my way of life lead toward harmony, or does it lead away from harmony?

Because fundamentally, sīla is harmony. An action is in accordance with sīla when it results in harmony—not when it follows certain rules. And this harmony is both social and psychological.

So we start with the social. Again, the five ways of training—they're all about social harmony. They are disciplines which, if we practice them, result in a civilized, peaceful society. If we cultivate these ways of training, we cultivate a society where people can feel safe and at ease with others.

In one discourse—the Kūṭadanta Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 5—the Buddha talks about his social ideal as part of a story. One expression he uses is that in an ideal society, people live at ease "in open houses." This expression really struck me when I first encountered it, because it reminded me of where I was raised.

I grew up in the Sydney suburb of Cammeray, on the lower North Shore. The suburban houses there were basically aspiring working class and lower middle class—brick houses with yards, the whole shebang. The front door was rather elaborate, with wood and glass paneling, and it had a lock. When the kiddies reached a certain age, we were given our very own copy of the front door key so we could come and go as we pleased. It was a mark of relative independence.

It was years before it occurred to me—there I was, clutching my key—but the back door had no lock. It was never locked. It didn't have a lock to lock. You could always wander in and out the back door. Only the front door had a lock, because that's where you faced the street, the social whatever. But if you wanted to get in, you just went around to the back door, which is what the neighbours did.

These days, in the same suburb, the houses have all been sold and bought by upper middle class people. They've all been renovated. And they've all had walls put up. Our house didn't even have—it had no fence. Some people had low fences you could step over. But now, all the houses on that street have high walls. The house we used to live in has a door with a carefully locked, very elaborate lock, then there's the driveway with another lock, and I'm pretty sure every door and window is locked. In other words, life there is a lot more insecure than it was back then. Things have changed—which would suggest, from the Buddha's point of view, that the five ways of training are not as established in that community as they were in those days.

So the five ways of training are about creating a certain kind of community. And the social aspect of sīla also comes out in the way the Buddha speaks about the benefits of the practice. In one way, he says that if we live without sīla, we are uncomfortable with people whom we respect and whose respect we wish to have. This is the relationship he focuses on.

He teaches, for example, that saddhā—the orientation of the heart toward the Dharma—begins with association with good people, or association with authentic people. The term in Pāli is sappurisa. Purisa means "person." Sat is usually translated as "good," and certainly that's included in the meaning, but sat actually comes from the root meaning "to be." So a sappurisa is a person who is—in other words, an authentic person, a genuine person. And if we want to practice Dharma, these are the people we need to spend time with.

But if we lack sila, if our ethics is shaky, we do not feel at ease with these people. What if they find out what I'm really up to? That could be alarming. There is a part of me that must be hidden from them, and this threatens harmony.

When I cultivate sila, ethics, I find I can be more at ease within my community. But what's really important for the Buddha is that I feel at ease within a community composed of people whom I respect and look up to, people who I want to respect me. Coming back to the training in virtue: if I practice sila, I feel in harmony with precisely those people who are most likely to bring out the best in me, the ones who are most likely to help me along the path. This is social harmony, which for the Buddha is an important benefit of practicing sila.

Then there is the psychological harmony, and here we return to the relationship between sila and samadhi. The psychological result of practicing or not practicing sila emerges in one discourse, the Kimatthiya Sutta, which can be translated as "For What Purpose?" This is from the Anguttara Nikaya. The Buddha speaks about the purpose and the benefit of sila. Basically, the question he addresses is: Why practice sila? What's in it for me? What's the benefit?

We won't go through the whole discourse. We're just going to focus on one particular relationship. The Buddha says that a major result of living with sila is what he calls avippatisara, which can be translated as non-regret. And this avippatisara generates pamoja, joy. Non-regret generates joy. This relationship we need to explore.

The word that gets translated as non-regret is avippatisara, which is a negative term—starting with the "a," that always gives you the clue—and then you get vippatisara. Vippatisara is constructed from the Sanskrit root smr, "remember," from which we get smriti in Sanskrit, sati in Pali—mindfulness. So that "sara" is the same as sati. Vippatisara is regret or remorse, and what it refers to is our relationship with the past, based on memory.

In other words, there's something we have done in the past that bothers us today and leads us to obsess about the past. Or there's something we have not done in the past which bothers us today and leads us to obsess about the past. This obsession pollutes our relationship with the present. And of course, if our relationship to the present is compromised, the meditation practice becomes a lot more difficult.

Avippatisara is the opposite. Now, this "a" can be translated in two ways. One is as a simple absence: no regret, no remorse. But it can also be translated in a stronger form—what in English would be "anti"—the opposite of regret and remorse. I think this is what the Buddha is getting at here. Non-regret indicates a positive state of happiness or contentment with one's life, even rejoicing in how one has lived. Looking back on how one has lived and feeling good about it. This is suggested by the fact that joy arises in one who experiences non-regret. Non-regret is a felt sense of satisfaction with the way one has lived, which causes joy to arise in the heart.

Here is a personal example. I remember back in the day when I'd finished a BA degree at the University of Sydney and then thought, well, I've got to do something useful. I went to the University of New South Wales and started studying law, thinking I'd be a good lawyer. I could nitpick with the best of them.

One day I was in the law library, preparing for an assignment. The cubicle was piled high with learned legal tomes, and my head was buried in D.T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Volume One. I looked up and gazed at the heavy volumes of knowledge. I got up, returned the books to their shelves, walked out of the library, walked out of the university, and never came back. Dropped out, made money, headed off to Asia.

Now at the time, it was a completely insane thing to do. And this was explained to me by a number of people, earnestly and hopefully. But looking back, I rejoice in that decision. I think I did the right thing. And I feel chuffed by it. A non-regret arises in the heart.

So this relationship to the past, for the Buddha, is important. It has real significance. For example, we talked about the virtue of generosity. One of the practices he recommends is reflecting on one's own generosity.

To give an example: these days, let's say you want to give to a charity or some worthy organisation. What they really want you to do is set up an ongoing payment out of your bank account. And once you've set it up, what they really want you to do is forget about it. Maybe ten years' time might be the first time you think about it. But if you're cultivating the virtue of generosity, an excellent practice is this: when you get your bank statement, go through it and mark where you're making these donations, and rejoice in your generosity. I'm making a contribution. This organisation is getting money which it would not otherwise have because of my generosity. I'm making a difference. And one feels chuffed by that. One feels happy by that. Non-regret arises. And as a result, the heart is settled and samādhi becomes that much easier.

So this is the psychological result, the psychological harmony, that comes from sīla. It gives rise to joy, and the Buddha goes on to explain that joy naturally gives rise to rapture, which leads to tranquility, then happiness, concentration, realistic understanding and seeing, disenchantment, the fading of obsession, and the understanding and seeing that comes from liberation. He says, "In this way, moral virtue leads progressively to the highest." Sīla leads progressively to the highest.

What the Buddha is talking about is a seamless progression from the everyday practice of ethics, through the depths of meditation practice, and from there to the heights of realization and enlightenment. It's all one progression. It's all part of one seamless whole.

In that list, the terms from rapture through to concentration are technical terms about meditation practice, while disenchantment through to the understanding and seeing that comes from liberation are technical terms for awakening or insight. So sīla

functions as a support, an indispensable support, for meditation practice and its result. It does this by grounding us in a way of life that brings a deep sense of satisfaction. That's its job. That's what it's meant to do.

And the teaching is quite radical. Because the Buddha is not saying that practicing sīla gives rise to harmony and so to a way of life that supports the path to awakening. What he's saying is that any way of life that gives rise to harmony, both social and psychological, is sīla. One implication of this is that sīla cannot be captured by any set of rules, because it's fundamentally not about obedience. Obedience is not a virtue for the Buddha.

It's interesting that if you ever ordain in the Theravāda—the Theravāda, by the way, has a secret and esoteric name. It's also known as the Terrible-vāda, because it is the most terrible of all the vādas. But if you ordain as a bhikkhu, you take on 227 precepts, and these really are precepts, these are rules. If you ordain as a nun, you take on 311.

Now I haven't looked at the 311, but I did go through the 227, and what struck me as very interesting—interesting for someone who'd come out of a Catholic background—was that you do not find the word obedience anywhere in those 227 rules. It's just not there. It's completely absent. And this is a real shocker.

If you come out of a Catholic background, if you're ordaining to a religious order in Catholicism, you've got only three rules: poverty, chastity, obedience. Fully one third of the path. If you're in the secular clergy, it's just chastity and obedience—half of the path. But for the Buddha, it's just not there. You do get the word respect, which is peppered throughout, and respect on the outside can look like obedience, but it isn't. It's something different.

You do not find obedience anywhere in the rules. And I think this is not accidental—I think it is significant.

So ethics cannot be captured by rules, because it's not about obedience. It's about what cultivates harmony. And sometimes what cultivates harmony is breaking the rules. Behind this idea lies a particular view of human nature.

Let me give you a sense of how this distinction between obedience and respect actually works. One time I was attending a retreat here as a mere humble meditator—I wasn't on the throne. A Burmese Sayadaw was teaching. Each day I would do my stretches in order to survive the demands of the retreat. One day I went into interview and the Sayadaw was looking a bit embarrassed. I thought, something's happened. He explained that one of the meditators had dobbed me in for doing yoga at a Buddhist retreat. He said, "You mustn't do that. You mustn't mix your practices."

I said, "Yes, Sayadaw." No argument whatsoever. I went off afterwards and I obeyed. I did not do any yoga for a full twenty-four hours. In doing so, I showed my respect for him. And then I continued to show my respect for him by continuing my yoga practice in the privacy of my room where nobody could see me.

Now, was I a bad boy because I was disobeying? Or was I a good boy because I was showing respect? I would say in the Buddha's context, it's the latter more than the former.

The Buddha's approach to sīla—to ethics—is based on his view of human nature. He believes that we are constituted in such a way that if we act in ways driven by obsession, aversion, and delusion, we will cultivate disharmony, even chaos, within us and around us. This will make us and those around us unhappy. But if we act in ways not driven by obsession, aversion, and delusion—motivated instead by the opposite qualities—then we will cultivate harmony and well-being within ourselves and within our community. We will be happy, and the people around us will be happy.

This has got nothing to do with the will of a divine being—even a divine being whom we might surreptitiously name "Buddha." And it's got nothing to do with the orders of authorities, whether of this world or another. It's simply the way human beings are constituted.

So practicing sīla involves cultivating a sensitivity to harmony and disharmony in our lives. We might begin by noticing: What brings disharmony? What disturbs me? What do I do that promotes disturbance in my life? These are things I should examine with a view to abandoning them. And what do I do that promotes peace and harmony in my life? These are things I should examine with a view to cultivating them.

The Buddha speaks about this in terms of abandoning the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome.

A question from the audience: Do you know why women have more precepts than men today?

Because their social situation was much dodgier than men's. There were female renunciants in India before the Buddha, but life was far more dangerous for them. Remember, life as a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī meant you were essentially a wandering beggar. A man—especially a couple of men travelling together—was relatively safe. They were men, they were wearing the robes, so they were sacred beings.

But women wandering around without men to supervise them? This violated the whole family ethos in ancient India, and such women were considered legitimate targets. There are cases in the Vinaya describing violence against bhikkhunīs. So a whole variety of rules developed to protect them, restricting their freedom of movement so it would be safer.

Plus, there are some rules actually designed to keep them safe from bhikkhus. For example, it's against the rules for a nun to accept the laundry of a monk and do it for him. No, mate—you do your own laundry.

So that's essentially why these rules existed. It wasn't based on a sense of the inferiority of women. It was based on a cold, sober assessment that the social position of women in that culture—as free, self-governing individuals, living in female communities, autonomous, with no men in charge—that exposed them to all sorts of pressures from the outside world that the men didn't have to put up with. So they had to make arrangements. It was about their safety, essentially.

But the key point is that they had their own self-governing communities. They weren't dependent upon men.

Sometimes questions arise about whether the nuns still wandered like the monks. Yes, they had the right to. Sometimes they chose not to because of physical difficulties, but sometimes they wandered. And there are all sorts of records about women who just wandered off into the forest and meditated, exactly as the men did.

The society was used to female renunciates, but the nuns were more exposed. They were in a more dangerous situation.

As far as we know, that was the case. And the earliest records, the earliest epigraphical records—like carvings that have survived—these are associated with the stupas that were built. Archaeologists have found many carvings of people who had made donations to the stupa and to various activities. These were quite important people, significant people in the Buddhist community. And a lot of them were Buddhist nuns. So they were clearly people of status and importance. That's as far back as we can go in terms of the record.

There's often a question about the story of how the Buddha agreed to ordain women. The traditional account says it was Ananda who petitioned him quite persistently, and the Buddha initially refused.

That's the story. But one of the things that research has shown is that if you're looking at misogyny and anti-gay prejudices in the Buddhist tradition, they develop over time. You find writings to that effect in the commentaries, but you don't find it in the earliest tradition. It develops over a period of time. It's like the external world kind of came in.

Now, the story about the Buddha's reluctance to ordain women and the eight garudhammas, the eight heavy things—special rules that he supposedly agreed to, saying "Okay, you can ordain, but you must follow these eight special rules"—modern researchers have become convinced that this was a later addition. This did not date from the Buddha. There are too many incoherences, too many contradictions. It just doesn't fit. It does fit a later era, where they're projecting back to the Buddha to justify the misogyny which was starting to creep in.

I'm pretty sure that the consensus among people who study early Buddhism is that this story is a fake. It was planted later.

The Buddha's aunt was said to be the first woman ordained. And Ananda figures prominently in the story. Ananda was an old softie. There's a whole series of stories in which he gets close to the nuns and helps them out. He is paired in the tradition with Maha Kassapa. And Maha Kassapa—he was an old toughie. He was a forest monk and he was very strict. He was very strict on Ananda, and he was very strict with the nuns. He criticized Ananda for being too friendly with the nuns.

This is not appropriate. You're hanging out with them. You're getting too close. You shouldn't do that.

This was partly because monks had to keep their distance, and partly to give the women space to make their own decisions. So Ananda was criticized for getting too close to them. But it comes out in the stories that he was just an old softy. He just liked to help people out. So he had that reputation in the early Sangha.

And the relationship between Mahakassapa and Ananda was very interesting. It was Mahakassapa who took Ananda in hand after the Buddha's death and basically turned him into a fully awakened one and a teacher in his own right. In the Zen tradition, Mahakassapa became the Buddha's successor, as you probably remember, and his successor was Ananda—not Sariputta. Sariputta is not part of the Zen lineage. In Zen, they trace it from Buddha to Mahakassapa to Ananda. Ananda is the second ancestor.

But in the early traditions, there are all these stories about their relationship in which basically Mahakassapa is scolding Ananda, telling him to get his act together. There's one story in which Ananda, as a teacher, goes off wandering around with his

students. Weeks or months later, he bumps into Mahakassapa, who says, "So where are your students? What happened to them?" And Ananda says, "Well, actually, they disrobed." Mahakassapa says, "What is wrong with you?" He scolds him and calls him a boy. And Ananda says, "My hair is grey and you're calling me a boy." And Mahakassapa says, "Yes, well, you behave like one."

So there's this whole dynamic between the pair of them that gets preserved in the stories. And it would be partly a genuine memory because I don't think people would fabricate these stories. But this also shows that part of the dynamic within the Sangha was that it had all sorts. You have the tough ones, the blokes, the footy players of Dharma: "What are you doing, hanging around with the sheilas?" And then you have the softies who were helping out the women—and Ananda with his photographic memory. So you get different attitudes and understandings and so on.

The picture that you get from the early records is this diversity of community—all these different people doing different things, sometimes clashing with each other, sometimes working together.

As for the Vinaya, that would have been fixed early because it's part of the Tipitaka, so it's in the earliest layer. But what keeps growing after that are the commentaries and the sub-commentaries and the sub-sub-commentaries. Because the Vinaya is a set of rules—it's a legal code. And if you've got a legal code, you get lawyers. And if you get lawyers, anything becomes possible. So the Vinaya keeps growing and developing over the centuries.

But the basic principle they had—and this is Mahakassapa—was established when the Buddha died and people were gathering for the funeral. One monk said, "Oh, well, you know, this is terrible, the old man's dead, but..."

At least we can relax now. He's not breathing down our necks anymore. We can relax a few of those minor rules.

Mahakassapa heard about this and declared: "There's no way. We are not changing a single rule, even the most minor ones. We're keeping them all."

So that was the initial aspiration. And then, of course, you had to develop an elaborate legal code so you could get around the rules.

What you find is that different schools of Vinaya developed over time. We're just talking about the Theravada at the moment—that's one lineage. Then you have other lineages, particularly the Buddhism that went out into Central and East Asia. They modified things considerably.

For example, consider monks and nuns wearing trousers. In India, people wore robes, and in the Theravada today, they still wear robes. They don't wear trousers. But of course, robes weren't much use in the northern Chinese winter, so they changed their system of clothing. They adapted the Vinaya for those sorts of practical considerations.

The way of life in East Asia is much more communal, partly because of the winters. In India, you could live in a little hut alone all you wanted. But if you lived in a hut alone in China or Korea or Japan, you were likely to freeze to death in winter. So people gathered together into communities that could be heated—literally. Then you get the development of rules reflecting a communal way of life that fits that culture.

The disadvantage the Theravada has is that if you're a strict Theravada monk or nun, you're leading a life based on a set of rules which make perfect sense in ancient India but do not necessarily make the slightest sense in contemporary Australia. But if you're a Mahayana monk or nun, you can adapt, because they've developed this theology of adaptation. They're not so hidebound.

Cultural transition creates real problems. Take the Tibetan monks when they came down to India—they were ravaged by tuberculosis and other diseases which simply didn't exist up in the Himalayas. The germs don't survive up there, so they had no resistance, and Tibetan medicine had no cure because they had never encountered these diseases. They faced all sorts of problems that were purely environmental. They would also often cling to eating habits appropriate for the Himalayas but not appropriate for the plains, not necessarily adapting.

In Thailand, the greatest cause of death among monks is diabetes and other sugar-related disorders, because Thais have a sweet tooth. And when you've got no sex, no drugs, no rock and roll—at least you've got sugar. But that's a feature of that particular culture, not specific to monastic life.

It is harder, though, if you join the Theravada as a monk or a nun. One of the things you give up is control over your own diet, because you eat what people give you. When I was in Burma at a meditation centre, some people who came to meditate were driven crazy by the fact that they had to eat this diet, which they found appallingly unhealthy and unsuitable. But they had no choice. Some of them left as a result—they couldn't handle it. Others got sick. There are all sorts of cultural transition problems to navigate.

Very, very oily. In Burma, it's a sign of hospitality to add oil. More oil. And still more oil. I've never consumed so much oil in my life.

But in Brisbane, we are parishioners of a Korean Mahayana monk, of his little temple. And one of the things he really likes to do is to come out to lunch with us. We either feed him at the house or we take him up to a restaurant. If you're a Korean monk, you're dedicated to vegetarianism, so what he likes to do is to get out and indulge in some meat. We feed him up on a regular basis.

Which you can do. You've got the adaptability. The other thing is that he will eat with us at the same table, and we just share. You can't do that with a strict Theravāda monk because the protocols are too strict. They have to eat separately. But you get a much more at-ease relationship in the Mahāyāna.

There's one of the rules in the Bhikkhu Vinaya that you cannot give a Dhamma talk to an audience which includes someone holding an umbrella above their head. Until they fold that umbrella, you cannot give the talk. And the reason is because an umbrella in ancient India is a sign of status. A servant would be holding the umbrella, sheltering the VIP from the sun. So what the person under the umbrella is saying to everybody else is, "I'm important. I'm more important than you are." Mate, not in a Dhamma gathering. You're no more important than anybody else. Get rid of that umbrella. So again, these are rules that make no sense for our culture, but they make perfect sense in context.

There's also one about not attending theater, and no entertainments. And one which causes a certain amount of controversy is no sporting in the water. This apparently came about because monks would bathe in tanks or in rivers. But apparently somebody —a lay person—complained. A lot of these rules come about through lay people because they see something and they think, "Monks or nuns shouldn't do that." So the Buddha, in order to avoid scandal, makes a rule: don't do that.

Someone saw the monks splashing around and chucking water at each other and having fun while they're in their bath, basically. And he thought, this is not dignified. So he complained to the Buddha. And the Buddha said, "Okay, bathe in the water, but don't sport in the water."

Now, the way this is interpreted today, most people say it means monks cannot swim. But other monks would argue, no, this is about playing around in the water. Swimming for health? No problem. Just jet-skis are off the cards. Beach volleyball? No way. But swimming for health, yes. So some monks do swim for exercise.

As for different sexualities in the Vinaya, given the culture of that time, the Buddha never mentions it. For him, sex is sex—whether it's male-male, male-female, or female-female. In the monastic life, it's strict celibacy. Break that rule and you're out for life. Never to be re-admitted.

"Even self-pleasure?" someone asks.

No, that's a *sanghadisesa*—an offense that requires public confession before your community.

Again, transparency. No secrets.

Someone raises another question: "The center in Tucson has a flat upstairs. The rent from that flat helps keep the center open. I always ask everyone who wants to stay—people usually live there for about a year before moving on—I ask them, 'Why do you want to live above a Buddhist meditation center?' I get various answers, nothing that's ever turned me off.

"So the latest renters are a couple in their forties. He's Indian, fresh from India. Over time, we've gotten into some really interesting conversations because he's a yoga scholar. What he knows—I wish I knew this stuff about yoga, and he knows almost equally as much about Buddhism.

"He's been casting about looking for what to do here. He had a school in India with about thirty students and sold that. He's been looking for what to do in America, and I've been helping him with permitting, understanding what contracts really mean, what to look for—all of that.

"So he went off to visit some friends and came back with an idea. The friends had this business of supplying dairies and corner shops with various goods. It never dawned on me that those goods included tobacco and alcohol—until the day he walked in and said, 'Can you help me get the tobacco license?'

"I said no.

"He was shocked. And I was shocked that he would even consider selling tobacco. Tobacco is a bit different than alcohol, you know. You can get ill from tobacco relatively easily, just from the exposure.

"We talked back and forth about it at length. How, with his knowledge, could he even think about selling tobacco to whoever walked in the door? He wasn't even the retailer in this situation—he would be the wholesaler, distributing to all the dairies and shops.

"I asked him, 'What do you know about the Buddha's practice? How can you even think about doing this?' He said, 'It's business.'

"I used to tell him, 'You know, there's two sets of rules in India.' He said yes. Is that true?"

Well, there's a certain pragmatism, and why not? You can have one set of rules for the family, one set of rules for business, one set of rules for the Dharma. It can happen. But I don't see that in the Buddha's teaching. There's no indication the Buddha had that attitude. I think it's more of a cultural thing.

"So after all that talk," the questioner continues, "now all of a sudden I've got three sets of standards to navigate."

"What didn't have any give?" someone asks.

The rules. Everything. If you're a monk or a nun.

We're talking about the Vinaya here—the monastic discipline.

We're not talking about lay people. Let me back up.

Why have teachings that promote morality and a sense of peace and harmony in the community, and then allow private rules that say, "Oh, I can do that"? It depends on the effect of having those rules. Do those private rules create disharmony or not? You can have a social context in which they do not create disharmony. In fact, you might even argue they create harmony.

This is one of the things about the Buddha's approach to ethics. For lay people—and again, it's different for monks and nuns—but for lay people, you have to work it out for yourself. What is the effect of what I'm doing? And you can have two people, both good people, who come to opposite conclusions. Because you don't have absolute rules. You don't have absolute rights and wrongs. It's up to people to decide for themselves. And you have disagreements.

So if you come to a Dharma centre, a meditation centre in Australia, the food invariably is vegetarian. Now, if you come out of Burma or Thailand, they think, "That's crazy. Why would you do that? Why can't you feed these meditators a bit of beef? Strengthen them up." But here it's felt that's not acceptable. And that's something people here have

worked out for themselves. Meanwhile, you get people who run meditation retreats who are sometimes criticized by others who say, "You should be vegan. How can you be merely vegetarian? That's appallingly unethical. You must be vegan."

So it's not that there's one right way. People work it out for themselves. What fits that particular social context is what's done. And where you have different social contexts, you may well have different practices.

People in the past, writing about right livelihood, have stipulated the sorts of things you should not be making money from. The slaughter of animals was one of them. So was the sale of drugs and alcohol. These have been left in the list. Yes, these constitute wrong livelihood.

So if this has been described as wrong livelihood according to the Eightfold Path, if you're following that path—but is this person following that path? Just because they know a lot about Buddhism doesn't mean they say they're Buddhist. I wouldn't sell tobacco. But listen, this fellow is so much a vegetarian that he won't eat off the same spoon that's been in with the spaghetti, yet he doesn't mind selling drugs and alcohol and tobacco. You see? Perfectly consistent.

Anyway, I think we've gone on long enough.

CHAPTER 62

The Mirror of Dharma Part 4

Patrick Kearney · 51 min

In this fourth talk on insight from the Mahāsī Sayādaw tradition, Patrick Kearney investigates the nature of awareness (viññāṇa) and its crucial role in the development of vipassanā understanding. Drawing on the Buddha's teachings about nāma-rūpa (name and form), he illuminates how experience always arises as a dyad—the process of awareing and that which is aware.

Kearney uses vivid analogies to explore awareness: like light that we don't see directly but which makes the room visible, awareness is both obvious and mysterious. He examines how mindfulness (sati) presents as the felt continuity of awareness over time, distinguishing between being simply aware and being aware of our awareness. The talk traces how distraction involves forgetting our awareness, while mindfulness involves remembering it—this recursive quality of awareness of awareness being built into the practice itself.

The teaching connects to the Mahāsī Sayādaw's approach of noting intention—the choice to aware something and the movement of awareness toward it. As practice deepens, practitioners discover that experience consists entirely of this partnership between awareing (nāma) and the aware (rūpa), with nothing standing outside this process. This recognition marks the first insight knowledge (nāma-rūpa-pariccheda-ñāṇa): understanding the distinction between mind and its object. When this becomes radical—realizing there is only this process with no observer outside it—one enters the transformative world of insight.

So this is the fourth in our series on insight, looking at Mahasi Sayadaw's approach to understanding how insight works in particular. Tonight we're going to talk about awareness and how that plays into the emergence of insight and understanding. We'll also go back to the beginning of the retreat, where we talked about how the practice that we're doing centers around awareness, or some people would say consciousness—in Pali, viññāṇa.

Now, we defined awareness. What do we mean by awareness? Awareness is the presence of that which is present. We compared it to light. Imagine stepping into a dark room at night. What is present? Only darkness. Then we switch on the light and suddenly the room itself and everything in the room are present. Awareness is like light. It is what makes the room itself and the contents of the room present to us.

We have the expression "he saw the light," but actually we don't see light. We see the world because of light. Right now, are you seeing? If you're seeing, that means you are experiencing awareness, visual awareness. So what are you seeing? You're seeing the room around you. You're not seeing light. You're seeing the room illuminated by light. And how do you know there is light? Because the room and what's in the room are present to you.

We can compare awareness to light, and we could say that awareness is both the most obvious aspect of our experience and the most mysterious. It's obvious, first of all, because we cannot have experience without awareness. Are you experiencing something now? Then your experience includes awareness. But awareness is also mysterious, because awareness is not a something, but the presence of something—not a thing, but presence itself.

We can see from our experience that awareness always has an object. Where there is presence, there is something which is present. When we are aware, we are aware of something. When we are seeing, we are seeing something. When we are hearing, we are hearing something. When we are thinking, we are thinking something. Experience comes to us always as a package—you could say a dyad—of awareness and its object. They come and go together.

In fact, the Buddha defines awareness largely by its object. This is one of the ways in which he defines it. He says, "Awareness is defined by whatever condition dependent upon which it arises. When awareness arises dependent on eye sensitivity and forms, it is reckoned as visual awareness. When it arises dependent on ear sensitivity and sounds, it is reckoned as auditory awareness," and so on. He goes through the six senses, including mind as the sixth sensitivity.

When we start a meditation practice, we are given an object to be aware of, and we're given something clear and obvious. When we ground awareness on something clear and something readily available, such as some aspect of the body, then the awareness of that object can become clear. At least this is what Mahasi Sayadaw says. So we have the basic instruction: note something clear and obvious. This is, of course, the grounding object or the primary object.

Awareness and its object always go together, and when we start, the emphasis is on the object. But there's also a sense in which awareness can be differentiated from its object. Take, for example, the practice of what we call open awareness, which we did at the end of the first week. We began by grounding awareness on some clear object, such as breathing. Then we stepped back, as it were.

to allow different objects of experience to come and go within the field of awareness. Instead of holding tightly to a single object and regarding anything else as distraction—therefore something to be pushed away—we allow awareness to wander. It goes on its journeys away from and back to our meditation object. We allow that, and we don't get in the way. However, what we're doing is maintaining awareness of these journeys. We watch awareness move from one object to another. This is what we could call open awareness.

You notice that in this style, the interest has shifted. We're not so much interested in our chosen meditation object. What we're interested in is whatever awareness chooses to be aware of. And what this reveals is a lighter relationship to the object of awareness. We're no longer heavily invested in any particular object. In fact, over time, we may find ourselves more interested in awareness itself rather than what we are aware of. At some point we may even begin to wonder: is my meditation object awareness itself, rather than what I am aware of?

To get a sense of this style of practice, imagine yourself sitting in a train at a window seat, facing the window as the landscape rolls by. Now, what you could do is look at the passing view—first there's this house, then that yard, then this road, then that park as they're moving along. Or you could rest your eyes and just receive the passing landscape without trying to examine anything at all.

You can see that these are two different relationships to seeing. In the first one, looking, what's at the center of our interest is the object of visual awareness—what we are looking at, even if it's only momentary. In the second, receptive awareness, what's at the center is awareness itself rather than what we are aware of. So we have two different relationships to visual awareness and two different experiences emerging out of those relationships.

This brings us to mindfulness, which, as we've seen, translates the Pali word *sati*, literally meaning memory. We compared mindfulness to the signs we see at railway stations: "Mind the gap." What the sign communicates is a reminder to remember the gap between the train and the platform—not some hours after we've finished the journey, but in the very act of stepping into or out of the train. The sign is asking us to remember the present. And this is mindfulness.

So how do we know we are mindful? If we're doing the practice, how do we know that mindfulness is developing? Mindfulness presents as the felt continuity of awareness over time. Mindfulness, you could say, is awareness extended through time. This has a very distinct flavor to it, which you're all familiar with—quite different from normal everyday awareness that jumps from one thing to another.

To get a sense of this mindfulness as memory, we gave the example of driving down familiar streets and suddenly realizing that we have no memory of the previous three blocks, even though we went through a set of traffic lights. If I'm in that situation and I ask myself, was I aware during those three blocks? I would answer yes, because if I was not aware, I'd be dead or seriously injured. But if I asked myself, was I mindful during those three blocks, the answer would definitely be no.

We see the same movement in the ordinary, everyday experience of distraction when we're meditating. I'm sitting, tracking my meditation object, when suddenly my mind slides into thinking. What is remarkable, when I notice it, is that I don't know that I've just made this slide. I'm thinking, but I don't know that I'm thinking. Then suddenly, I know I am thinking. I know I'm distracted.

So what happened when I slid off into the thinking? I forgot. I forgot my meditation object, or I forgot I was meditating. In that forgetting, I slid into habitual thinking without noticing. Then, sometime later, I realized I was thinking. What happened just then? I remembered. I remembered my meditation object, or I remembered I'm meditating.

Mindfulness training is training ourselves to remember this now, this present experience, by tracking experience continuously over time. When we look at this experience of distraction—which has a huge amount to teach us—we can ask: when I was lost in thought, was I aware of thinking? I'd say yes, because later, looking back, I can remember that I was thinking.

and perhaps even what I was thinking. However, at the time, while I was in the distraction, while I was aware, I was not aware of my awareness.

Then later, when I realize I'm distracted, when I remember the present, when I am mindful, I'm not just aware of my thinking—I am aware that I am aware of my thinking.

Notice the difference between these two situations, and what remains the same. In both of them, I am aware. But when I'm lost in distraction, I do not recognize my awareness. I am not aware that I am aware. I am not aware of awareness itself. Once I recognize that I am distracted, however, I am aware of what is happening in my distraction. I recognize my awareness. I am aware of awareness itself.

This awareness of awareness is an aspect of mindfulness. It's built into it. We could say that mindfulness always has this recursive quality. And we could sum this up by saying that when we are distracted, we forget our awareness; when we realize we are distracted, we remember our awareness. Mindfulness contains this awareness of awareness.

But how can we be aware of awareness itself? How does that work?

It works, perhaps, because awareness functions like a field. This field can be very wide or very narrow, but within it, we find a whole range of experience. We get a sense of this in ordinary, everyday meditation experience. Let's say I'm sitting, being aware of breathing. In the background, I can feel my body posture, I can hear sounds from outside, and I can sense thoughts drifting across my mind. All this time, I have a background sense that "I" am sitting here, practicing. This is a very ordinary experience, where a number of different things are happening, apparently simultaneously.

What we're recognizing here is a field of awareness in which we find a whole variety of physical and mental activity. This is how we can speak about awareness of awareness, or awareing awareness. Of course, language can be misleading. Saying "awareness of awareness" can be very misleading because it treats awareness as some kind of solid object. But is it? Or do we experience awareness as a field in which more than one event can be found?

We may also find layers or depths of awareness. Let's say breathing is my meditation object. I am aware. I am aware of breathing. I am aware of being aware of breathing. I am aware of awareness. These are, in a sense, different layers of awareness, and we find different flavors in the experience of awareness.

So this is awareness—both very obvious and very mysterious. According to Buddhist tradition, one very important thing we discover in our practice is that it is the nature of mind to aware. This is what it does, and it does it without asking our permission. It's just nature. The mind simply awares.

And again, notice the dyad. When mind awares, there is something that appears to it as what is awared. This is what we call the object of awareness.

When the Buddha speaks about this process, the phrase he uses is *nāma-rūpa,* sometimes translated as "name and form." We have, first of all, *nāma,* a Pali word cognate with our English word "name." What it refers to is the mind's reaching out to aware. And *rūpa* refers to what the mind reaches out to.

If we start with *nāma*, the Buddha gives a definition. He says: feeling, perception, choice, contact, and attention—this is called name, *nāma*. Here we have a list of psychological qualities, and what they all describe is our active engagement with the world.

So feeling tells us how we are feeling about and responding to an experience. Perception tells us the meaning of the experience. Choice gives us what to do about the experience, including the choice to be aware of it in the first place. Contact is the impact between the sense object and awareness itself—all three coming together to create the elemental level of experience. And attention is the directing of awareness towards its object.

So this is a very brief summary, but this is how the Buddha defines name, nāma. The key point to notice is how nāma is complex and active. It's the collective process of the mind reaching out to the world to encounter it and to make sense of it.

Now, when the mind reaches out to the world, what does it find? It finds rūpa, form. This term rūpa is another technical term, and it first appeared in the Upanishads, way before the Buddha, where it referred to the visible world—in other words, the material world that we can see. So rūpa is often translated as body.

Using it in that meaning, let's see how the Buddha defines rūpa. He says, "Why do you call it body? It is impacted. That's why it's called body." Now in English that doesn't make much sense, but in Pali it's basically: "Why do you say rūpa? Ruppati, therefore rūpa." It's a play on words. This is very common in the Indian tradition—they will define something by playing with the sounds.

So why do you call it body? It is impacted. That's why it's called body. What is it impacted by? It is impacted by cold, heat, hunger, and thirst. It is impacted by contact with snakes, wind, heat, mosquitoes, and gadflies. It is impacted. That's why it's called body. Ruppati, therefore rūpa.

The point here is that rūpa is something which is impacted, struck by something. And so when rūpa refers to the physical body, it's what is impacted by cold, heat, rain, mosquitoes, and so on.

Now, because rūpa originally in the Upanishads referred to the material world in the sense of what we can see, it could be translated as body, and in some contexts that's the best translation. But the Buddha extends this meaning to appearance—what appears in the visual field. So a Buddha statue, for example, is a Buddha rūpa. It's a solid object, so body in that sense. But mostly it's called rūpa because it's a visual representation of Buddha. It's a Buddha rūpa, a Buddha appearance—how a Buddha appears.

And then we get a further extension of the meaning of rūpa. It is appearance itself. Whatever appears to mind is rūpa.

What the Buddha is presenting here is a first-person model of experience—experience understood from inside the experiencing. We begin with awareness, the quality of presence, and as part of the experience of presence, we see that the mind moves towards something, its object, and impacts it, making it present, bringing it into appearance.

This is the intentionality of the mind, summed up in those five qualities that make up nāma: feeling, perception, choice, contact, attention. The basic point the Buddha is pointing out is that mind is active and it entangles itself in experience. Mind actively awares its object, and in so doing it understands it. It names it and establishes a relationship with it.

So rūpa, form, represents what is being aware, what mind impacts, what is being named. Rūpa is what appears when awareness impacts something. We have nāma-rūpa, and it could be translated as "named appearance."

When there is awareness, something appears. An object is present. And if there is something that appears, if there is an appearance, then there must be the activity of mind aware of it and naming it. So they always go together.

Now, you notice that what the Buddha is not presenting is a dyad of me here and the world that I'm living in, which is what we assume is happening. What he's presenting is reality. There's only mind and what mind awares. That's it.

We have been developing this perception during this retreat. For example, we've talked about how normally we are interested in what we experience, rather than the experiencing itself. In other words, in most situations, what we're interested in is the appearance, rupa, not the naming of it, nama. However, as the practice develops, we start to become interested in the activity of awaring itself, not just what we are aware of.

We practiced this in tracking the thought stream, if you think back to that first week. And what we find is that experience emerges as a relationship between awaring and the aware, experiencing and the experienced. These two always arise together, and they're always working together. Each depends on the other. And once we start to recognize this, it opens us to a new way of perceiving ourselves and our world.

In our normal everyday life, our assumption is that what we aware is more important than our awaring of it. The awaring itself fades into the background. Normally we don't even notice it. When we're caught up in thinking, for example, we assume that what we are thinking, the story we are telling ourselves, is what's important. It's certainly more important than the activity of thinking itself, which we don't even notice. We assume that thoughts are more important than thinking. And as a result, we miss what's going on.

Remember the story about the two fish? There are two little fish swimming in the ocean, and they're quite happy. It's a nice morning. But in the distance, they see this big, ugly, aggressive, mean fish coming towards them. There's a moment of panic. What do we do? Will we get out of here? No, it's too late. He's already seen us. If we run away, it will just really attract his attention. Just ignore him. So they keep swimming and the big ugly fish gets closer and closer. They're quite taken aback when, as he passes, the big fish says, "Morning boys, water's beautiful this morning, isn't it?" And off he goes. The two little fish move away, and when they feel completely safe, way out of earshot, one of the little fish turns to the other and says, "What the hell is water?"

This is the situation we're in most of the time. Think about air. We forget about air. We don't notice it, although without it we're dead. But we notice it when it disturbs us in some way, when it impacts us. Then we notice it. Like the Buddha's example of rupa as body, we notice it when it is impacted, or when it impacts us—cold, heat, and so on. Otherwise we forget it, because it's always here. We just forget about it. And this is what happens to awaring itself.

We just forget about it, because it's always here.

And the Buddha is saying that actually, when we pay attention, what we discover is that we live in a world made up entirely of the dyad of awareing and the aware—but we don't notice this. And in particular, what we fail to recognize is that in this partnership, the work is done by the aware-ing.

Imagine you're talking to a friend, and your friend suddenly looks away and says, "Look over there." How would we respond normally? The body would turn in that direction, the eyes turn in that direction, and you may even feel your awareness moving in that direction. This is an example of how mind moves. It's active, it's dynamic. The object that is aware is what mind bumps against.

We have the two opening verses of the *Dhammapada*, which are very famous—actually, famous partly because they are among the most misquoted texts of Buddhism. There's a whole website devoted to misinterpretations, misquotations, and just down-

right fantasies of what the Buddha said, and these two verses always get a mention. Both *Dhammapada* 1 and 2 begin with: *mind shapes experiences; mind is first; experiences are made by mind*. This brings up the activity of mind—that what's dominant in an experience is the minding, the awareing.

When we start to notice this, the role of awareing, we discover a world that consists of a partnership between awareing and the aware. And this world is new. This world is quite different from the world we're used to living in, where what matters to us is what is aware, along with the assumption that there's someone back here who is doing the awareing—and this, of course, is the self.

When awareness is habitual, conditioned heavily by the past, the world appears in the familiar ways that we take for granted as real, as normal. The world appears to be a solid, unmoving world that exists independently of us—a world that was waiting here before we became aware of it, and that remains unchanged after our awareness moves on to something else. In other words, not only are we habitually focused on the aware, but because of this we project all our sense of reality into the aware and lose touch with the awareing that brings it into presence in the first place.

In its extreme form, this results in materialism—the belief that only the world which is aware and can be measured is real, whereas awareing itself is not real.

But when we penetrate into the actual experience of awareing, the object that we aware changes. It's no longer the second-hand world of concept, characterized by a sense of the permanence of solid objects out there, independent of us. It's the first-hand world of direct experience. And what we find is that this world is being shaped, formed by our awareing. We discover a dynamic world which is continually being shaped by our participation through the quality of our awareing. Change the quality of the awareing, and the world itself changes.

So we live in a partnership, a dyad, of awareing and the aware, where mind is active while the aware is receptive. Mind is shaping our experience while the aware is being shaped. Mind is constructing our experience while the aware is being constructed.

As mindfulness develops, we experience a widening field of awareness that takes in both the whole process of awareing—what the Buddha calls *nāma*—and what is aware—what the Buddha calls *rūpa*. We could translate this as name and appearance, or simply named appearance. And of course, named appearance, *nāma-rūpa*, is held within a wider field of awareness.

When this becomes clear, it also becomes clear that both awareing and the aware are changing. They are beyond our control. They come and go according to conditions. In other words, we enter into the world of the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. And this is the world of insight.

Mahasi Sayadaw directs our attention toward this world by having us learn to recognize mind in its activity. Remember how earlier in the retreat we raised the question: how can we know mind, given that mind is not physical? We cannot see it, we cannot hear it, we cannot smell it, we cannot taste it, we cannot touch it. How can we know mind?

We know mind through its activity—what it does. And what it does is bring a world into presence. In other words, aware it.

Mahasi Sayadaw directs our attention to this process, beginning with what his English translators call "intention"—although it's a somewhat inadequate translation for what he's communicating. As we practice, the object of our awareness, our meditation object, becomes clear. And as this develops, what also becomes clear is the movement of awareness toward its object—the activity of awareing itself.

And this movement becomes part of our experience. So let's say breathing is the meditation object. What we realise we're working with is not simply breathing, but awareing breathing. The practitioner becomes interested in this movement of awareness, and we begin to discover that our object of awareness is not so much an object, but a dynamic and natural relationship.

But we begin by clarifying the object. And as our object of awareness becomes clearer, so too does the awareing, the knowing of it. The mind that is aware emerges along with the object of awareness. They manifest together as a dyad, a pair, a partnership. As mindfulness and concentration grow stronger, it may be that our awareness of awareing itself appears to be even more important than the object of awareness. We may become more interested in the experiencing rather than what we experience.

Mahasi Sayadaw speaks of this entry into seeing mind and its activity as noting intention. What he means by intention is twofold. The first is the choice to aware something—in other words, to direct awareness toward it. And secondly, the movement, the actual movement of awareness toward that something.

If we ask what is the source of each action of awareness, what is the source of what Mahasi Sayadaw calls noting, some people would say effort. But no, it isn't. It's choice or decision—the choice made now to aware this. Notice that we're not talking about effort. We're not trying to choose to aware. We are choosing to aware, or choosing to not

aware, as the case may be. It's like switching on the light of awareness. We either make the choice to switch it on, or we don't, because we're making another choice. But we're making a choice. Effort comes later; effort appears as the commitment to continue this choice over a period of time.

This choice sends awareness on its journey. And when we see this choice, when we feel this movement of awareness and recognize the object of awareness, the world we are aware of becomes less solid. It doesn't so much consist of things as relationships.

Let's say my meditation object is breathing. As mindfulness and concentration develop, the sense that I had in the beginning—that breathing is something in the world that has its own existence—this fades. Instead, what I recognize is a choice to aware and the different sensations that then appear within awareness when I make that choice, sensations that I could name "breathing." And of course, what also appears are all the events that accompany breathing. I'm beginning to recognize that my sense of reality is no longer as solid as I assumed it was. It's made up of awareing and what I aware, and these are dependent upon each other, and both of them are arising and ceasing with each moment.

Those of you who are familiar with the classical sixteen ñāṇas of Theravada Buddhism that describe the path of insight will recognize that what we're talking about now is the first ñāṇa: nāma-rūpa-pariccheda-ñāṇa, understanding the distinction between awareing and the aware. With this understanding, we have well and truly entered into the world of insight and understanding—vipassanā and ñāṇa.

As our experience of this world deepens, things may become radical because we become familiar with this relationship between awareing and the aware. It may be that at some point the penny drops: this is all there is. There's nothing other than this. I've always assumed there was someone behind it all who's watching this, and that someone is not part of this process. But when it clicks that there is only this process and nothing outside it, that's when the understanding becomes radical. This is the entry into the world of insight. And once we enter into this, everything else will naturally arise.

[END CONTEXT]

"Can we have some words, please, on delusion and its effect on awareness?"

Ah, what is the effect of delusion on awareness? This is a very good question. I'm not sure that I have an answer. What it does is it obscures awareness. People describe different things. Sometimes it's experienced as dullness, heaviness, absence of clarity, fogginess. Sometimes it has a quality of restlessness to it, agitation. Confusion.

Delusion is complex, so it manifests in different ways. Attraction and aversion are relatively straightforward—attraction is "I want," aversion is "I don't want." But delusion is more complex, so it has different flavors. Varieties of not knowing, from ignorance through to total misunderstanding, and from dullness through to restlessness and agitation. It covers the whole territory.

That's the very nature of delusion. When you're caught up in it, you don't know. Not only don't you know, but you don't know that you don't know. Everyone says that when you're greedy, you know it. When you're hateful, you know it. But somebody has to tell you you're being delusional. And they generally don't like it when you tell them. They tend to take it personally. So if I were you, I wouldn't tell them.

"I'm trying to look for a way out of being stuck in delusion."

The first thing I would suggest is keep it very simple. In the context of the meditation practice, keep it really, really, really simple. Go for something which is clear and obvious and just stay with it. Don't be tempted by all these glittering little things at the outskirts of awareness. Just stay with that. Otherwise you'll be lost—lost among the glitter.

Everybody's delusional except me. Yeah, well, actually, I think you're wrong. I think everyone's delusional except *me*. I don't know how you made that mistake. I think it's evidence of delusion.

"So in this model, there's awareness and then there's the object of awareness. How does it account for the awareness of the absence of something? This afternoon I was walking down the road and I was aware of the absence of the sound of a car, so then I knew it was safe to step into the road. If there's awareness of an object, how does it work when there's an absence of an object?"

In this case—I'm repeating this for the Zoom audience—you notice you're walking along the road and you notice the absence of the sound of a car. That absence is also an object of awareness. In other words, you've named it: "There's no sound of a car." So that is *rupa*, it's the appearance. Now it's much more subtle, because it's not a something, it's the absence of a something. Generally it's harder to notice an absence than it is to notice something which is present.

This is one of the reasons why the understanding of not-self can be so tricky, because not-self isn't a something that we notice—it's the recognition of an absence. We expected something to be there. So the sense that you have of the absence of a sound is itself an appearance. Again, "object" doesn't quite work as a word because it's too solid. But I think you could see it as the appearance.

"How about mind object?"

A mind object is the older translation of the Pali *dhamma*—in Sanskrit, *dharma*.

When you look at mind as a sense, and therefore it senses something which is the object, "mind-object" actually means the sense object corresponding to the mind. But it sounds like it's something solid bouncing around inside the mind. I find that expression doesn't quite fit. So I prefer to translate *dhamma* in this context as "phenomenon"—mind and phenomenon. This is what I've consistently used in the translations we've been going through throughout this month. A phenomenon is something which arises within experience and then, of course, ceases. To me, "mind-object" strikes me as some kind of mental billiard ball. It's never made any sense to me.

A question came from the group: "You talked about the analogy of light with awareness. Sometimes in meditation practice people experience lots of light. Is that simply because they're becoming very aware of awareness itself and nothing else?"

This definitely happens, and it's associated with concentration. For some people, when the mind becomes concentrated, the light becomes very strong. It's a light generated by mind. So it's not awareness itself—awareness would be the presence of the light, the fact that one recognizes, "Oh, there's light." At least this is the way I'm using the terms. I would say that light is a phenomenon, or mind-object, that appears within the mind. Sometimes people actually use that as a meditation object, but not in this approach.

There was a time when I used to teach regularly in Malaysia, and Malaysian meditators overall have very good concentration power. For a number of years it was astonishing how many people were seeing light—it was the fashion at the time. Once I noticed that one of the meditators, in this big hall where walking meditation was done at the back, was doing walking meditation wearing sunglasses. I asked her about it in the interview and she said, "Well, the light was so bright, I thought it might help if I put on sunglasses." I asked, "Did it?" She said, "No. It didn't work."

So it definitely happens. It's definitely an experience. But it's generally taken to indicate stronger samādhi, stronger concentration. And it doesn't happen to everybody.

Another question arose about being aware of the absence of things, because the Buddha talks about being aware of the mind being free of anger, free of grasping, free of delusion—whatever the hindrance or defilement might be. How does one note those sorts of things?

The meditator reflected that it requires continuously watching mental phenomena. Having been watching mental phenomena over time, they said, "I know for myself I started doing that at some stage years ago. And how did it work? I just don't know. It's simply an awareness that those hindrances weren't there."

Did it have a good effect? Is that why you did it?

"I don't know, but it was..." Yeah, that's where the Buddha talks about it.

So the discussion centers on how the Buddha sometimes talks about seeing the absence, for example, of a hindrance. Seeing when greed arises and seeing the absence of it when it doesn't arise. He moves between presence and absence, presence and absence. Seeing the absence of something is very much a part of the practice. But again, it tends to be more subtle. People tend to miss it, unless maybe reminded of it.

But it is an interesting thing to do. The exercise we did at the beginning of the retreat where we were watching for thought and where thought came from—the experience of watching for a thought and then no thought comes. That was a really clear example of noting the absence.

Here's another example. We had a thunderstorm recently, and a meditator was talking about how when she's tracking breathing, one of the things she hooks onto is the sound of the breath. But there was so much storm going on that she couldn't hear it. This created a whole new experience, which was somewhat discombobulating, it sounds like.

"Yeah, so I was trying to make the storm a meditation object."

So the storm became a meditation object. It was a very strange sort of loss—losing your anchor. The loss of that sound was the loss of an anchor.

I was reading something not too long ago about a room they had designed—I can't remember why—but they designed this room with no sound, absolutely no sound. And nobody's lasted more than 54 minutes in that room.

What happens to them? Some bizarre experiment. What happens after 54 minutes? Do they come hammering at the door to get out of there? I don't know about that part. That's all they said—that the total absence of any sound became unbearable.

Anyway, we're wandering onto the esoteric fields of scientific speculation. And I was thinking of putting a sign up above the meditation hall: "No Science!" Exclamation mark. But I restrained myself. Because Buddha says restraint is good.

Okay, it's getting late. How have you done?

CHAPTER 63

Sīla Part 2: Consequentialist Ethics

Patrick Kearney · 1h02

In this second talk on sīla (ethics), Patrick Kearney examines how the Buddha combined virtue ethics with consequentialist thinking through his understanding of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent arising). The Buddha classified himself as a teacher of action (kiriyavāda), emphasizing that our choices—not merely physical deeds—constitute kamma. Drawing from the Titthāyatanādi Sutta (AN 3.61), Patrick explains why the Buddha rejected three fatalistic views: that everything is caused by past actions, by God's will, or arises without cause.

Central to this teaching is understanding kamma as a non-linear system operating in the present rather than a predetermined fate from the past. Using the Loṇakapalla Sutta (AN 3.100), Patrick illustrates how the same action can ripen differently depending on one's ethical development—like a lump of salt in a small bowl versus the Ganges river. The story of Aṅgulimāla, the serial murderer who became an arahant, demonstrates the liberating implications: because kamma is not mechanical cosmic justice, transformation and awakening remain possible regardless of one's past.

Patrick emphasizes that kusala (wholesome/skillful) actions are both intrinsically good and lead to good results, connecting virtue ethics with consequences. The agricultural metaphors of vipāka (ripening) and bhāvanā (cultivation) remind us that practice unfolds within an infinitely complex, non-linear universe where the path itself is part of nature, offering genuine opportunity for human flourishing.

Tonight we're going to continue our series on sīla, ethics, and look at consequentialist ethics.

We've talked about how the Buddha's approach to ethics could be described as a form of virtue ethics, in the sense that the central project is to become a person whose life embodies certain virtues and therefore will live well and happily. At the center of any kind of program like this is training, so that we learn how we can move beyond our limitations to become the kind of person that we would aspire to become. The fundamental template for the training is the Eightfold Path. We talked about how it consists of eight interrelated virtues collected into three systems of training: sīla, samādhi, paññā.

We looked in particular at the link between sīla and samādhi, between ethics and meditation. For the Buddha, samādhi is grounded on sīla, because sīla promotes harmony. For the Buddha, ethics promotes harmony, both social and psychological. And this harmony is necessary for us if we want to deepen our samādhi, our meditation practice. As the samādhi develops, we find that psychological and social harmony becomes more natural to us. We find ourselves more naturally attracted to a harmonious way of life.

This link between sīla and samādhi, ethics and meditation, is causal. In other words, it's an instance of dependent arising, paṭicca samuppāda, which is the basic framework for the Buddhist teaching. So we have a relationship between sīla and samādhi, ethics and meditation, in which each conditions the other. When there's one, the other will be supported. When that one is supported, the first one will be supported.

When we start talking about dependent arising, that brings us to the second aspect of the Buddha's ethics as a form of consequentialism. This is an approach to ethics which looks at the consequences of an action. The moral rightness or wrongness of an action depends upon its consequences. If what I am doing results in good, then what I am doing is good. This is the basic principle. In the Western tradition, when taken to its extreme, this becomes utilitarianism.

What the Buddha does is combine these two approaches. He combines virtue ethics with a concern for consequences, and all this comes out of his understanding of dependent arising. The Buddha's basic project is to teach a way of life that leads toward human flourishing. If you're going to do anything like that, then an understanding of causality is built into the project. What is it that will condition the arising of the path? What will prevent the arising of the path? As practitioners, we need to distinguish between what moves us towards awakening and what takes us away from awakening. This is all about conditionality, causation, dependent arising.

For the Buddha, awakening—bodhi, or enlightenment—represents his ideal of an ultimate human flourishing. We may have other ideals of human flourishing, but the principle remains the same. How do we distinguish between what moves us towards that direction or what takes us away from that direction? This involves dependent arising.

One way the Buddha talked about this distinction was through the concepts of kusala and akusala, the wholesome and the unwholesome, the skillful and the unskillful. Kusala is what moves us toward awakening, while akusala, the opposite with the negative *a*, moves us away from awakening.

There's a famous verse in the Dhammapada, verse 183, that sums up the teaching of all Buddhas, not just our Buddha, but all of them. It says: "Not doing any wrong, cultivating the wholesome, purifying the heart—this is what Buddhas teach." Notice that Buddha is in the plural. Buddhas teach this. For the Buddha, this is really fundamental.

Let's look at this wholesome and unwholesome, kusala and akusala business. We start with the word kusala, which I think we've mentioned before, but it has a cluster of meanings. In its wider sense, kusala indicates health. It's interesting to look at what this implies. If we ask the question, is health a good thing? We'd probably answer yes it is. If you meet a friend and your friend says, "How are you?" and you say, "I'm going great, I'm in perfect good health," would you be puzzled if your friend frowned and said, "So what's so good about that? What's the point of that?" It would be a bit of a puzzle, because it's obvious that health is good. We don't have to justify why health is good. It's just obvious that it's good. In other words, health is intrinsically good.

It is good within itself. It needs no justification beyond itself. So this is kusala, translated as wholesome—that which is good within itself, that which is intrinsically good, that needs no justification.

Now, if you're talking about health, health also has an instrumental value. In other words, if I'm healthy, then I can do things which otherwise I could not. I can accomplish things I otherwise could not accomplish—which is something you discover when you get aged and decrepit. You young people don't know yet. I've come to realize that there's only one thing wrong with young people: they're young. But apart from that, they're okay.

So this brings us to the second meaning of kusala, which is skillful. Here, the word kusala—or kushala in Sanskrit—is associated with kusha grass. This is a particular species of grass in northern India, and it has sharp edges. It apparently has strong pranic power because traditionally it's woven into seats used by yogis for meditation purposes, including the Buddha. Sometimes you have a reference to the Buddha sitting on kusha grass. This grass has healing properties, a very strong pranic energy field, and so it's associated with yogis. But kusha means sharp, because the edges of this grass are sharp. These sharp edges make it difficult to handle, so it takes skill to handle it, to weave it into useful products. It takes expertise to create useful products from it. So kusala therefore indicates skill. Now, it could be a mundane skill, such as the skill of a good craftsman, or it could be a dharma skill, like the skill of a good meditator.

So kusala has two aspects. That which is kusala is good within itself, and it leads to a good result. The first aspect—good within itself—points towards the virtues. The second aspect—leads to a good result—takes us to the Buddha's teaching of karma, action and its ripening.

So here we come to the second aspect of the Buddha's understanding of sila: we focus on the results of an action, its consequences. When kusala is translated with an emphasis on its consequences, it's usually rendered as skillful. So you have wholesome and unwholesome, skillful and unskillful, and it depends on which aspect of kusala you're emphasizing in the translation.

Let's look at action and its ripening. This is karma vipaka. We'll go back to how the Buddha framed the fundamental ethical question: How shall I live? He asks: What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? What is praiseworthy? What is blameable? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? Having done it, what will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term?

Notice this emphasis on the long-term results of one's actions. What brings me harm and suffering over the long term? What brings me welfare and happiness over the long term? In other words, what are the long-term consequences of my actions? This brings us to the teaching of karma.

The word karma is originally Sanskrit, but it's become English because English borrows words. In Pali, it's kamma, and it simply means action—just action. For the Buddha, karma is very important. He lived in this complex multicultural society where there was no established orthodoxy, but the different schools of thought and practice were battling each other for market share. The Buddha looked at the teaching scene and made different classifications of the kinds of teachers that were around.

He saw some teachers as teachers of action—they taught kriyāvāda. And others were teachers of inaction, akriyāvāda. He classified himself as a teacher of action. In other words, actions have real consequences, so we need to pay attention to them. In contrast, those who taught akriyāvāda did not teach the importance of the consequences of action. He described these as teachers of non-action, and he wasn't being complimentary. In fact, he had absolutely no respect for these characters. He thought they were leading people astray.

So the teaching of karma focuses on the results of actions. The concept begins in the Vedas, where karma referred to the physical actions performed in rituals, especially the ritual of sacrifice. Sacrifices were held to be powerfully effective in bringing good for-

tune to the people who sponsored them—in other words, paid for them. They were powerfully effective. You could even, if the sacrifice was powerful enough, bend the gods to your will. But you could only do this if the actions of the rituals were performed correctly, in exact accordance with the texts. Hence the importance of the specialist Brahmins who ran the sacrifices and were paid to perform the rituals, and hence the importance that the action be correct. Otherwise you don't get the result. So this is in the Vedas.

Later on, karma was taken to refer to moral action—action that has a moral effect. Among those who taught this were the Jains, who were competitors of the Buddha. They extended this idea to moral actions, but again, like in the Vedas, for them the actions were physical actions, actions of the body. The Buddha took this and then changed it by focusing not on the physical action, but the state of mind that stimulates the action and is in turn shaped by the action. This is how he expressed it: "I declare that choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing."

This is the Buddha's particular spin on the teachings of karma. When he says "I declare," this is an emphatic statement. He's saying, this is important, pay attention. "I declare that choice"—this is cetanā, often translated as intention—"choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing." So for the Buddha, it's the choices that shape our lives that constitute karma. We are always making choices, and these choices create ourselves and the life that we lead.

If we ask how this links up with virtue ethics, well, we become a particular kind of person because we are shaped by the choices we make. If we choose to do things that develop a particular virtue, we become a person who has that virtue. If we choose to do things that develop a particular vice, we become a person who embodies that vice. For example, if we practice generosity, we become a generous person. If we practice stinginess, we become a stingy person. We're always faced with a choice: What kind of actions will I do? Will I perform actions that lead to becoming a virtuous person, actions that lead me along the path? Or will I perform actions that lead to becoming a person lacking in the virtues, which takes me in the opposite direction of human flourishing? This is the Buddha's emphasis on the centrality of choice. This is what he's really getting at when he talks about karma.

Now, one of the things about understanding what he's talking about with karma is that karma-vipāka—action and its ripening—is not a system of rewards and punishments, although often when people talk about it, that's the way they present it. It's a law of nature, like the law of gravity. We're not talking about rules, and we're not talking about someone upstairs who's enforcing those rules. None of this has anything to do

with what the Buddha is talking about. We're talking about how nature works. Let's say, for example, I fall down the staircase and injure myself. I don't look up and think that the staircase has punished me, or that the Buddha has punished me. It's just nature—if one falls down the staircase, one is likely to be injured. It's simply the way nature works.

And in the same way, if I suffer painful consequences because of a particular action, this does not mean I am being punished. And if I enjoy pleasant consequences because of the nature of an action I've done, this does not mean I am being rewarded. It's simply nature—certain kinds of actions lead to pleasant results, and certain kinds of actions lead to painful results. It's just the way nature works.

Kamma vipaka, action and its ripening, is a teaching of causality in the natural world. It has nothing to do with any kind of supernatural interventions.

There have always been different ways of looking at kamma and understanding it. From the Buddha's perspective, some of these are misunderstandings. A major misunderstanding, which you find throughout Buddhist Asia, is to see kamma as some kind of fatalism. This understanding is quite common, and yet it was specifically rejected by the Buddha in the Titthayatana Sutta, the discourse on "Outsider Teachings," in Anguttara Nikaya 3.61.

This sutta is very interesting, because here the Buddha lists three views held by teachers in other traditions—outsiders—that deal with the question of what creates the conditions of our lives. The three views he rejected outright were: first, whatever we experience is caused by what we did in the past; second, whatever we experience is caused by the will of God; and third, whatever we experience has no cause but arises spontaneously.

His basic reason for rejecting these views was that if we actually believe—genuinely believe—in any one of them, we would have no motivation to cultivate an ethical life. Why would we bother if everything has already been decided? If we can do nothing to change our situation? If everything comes about through no cause at all, what's the point of doing anything? If everything is determined by the past, I cannot relive my past. If everything is the will of God, I have little chance of getting him to change his mind, so I may as well give up.

Notice that he doesn't reject these views because they are factually wrong. He rejects them because of their consequences—and again, he's interested in cause and effect, in consequences. Our views are important because they have real consequences for the way we live. The Buddha is concerned with the actual truth of a teaching, but he is

more focused on the results that come from holding onto that teaching. What we believe is happening necessarily affects the way we live, and this is why the Buddha places right view, sammā diṭṭhi, at the beginning of the path. Here, right view is right because of its consequences. Right view moves us along the path; wrong view takes us in a different direction.

Now let's look at this misunderstanding more closely. The tendency to read the teaching of action and its ripening as some form of fatalism is based in part on whether we see the relationship between action and its result as indicating a linear process or a non-linear process. This is what we need to examine now. "Linear" can refer to time, or it can refer to input and output. In regard to time, linear means operating over time, while non-linear means operating now, in the present.

In regard to input-output, linear means that the output—the result of an action—is proportional to the input, the cause. A small cause brings about a small result; a big cause brings about a big result. Whereas nonlinear means a small cause can bring about a big result, and vice versa, a big cause can bring about a small result.

Let's look first at linear and nonlinear in terms of time—this is where we get into that aspect concerning the past. If we look at karma as linear over time, it's based on a sense of the centrality of the past. We define ourselves in terms of our past. When we do that, karma becomes fate. It robs us of choice, because the past is already decided. We tell ourselves that we get what we deserve and that we cannot do any better, because we're looking back to the past, defining ourselves in terms of our history. There's nothing we can do about that.

This is one reason why remorse or regret can be so destructive—when we use it to construct an identity. For example, I might construct an identity of myself as an unworthy person or an immoral person for whom there is no hope of redemption, because the future is already decided. It will be the same as the past. This is what happens when karma is seen as linear over time.

But if karma is seen as nonlinear over time, it's based on the centrality of the present. In a linear system, what's central is the past. But when it's nonlinear, what is central is the present—now. When we define ourselves in terms of our present, karma becomes choice. The focus is on possibilities arising now, and it tells us about our opportunities to shape our present and therefore to shape our future along certain lines.

This is the Buddhist approach to karma. This understanding emphasizes the openness of the future. If we're focused on the past, the future is closed because it's already been decided. But if we're focused on the present, the future is open, because we're in the process of deciding it now. It emphasizes the possibility of change and transformation.

This, I think, is a central principle of the Buddha's understanding of karma-vipāka—action and its result—that many people don't grasp: it represents a teaching of opportunity. There is something we can do to improve our situation. There is always something we can do to improve our situation. This is why the Buddha rejects the idea that everything that happens occurs as a result of the past, because then we're trapped in the past.

Now we come to linear and nonlinear in terms of input-output. Here the Buddha uses the simile of a lump of salt to explain it. This comes from a very interesting discourse: Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of the Threes, number 100—the Loṇa-kapalla Sutta, "A Lump of Salt."

The Buddha explains that if we drop a lump of salt into a small bowl of water, the water would become salty—all of the water would become salty and even undrinkable. If we drop the same lump of salt into the river Ganges, the water will be unaffected.

The Buddha says that in the same way, one whose ethics is poor, whose heart—citta—is narrow and limited, and whose wisdom is undeveloped, may do a comparatively minor bad action, and this leads him to hell. While one whose ethics are good, whose citta is wide, and whose wisdom is developed, may do exactly the same action, and the ripening is experienced as a mere inconvenience—a temporary inconvenience in this life. Completely different results.

The principle here is that the results of action do not come about automatically, and they do not come about because of some predetermined cosmic code. It's not that if we murder someone, we will be murdered in our next life. It's not that if we steal in this life, we will be poor in the next life—although in Asia, karma is frequently taught like this. I recently visited Vietnam, and we'd go to visit some famous pagodas and temples.

And in the courtyard, they very often have these enormous charts that show illustrations of what happens if you do this deed or that deed. And it's exactly in that order: if you do this, that will happen. That's it. Full stop. So don't do this. I suppose it's a convenient way to teach basic morality, but it's not what the Buddha taught.

What the Buddha is saying is that there will be a result of our actions, but the degree to which we are affected by these results will depend in part on how developed we are as human beings and how we practice in the future. And we can see here how the Buddha's consequentialist ethics intersects with his virtue ethics. What kind of person we become affects how an action ripens within us. One who is narrow and limited in their heart may be greatly affected by even a comparatively small action. Or one who is wide and deep in their heart may be affected by a larger action to such a small extent that it's barely noticeable. When we become a highly developed person, we may be relatively—and I emphasize relatively—immune to the effects of unwholesome and unskillful actions. However, these actions will have their effect. They will have some effect.

This teaching is emphasized by the Buddha giving the example of the results of theft. He points out that one person steals a certain amount of money and is grabbed by the law, tried, and imprisoned as punishment. Someone else steals exactly the same amount of money and is not grabbed by the police, not tried, and not punished. The Buddha asks, what's the difference between these two people? And he says the difference is very simple. The person who is punished is one who is poor. The person who gets away with it is one who is rich.

I really like this example. The starkness of the social realism is quite striking—oh wow, this is not very spiritual. But of course, it's real. So here we have the ripening of action, and you notice it's got nothing at all to do with justice. It's got everything to do with one's social position and influence. A person with social status and influence can get away with a crime, while a person without them cannot. And again, this is karma being presented as simply nature. This is the way the world works. There's one law for the rich and there's another law for the poor. It was true in the Buddha's time. It's true in our time. It's just the way it is.

So the Buddha is suggesting that action and its ripening is not a principle of cosmic justice. It's just the natural workings of cause and effect. Now this can sound disappointing, because we would like to think there's some kind of principle of cosmic justice, and the bad guys will get it in the end. But the Buddha points out in this discourse that it's because the working of action and its ripening is not mechanical, because they do not represent some inexorable law of cosmic justice—it's because of this that liberation is possible. From his perspective, if we had to go through the consequences of our actions without any hope of reprieve, then the process of samsara would never end. Because the universe is so complex and so non-linear, it's because of this that we can learn to ride the conditions, the complexity of the conditions, for our benefit and for the benefit of others. And this is the liberating power of the path.

This teaching is partly based on the Buddha's sense of the time span that he's working with. Decades ago, at Sydney University, there was a very senior European Jesuit—I think he was Belgian—who lived in Japan. He was an expert on Japanese Buddhism, particularly Pure Land Buddhism. He came to Sydney University and gave a public talk. All the Zen people came because the teacher of the Sydney Zen group at the time was Robert Aitken, actually. Robert Aitken Roshi got entangled with Zen when he was a civilian internee in Japan during World War II. Before the war broke out, he was working in Guam for a mining company. The Japanese came, and because he was a civilian, he wasn't a prisoner of war, but he was shipped off to Japan to an internment camp where all the enemy alien civilians were interned. This place was a seaman's mission. Apparently it had a good library, so he spent the war in the library. This is where he got interested in Zen. And one of the people in this camp was this then young man

Jesuit missionary. We knew about this because Robert Aitken had an interesting discussion with him. I should tell you this, shouldn't I? Because it's part of the story.

Robert Aitken was wrestling with the problem of the historical genuineness of the Buddha. Did the Buddha really exist? Was he really alive? Or is it just a story? And he was discussing this with a young Jesuit priest. He asked him, "If it could be conclusively proved that Jesus Christ never existed, how would this affect your faith?" That was the question he threw at this Jesuit. And the Jesuit said, "It would destroy my faith."

It's decades later that Robert Aitken Roshi is telling us this story. And he says, "Even though I was a young man and didn't know anything, I knew this was the wrong answer. I didn't know what the right answer was, but I knew it was the wrong answer." And then he paused and he said to us, "Even if it could be conclusively proved that the Buddha never existed, it would make no difference whatsoever to the truth of Buddhism."

And I think he's right. Again, it just works. It's nature.

Anyway, this particular Jesuit, now an old man, was giving a talk in Sydney, so we all went along. He gave a kind of standard academic talk about Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, and then there were questions. One of the questions that popped up was, "You've spent decades studying Buddhism in Japan, and you're a Jesuit priest. What is the basic difference between Christianity and Buddhism?"

Without hesitating, the Jesuit priest said, "If you're a Christian and you die, you might go to heaven. If you're a Buddhist and you die, you will go to hell."

There was exactly that response in the room—a combination of horror and nervous laughter. He waited for it to end, and he said, "Because in Christianity, you've only got two lives. You've got this life and the next one. And you've got heaven or hell. So you may go to heaven. But in the Buddhist world, you have life after life after life after life. In the Buddhist world, you've already been to hell many times. You've been to heaven many times. And afterwards, you will go to hell many times. And you will go to heaven many times—until you're enlightened."

Of course he's absolutely spot on. I don't know why I told you this. That's right—this is the time span.

So from the Buddhist perspective, we don't just drag with us the accumulated bad karma of everything we've done since conception. It's lifetime after lifetime. We're never going to work our way through that. Think emptying the Pacific Ocean with a bucket. Good luck with that.

It's because karma is a non-linear system that we can cut through and short-circuit all of this process. That's what makes liberation possible from the Buddha's perspective. And hence the liberating power of the path, puñña—it allows us to short-circuit saṃsāra.

So again, karma is the law of nature, but nature is immensely, infinitely complex and non-linear. One famous example in the tradition is that of the serial murderer Aṅgulimāla. He was on this crazy, apparently spiritual path where he had to complete a thousand murders and then he'd be—whatever, enlightened or whatever. He had managed to chalk up 999 murders, and for his thousandth victim, he zeroed in on the Buddha.

Now, he was converted by the Buddha, so he stopped being a serial murderer and in fact became a bhikkhu. If he had to go through the results of those 999 murders just in this life, much less what he got up to in previous lives, then his awakening, if it happened at all, could only be after an immensely long period of cosmic suffering. However, somehow, through the infinite complexity of causes and conditions operating through dependent arising, he was face-to-face with the Buddha as his thousandth victim, and somehow he had an affinity.

And at that moment, when he encountered the Buddha, his heart was open enough that instead of adding another murder to his list, he converted and became a Buddhist monk. He did the practice, and he became an Arahant, fully awakened, in this very life.

Now, he still had to suffer the ripening of his deeds in this life. Basically, he would go out on alms round, and every time he entered the village, the village people would attack him and beat him mercilessly. Because they knew who he was, and he would crawl away and bandage up his wounds and maybe get some food from somewhere. And the next day, he'd be back there because he was receiving the results of his actions. What he was going through was minor compared to the pain that he had inflicted on the people of this area.

Anyway, Angulimala becomes a Bhikkhu, and the Buddha takes him under his wing. They proceed to Savatthi, which would have been better for Angulimala because nobody actually knew him there. The Buddha is camped out, and he's visited by King Pasenadi, the king of Kosala, who is his personal student. Behind the king, there's this big troop of armed and fierce-looking individuals.

The Buddha says, "So, what's happening? What's going on?"

King Pasenadi explains that there's this crazed serial killer, Angulimala, just rampaging across the country. He's received all these complaints. He's called out the military, and he's going out there to find him and punish him for his crimes.

The Buddha said, "So how would you respond if, let's say, this crazed serial killer had in fact stopped being a serial killer and had ordained and was now practicing the path as well as any other venerable one? How would you respond to that?"

Pasenadi was taken aback. "That's impossible. That is ridiculous. But I tell you what, if it happened, I would bow at his feet and become his disciple."

The Buddha says, "Really? Your Majesty, meet the Venerable Angulimala. Venerable Angulimala, meet the king."

And Pasenadi was as good as his word. He bowed at Angulimala's feet and became his disciple. And of course, the expedition was abandoned.

This story illustrates the power of Dharma and the malleability of karma. It's part of nature, but so is awakening—part of nature. It's not a supernatural intervention. The path is part of nature. It's not a supernatural intervention.

This attitude, by the way, extends further. A good example is in Burma. The first prime minister of Burma was U Nu. He was a devout Buddhist and a personal student of Mahasi Sayadaw. The early government passed a law. First of all, they had a teaching meditation in prisons program. And they passed a law saying that if a prisoner was certified by a reputable teacher as having attained the first stage of awakening, that pris-

oner was immediately released, no questions asked, regardless of what crimes they had committed. The reason was, if someone's attained the first stage, then they will lead an ethical life and they're no longer any kind of danger to society. So why are we keeping them in prison? As far as I know, that law is still on the books. It gives a certain edge to teaching meditation in prisons.

Now you notice that from the Angulimala story, what radiates from it is a sense of optimism. Anything is possible if we set out along the path in the right direction towards awakening. In other words, I think the lesson is: do not underestimate the power of the Dharma.

Finally, notice how the Buddha speaks about the results of action. He uses the term vipaka, which literally means ripening. So often kamma vipaka is translated as action and its result, which is technically true, but it misses out the feel of the literal translation—ripening. Vipaka, ripening, is an agricultural term. In other words, the Buddha is saying our actions gradually ripen like fruit. But for fruit to ripen, they need a variety of conditions: good seed, the right soil, the right temperature, the right amount of water, suitable care, and so on. It's not a question of planting a seed and the fruit jumping up and hitting us in the head. And so, in the same way, action and its ripening

points to the fact that this process takes place within an infinitely complex context of dependent arising—an infinitely complex, fundamentally non-linear universe of constant swirling and movement. And out of that emerges the results of action.

Similarly, we have the term *bhavana*. This is the term that gets translated as meditation, and *bhavana* is another agricultural term meaning cultivation. So what we're doing here is cultivating. We're cultivating ourselves, and we are gradually ripening as a result of that cultivation. When the conditions are right, there will be a crop. It's just nature.

This is the Buddha's essentially optimistic teaching: if we cultivate the wholesome through the choices we make in the present, we're going to get a good result. And that good result is going to be a flourishing way of life—one that expresses *sila*, ethics.

Question: It seems like in the current day and age, the pace of awakening has slowed down compared to these stories. You give someone a teaching, and the student fails to awaken. Teachers in the twentieth century were bringing students to the first stage of awakening, so what's happening?

The traditional answer would be the decay of the Dharma since the time of the Buddha. Basically, Buddhism has been downhill ever since the Buddha died—in fact, even before the Buddha died. There's one discourse in which Ananda approaches the Buddha and says, "When we started this whole business off, the monks and nuns had very few rules and lots of enlightened people. Now that we've developed this enterprise for so many decades, we've got lots of rules and much fewer enlightened people. So what's going on?" And the Buddha said, "That's the way it is."

So according to the traditional view, the Dharma is decaying from its high point in the lifetime of the Buddha, then gradually crumbling. Our capacity to access it and practice it—the conditions are such. But that's the traditional answer.

I think basically the answer is we don't know. We have these stories about all these people getting enlightened as soon as the Buddha opens his mouth. Is it true? Is it not true? Are these exaggerated fairy tales? We don't know.

Question: But there would be some information from the twentieth century that's available, confirming how many people awaken Mahasi style.

Oh yes, that's available. They keep records. And I can imagine it's still slower than what it used to be in the twentieth century. Do you know that?

Not that I know of.

Do you know any statistics?

No. They keep them secret. They do keep lists—a record of students and how far they get, especially for people who have finished the course, quote-unquote. But I don't know how many there are. They do that because it's important to them, but at the same time, they're very cagey about saying anything publicly.

One of the general traditional principles is that if you think or know you've attained some level of awakening, you never tell anybody about it. And the reason, as explained by a senior Korean nun, is if you make—

any claim to enlightenment, you will spend the rest of your life defending it. You're just buying trouble. So keep your mouth shut—it's the safest thing to do.

People are very reticent to talk about it. And sometimes when people do talk about it, it's self-promotion. "Come to me. I'm an Arahant and I can teach you how to become an Arahant. And this week we've got a discount." I find it very, very dodgy when people make claims. But if you get to know people—again, it's the principle of association with

good people, with authentic people—you get to know them and you recognize there's something happening there which is not usual. There's something you would like to share.

But as for the stories about the Buddha himself, who knows? Historically, you can't say. All we know historically is that his movement was very successful. It was successfully exported. It flourished and didn't die out. Most of the other schools from that era either died out or morphed into something completely different, and they're quite small. Whereas Buddhism became probably the world's first world religion. So there was something about it that was very dynamic and very successful over a period of generations.

I go on and on about what the Buddha did—obnoxiously so. And invariably, someone will ask me, "Are you awake?" And I say to them, if you say it as a noun, no. If you say it as a verb, yes. That's a good way to slide around the question.

Someone asked about the difference between serving our heart and Buddhahood. Theologically, philosophically, there's a difference. But I think in practical terms, there wouldn't be much of a difference. Except, well, in the traditional sense—the Buddha wasn't just an Arahant. He was an Arahant, but he was also a Sammasambuddha. What that meant was, first of all, he figured out the way for himself. He didn't have someone who taught him the way to Arahantship. Eventually, he figured it out by himself. And secondly, he had the package of talents which enabled him to found a Buddhism. He was a brilliant organizer, a brilliant politician, a brilliant lawyer, a brilliant teacher. And he managed to set up this organization that even in his own lifetime spread across the Ganges Valley, and was so well organized and structured that it survived for centuries and was successfully exported to other parts of the world.

So a Sammasambuddha is not just awakened, but they have that package of talents. Because you can have someone who's awakened, but they're not very good at teaching or explaining or whatever. They're just awake. "Work harder."

Someone raised a question about precepts—lay people have these five precepts, these trainings. Monastics have more: men have 227 and women have 311. So if the odds of being enlightened as a lay person are the same as for a monastic, why would anyone become a monastic?

Oh no, people become monastics because they like the life. Is it also more advantageous for awakening? It can be. It depends on how you treat it. Some people become monastics and kind of go to sleep. I mean, it's a comfortable life. If you basically just don't have sex and behave yourself, you're looked after, you're respected, you're bowed to.

You have a job teaching the Dharma—not necessarily particularly arduous. You've got a lot of time to yourself, for your spiritual development or whatever. You can hide away. You're looked after. You never go hungry. You never have to face rental increases that you can't manage. You never face that kind of problem. No rat race. You go up the ladder by seniority.

But the good monks—if you meet good monks or good nuns, ones that really strike you as genuinely good—

They're good at this. One thing they all have in common is they enjoy being a monk or a nun. They really like the lifestyle. They find a freedom in it that most lay people don't have because they've got to scramble for a living. So you can take those conditions and use it as a launching pad for awakening. Or you could take those conditions and use it as a launching pad to go into sleep. Or anything in between. There's no magic in it.

A student speaks about the teaching being sustaining and applicable.

So you feel optimistic? The diamond's on the way up. Good. We may not get as many full-blown enlightened people walking around, but that's alright. I don't know how many there are anyway.

But yes, I mean, this is the traditional view that it's all crumbling away. And it's one of the motivations. Mahasi Sayadaw and the people around him felt, let's get it out there as quickly as possible. But you know, the Dharma is flourishing in certain parts of the world where it hadn't flourished before, and it's having a significant cultural impact. We don't know how it's going to develop. Basically, we're inventing Western Buddhism. We don't know how it's going to look.

If you compare the movement of the Dharma from Asia to the West, the cultural journey, the cultural distance they had to travel, is pretty much the same as when it moved from India to China. We tend to think, oh yes, India, China, just Asians, they're all the same. No. There's a huge cultural gap between them. And in China, it took about three centuries for the record keepers, the Confucian scholars, to even notice that there was this thing you could call Buddhism, which wasn't Taoism. They just thought it was an offshoot of Taoism. It took several centuries for enough genuine Chinese Buddhism to start to emerge. And we're just beginning. So who knows what it's going to look like in a century or two centuries or three centuries.

A student asks what the West will bring to Buddhism.

I don't know. For me, it's too soon. There's psychology, but that could be dangerous.

The student clarifies: psychology.

Yes, the West is bringing psychology to it. But that's a big danger because psychology is in the world of concept. So far, anyway. So that has good things about it, but there are also disadvantages.

There's an organisation in Sydney, ABCAP. It could be that Buddhism influences psychology. There's a big dialogue between them and lots of getting together. They're not necessarily going down the same road.

Sam Hill is a psychologist. So you don't think my suggestion about simply banning psychologists from my retreats is a good idea?

There are all sorts of interesting dynamics here. What I think is really significant for Western culture is this: Buddhism has what you could call a technology of meditation, or contemplative practice—a methodology, a way you can actually go about doing it. The West has never had that, partly because what's been dominant has been the Christian church, and they've either suppressed this because it's a threat to the bureaucracy, or simply not been interested in it.

But now this understanding—the skill with which you can work directly with the mind, which we call meditation—is starting to filter out into Western culture. And this is revolutionary. It's never happened before. The influence on contemporary psychology is huge. It's just coming out everywhere, and it's not always packaged as Buddhist. It's in every corner of the culture, in all sorts of forms.

I think as the influence of the Dharma spreads out, it necessarily becomes shallow. If you want depth, you're going to have a few people. And this has always been the case. If you look at traditional Buddhist societies where everybody is a Buddhist, well, for most people, being a Buddhist means you go to the temple every now and again and you chant to the Buddha, you ask him to help you with this or that, and you toss some offerings to the venerables. Shallow. But you get a few people who really go into it. It's always been the case, and I suspect it will continue to be the case.

So shallow is good, because shallow is wide. It touches so many people, and some of those people are touched by it and think, "I want this fully." And they'll go deep.

There's an optimism in other schools about this—a confidence that the essential teachings are going to manifest and merge with whatever expressions of society as it moves through time. I think there's a movement in Tibetan Buddhism now where

they're trying to preserve and transmit the teachings because of that awareness. In China it's similar—a more traditional view. But of course, we gloomy old Theravādans—what can you expect?

Someone asked about the role of volunteers and financial support. Well, it certainly has an effect. In this country, a major barrier to more retreats isn't the lack of teachers—it's the lack of managers and material support. The main bottleneck for having more retreats in this country isn't teachers; it's retreat centers.

This place, for example—it runs, it has survived. One of the management committee was saying in a discussion some time ago that the greatest achievement this center has had is that it has survived. It's still here. And that's amazing.

Count up the number of volunteers who have come through this place to keep it running. Even the managers are volunteers. Everybody's a volunteer. Gabriel has an office job up there, part-time—she's the only paid person. Everyone else is a volunteer. And it's a very big job. Some people say it's bigger than teaching. All volunteers. All of them keeping this place running.

Someone mentioned they'd thought about offering to help but live in Victoria. You'd need people who live locally, I assume. I'm at Coffs Harbour myself—so I have no excuse.

As for whether raising the prices of courses would reduce attendance—yes, there would be yogis who couldn't afford to come. It turns it into a middle-class luxury.

Well, look, something's got to move. It's moving—yes, it's happening. But the first thing that goes is maintenance on a facility like this, and then sometime in the future it just comes and bites you. The building's still here, it hasn't collapsed—don't be such a gloomy old pessimist! But not everybody has five hundred dollars extra. It doesn't have to be straight across the board though; it can be scaled.

I have actually thought of putting a meter at the door of the interview room—tap as you come in and as you go out, if you like.

Just before I left, I checked Spirit Rock to see what was happening. They had a thirty-day retreat: eleven thousand dollars at the benefactor rate, and the standard rate is just over six thousand. But how that translates for me is that I can fly here at the comfort rate, pay for the course, and still come out ahead—and have a nice time. So perhaps we should be advertising in the United States.

That's very good to have in mind. As soon as we finish this talk, I can explain what's going to happen tomorrow. So let's finish it.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 64

The Awareness Game (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 43 min

In this practice-focused session, Patrick Kearney introduces 'the awareness game'—a playful approach to understanding viññāṇa (awareness/consciousness) that strips away the heaviness often associated with meditation. Drawing on the Buddha's own definition from the Pāli Canon—'Why do we say viññāṇa? We aware. That's why we say viññāṇa'—Kearney emphasizes that awareness is not something we create through effort but rather something already happening as part of nature, classified by the Buddha as a dhātu (element).

The teaching explores awareness through the metaphor of light: just as we don't see light itself but rather the world illuminated by light, awareness is known through the presence of whatever is present. Kearney guides participants through two exercises—first simply noting 'aware,' then identifying which of the six senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding) is predominant. This reflects Mahāsī Sayādaw's definition of insight meditation: directly aware-ing whatever is predominant in any of the six senses now.

The session addresses why meditation feels difficult despite awareness being natural: our habit of forgetting awareness, and our tendency to struggle against 'distractions.' The cure, Kearney suggests, is sati (mindfulness)—not as effortful concentration but as the practice of remembering awareness. Recalling the Buddha's own breakthrough moment when he spontaneously remembered childhood awareness, Kearney encourages practitioners to approach meditation with childlike curiosity rather than adult work-ethic heaviness. The key instruction: 'Do not try and do not meditate—just play.'

This morning we're going to start off by playing a game—the awareness game—because meditation practice is all about awareness and our relationship with awareness.

We'll begin by defining our terms, what we mean by awareness. In Pali the term is *vijñāna*. Often, usually, you see it translated as consciousness. I prefer translating it as awareness because the English word consciousness has all sorts of philosophical uses and connotations which just get in the way of trying to work out what the Buddha is talking about. Awareness is a much more ordinary, everyday word, so I prefer that.

So from the Buddha's perspective, what is awareness? When we get down to its elemental essence, awareness is the presence of whatever is present.

For example, right now, are you seeing? Is anybody in this room seeing? So what does it mean to see? What's the experience? Doesn't it mean that this room and the people and things in this room are present to you?

Now, there is a magic trick where you can make them go away. I'll demonstrate it. Try doing that. As the room and the people in the room disappear, they are absent. You open your eyes, they are present. You close your eyes, they are absent. Now as adults you feel like a complete idiot doing this. Do you remember when you were a child and you discovered that? You discovered you could make the entire world go away—admittedly, only for a relatively short period of time. This is when we first played around with awareness.

So awareness is presence. And we can say that awareness is like light. In English we have the expression, "he saw the light." But do we in fact see light? What we see is the world. But we see the world because there is light. So is there light here in this room? Obviously. How do we know that there's light in this room? Because the room is present. What we call light can be found in the fact of presence.

Awareness is like light. We step into a dark room at night—what is present to us? Just darkness. We switch on the light and suddenly the room and everything in the room is clearly, vividly present. This is how light is like awareness. Awareness is not the room; it's the appearance from darkness of the room.

And this is what makes awareness, in this elemental quality of it, so slippery. Awareness is both the most obvious thing, because we can't have an experience without it, but it's also incredibly slippery and obscure because we can't actually pin it down. Awareness in its essence is not a something; it's the presence of something.

But of course, whenever there is presence, there is something which is present. So we call presence itself awareness, and the something which is present is the object of awareness. Which is a complicated way of saying that when I am aware, I am aware of something. When I'm seeing, I'm seeing something. When I'm hearing, I'm hearing something. When I'm thinking, I'm thinking something.

In the context of the meditation practice, we call this something the meditation object—the object of awareness when we're practicing meditation. And of course, when we talk about meditation, a fair bit of the time we talk about the meditation object, and this is what it is.

When we take something for granted, we forget. We don't notice that we already know.

Awareness is part of nature. The Buddha classifies it as an element, a dhatu. It is part of nature and it is already happening. In other words, we are already aware. We're already doing it. Even if we do not want to be aware—and sometimes we don't—we are. We can't get away from it.

The Buddhist tradition says it is the mind's nature to aware an object. That is what it does, and the mind does not stop to ask our permission or how we feel about it. It just does it. It just awares.

So if I ask myself the question, am I aware now? What's the answer? Yes. Am I making any particular effort to be aware now? The answer is no.

Now what does this suggest to us as meditators, as practitioners? What it suggests is that awareness is not a matter of effort. We do not try to be aware. We simply are aware. Effort is not involved. And this is very interesting data when you embark on a meditation retreat. It's fundamentally not about effort.

But while effort is not involved, action is. And this is something that we tend to miss.

Let's ask a more specific question. Right now, are you sitting? If the answer is yes, how do you know you are sitting? And the answer is, well of course I know. It's obvious. We are already aware of our posture in a general sense. We basically know how our body occupies space. So if I'm aware of my posture as a deliberate meditation exercise, I'm being aware of what is obvious and already available to me. Yet if I'm doing this, I am performing an action. I'm doing something.

We miss this very easily, partly because of how we conceptualize awareness. In English, for example, we use the word awareness as a noun. We treat it as a something. And we tend to overlook the activity of aware-ing.

Let's approach the same experience of sitting using two different questions. The first question is: are you aware you are sitting? Probably the answer is yes. The second question is: can you aware your sitting posture?

Do you notice the difference between the two questions and the answers that come up? The first question is asking about your state of being—are you aware or not? The second question is asking you to do something.

In this retreat, what we are doing is aware-ing. We spend a lot of time playing with awareness, which means we spend a lot of time aware-ing.

The Buddha spoke Pali, an ancient Indian language very closely related to Sanskrit. In Sanskrit-based languages, there's a tighter relationship between nouns and verbs than we find in English. In one discourse, the Buddha explains the nature of awareness, and this is what he says: Why do we say awareness? We aware. That's why we say awareness.

In English, we don't quite get the connection, but in Pali it would be: why do we say *viññāna*? Because we *vijānāti*—therefore *viññāna*. The sounds are very close, and for the Buddha's audience, the connection was obvious. What he was getting at would have been immediately clear. For us, it's more difficult in English.

We know awareness because we are doing something. We are awaring. And in our meditation practice, we are going to be awaring the flow of our experience.

Now, what is the source of this awaring? Where does it come from? Does it come from effort? No. Effort comes later on. Effort comes as the commitment to maintaining awaring over a period of time without any break. That's where effort fits in.

If all this is true—if awaring is part of nature and is already happening regardless of our opinion—why is meditation so difficult? Does anybody find meditation difficult? A couple of people. Not many. Good. Glad to see we've got such an advanced crew.

Just my own personal speculation, but I think there are a couple of reasons. Partly it's because when we're doing a meditation practice, we are struggling to aware some things rather than other things. When we embark on a meditation practice, usually we're given a meditation object and told to aware this—the approved meditation object—rather than anything else. We divide the world into two: meditation object is good, and everything else is distraction, which is really bad. We really don't want any of that in this meditation hall. When we do that, we're setting ourselves up for a struggle.

But the major difficulty, I think, comes from our habit of forgetting awareness. We simply forget we are aware, and we forget what we are aware of. We'll talk about this more as we go through the retreat. For the moment, let's just leave it hanging there.

If we have a habit of forgetting awareness, then what's the cure? The cure is to practice remembering awareness—to make awaring a habit. It's currently our habit to forget awareness. What we want is a new habit of remembering it. And this remembering awareness is mindfulness. So a lot of this practice is basically developing the habit of remembering awareness.

Of course, when we practice something, that's what we become skilled at. We have spent many years practicing to forget awareness, and we have become very good at it. In this retreat, we're practicing to remember awareness, and although we may not be very good at this today, over time, if we practice it, we will get better at it.

Now, to help with this, let's play the awareness game. Keep in mind that the title is deliberate. This is just a game. Do not try. Effort makes something that is not heavy seem heavy. So do not try, and do not meditate. If I see anybody meditating, you'll be in trouble.

For this game, there's no need to maintain a meditation posture. You can do whatever you like—get up and stretch, look out the window, wander around. You just want to be able to hear what I'm saying. So feel free to abandon your meditation posture and do whatever you like. A few people beginning to relax already. That's a good sign.

Okay, so all I want you to do is to remind yourself that you are already aware. I suggest that you could do this by mentally naming "aware."

So what we want to do is remember awareness. Every now and again, whatever you're doing—it doesn't matter what you're doing—remember to mentally say "aware." It just reminds us: oh, I'm awake. Just remember. Every now and again, mentally say "aware."

And when you do this, does awareness become apparent? Aware. No effort to be aware is involved because mind is already aware. So don't try, just remember. Oh, aware. Don't be concerned with what you are aware of—it can be anything at all. Just notice awareness itself.

And don't be concerned with how long you can remember awareness. It may be just for a moment, and then you forget again, because it's our habit to forget awareness. The more often we remember to be aware, the stronger the habit of remembering awareness will become, and so the time we spend aware will naturally expand.

It's like noticing that we are in the dark and then switching on the light of awareness. Aware. And when we do this, we don't care how long the light of awareness stays on. That's not our business. Our business is to remember. Aware. And again, notice that we are not concerned with what we are aware of. It can be anything at all. Just aware.

Okay. So how did it go? What's your experience of awareness?

One person shared: "It seemed that as well as being aware or not, or being aware of being aware, there was also a question of *how* I was aware. I felt that when I was just sitting without noticing, it was a kinesthetic awareness, which turned into a kind of sensory awareness."

What's the difference between kinesthetic and sensory?

"Kinesthetic is knowing yourself in space even if there are no sensations that you can pinpoint that tell you where you are. Whereas if I put my arm up, I've got some sensations of tightness and things like that. But I know exactly where my little finger is up there without a specific sense. And physiologically they're different."

Good. Anyone else? What was it like? What did you discover?

Another participant responded: "Just constantly changing, you know—different things, the awareness of different things. And occasionally the mind just flitting off and losing the awareness, in a sense, until I realized the mind had flitted off and I brought it back."

Yes, the constant natural change in the world. It never stays still. Constantly shifting and darting about. And sometimes it darts about without you noticing it, and then you remember. That pretty much sums up the entire meditation practice.

Shall we modify the game a bit? Instead of saying "aware," we're going to name what we are aware of. Now, as we've talked about, awareness presents in the structure of a dyad: awareness and its object. Always it presents with that structure. In simple terms, when we are aware, we are aware of something. If we are seeing, we are seeing something. If we are thinking, we are thinking something.

In the first game, we were not interested in what we were aware of—we were just interested in the aware itself, so we just named it "aware."

Now we're going to become interested in the kind of aware that we are doing. We're going to use the six senses as our framework. Which of the six senses are we aware of? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding.

For the Buddha, mind is another sense. If you're not quite sure what he's getting at, we'll just make it thinking. That will make it simpler.

So we'll start. And again, no meditating—I find it somewhat disturbing. Just see what happens when you remember to be aware of whatever you are in contact with. You can name if you find it useful. If you realise you're seeing, then say "seeing," and so forth. What are you aware of now? Which of the senses is strong now? What is clear now? What is obvious now? What's happening now?

How did it go? What was clear? What was obvious?

"Hearing." "The body." The whole body? "I found the contact of the buttocks on the cushion and the movement of the body kept being obvious to me."

Did you find you favoured any one particular sense?

"Seeing." That was the one you kept coming back to? "Yes, it's just so dominant."

When Mahasi Sayadaw defines what he means by insight meditation, he says the practice is to directly be aware of whatever is predominant in any of the six senses now. So it's a wide open practice.

From this morning, hopefully what we get a sense of is this: first, awareness is part of nature. It's already here. It's just a matter of remembering it. And awareness presents in the structure of a dyad—awareness and its object. I can be interested in either end of the dyad. If I name "aware," I'm directing the mind towards the aware-ing itself. If I name seeing, touching, and so forth, I'm directing awareness towards the object itself.

Either one works because each contains the other. But you might find you feel more interested in one rather than the other.

Awareness always presents as a dyad. There's the aware-ing and there's what is aware of. In the first exercise, when we just remembered aware, we were aiming at the aware-ing. In the second one, we were looking at what we are aware of—the object. And that's a continuum, a spectrum. Each contains the other.

But there's a shift in emphasis. Some people find that what works for them is to go for the object, because that's more clear than the awareing itself. Certainly that's our habit—we tend to be fixated on the object of all habits. But some people might find that simply aware itself might work for them. You've just played with it, so you've got a sense of it. And you might find yourself dancing between the two ends of the spectrum. There are different possibilities available.

As you do this, as you play with both, do you find they're different? Or are they essentially the same? What's your experience of it? If they're different, which one are you more comfortable with, more naturally than the other? And among the senses, which sense tends to be predominant? This is just playing around with it and getting a sense of how awareness works, what it's doing.

The key points are: remember to aware, and do not take this seriously. No effort. Do not try to aware—because awareness is already happening. If we try, we may well just smother the experience and make something big and stressful out of it when it really isn't. So just remember to play the game, but be interested in the result.

Your mission this morning, should you choose to accept it, is to play the awareness game. Do it in whatever posture you like, in whatever way you like. As we mentioned last night, you could play the awareness game of being aware of going back to your room and taking a nice post-breakfast nap. That's another way to play the game. So play with it. And you notice that we haven't actually started any kind of meditation yet—we'll talk about meditation this afternoon. But for the moment, just play with awareness.

A question arose: So is it remembering to aware, or remembering that we are aware?

Either one works. Though the first one indicates an action—remember to do something. But you're already doing it. So you can't remember to do it, but we've forgotten that we're doing it. We can remember that we are doing it. That would be a good way to look at it, if that makes sense to you. When we talk about awareness, as I said, it is very, very slippery. It's both bleeding obvious and extremely slippery. So whatever form of words helps you get in touch with it.

Someone observed: Not just to think of seeing as it were what we are wearing, but there's kind of the seeing and there is what we are seeing. So there's awareness in the seeing, and there's what we are seeing.

That's right. Seeing itself is a form of awareness, but the object of awareness is usually the thing that we think we have seen. And in general, our habit is to fixate on the object so that we miss the awareing. But when we engage in meditation practice, we want to actually open up to the awareing itself, because that opens up a whole field of very interesting stuff that's going on.

Another practitioner wondered: When you gave the example of feeling the bobbles on the cushion underneath you, during the second version of the game I was noticing seeing, hearing, sensing, but I wasn't so much paying attention to what it was that I was

seeing, hearing, sensing—just the more general category. I was just seeing. So when you gave your example of what you were actually feeling, I started to wonder, is that what I should have been doing? Not just noticing sensing, but noticing the sensing of the thing that I was sensing?

No, there's no should here.

There's different ways of playing the game. But there's no should. What happened for me was, as I was asking myself what I was aware of, that question came up naturally—well, what am I aware of? And I thought, well, this is what I'm aware of. Very simple and straightforward.

Once you start to get interested, you can play the game in different ways. You could just decide that you're going to stick to the categories: seeing, hearing. When I do my own retreats, my own practice, usually that's the way I begin. I want to keep it very simple and straightforward—which of the senses is predominant? So I'm not particularly concerned with what I'm seeing, what I'm hearing, what I'm touching. It's just in general, because it's like a broader target, and that gets me settled. Then it naturally goes into what the object is, what I'm actually perceiving. It starts broad and then comes in. But this is just what happened for me at this particular time. That's why I mentioned it.

So there are different ways of playing with it. If you ask the question, "What should I be doing?"—at that point, it sounds like you're turning it into work. It sounds like you're turning it into something that you might succeed at, in which case you get a wombat stamp, or you might fail at, in which case your wombat stamps are in danger. And that's not a game anymore.

I think the attitude of playing with it is important—that you don't have an attitude of winning or losing, doing it right or doing it wrong. It's more like a childlike, spontaneous approach where whatever it is, is what it is. But you remain interested in it and curious about how it unfolds.

Meditator: I became aware that hearing was quite predominant for me. Then I started thinking, well, I have all these other senses, so I wonder if I focus on my sense of touch, what am I going to experience on the cushion? So that becomes a bit of an effort then, to purposely change around rather than allowing it to naturally flow.

Yes, you could play that game. You could say, as you put it, get interested. "Well, this is obvious. Is there anything else? Just this one? Let me go around and have a look and check it out." And you notice that as you do that, you're getting a sense of where your sensitivities lie.

Everybody comes to the practice with a particular set of sensitivities. There are certain things that people are sensitive to, and certain things that people are not sensitive to. Especially when you're getting started, what you want is to use what you are sensitive to as your meditation object, because it's available, it's there, it's fairly straightforward.

Hearing, for example, is a very good meditation object in this style of practice. And people who use hearing as a meditation object quite a bit really like this particular centre because it is, to put it kindly, a sound-rich environment. Some people find it drives them absolutely crazy—"How can I meditate here? It's so noisy." But for other people, it's fantastic. There's such a variety of sounds around here. You use whatever is available.

Again, you've got this sense of exploration. This area is difficult for me. This area is easy. That might explain why I find this style of meditation practice hard.

Because I'm just not sensitive to that area, and so on.

When does this kind of slip into being effort? Because I was consciously saying to myself, I'm going to focus on this one now. I've got my hearing, I'm going to focus on touch, I'm going to focus on that. So it kind of slips into effort at some point.

If you say "I'm going to focus on X," what we're talking about here is a decision—a choice. And choice is really interesting, that choice to be aware. Now, do we try to choose, or do we just choose? I would suggest we just choose. The effort comes in later. We make the choice, but then where the effort comes in is: now I've landed here, I'm going to stay here. That's where the effort enters.

So it is interesting to start disentangling these very subtle movements of the mind. Because when we're doing a practice, one thing we're doing is studying the mind. We're studying experience, and the mind creates the experience. So we're, in a sense, looking at how we create a world. We're interested in these things. But again, don't be heavy with it, because that generally slows us down.

One thing I like to illustrate this point: if you're living in a modern household with all this electronic whizz-giggery all over the place, and something goes wrong with some high-tech piece of equipment, who do you call? Usually you call the youngest member of the household. Now, is this because children these days are born with PhDs in electronics implanted into their brains? No. It's because when a child sees a complicated bit of tech, what they think they're looking at is a game. And they play with it. And they

learn it. But if we have this really heavy attitude of "Oh my God, I've got to get this right, I've got to work on this," it slows us down. But if we see this is a game—I'm going to play with this and see what happens—the learning process kind of naturally manifests.

I have an eight-month-old granddaughter, and she's getting into playing peekaboo, which of course is playing with awareness. And there's such joy in it, such pure joy at that age in being aware. It just makes me think: what happens as we become adults that we don't remember that joy?

Well, before the Buddha became the Buddha, when he was a struggling yogi and got completely, hopelessly, totally bogged down, he had to give up the whole thing and walk away. He must have been in existential despair, thinking, what the hell am I doing? What got him past that was a spontaneous memory of childhood when he was aware. Oh, I did it before. Maybe I could do it again.

So yes, that sense of childhood is important in developing a meditation practice. But all too often, as adults, we come to meditation assuming it's work. For many years, I would teach retreats in Malaysia to Chinese students. They have the Confucian work ethic—I mean, if you think the Protestant work ethic is bad, you haven't seen anything. So all year it's work, work, work, work, work. And then they come to a meditation retreat: work, work, work, work, work. They go back home: work, work, work, work, work. So I spend a fair bit of time saying, don't work here—just play, enjoy.

Okay, good luck. I'll see you this afternoon.

CHAPTER 65

Practising Mindfulness (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 42 min

> *In this practical session, Patrick Kearney leads participants through a series of contemplative exercises designed to illuminate the distinction between awareness and mindfulness (sati). Beginning with simple hand-awareness exercises, he demonstrates how awareness is already built into experience—requiring no special effort—while mindfulness involves the remembering of awareness over time. The exercises reveal a common discovery: when we pay close attention, we notice that our awareness is discontinuous, marked by forgetting and remembering in alternating waves.*
>
> *Kearney explores how mindfulness presents as the felt continuity of awareness, drawing on the Buddha's teaching of satipaṭṭhāna (the applications or foundations of mindfulness). He offers the evocative image of drawing a line in sand at the water's edge—easy to draw but quickly washed away, requiring us to begin again and again. This persistence in remembering, rather than the effort of concentration, is where the real work lies. The problem, he emphasizes, is not that awareness moves but that we forget it has moved.*
>
> *The session introduces a key insight for insight meditation (vipassanā): unlike pure samādhi practice where we coax the mind to stillness, mindfulness practice tracks how and where awareness moves. Any aspect of human experience can serve as meditation object. Kearney recommends using the body as home base, since embodied awareness keeps us grounded in the present moment. Practical guidance includes not hurrying, noticing clumsiness as indicators of momentary mindfulness loss, and simply remembering that we are already aware rather than trying to create awareness.*

This morning we were playing with awareness, getting a sense of what that is all about. We played the awareness game. This afternoon we're going to continue from there, but move on to mindfulness.

We compared awareness to light. We know that there is light because the world is present. Awareness is not the world that appears; it's the appearance of the world. Where there is awareness, there is experience, and where there is experience, there is awareness. This gives us a dyad. When awareness arises, we have awareness on the one hand, and the world that we're aware of on the other, and they come and go together. We experience awareness and its object together as a spectrum, as a package.

So what we'll do now is a couple of meditation exercises, but we'll start by essentially going back over what we did this morning. This time we've got a meditation object: the touch of your hands when you hold them together.

Sit comfortably, settle your posture, hold your hands together, close your eyes, and ask yourself: Can I feel my hands? This is not a trick question. Don't overthink it. Just feel your hands. Can you feel your hands? And if the answer is yes, then ask yourself another question: Am I making any particular effort to feel my hands? Is this hard work? Keep it simple. Just feel your hands and check how hard you have to work to feel them.

I first came across this exercise the first time Sayadaw U Tejaniya came to teach in Australia. He gave us this orientation about what we were supposed to do. After we did the exercise, he said: when you're doing your meditation practice, you do not have to make any more effort than that. Whatever effort you made feeling your hands, that's the maximum effort you ever have to make in a meditation practice. I found it a bit alarming, coming from a more effort-oriented Burmese approach, but it was a very interesting comment.

The reason we're doing this exercise is to notice how awareness is built into experience. Is something happening? Then there's awareness. I don't have to do anything to be aware.

Effort is not involved in basic awareness, although effort does become involved if we choose some particular thing to be aware of. That might be the distinction—effort becomes involved in selection.

So this is awareness. But let's do the same exercise again, this time exploring mindfulness to see what the difference is.

Once more, sit comfortably, settle your posture, hold your hands together, close your eyes, and ask yourself: can I feel my hands? Just feel your hands. This experience of feeling my hands is awareness—the awareness of feeling my hands.

Keep feeling your hands. Is your awareness of your hands continuous? Or do you notice any breaks in your awareness? When you look closely, is your awareness of your hands discontinuous? Is it continuous or discontinuous?

For example, you may notice thinking in the background of your mind and then suddenly realize that thinking has taken over. Did you lose the touch of your hands? You may be listening to my voice and suddenly realize you have lost the touch of your hands.

Just feel your hands. Check to see if there are any gaps in your awareness of your hands. Are there any gaps? Or is your awareness of the touch of your hands continuous?

So—was the awareness continuous or discontinuous? Discontinuous. It's a bit disappointing. Anyone would say continuous? No one? Very disappointing.

The first version of this exercise that I did years ago, I would add a bit extra to it. I would say, "As soon as you realize that you've lost the touch of your hands, raise your hand." Adding a little element of social humiliation to the exercise just to spice it up. What was interesting is that, as a general rule, the most experienced meditators in the room were the first to raise their hands, which is very interesting.

Years ago, when mindfulness became really popular, it started to be researched in social science. And of course, researchers had the problem of how to measure it. One way—one would hope they continue to do this—was through questionnaires. If you submit to a questionnaire devised by cunning psychologists and score highly, then you've got a good mindfulness score. If you score badly, you've got a poor mindfulness score.

A typical experiment would run like this: they would get a bunch of naive meditators who had never meditated before, have them do the test, and they would score quite reasonable mindfulness. Then they would go through mindfulness training, and after some time do another test—and their mindfulness score would collapse. Proving, apparently, that mindfulness training destroys mindfulness.

Then, if they could persist with the practice, after some time they would do the test again and the mindfulness score would begin to rise. But that initial crash is very interesting because what it seemed to show is that most of us assume our awareness is continuous. It's when we start to pay attention that we realize it isn't.

And this is where mindfulness comes in. Awareness is perfectly straightforward. Can I feel the touch of my hands? Yes, I can feel the touch of my hands.

What is mindfulness? The Pali word is *sati*. The English word "mindfulness" comes to us courtesy of T.W. Rhys Davids, who was one of the pioneer English translators of Pali into English. It's him and his generation that actually gave us our standard Buddhist vocabulary.

Mindfulness for the Buddha is very important because he puts it right at the centre of his approach to meditation—especially the kind of meditation that we're doing here in our culture, which we tend to call insight meditation or mindfulness meditation, but

which he called *satipaṭṭhāna*, the applications of mindfulness, or the foundations of mindfulness. He takes this quality, mindfulness, and puts it at the very centre of his whole approach to meditation practice.

Now, how does mindfulness present? Well, it's awareness. But the way it presents is as the felt continuity of awareness. Mindfulness is awareness over time. And what we discover when we start to pay attention to awareness is what we talked about this morning: we easily forget.

So we're aware, but we forget. And then we wake up—whoops, something happened. What was that? Back to feeling the hands, and then we forget, and we wake up somewhere else. We forget, we remember, we forget, we remember. This is the normal human condition.

Imagine standing at the edge of the water on a beach with a stick, drawing a line in the sand. A wave comes in and wipes it out. The wave recedes, you draw the line. The next wave comes in and wipes it out. The wave recedes, and so on. It's very easy to draw the line—no problem at all. But very quickly it vanishes, and we have to draw the line again. And then we have to draw it again, and then again, and then again.

So when we talk about effort, that's where it comes in. To do it again, and then to do it again, and then to do it again. And why do we have to do it again? Because we forget. And then we remember.

Awareness moves. It doesn't stay where we tell it to stay. It goes off somewhere else. Where does it move to? This is, of course, something we become interested in when we do this practice. But often where it moves to is wherever habit takes us. Each of us in the course of our lifetime has built up certain habits of mind, patterns of mental activity that take over if there's nothing in particular that we have to do. We could call it autopilot. We drop into deeply conditioned habits. And when we're in a deeply conditioned habit, we do not know what we are doing. When we're lost in habit, we are prisoners of our past conditioning. And for the Buddha, this is not good. Not a good situation at all.

So mindfulness is characterized by a felt continuity of awareness. When mindfulness is weak, awareness has a kind of strobe-like quality to it. I'm present and then I'm absent, present and then absent, and so on. But when I am mindful, I can feel the uninterrupted flow of awareness over time, and this feeling becomes very quickly strong and clear. Those of you who are experienced meditators have felt it.

But still, even when we're mindful, awareness moves. This is not a problem, provided we can stay aware of the movements. The fact that awareness goes on walkabout is not the problem. The problem is that when it goes off on walkabout, we don't know because we've forgotten. The walkabout is not the problem. The problem is the forgetting. Does that make sense?

So let's do one more little exercise on remembering awareness. Here we're going to change it slightly. What would happen if, on the one hand, we remember our awareness, but on the other hand we do not try to force it to stay on any one particular object? We allow it to move if it wants to.

We're going to start with the hands again. Sit comfortably, settle your posture. Hold your hands together and close your eyes. Feel your hands. Be aware of the touch of your hands, the different sensations that are playing out in your hands. Don't try to do this. Don't try to feel your hands. Don't make it into a special project.

You already know you are feeling your hands. Just notice what you already know.

Has your awareness moved? Do you find yourself being aware of other sensations in your body? Or the sounds around you? Or your thoughts sliding here and there? Don't try to stop any of this happening. Just watch and see what happens. Let your awareness move. Let what you are aware of change. Just be aware of these movements and changes.

Use the touch of your hands as a home base, somewhere you leave and return to. Do not try to cling exclusively to the touch of your hands. Let the touch of your hands come and go. Sometimes you are aware of it, sometimes not. Just watch whatever is happening. You are using the touch of your hands as your home base but not holding tightly to it. Just hold your mind steady. Let things come and go. Just be aware that things are coming and going.

What happens when we try to maintain our sense of awareness while allowing awareness to go wherever it wants? What happens when we do not care what we are aware of but just want to remember our awareness?

So how did it go? Did it make any sense? The idea of holding the mind steady and letting awareness do what it wants—does that make any sense?

Notice how we started with a meditation object, the touch of the hands, and then we backed off a bit, allowing the awareness to go wherever it wants to go. In terms of the dyad, we started with the object, then backed off, becoming more interested in the awareness. This illustrates the different possibilities that are available in any kind of meditation relationship.

I can see you're far too deeply in samādhi to be bothered with mere intellectual scuttlebutt, so we'll move on. But this is our introduction to what we're talking about when we talk about mindfulness. Mindfulness remembers awareness—that's its job, that's what it does—such that we can feel the continuity of our awareness. That's how mindfulness presents. But what we are acknowledging is that awareness in fact moves. The mind is very dynamic and very energetic, so it's hardly surprising that it's dashing from here to there and everywhere else.

In this practice our job is not to prevent awareness from moving. If we were doing a straight serenity practice, that would be the job—mind is moving, and we want to coax it into being completely still. This is a pure samādhi approach, classically what we do in a serenity practice. But in a mindfulness practice, which is more insight-oriented, our job is not to prevent it, not to stop awareness from moving, but to track how it moves and where it moves.

A key aspect of mindfulness practice, and this is one thing which makes it unique perhaps, is that it is not restricted to any particular meditation object. If we ask the question, "What is my meditation object in mindfulness meditation?" the short answer is everything. Or anything. Or everything and anything. Basically any aspect of human experience can be a meditation object. This is what gives this style of practice its particular characteristic and perhaps its particular strength.

Fundamentally it does not matter what the object of awareness is. What matters is that we remember our object of awareness. This is something that becomes increasingly clear the deeper we go into this practice.

Now, while the object of awareness is not important, some objects are more useful than others. In particular, it can be very useful to use the body as our central point of focus, our home base. The practice begins by keeping our awareness in the body—by which we mean the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. But especially the fifth of the five senses, sensitivity to touch sensation. That is often the key meditation object in many meditation techniques.

So sensitivity to touch plays a particularly important role. But basically, one way of looking at what we're doing in this training is that we're learning to live in the physical world rather than in the world of our thoughts and concepts. What we've been training to do over a long period of time is to live in the world of our thoughts and concepts, and we're going to be talking a lot more about this as we go through the retreat.

So it's really important, especially now that we've arrived and we're settling in, that we learn to listen to the body. This is central. The body is really important in part because to the degree that our awareness is in the body, to that degree we are in the present and not caught up in past and future. Mind time-travels. Body is always in the present. So to be embodied is to be in the present.

If you're mindful of mind objects, mind states, emotions—can't you be also equally in the present? Absolutely. It's just harder to stay in the present. It is. So here, in the context in which we're speaking about, we're just getting started. Even if I'm an experienced meditator, still the engine's a bit rusty. Got to crank it up. So it's a good place to start, is in the body. And it's a good place to learn to come back to.

But again, it's not compulsory. One could just ignore the body, theoretically, and simply be aware of mind. But in practice, very few people could do that successfully. Most people, if they tried to do it, would just get lost. Because mind is too seductive, it's too powerful, it's too fast. The body helps stabilize us and keep us grounded. So in that sense, it's useful.

It's a good place to start, and a good place to come back to if nothing else is happening. And one good place to start, which I think is what we're doing already, is holding awareness in our ordinary activity. This is everyday mindfulness where the meditation object is the normal flow of experience. Just as we're going about doing whatever we do, just staying aware of what's happening. Track your experience wherever your awareness naturally goes, but at least for the time being give priority to awareness of body, because that helps to ground awareness and to keep us in the present rather than drifting off to past and future.

Just a few tips to send you on your way. Number one: do not be in a hurry. There's no reason to hurry during this week. And if we say don't be in a hurry, then notice when you find yourself hurrying. Be particularly interested in that, because you may find some tension underneath the hurrying. Feel the tension and relax. And check how your posture is when you relax, because hurrying changes the posture. Tension in the body changes the posture. So don't be in a hurry.

Be graceful—which in practice means be committed to noticing those moments when you are clumsy. When you drop something or bump into something or trip over something or make a loud noise doing something, you may notice that a moment of clumsiness is conditioned by a momentary loss of mindfulness. A moment when you lost awareness of your body and dropped into habitual concepts. So be interested in those moments of clumsiness. Be graceful.

Remember awareness. In other words, do not try to be aware. Just remember that you are already aware, which is more subtle than trying.

And finally, ask yourself: What is clear now? What is obvious now?

Any questions? Any comments?

Very good. The lake of samādhi is deep and placid and still. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to remember awareness.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 66

On Method

Patrick Kearney · 37 min

> *In this foundational talk, Patrick Kearney introduces the meditation method developed by Mahāsī Sayādaw (1904-1982), explaining why we need a framework for practice and what distinguishes this particular approach to satipaṭṭhāna. He uses the analogy of artistic mediums—watercolours versus oils—to illustrate how appropriate limitations actually foster creativity rather than constrain it. A framework too loose kills creativity by offering nothing to work against; too tight a framework stifles it through rigid obedience.*
>
> *The talk outlines three essential limitations that shape this practice: maintaining felt continuity of awareness over time, using a grounding object (mūla ārammaṇa) as a central reference point, and learning to focus on transitions. Kearney distinguishes between directed awareness (noting) and undirected awareness (noticing), explaining these as two ends of a spectrum rather than mutually exclusive states. He also discusses naming—the optional practice of applying concepts to experience—as a tool for precision, particularly valuable when cultivating insight (vipassanā) rather than serenity (samādhi) alone.*
>
> *Practically, Kearney explains the relationship between grounding and secondary objects. When awareness is "kidnapped" by distraction, that distraction becomes the meditation object the moment we recognize it. This transforms what we might call distraction into simply another object of awareness. The pattern of moving between grounding and secondary objects opens up the perception of impermanence (anicca-saññā), the gateway to insight. As practice matures, these conceptual distinctions naturally dissolve, leaving simply awareness awareing.*

Tonight we're going to talk about the meditation method that we're using during this retreat.

This morning we started with awareness, because everything revolves around awareness. Then we looked at mindfulness—what that is all about—which is essentially awareness continuously over time. But we didn't have much concern about method or technique. Just remember awareness now. This is mindfulness in its simplest form, and it could be aided by asking questions like: What am I aware of now? What is clear now? What is obvious now? What's happening now?

So this morning and this afternoon was all very general, but this evening we move on to the particular topic of method that we're using during this retreat. This approach to mindfulness meditation—what the Buddha calls satipaṭṭhāna—was developed by Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. He lived from 1904 to 1982 and was part of the modern revival of meditation, particularly insight meditation, for lay people. This was meant to help make meditation widely available across society. This approach was first outlined by him in a book called, in English, *Manual of Insight*, which was published in 1945. It was this book that made his reputation in Burma as an authority on the practice of cultivating insight, vipassanā, through mindfulness. And that started his career.

So that's very briefly the background. But we might ask: why do we need a method? What's it for? What's it all about?

Basically, our meditation method gives us a framework. It gives us a set of limitations within which practice can occur. We need some kind of framework, but it needs to be the right kind of framework.

If the framework is too loose—if the limitations are lacking, or even absent—this kills creativity. Because there's nothing to bump up against, nothing to challenge, nothing to be challenged by. For me, too loose a framework can be indicated by attitudes like "it's all one," or "there is no such thing as a good or a bad meditation," or "one must never judge one's practice." To me, these are all indications that the framework is too loose. And when the framework is too loose, it kills creativity.

Too tight a framework also kills creativity. If the limitations are overly constricted, there's no room for one's own decisions. The emphasis is on obedience and the endless repetition of familiar drills. But in a dynamic world there is no such thing as repetition. This move that we make right now is new, and this is something we'll be exploring during the retreat.

So too loose a framework doesn't work. Too tight a framework doesn't work.

Just as an example, let's say you take up painting. The first choice you might be faced with is: will you paint with watercolours or oils? This initial decision, whatever decision you make, presents you with a variety of demands that will condition how you paint—what specific skills you need to develop that will allow you to work within the limitations of your medium.

If you choose watercolours, you paint on paper. If you choose oils, you paint on canvas or wood. If you choose watercolours, you make quick decisions because the paint dries quickly. If you're using oils, you can take your time and remake it as much as you

like. If you use watercolours, you start with the lightest colours and layer the darker colours on top. If you're using oils, you can add light colours to dark or dark colours to light.

The limitations of each medium set the conditions within which your craft develops. And craft develops by using the available materials in new ways. I respect the limits, but I develop creative ways to work within the limits. In this way the craft is developed.

So if we're looking at this particular approach, what are the limitations that shape the practice?

Well, the first one, the most important one, the essential limitation, is the felt continuity of awareness over time. That's the key. Maintaining awareness over time—that is number one. That shapes the whole project.

Basically, you could sum it up by saying: do whatever it takes to experience the continuity of awareness. That would be the essence of the method. Abandon whatever habits condition the discontinuity of awareness. And of course, this afternoon we had a sense of that. Abandon anything that conditions the discontinuity of awareness. Cultivate whatever encourages the continuity of awareness. This limitation is the distinguishing characteristic of mindfulness training.

Secondly, we use a central reference point to structure the continuity of awareness. In the standard translations of Mahasi's writings, this is called the primary object. I translate it as a grounding object. This central reference point, what I'm calling the grounding object, provides a home base in which we live and to which we return. And again, we played around with that this afternoon. It's our centre of gravity. It's what draws us back when our awareness goes walkabout. It's particularly important in the early stages of the retreat when we're developing what the Buddha calls serenity. During the early stages of this retreat, we're going to use mindfulness with breathing as our grounding object. But it doesn't have to be that. We can use other things for the grounding object, but we need a grounding object. We need a central reference point, somewhere where we can stabilise the heart and the mind.

And then finally, we learn to focus on transitions. This plays a really important role in this style of practice. As we've seen, awareness moves. It goes from one place to another. We could say awareness moves from A to B. Physically we can see the body moves from A to B. How many people have remained completely still since they walked into this room? No one. Mind moves from A to B. The mind moves a hell of a lot faster than the body.

Now, as our practice settles, as we become more sensitive to what's going on, we become interested in these transitions. We may come to recognise that transitions are always happening. In fact, we may discover that actually there is no final position. There are only transitions. This is what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence, *anicca-saññā*.

So we become interested in the fact that we move from A to B, and then we learn how we move from A to B. By learning to maintain awareness through transitions, that's a major way in which we learn the craft of the practice.

This is what we need, and this is what the different meditation methods give us. Obviously there are a hell of a lot more meditation methods than what Mahasi Sayadaw teaches, but his approach is the one we're working with. His picture is underneath the Buddha. Apparently that photograph was taken just days before his death, I was told, in Burma.

So, we start with awareness. Because any meditation method, no matter what we do, centres on our relationship with awareness. As we talked about, awareness is presence itself. If something is present, if something is happening, then awareness is involved. Which, as we've discussed, suggests I am already aware. I don't need to do anything to be aware. I don't have to make any effort to be aware—I am already aware. It's a good place to start.

However, I discover that I am in the habit of forgetting my awareness. And this is what makes the continuity of awareness so difficult. Awareness is here, now, but easily forgotten.

So our task is to remember awareness. This is essentially what we have to do.

We compared awareness to the light that illuminates a dark room at night. We realise that we are in darkness, and then we flick the switch and light appears. So our practice becomes flicking the awareness switch. Aware of what now? What is clear now?

In this practice, it does not matter how long the light of awareness stays on. That's, in a sense, not our business. What is important is that we become sensitive to when the light goes out, that we notice that, and then flick the awareness switch on again. This is what we're doing again and again and again.

Now this brings us to attention, what the Buddha calls manasikāra. In the context of meditation practice, he calls it yoniso manasikāra, which is probably the expression that would be translated as the meditation method. Thanissaro translates yoniso manasikāra as "appropriate attention." I think that pretty much fits it.

When we become familiar with awareness, we can begin to see that awareness has depth. I can be faintly aware. I can be vividly, clearly aware, or anything in between. But if awareness has depth, this suggests it can be developed. It can be increased. It can be deepened. So how do I deepen awareness? How do I make awareness stronger? I do this by practising attention, where attention is the act of directing awareness.

We could compare it to the difference between seeing and looking. I don't have to do anything to see. I'm just seeing, even if I don't want to. But when I am looking at someone or something, or looking for someone or something, then I'm doing something. I'm directing visual awareness in a particular direction or towards a particular object. So attention actively directs awareness, and it necessarily involves some degree of engagement or effort.

We've been introduced to this idea when we spoke about awareness as a verb—to aware. When we aware, the mind moves towards its object. It engages. So awareness is active. It's more an activity than a something. And this of course brings us to how we work with awareness.

Mahasi Sayadaw spoke, wrote and taught in Burmese, and everything had to be translated into English. The people who did the translations were his Burmese students who spoke English. In their translation, they put down the three basic activities involved in awareing an object as noting, noticing, and naming—conveniently, the three N's.

The first two, noting and noticing, could be called directed and undirected awareness. Noting, what Mahasi Sayadaw calls noting, is directing awareness towards an object. It's essentially active in its nature—a reaching out to the object of awareness. I think we should simply call it directed awareness.

Let's say, for example, I want to be aware of my breathing for a period of time. So I actively direct awareness to this breath now, and then to this breath now, and then to this breath now. I do this because I want to stay with my chosen meditation object. I am actively engaged now, and again now, and again now. And you can see this brings us into the whole realm of effort.

The flip side is what Mahasi calls noticing, which is awareness receiving an object.

It's more receptive than active. We could call it receptive awareness, or we could call it undirected awareness—directed awareness, undirected awareness. That's a bit tidier. But undirected means receptive.

So I am aware, but I'm not deliberately aiming at any particular object. For example, I might be actively aware of the movements of breathing. Let's say I'm using breathing as a meditation object. So I'm actively aware of the breathing. But at the same time, I'm hearing sounds around me. Now, I'm not focused on these sounds. I'm focused on my breathing. But the sounds are coming to me. I cannot shut them out. I am awake to them. I am receiving them, but I'm not deliberately directing awareness towards them.

So there's a going out to actively engage with the meditation object, while at the same time there's a receiving of everything else that's going on. And it's very useful to get a clear sense, to be able to distinguish between noting and noticing, or directed and undirected awareness. In directed awareness we aim awareness at an object. In undirected awareness the object of awareness comes to us.

Does that make sense?

These represent two ends of a spectrum, and they point to different relationships, different possible relationships to the meditation practice. For example, within the Mahasi lineage some meditation styles emphasize directed awareness and are primarily concerned with focusing awareness on a single object like the breathing. This is typical of my main teacher in Burma, Sayadaw U Pandita. He taught a very active, directed style of meditation practice. Other meditation styles emphasize undirected awareness and are primarily concerned with simply receiving whatever sense data arises. This, in the Mahasi lineage, would be associated with Sayadaw U Tejaniya and his approach. So you get, even within a single lineage, different styles of practice, depending on the personality and the experience of the teacher, and of course depending on what works for them.

Some styles combine or balance these two. In fact, really every style combines and balances them to some degree or another. And it's important that when we're dealing with concepts, when we're talking about meditation practice—we can't talk about it without concepts—but the concepts are important because they help us by mapping the contours of our experience. Directed awareness, undirected awareness. But if we become entangled in the concepts, if we confuse the concept with reality, then we create problems. And of course it is our long-standing habit to identify with concepts and to take them to be real. We're going to be talking more about this as we go through.

So we talk about directed awareness, undirected awareness. We distinguish them clearly and we learn to recognise them. But they are not mutually exclusive. They represent two ends of a spectrum. Imagine a ruler. One end of the ruler we call directed. The other end of the ruler we call undirected. When we reach for the ruler to pick it up, we could pick it up at one end, or we could pick it up at the other end, or we could pick

it up somewhere in the middle. But it doesn't matter where we pick it up—both ends are taken up. They're always mixed up together to some degree or another. It's very rarely that you would have a pure directed or pure undirected awareness.

Again, the concepts can be useful because they map the terrain, but as the practice develops and matures, we may well find that this whole distinction between directed and undirected awareness just dissolves. And we may find that all we've got is awareness, awareing, that's it. And putting any concept on top of it just gets in the way. So be careful with the concepts. They're useful, but don't get stuck on them.

So directed awareness, undirected awareness—what Mahasi calls noting and noticing. And then we come to naming. This is the third aspect. Naming puts a concept, a name, or a label on the object of awareness or on the act of awareing, as the case may be. And we have already used naming today.

So for example, it could be in the form of a question. "What is clear now?" This is putting a name, a concept, on top of the experience. And naming, when it works, clarifies the experience.

Let's say we're distracted by thinking, and so we move to actively aware it. We could name the experience, and because the naming directs awareness towards it, this can be particularly useful when we're working with the mind, where it's much more subtle to aim awareness at different aspects of psychological experience than when working with the body.

So we aim awareness at thinking by naming it. The name can be very brief: "Thinking." It could be a bit longer: "A thought is just a thought." I might give it that name when I can see the urgency I have to identify with the thought and get entangled with it. "A thought is just a thought." It's both an aiming of the awareness and a stepping back.

Or the name could even be a question: "Past or future?" That's an interesting one because most of the time when we're thinking, if we pay attention to what's going on, we realise we're either thinking about the past or we're thinking about the future. Sometimes we think about the present, but a lot of the time it's past or future.

Whether it's a name, a statement, or a question, the purpose of adding a concept to awareing is to stimulate accuracy, aim. This is particularly important when we're meditating for insight. It's not so important if we're meditating simply for serenity, if we simply want to calm down and chill. Accuracy, aim, precision—they're not so important then. But if we're working for insight, it becomes very important. We won't go into it tonight, but we'll talk more about it as we go through the retreat.

So these are the three basic activities: directed awareness, undirected awareness—that's the essential structure. The optional added extra is the naming. Some people find the naming very useful, so they use it a lot. Some people find it just gets in the way, so they don't use it at all. You get many different relationships with the name, depending on the person.

I used it a lot in my early years because I found it useful, because I tend to completely forget what I'm doing. These days I don't use it every day. If I'm on retreat, I'll use it in the early days because it helps ground me. "This is what's happening. This is what's happening. This is what's happening." And then it fades away. But when things get deeper, every now and again it'll come back. When something's shifted, something has changed, and I don't quite know what's going on because it's new, I drop in a name. "Oh, that's what it is." Bingo.

So directed and undirected—this is built into the meditation practice itself. But the third one, naming, is an optional added extra. You work out your own relationship with it.

This is the process of awareing that we've been talking about. And then there's what we aware.

We start with this idea of the grounding object. We've already seen in the games we've played so far how unstable the mind is, how easily it wanders from one object of awareness to another, and how quickly the mind will slide into habitual thinking. Now, if we want to train our attention so that we can maintain a felt continuity of awareness over time, we have to learn to stabilise the mind. This is essential.

We do this by grounding our awareness. And this cultivates samādhi. Samādhi is classically translated as concentration, but I don't think it's a very good translation. It's essentially the unification of the heart.

And we'll talk more about samādhi later in the retreat.

So, we've said that awareness is awareness of something. Awareness has an object. If we're going to stabilise the mind, we need to be able to settle our awareness somewhere that will encourage it to rest and become still.

This is what Mahāsi Sayādaw calls the mūla ārammaṇa. This is a Pāli term where ārammaṇa means object and mūla literally means root. So, a root object. The root here represents our foundation, our ground. This is why I translate it as grounding object. This is where we ground our awareness. This is where our awareness makes its home.

As we said, normally mind is chasing one thing after another, after another, after another. We're constantly looking for a satisfaction that never quite arrives, so we're looking for something else. We need to stabilise mind. In practical terms, what this means is we need to learn how to keep our awareness in one place over a period of time. This is the function of the grounding object. This is what the grounding object is for. It gives us a place for our awareness to settle and stabilise over a period of time.

We could say that our grounding object is where our awareness remains unless it has a specific reason to go somewhere else.

In this retreat, we're going to begin by using breathing as our grounding object and focus on this for the first few days. We do this to build a foundation of serenity, of stability of the heart-mind, so that we can then turn towards insight. The basic pattern is serenity, then insight. This is very common. Every meditation method requires serenity. Without it, we're just bouncing around on the surface.

The different meditation approaches vary in terms of how one cultivates serenity, how much serenity we need, at what point we turn towards insight, and how we do that. All these questions pop up, and the different techniques provide different answers. Of course, over time our grounding object may change, because there is no universally compulsory grounding object.

Remember our first limitation: maintain awareness over time. What is central is awareness, not the object of awareness. There's no magical meditation object. There are just meditation objects that work or don't work, as the case may be.

However, we do want to ground our awareness, and the easiest way to do this is to find some aspect of body or mind that we can easily locate and stabilise our awareness upon. This is what we need to establish as we develop a meditation practice. Where can I most readily rest my awareness so that it will remain relatively still over time? This is my grounding object. This is what my awareness will learn to call home. And it will likely change over a period of time.

So this is the grounding object. This is where we start. Tomorrow we'll be getting into the breathing to do that.

Then we have the secondary object, which is the counterpart. We establish our grounding object and then discover that restlessness is one of the most obvious characteristics of the mind. I'm thinking, then I'm looking, then I'm wanting, then I'm moving, and so on.

As we've said, and we'll keep emphasising, it's important to realise that when we're cultivating mindfulness, we are not trying to stop our minds from moving. We're not trying to clamp down on it and control it. What we're trying to do is learn to understand that the mind moves and how it moves. Because this provides us with the gateway into insight.

We're tracking our grounding object, and the next thing we know, we're caught up in thinking or physical pain or something else. As soon as we know that we are caught up in something else, that something else becomes our meditation object. We could say that we were brought there by force, we were kidnapped. But once we arrive, we volunteer for the experience by actively being aware of it. We were dragged here. We wear it. Oh, I've been thinking. We wear it. What's going on now? We wear that too.

So we directly aware our distractions, which means that our distraction becomes our meditation object. And I think this is probably the central characteristic of Mahasi Sayadaw's approach to meditation practice. As soon as our mind rebels and our awareness is kidnapped, as soon as we know that we have been distracted, that new object of awareness becomes our meditation object. Distraction disappears because what we previously called distraction we now recognise as our secondary object. We actively aware our new secondary object, and then we return to the grounding object.

Again, we're distracted. And as soon as we know we are distracted, we actively aware our distraction. That's our secondary object. And then we come back to the grounding object. So we're moving from grounding to secondary to grounding to secondary to secondary to secondary back to grounding, and so on. And these movements open up the perception of impermanence, which is the gateway into insight.

When people hear about this approach, the first question that comes up is: how long do we stay with our secondary object? In the early stages of the practice, the answer would be briefly. Why? Because we need to stabilise the mind, and this is the job of the grounding object. So we aware our distraction only briefly and then return to the grounding object.

Now sometimes our secondary object will not let us go. For example, physical pain. Have you ever had the experience where you're trying to meditate but your body is rebelling and won't let go? Well, you've got to stay with it, because it's demanding attention. Or obsessive thinking can pop up. Same thing—you've got to stay with it, because it won't let you go.

How long we stay with our secondary object—these are questions of skill. These are questions of the craft of meditation, which we learn over time. It's not immediately obvious when we begin, but over time we figure out how to work with these distractions.

As the practice matures, at some point this whole distinction between grounding and secondary object dissolves. Our meditation object becomes the flow of experience, where conceptual distinctions between grounding and secondary just fade away quite naturally. But in the beginning, it may be useful to use this distinction between grounding and secondary to map the movements of your mind, to get a sense of what the mind is doing over a period of time. And again, this is mindfulness—this is awareness over time. Grounding and secondary provide a framework for working with this.

So we could summarise the practice by saying: settle awareness in the body, and then see what happens. Settling awareness in the body—serenity. Seeing what happens—insight.

CHAPTER 67

Ānāpānasati (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 46 min

In this practice workshop, Patrick Kearney offers detailed guidance on ānāpānasati—mindfulness with breathing—making a crucial distinction that transforms how we approach this foundational practice. Rather than treating breathing as something we must perfect or control for meditation, Kearney invites practitioners to recognize that breathing is already happening and awareness is already present. The practice becomes one of remembering what is already here rather than creating something new.

Kearney explores the fundamental structure of awareness as a dyad of 'awareness and the aware-ed,' noting our habitual tendency to focus entirely on objects of awareness while taking the aware-ing itself for granted. He addresses the common challenge of interfering with the breath once we begin observing it, offering practical solutions including working with posture as the foreground while allowing breathing to remain in the background. The guided meditation emphasizes building posture from the ground up, relaxing tension, and maintaining a quality of non-striving.

The session includes valuable discussion with participants about individual challenges and adaptations. Kearney emphasizes that there is no 'one true technique'—what matters is developing continuity of awareness over time. He encourages a playful, experimental attitude rather than rigid adherence to instructions, suggesting that practitioners take what helps and leave what doesn't. This approach honors the creative element inherent in meditation practice while maintaining focus on the essential goal: cultivating the serenity needed to support insight.

This morning we're going to begin working with our grounding object, which is breathing.

The practice in Pali is called ānāpānasati. This is a compound word. Ānāpāna is literally "in and out breathing," or simply breathing. Sati is mindfulness. With compounds, the relationship between the different words grammatically can vary, so compounds are always ambiguous. This ambiguity is one of the ways in which the tradition plays with different possibilities of meaning. There's always a degree of creativity in how one interprets a compound.

This compound, ānāpānasati, is usually translated into English as "mindfulness of breathing"—sati of ānāpāna. Grammatically this is correct, but there is a problem with it because it can give the wrong impression. It can suggest that this practice is all about breathing. But it isn't. It's about mindfulness. So here we're calling it "mindfulness with breathing."

As we said, we're talking about awareness. At the very centre of the whole project is awareness. And awareness always presents as awareness of something. If I'm aware, I'm aware of something. If I'm seeing, I'm seeing something, and so on. We summed it up by saying that awareness always presents as a dyad of awareness and the aware-d. It's always a package. And this dyad is already here, already functioning, whether we notice it or not. It's just the way it is.

Now, normally it is our habit to invest all of our attention and all of our interest into the object of awareness, the aware-d. If I am seeing, I assume that what is important is what I am seeing. If I am thinking, I assume that what is important is what I am thinking. Our habit is to give all of our attention to the object of awareness, and we completely take for granted the aware-ing itself.

In this practice, one of the things we're doing is learning to become sensitive to the aware-ing as well as the aware-d. This means we're changing our relationship to the aware-d.

Let's take breathing as a meditation object, for example, and let's say we're using it as the grounding object. As we discussed, the grounding object is very important. This is where we learn to stabilise the mind, where we keep our awareness at home, as it were, unless it has a reason to go somewhere else. The purpose of all this is to develop serenity—in this practice, to develop enough serenity to support insight. So it's pretty important.

If I'm going to work with breathing, first of all I have to find it. That makes sense, doesn't it? Then I have to keep it in mind, which means that my breathing has to be of a pretty high standard, don't you think? It's got to be clear enough and consistent enough for me to develop mindfulness and concentration on it for a considerable period of time. We are talking about a pretty high standard of breathing, aren't we?

As soon as I begin like that, this attitude compromises my relationship with breathing right from the very beginning. I am already anxious about it. I'm ready to judge it as good enough for my purpose, or not good enough. I am ripe for frustration if it's not good enough—if it's not clear enough, or keeps slipping away, or I can't really find it. I am ripe for delight if it passes the test.

In other words, what I'm doing from the very beginning is imposing a great blob of concept on top of the breathing. The breathing has to carry this burden as well as keeping me alive. And the blob does nothing at all except get in the way.

But the fact is, I am already breathing. That's already happening. In fact, it's extremely difficult to not breathe. We could do an experiment and stop breathing—but we won't, because we're not that extreme.

So if we're practising mindfulness *with* breathing, rather than *of* breathing, I can let the breathing take care of itself. It doesn't really need my intervention. It hasn't up to now, and it doesn't today. What I need to focus on is the mindfulness, not the breathing. What I need to focus on is the continuity of awareness. In other words, I need to learn to notice what is already happening. I need to remember what is already here.

One practical consequence of this is that it's important we do not make too much effort in mindfulness with breathing. Do not try to *do* this practice. And in particular, do not try to breathe. Just remember what's already happening. So relax. Because if I was bold enough to make a guess, I would say you are already breathing.

With that as an introduction, are we ready to get started? Anybody feeling anxious? This is the test.

Sit comfortably and settle awareness in your body. As we were doing this morning, construct your posture from the ground up. Feel the strong, firm sensations at the base of your body, where you are supported by your cushion, your bench, or your chair. Then lift up through your spine, creating space between each vertebra. Let your chest open and your shoulders relax. Bring your head into balance and let your arms hang down, your hands resting in your lap or on your thighs. Feel yourself sitting.

Can you feel your body? Begin with what is clearest and most obvious. This may be the sensations at the base of your body. It may be the sense of lift up your spine. It may be stiffness in your shoulders. It may be the touch of your hands where they rest. It may be the movements of your breathing. Let your awareness go to whatever attracts your attention.

It does not matter what you are aware of. Just see where your awareness goes. Ask yourself: what am I aware of now? You may find it useful to name what is happening. You might start by saying to yourself "sitting," aware of your whole posture. Then

aware whatever sensation seems clearest and most obvious. When you drift into thinking, do not be discouraged. It is natural to think. When you realise you are thinking, say to yourself "thinking." Then bring awareness back to your body.

Are you breathing? Let your awareness settle on your breathing—the movements of in-breath and out-breath. Where are these movements clearest and most obvious to you? Are they in your belly? Are they in your midriff? Are they in your chest? Are they at your nose? Are they somewhere else? Aware these movements wherever they are clearest and most obvious. You might name them "breathing."

Remember that in bringing awareness to your breathing, you are not doing anything extra. You are already breathing. Just relax and let yourself breathe. Breathe and relax.

Why is relaxation important? It is easy to strain in mindfulness practice, to try to make something extra happen. But you are not trying to have some special experience. Just notice what is actually happening. When you are lost in your thinking, just aware that.

Thinking. And come back to your body. Sitting.

Settle awareness in your body, and then see if you can feel the movements of your breathing. In. Out. Very simple. Nothing special.

Have you forgotten your breathing? If so, notice that the problem does not lie in your breathing. Your breathing is taking care of itself. The problem is that you forgot. You forgot you are breathing. So just remember—oh, I'm breathing.

Just breathe and be aware. You are already breathing. You are already aware. It's not a big deal.

Can you feel the movements of your breathing? This is mindfulness with breathing. Can you feel your awareness going somewhere else? This is also mindfulness, so no problem. Just be curious about what your mind is getting up to. No big deal. Just breathe and be aware.

Are you doing something special to your breathing? Trying to make it good enough for your meditation practice? It's already good enough. Maybe it is not clear. That's fine. That's the way the breathing is now. Let breathing do what it wants. Don't get in the way. Just aware of whatever is happening. Relax and breathe.

You began by feeling your whole posture. Then you allowed your awareness to settle on your breathing. Now open again to your posture. Feel yourself sitting here. Let the movements of your breathing be in the background of your awareness, but be interested in your whole body as it sits and breathes.

Can you feel any tension in your body? Relax and let it go. Just sit. Just breathe. Just relax.

You are already sitting and breathing. There is nothing extra to do. You don't have to do this properly, like a good meditator, because you are already sitting and breathing. So relax.

Notice any tension in your body and let it go. Don't hold yourself rigidly. Adjust your posture if you are uncomfortable. Don't try to get anywhere. Just notice you have already arrived.

I noticed quite a lot that it was very comfortable to move between just focusing on the breath and then other things came up and moved into the foreground. There was something about having the two of them there at the same time that was very calm, and it felt very good at both ends. I was very comfortably aware of the two without having to prefer one to the other.

Yes, absolutely. One of the things about meditation is that it's very difficult to capture in a technique. In fact, it's impossible. You get in the meditation world sometimes people claiming, "This is the ultimate practice that will speedily take you to enlightenment, and the others—okay, I suppose—but they're not going to work." So you get the myth of the one true technique, and it simply does not exist, because it depends on what works for the particular meditator.

Decades ago I was discussing this with someone who pointed out: if you go to a meditation center and there are twenty people in the hall meditating—let's assume they've never done any practice except in this particular center, with this particular teacher, doing this particular technique; they have no experience of anything else—if you went around the room one by one and asked, "What are you doing now?"

You would get 20 different answers. You cannot pin it down. So basically, if it works, it works. This is the area of experimentation. The basic limitation is continuity of awareness over time, so do whatever it takes to develop that continuity. If that involves sitting on your head and contemplating the universe, well, sit on your head and contemplate the universe. Whatever works.

Did anybody feel they were actually developing a bit of serenity? Anybody feel that no, it definitely didn't work? There must be someone, surely. No protests?

One participant shared: "I had to kind of go with breathing and everything else, because everything else was there—tones and energetic streams. I just thought, I'm not going to pretend they're not happening. I'm just going to call it everything else. And that kind of helped a bit."

So you had breathing plus everything else, interwoven, with breathing as part of everything else? And in your case, when you decide you're going to do mindfulness of breathing and focus on breathing to some extent, does that get in the way?

"Yes, it does a bit, because normally I'm just an everything else person. Not that I'm always interpreting—I mean, in this instance I was, and I was just going, oh, there's a lot of energy streams."

So adding the breathing to the soup doesn't really improve the flavour? You have to keep experimenting and see. If it doesn't help, drop it. But it can be useful to experiment because often we have assumptions about what works and what doesn't, and it turns out when we test them they might not be true. Apart from which, things change over time. What works for us one day doesn't necessarily work for us the next, and vice versa. So keep an attitude of playful experimentation. Don't take it too seriously—just check it out.

Another practitioner raised a similar challenge: "Often I find that when focusing, I tend to really grasp at it and control it. Then it becomes a point of stress because there's some sort of fusion with the physical breathing at that point. So just experimenting—dropping down, trying to drop into the pure physicality of it, the physical qualities—that's helpful."

Yes, and if you find any tension, just relax. Drop the tension. Drop the focus on breathing. If the focus creates tension, what would happen if you dropped the tension? Now, if you drop the tension, you may lose the focus. Well, fine—it doesn't matter. What you want to do is drop the tension. And then, okay, relax. Now see if you can point awareness towards the breathing without the tension. If the tension pops up again, okay, let go, drop it. When you're relaxed, have another look. Oh, there it is again. Okay, just drop it.

So it could well be that the practice becomes: noticing tension, relax. Tension, relax. Tension, relax. And that's a very good practice.

And then you might find, at some point you might discover that you can actually be aware of the breathing without the tension. It may not be for very long. It may even be that as soon as you notice, "Oh, I'm not tense anymore," the tension returns. But that's fine. "Oh, tension—relax."

"It's not like I've never experienced that beautiful serenity of just being with the breath, but it tends to arise organically when I'm already in a more samādhi state."

So for you it's not good as a preliminary practice?

"Usually it would seem that way."

This is the trouble with meditation teachers. They want to interfere in your meditation practice. I don't like going to retreats where there are teachers. They just get in the way. I don't know how you people tolerate it.

Okay, so that's our experiment in mindfulness with breathing. I'm introducing it as the grounding object. But as you can see, the element of creativity is inescapable. It's not a matter of obeying orders. There are no wombat stamps for obedience. It's about the sensitivity and the awareness.

So if following these kinds of instructions helps, you follow them. If they don't, forget about it. If you find that in the course of however much teaching there is, there is one comment that is useful, you take that and pocket it. And the rest of it, you completely ignore.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 68

Establishing Mindfulness

Patrick Kearney · 49 min

In this foundational talk, Patrick Kearney unpacks the Buddha's instructions for establishing mindfulness by examining key Pāli terminology from the suttas. He begins with the standard passage describing a practitioner beginning meditation—sitting, straightening the back, and establishing mindfulness directly (parimukhaṃ)—revealing how posture creates the foundation for a balanced, alert mind. The term upaṭṭhāti conveys firm grounding and intimacy with experience, while parimukhaṃ suggests a 'face-to-face' encounter with whatever arises.

Kearney illuminates the meaning of sati as derived from the verb sarati (to remember), explaining that mindfulness is essentially 'memory of the present'—like the railway sign 'mind the gap' asking us to remember in the very moment of stepping. When mindfulness lapses, we experience muṭṭhasati (forgotten mindfulness), a state of oblivion where we don't know and don't know that we don't know. This forgetting represents the essence of delusion, while remembering awareness marks the return to clarity.

Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, he explains the practice of anupassanā (tracking or seeing-along) as following experience over time—illustrated beautifully through the metaphor of an Aboriginal tracker reading subtle signs across the desert. The talk emphasizes that satipaṭṭhāna is not a technique but a way of life, with everyday mindfulness being central rather than peripheral to the practice. This understanding transforms how we approach both formal meditation and daily activity.

Tonight we're going to talk about establishing mindfulness, broadening out our understanding of what the Buddha means by mindfulness and what characterises its practice. We're going to look at this by examining what the Buddha says about how to establish mindfulness, how to get it going, but also what he says about what happens when we lose mindfulness.

We'll start by looking at a single sentence that appears in a number of discourses where the Buddha describes a practitioner beginning his or her formal meditation practice. This is a standard sentence that talks about getting started. He says: "The practitioner sits down, crosses her legs, straightens her back, and establishes her mindfulness directly."

This is the beginning, and you notice that he begins with posture, which is quite interesting. He doesn't give any advice about how to construct the posture; he just describes the practitioner doing it. Presumably he didn't need to, because he lived in a society where people were raised from birth without furniture. Sitting on the floor was as natural for them as collapsing onto a lounge chair would be for us, so there was hardly any need to give an explanation of how to do it.

But still, he emphasises the role of posture. What he describes is a balanced posture with the back naturally straight. This enables two things to happen: it enables the body to relax while at the same time remaining alert. And this gives us a real sense of what we're looking for in a meditation posture. We want relaxation, but we also want alertness. This is what the Buddha is describing.

One way to look at it is to say that we construct a posture of body in order to construct a posture of mind, a posture of attention. This is what the meditation posture gives us—the framework, the foundation for the mind to be balanced and alert. And this reminds us that we practice with our body.

It's interesting that in English-speaking Dharma circles, people often refer to meditation practice as spiritual practice. But as far as I'm aware, there's no word that the Buddha uses in terms of talking about meditation practice that could be reasonably translated as "spiritual." It's very clear, however, that he regards meditation as physical, which we see here.

This is the opening, and then it brings us to mindfulness. The Buddha describes the practitioner: "He establishes his mindfulness directly." Let's look at this expression because there's a lot in it.

First of all, the idea that mindfulness must be established. The original Pāli word comes from the verb *upaṭṭhahati*, which comes from the prefix *upa*, denoting nearness or intimacy, and then the main form of the verb, which comes from the Sanskrit root *sthā*—from which in English we get things like "to stand," "to station," "to stabilise." English is part of the same family of languages as Sanskrit and Pāli, so often you see these familiarities.

When you see a verb based on this root *sthā* (or in Pāli it becomes *ṭhā*), what this implies is a firm grounding or stationing of the mind. Awareness is firmly grounded, stable, stationed. And it's grounded on something, something definite. The *upa* again denotes intimacy, so this relationship with experience is firmly grounded and is intimate. It's very close up.

This is emphasised when the Buddha says the practitioner establishes her mindfulness *directly*. What's translated as "directly" is the adverb *parimukhaṃ*, which means something like "completely facing." *Pari*: completely. *Mukha*: face. So, completely facing the meditation object, or whatever we experience. It's what we would call in English a face-to-face encounter, an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with whatever it is that we are experiencing. It conveys a sense of being firm and direct with how we engage with whatever is happening, regardless of what it is.

In the later Abhidhamma—the systematic psychology and philosophy of early Buddhism where they try to dot every i and cross every t—they talk about mindfulness appearing as the state of confronting, or being face-to-face with an object. It's like: bang, there it is. This is what's happening.

In the terms we've been using, it sounds very much like a description of what we've been calling the grounding object—grounding awareness somewhere, somewhere definite.

So let's have a look at how this might work out. Let's say I'm working on my meditation, whatever it is. Let's say breathing is my meditation object. But let's say my mind is preoccupied by some thinking or other.

Has this sort of thing ever happened to you? And let's say that as time goes by, I'm getting increasingly discontented with the state of my meditation—possibly even getting impatient for someone to ring a bell so I can escape.

Now, this is a fairly typical meditation experience. Clearly, during this experience, I am aware. We've talked a lot about awareness and how elementally fundamental it is. And in this experience, I am aware. I can prove it, because if someone says, "So how was that sitting?" I might say, "It was complete rubbish," and I describe why it's complete rubbish. So I must have been aware, otherwise I couldn't describe it.

But in this experience, my mindfulness is weak—very weak—because my mind is wobbling. It's not firmly grounded, stationed on anything. It's wobbling between at least three distinct fields of experience: there's breathing, there's thinking, there's discontent. I am not directly confronting any of them, but just wobbling between them. The mind is not fixed, it's not established, it's not face-to-face with the situation. It's just floating around it.

But when I am mindful, I establish a firm connection with what's really happening. So if I decided, "OK, this is not good enough, I've got to get the mindfulness going," what would possibly be my response? What could I do about it?

Well, there are different possibilities. Let's just go through a few.

First of all, I might decide that what's governing this condition I'm going through is my attitude—my attitude of discontent and resistance. And that's why I'm half-hearted about the breathing. That's why I'm easily distracted and generally restless. So what to do? I turn towards my discontent. I directly confront it face to face. The discontent becomes my meditation object and I become intimate with it. I establish mindfulness on it. So, I'm away.

Or, another possibility: I might renew my determination to place awareness on breathing, the chosen meditation object, directly engaging with it. I'm just going to face it. I'm just going to go there.

Or I might make the distracting thoughts the meditation object. We're going to talk later in the retreat about using thinking as a meditation object.

Or—and this I think would be the most difficult one—I could make the whole package my meditation object. I could go wide in an open awareness approach and make the complete experience of sitting here and wobbling my meditation object. But again, directly confronting it face to face.

And it's that movement of grounding awareness firmly on something that generates the mindfulness. It doesn't fundamentally matter what that something is. Some meditation objects are easier to work with than others. But in this practice, as we mentioned before, if we ask what is the meditation object of mindfulness meditation, it is everything. But I need to ground awareness firmly on something. And notice that this means I must be actively engaged with the experience. Then mindfulness can emerge.

So this is how the Buddha talks about getting started with mindfulness. And it shows us something about what he thinks the nature of mindfulness is. Because often when the Buddha talks about a meditation practice, he doesn't define it—he describes someone doing it.

So mindfulness, as I think we have mentioned, translates the Pali word *sati*. And this is derived from the verb *sarati*, to remember. So mindfulness—it literally is memory. And it would have been interesting, those early pioneer nineteenth-century translators of Pali into English, coming across this word and trying to work out: what do they mean? I mean, they're sitting cross-legged and they're not moving and they're working on their memories. What?

What is this about? It would have probably discombobulated them for some time.

So mindfulness is memory, but what makes it distinct from the way we normally use memory is this: mindfulness is memory of the present, not the past. And this, of course, is an odd way to use memory for us. So what's the Buddha getting at?

I think a very good example in our culture are the signs that we see in railway stations saying, "Mind the gap." You've seen those signs, haven't you? And what is the sign asking us to do? It's asking us to remember there's a gap between the train and the platform. Now, it's not asking us to complete the journey, go home, make a nice dinner, have a few glasses of red, and then, while cogitating on the nature of the world, remember, "Oh, that's right, there is a gap between the train and the platform." That's not what it's asking us to do. It's asking us to remember there's a gap in the very act of stepping into or out of the train. It's asking us to remember the present. And this is pretty much exactly the way the Buddha means it. So if you see those signs, bow to them as your teacher.

Mindfulness training is memory training, which is quite weird when you think about it. We train ourselves to remember our awareness. And you might remember that we were talking about how we are already aware and it's obvious, but we easily forget awareness. So mindfulness training is training in remembering awareness. We've been using the example of remembering to switch the awareness light on. We notice, "Oh, it's dark." Remember to switch the light on. "Oh, ah, there it is."

And if establishing mindfulness is remembering, then what is losing mindfulness? It is forgetting. When the Buddha talks about losing mindfulness, when he talks about lapses in mindfulness, one term that he uses is muttasati, where mutta is "forgotten," and sati, of course, is mindfulness. And mutta is derived from the verb musiti, to forget, to fall into oblivion. So the opposite of mindfulness is oblivion. And specifically, it's the oblivion that comes from forgetting, which has its own peculiar flavour. Something is here, and then suddenly it isn't, and that moment of loss represents a total absence.

So how does forgetting work? Let's say I'm packing to come to the retreat centre, and my mind's going through all the things I need to remember to bring. There's one particular item I definitely remember to bring, and it's no worries because I can see it right in front of me. I know I've got to remember that. I definitely have to remember that. There's a very clear encounter. And then hours later when I'm unpacking, I'm looking for this particular item, thinking, "I definitely, I definitely..." The bag's empty. I'm shaking it, I'm jumping up and down on it. "I definitely... it must be here, it's got to be here." No, it isn't. I forgot.

Have you ever had that kind of experience? If you look closely at this process, at the moment that I forgot that item, did I have a problem? No. There's nothing the matter whatsoever. Everything's going according to plan. And why is there no problem? Because I cannot discern the existence of any problem in the total absence, which is muttasati, forgotten mindfulness.

Forgotten mindfulness is a state of oblivion. It's a state of delusion in which there is no problem because there is no awareness of any problem, or even any awareness of the possibility of a problem. In other words, when we forget, we are in a situation in which we don't know, and we don't know that we don't know. And it's that which is the essence of delusion.

So the movement from mindfulness into a loss of mindfulness is a movement from memory into forgetting, from clarity into delusion, from wisdom into ignorance. And conversely, the movement from forgetting into mindfulness, into remembering, is a movement from delusion to understanding.

When I finally realised: "Of course. I knew I had to pack that. And I put it on the edge of my desk so that I would see it very easily when it came to pack the little odds and ends. And I never packed it." Suddenly I know the whole situation. Everything is clear.

So mindfulness begins with the movement out of oblivion into clarity, into understanding. *This* is what's going on. In a sense, mindfulness is complete in that very moment. Yet while it's already complete, mindfulness, as we've seen, implies continuity of awareness over time. Awareness arises through memory—"Oh, that's what's happening"—and then it must be extended through time in order to truly become mindfulness.

So mindfulness is threatened by the discontinuity of awareness. "That's right, I must remember to take that." Then it's gone. Hours later: "Oh, I forgot to pack it." That is the discontinuity of awareness—a big gap. Mindfulness is threatened by discontinuity, the discontinuity that comes out of forgetting awareness. And it's cultivated by the continuity of remembering.

This brings us to the practice of mindfulness. The practice we're doing in Pali is called Satipaṭṭhāna, which is another compound word and therefore capable of various translations. But rather than getting bogged down in technicalities, let's just call it establishing mindfulness, or applications of mindfulness. It's what we in English often know as insight meditation. And what it's about, essentially, is changing our view of ourselves and our world—of what we assume we are, what we assume the world is. It does this through cultivating mindfulness.

So we go back to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the discourse where the Buddha goes through this practice, and we look at a passage where he describes essentially the essence of the practice. Now we have said that the meditation object for mindfulness meditation is everything. The way the Buddha talks about this, he says there are four foundations of mindfulness: body, feeling, heart-mind (we'll talk more about this later), and dharma. Essentially, this is a way of classifying experience into four categories that covers everything. We won't go into the technicalities, but we just take it for granted that this covers everything.

So here is the Buddha describing a practitioner doing it: "Here, a practitioner, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body, lives tracking feeling as feeling, lives tracking heart-mind as heart-mind, lives tracking dharma as dharma—ardent, clearly understanding, and mindful." Now he actually repeats the same sentence four times; we've shortened it a bit.

What we notice about this description is that it does not impose any specific meditation object, nor does it specify any particular meditation technique. It says "tracking body as body, mind as mind." So Satipaṭṭhāna, insight meditation, does not represent a meditation technique. What it's referring to is a way of life—a way of life characterized by being awake rather than asleep, of remembering rather than forgetting.

This comes out again in the Buddha's language: "Here a practitioner, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, *lives* tracking body as body, *lives*." The verb is *viharati*. In other words, he's saying this is the practitioner's normal, everyday mind state—not something that you spend a certain amount of time each day on a special cushion or whatever, but something that we do all the time. We live in that state.

I'd also just note "surrendering longing and sorrow for the world." What this is about—longing and sorrow—in Pali you have *abhijjā* and *domanassa*. *Abhijjā* is a word for desire, but it indicates a kind of leaning out of the heart. It's like, "I want." It implies a loss of balance—reaching out, give me, give me, give me. And the word translated as sorrow, *domanassa*, actually covers all forms of psychological pain. Basically it's talking about when we are entangled by what we would call the emotions. We are either distressed or delighted but completely entangled with the situation because of it. The heart and the mind are out of balance.

So we surrender longing and sorrow for the world and live tracking body as body. And you notice that this surrendering is something that goes along with the practice. It's not that we surrender longing and sorrow for the world before we step into the hall

and pick it up again when we leave. We're doing it all the time, because often the meditation object we're working with *is* longing and sorrow for the world. So it's a constant letting go, letting go, letting go.

But the central practice that the Buddha is talking about here is where he says, "surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, she lives tracking body as body." Tracking. This is the essential practice.

The Pali word is *anupassanā*. Sometimes you see this translated as "contemplating." I think that's a terrible translation because it implies thinking about—I will sit down and have spiritual thoughts, and that would be my spiritual practice. The Buddha's not talking about that at all.

The word is *anupassanā*, which again is a compound. There's *passanā*, which is seeing—you'd be familiar with this from *vipassanā*, seeing. And *anu* is a prefix which denotes "along." So seeing, a direct encounter with what's happening right now, seeing along—tracking something, following it over time. This is the essential practice of mindfulness.

It implies, first of all, a deliberate directing of the mind towards something, the establishing, having this direct face-to-face encounter with the experience right now. And then making this relationship, extending this relationship, this direct face-to-face encounter, over a period of time. Tracking body as body.

Anybody remember the Australian movie *The Tracker* that came out? Must be a couple of decades ago. It's set in the deserts of South Australia and it's about an Aboriginal tracker who's being roped in by the police to track another Aboriginal man accused of a crime. You've got three coppers on horses and the tracker is on foot. There's this build-up of tension among the party because the tracker definitely doesn't want to be there.

At some point they're going through the desert and they come to a gibber plain. The camera shows you this rocky, stony section of desert that goes up to a ridge, and you can see as far as the ridge. The tracker stands there and says, "Yeah, he was here about maybe an hour ago. He crossed here and went over the ridge there."

One of the coppers is a young bloke who's very suspicious of this tracker. He says, "This is complete bullshit. He's leading us around. He's just lying to us. He can't possibly know that."

The older copper, who knows this guy, says, "Get down off your horse, stand beside him, and he'll show you."

So the two men are standing there, and the tracker points downwards and says, "Do you see that pebble?" The camera goes down and it's like billions of pebbles. What pebble? The tracker says, "That one." And the camera focuses, and there's one of those pebbles, a little stone that has been moved, because the sand underneath it is just a slightly different colour than the sand around it. It was moist not so long ago, but someone kicked it over.

Then he says, "And do you see that pebble? Yeah. Do you see that stone there? Yeah. Do you see that one? That one, that one, over the ridge."

This is tracking. And this is what we're learning to do in this meditation practice. We're learning to follow, to track the experience as it unfolds over time.

So, what mindfulness does is it remembers. It remembers the present. When we are distracted, we forget the present. We forget we are meditating, or we forget the meditation object. And when mindfulness returns, we remember. We remember we are meditating, or we remember the meditation object.

This remembering implies not just awareness, but awareness of awareness. Here we've been talking about the dyad of awareness and its object. Now we're starting to look at the awareness itself.

As we've been exploring, normally we are aware. We don't have to make any special effort to be aware—we are already aware. We see, we hear, we smell, we taste, we touch, we think. So far so good; we are already aware. But are we aware that we are aware? And are we aware of what we are aware? In brief, are we aware of our awareness? This is the different aspect.

Consider the process of distraction. I am meditating and then I fall into thinking. This is familiar, isn't it? We've all done this before—more than once, is my guess. Now that slide off into thinking, what happens then? I forget. I forget that I'm meditating. So I am distracted, but I don't know that I am distracted. You're all familiar with that, aren't you? You slide off into thinking, you're lost in the thinking, but you don't know that you're lost in the thinking. This not knowing is the essence of distraction and, of course, of delusion.

And then suddenly I know I'm distracted. Whoops, I'm thinking. Have you ever had that experience where suddenly—oh, what a shocker—I've been thinking for the past five minutes? Now, what's the difference between this new experience, knowing I am thinking, and what was going on just a second before, thinking?

When I was caught in thinking, I was aware. Images were flowing through the mind, words flowing through. So when I was thinking, there was awareness. But when I realized, oh, I'm thinking, there's an extra dimension added. There is now awareness of awareness. I recognize awareness as a field within which awareness awares awareness itself. And it's within this wider field that I find mindfulness.

It's a very interesting experience. A moment ago I was distracted and I didn't know. Now I know. So what happened? I remember. And what's the difference between my distracted awareness now that I know I'm distracted and my distracted awareness back then, before I knew? The difference is mindfulness. And mindfulness always contains a quality of recursiveness, of awareness awaring itself.

Sometimes we hear about awareness of awareness as a meditation practice, and it can sound very esoteric and mystical, but it's actually very ordinary and everyday. We just don't notice it. We just take it for granted—like that very ordinary, everyday experience of suddenly realizing, oh, I'm thinking. And we don't realize that is awareness-awaring-awareness.

So, mindfulness remembers awareness. Oh, I'm thinking. Or it remembers the object of awareness—in this case, the meditation object.

and you slide off into distraction, suddenly you know you're distracted and the awareness goes, bang, straight back to the meditation object. Has that ever happened? So there the flavour of remembering is you're remembering the object of awareness, you're remembering the meditation object.

So I remember my awareness—oh, I'm thinking. Or I remember the object of awareness—oh, there it is, back onto the breathing or whatever. These are the two flavours that emerge.

The work of being mindful, of practising mindfulness, is the work of reminding ourselves that we are already aware, or reminding ourselves to be aware of this, my chosen meditation object. So you can see the different styles of the practice. I can give myself something specific to be aware of—this morning we were playing with the breathing, although we were doing it pretty loosely. But you give yourself something specific to be aware of, so the job is to remember this. Or you might have a much more open style of practice where the job is simply to remember awareness itself and you don't particularly care what you're aware of.

These are the two ends of the spectrum: directed awareness, undirected awareness.

Now again, mindfulness is meant to be something to be lived on. It's something to be done in the ordinary and everyday. And of course we get a particular opportunity in a retreat like this where there's nothing else getting in the way and there's nothing else to do anyway, so you may as well be aware.

So the question becomes, when do we remember awareness? And the answer to that question obviously is now. This practice can only be done now. We cannot postpone it for the future when conditions will be better. And we cannot go back to the past and redo our mistakes. All we have is now. All we ever have is now. And the job is to, right now, remember it.

So what is happening now? This is the meditation practice. We talk about various techniques, but when we get down to the basics, it's simply: can we remember what is happening now? The challenge is to remember our awareness. Right now we are already aware, but do we recognise this? Are we awaring?

We gave the example, the question: right now, are you sitting? And of course the answer is yes. How do you know you are sitting? Don't you already know? It's just recognising what you already know. This is switching on the awareness light. Remember what you already know, but may have forgotten. And this remembering is mindfulness. Reminding ourselves that this is happening now is practising mindfulness.

This is the essence of the practice. Just remember: this is happening now. That's it. Very simple. But, as you know, quite difficult.

Any questions?

Today when I was just noticing what I was aware of, there were a number of layers. I was hearing, seeing, there were some thoughts going, and it was a perfectly pleasant combination. Talking about mindfulness as being face-to-face—two questions arise out of that. One is, does that mean that other things just have to wait in the background, wait their turn until they're relevant? And secondly, if it's a matter of remembering, how do we, as it were, know when to shift from one to another? There's the feeling of the sun on your face and your body, which is very pleasant in all of those. And it's very appropriate for different ones to be foregrounded at different stages.

The first part of the question brings up the whole debate among different schools of mindfulness practice. With the classical Burmese approach of Mahasi Sayadaw, it tends to be very go-for-it. But when, for example, Ajahn Chah talks about mindfulness, he talks about it in much more of a kind of wide-opened

not directed—so directed versus undirected. And there's a debate where some people today would say, well, mindfulness actually belongs to the undirected. That's where it really sits.

So here we're really getting into styles of mindfulness practice, I think, rather than mindfulness itself. The way I was talking about establishment tonight was very "oomphy." And partly this is because we're in the early stages of the retreat. Let's fire the engine up here. Let's come in and sit for a reasonable period at a time and just be clear about what's going on.

But taken to an extreme, this can shut out too much, because there's a narrowness of focus on a single aspect of experience and a pushing away of other aspects. Now, it may well be that you go through periods of practice where you do exactly that, because what that does is cultivate the samādhi power which is necessary. But there's also a style which is much more open—especially in the everyday mindfulness that you were talking about. There it's wide open.

But I would suggest that, let's say, I'm moving through the garden. There's the changes within the atmosphere, the view, body sensations, the whole package of shifting elements. It's true that I'm not focused on any one particular thing, but there is a sense of being established on the whole panorama.

I remember my boot camp training in Burma with U Pandita was very much focused on walking. That's what he wanted, because he wanted the students to develop samādhi power. And I can remember going to one interview and saying, "Sayadaw, I'm not noting the grounding object. I'm noting the entire universe. Is that okay?" And he laughed. He said, "You're seeing the whole element."

So sometimes things just open up spontaneously and you get the whole picture. You know the story about the elephant? It's a classic story about blind men who were given the job of describing an elephant. One holds the trunk and says, "It's like a pipe or something." One holds the leg—"It's like a pillar." One touches the side—"It's like a wall." One's holding the tail—"It's a rope." Each of them were right and each of them were wrong, because they were just seeing a part.

So to see the whole elephant is to see the whole picture. There are situations in which this happens spontaneously. The mind will just open out. But you can also practice this, particularly in everyday mindfulness, when you're just cruising around and you're not focused on anything in particular. I would say there is that establishment on the whole field, but it's shifting and changing and moving within it.

And the decision about where to go is usually spontaneous. I think it becomes more natural as you get more experience with it—the flow, the sense of flow, where the awareness should go. You do get foreground-background structure, but with that wide-open style, it's much more fluid than it is if you're doing a formal meditation session, including formal walking meditation if you're doing the classic slow walking.

So there are different styles, and my rhetorical style tonight has got it... well, I was channeling my inner U Pandita.

Any other questions? Is this making any sense? I think it's useful to get a clear sense of what the project actually is. And it is designed very much for everyday awareness.

At the Mahasi Centre, when I went through my boot camp, there was an unspoken—never mentioned, but implicit—hierarchy: sitting is number one, walking is number two, and mindfulness in everyday activity is number three.

If you ever practice with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, he's part of the same lineage, but he's completely flipped it over. The central practice is everyday activity. And formal sitting meditation is number three. So if you go to his retreat centre, if you never turned up to the meditation hall, he wouldn't notice, and he wouldn't care. It's just: are you being mindful?

Whatever you're doing. That's it.

And it's an interesting approach, partly because it's a lot slower for people to gain momentum. It takes a lot longer to really get into it. But once you've got it, it stays with you. Whereas the more focused, directed approach is much faster to get into, but it can have the disadvantage that if you're not in the sheltered workshop environment, you can't do it.

I'll give you an example. The first time Sayadaw taught in Australia, after a couple of days, he asked the managers, "Why isn't anybody talking?" The manager said, "Well, we're on noble silence." He said, "Why?" They replied, "Well, it's a retreat. We're supposed to be on noble silence." He said, "Did I ever say we're on silence?" "Well, no." And so he abolished the silence.

The result was pandemonium. There was a certain group who just went ballistic with the talking. It drove people crazy—people were being driven insane by this. Complaints started flowing toward Sayadaw. Eventually he parked himself in the dining hall, which was the worst during meals. It was just chaotic. He ate his meals there, eyeball to eyeball with the meditators. It did calm everybody down for, I would say, at least twenty seconds. But it didn't work.

Finally he stood up in the dining hall and said, "Look, I am not going to ask you to keep silence. I am not going to do this. One of the most difficult things to be mindful of is speech. If you don't get to practice it here, what chance have you got when you go home? So I am not asking you to keep silence. I'm asking you to be mindful when you speak."

He was so determined on this principle that he was prepared to see the whole retreat dissolve rather than compromise. I must say, I've never followed this example myself. But it really illustrates something about his approach—the centrality that mindfulness is about tracking experience over time. It's not necessarily about sitting in a particular posture and following your breath for thirty minutes. It's about being aware in all your activities.

In this sheltered workshop situation, you've really got the opportunity. Slow down. Be aware of the movements of the body. What's happening in the body? Feel the nature of experience. And up here in this environment, you're really in it. It's wonderful. Track what's happening in your mind as you do this, as you do that. As you move in here, as you move out there. Really practice it, because this is what you take with you when you leave.

If you manage to get a deep samādhi state, you're not taking that with you. That's going to crumble very quickly. But the habit of staying aware in ordinary everyday activity—that you take with you. So really get into it.

CHAPTER 69

Awareness with Breathing (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 44 min

> *In this guided practice session, Patrick Kearney leads practitioners through an experiential exploration of ānāpānasati (mindfulness with breathing), emphasising the distinction between awareness and what is being aware-d. Rather than focusing narrowly on the breath as object, this approach treats breathing as a grounding foundation for investigating the mind that is doing the aware-ing.*
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> *The session introduces the image of awareness 'holding' the breathing, then progressively relaxing that grip to become interested in the broader field of mind within which breathing appears. Kearney explores the Buddhist understanding of mind through the terms mano (mind as sense faculty), citta (the inner container or space of experience), and viññāṇa (awareness itself), noting that while these terms cover the same territory, they illuminate different aspects of mental experience.*
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> *The practice reveals how qualities like clarity, obscurity, interest, and boredom are characteristics of mind rather than of breathing itself. Practitioners are encouraged to notice the movements of mind—how awareness shifts, how objects come and go, and what characterises the mind that is aware-ing. This serves as preparation for insight practice (vipassanā), where understanding how experience works becomes more important than simply achieving stillness. The discussion following the meditation illustrates how individual practitioners navigate this territory differently, reinforcing that meditation cannot truly be taught, only learned through direct exploration.*

This morning we're going to continue with ānāpānasati, mindfulness with breathing. We're using this as our grounding object, as a means of developing a foundation of serenity, so that when the mind becomes sufficiently still and calm, we can turn towards insight.

The way we've been approaching this practice places emphasis on the mindfulness rather than the breathing. That's why we translate it as "mindfulness with breathing" rather than "mindfulness of breathing." We're letting the breathing take care of itself. What we're focusing on is the mindfulness. And as we've been saying, mindfulness presents as the felt continuity of awareness.

If you're looking at the difference between mindfulness and awareness, we've said that we are already aware. Awareness is something which is already happening. We don't have to do anything extra to be aware. It's the mind's function to be aware, and it does so regardless of anything we have to say about the matter. That's one reason why we emphasize the importance of not making too much effort in the practice—because we might find ourselves trying to do something that we're already doing. We just tie ourselves up in knots without really getting very far with the whole thing.

Yet, as we've been talking about and discovering, maintaining awareness is difficult because of the habit we have of forgetting our awareness. The classic example is being distracted by thinking. I'm tracking my meditation object, and then seconds later or minutes later or hours later, I realise that no, I'm not—I'm caught up in thinking. I've been caught up in thinking for some time, but I haven't noticed it. And now I suddenly realise, oh, that's right, I'm thinking. We slide into thinking without knowing we are thinking, which is a very strange experience. I still can't quite wrap my head around it. It happens, but I'm left scratching my head wondering how it happened. It's very puzzling. This is a very normal everyday experience, but isn't it strange when you think about it?

We are lost in thought. We are aware of thinking—we know this because afterwards we can say what we were thinking about. Yet we are not aware of our awareness. Then suddenly we know we are distracted. We are aware of our distraction. We are aware of awareness. Now, we tend to brush over this experience because we're so agitated: "Oh my God, I was distracted, now I've got to get back to the meditation." We don't notice the experience itself and how strange it is. But it is very interesting—that moment when vividly and clearly I am aware of awareness itself.

We can understand this experience in terms of the dyad of awareness and the aware, which we've been exploring. Our habit is always to project all importance into the aware, into the object of awareness. We miss the aware-ing. We just take it for granted. Yet the aware-ing is already available, and sometimes it's quite clear. For example, I realise I am thinking. At that moment, I am both aware of thinking and aware of my aware-ing. Now I know I am thinking. I am aware of the process of thinking. As we go deeper into the practice, one thing we're aiming to do is to become more familiar with this world of aware-ing. This is one way that opens up the mind to the meditation practice.

We've been talking about aware-ing largely in terms of its elemental quality—the presence itself of an object. But aware-ing as a process is more complex than that. I suddenly know I am thinking. Thinking is now vividly present to me, and that presence is the essence of awareness. But there are other things happening in the process of awareing as well.

For example, there is perception. I understand, "Well, that's a thought. It's not a physical experience." If I'm seeing something in my mind's eye, I know, "Oh, that's a thought," as opposed to, "Oh, that's what's happening out in the world." There's perception. There's feeling. "Oh, this is pleasant. Oh, I like this. Oh, I don't like this. This is unpleasant." And so on.

So there's a whole cluster of activity which is part of the broader process of awareing. We've started our understanding of awareing by just looking at the elemental quality of it—pure presence. But when we become familiar with it, we realize there's a lot more happening in this whole process, this whole area of awareing, this area that we call mind. And as we go through the practice, we become more interested in this broader process.

So we're going to do a little meditation experiment where we're going to explore the dyad of awareness and the awared—or awareing and the awared. We're using breathing as the meditation object, and we're going to use an image to get a sense of what it's all about. The image will be of our awareness holding our breathing. It's like you imagine you've got breathing, and the awareness reaches out and holds it and stays with it over a period of time. This is the central image, and as the game progresses we're going to become interested in how tightly we are holding on. In other words, we're going to become interested in the state of the mind which is doing the awareing.

A student asks, "So if we notice at first that the awareness is pretty contracted, we would just loosen the contraction?"

Yes. Once we get a sense of the quality of the awareing, then we can play with it. Am I holding too tight? Am I too loose? Am I too caught up in it? And so on and so forth.

Another student offers, "You have the awareness as a container."

Yes, the image of the container is interesting. Later on we're going to be talking about the concept of citta. There are three key terms that the Buddha uses to talk about mind: mano, citta, viññāṇa.

Mano is literally "mind." It's cognate with our English word "mind." Mano refers to mind as a sense sensitivity. We talk about the six senses, and each sense is a particular kind of sensitivity. Take seeing, for example: there are two little parts of the body that are sensitive to light. Light strikes the body, and it's registered in these two little parts that we call the eyes. So we have the sense of the eye, but the sense is a sensitivity—a sensitivity to a particular form of data, in this case light. The ears are sensitive to sound. They're not sensitive to light; they're only sensitive to sound. And so on through the five sensitivities.

Mind is also a sensitivity. It picks up internal data—thoughts, perceptions, feelings, ideas, concepts. But it also takes in the data from the five physical senses, brings it all together, and creates a world out of it. When the Buddha is talking about mind as a sense, he uses the term mano.

Sometimes he uses the term citta. Here he's talking about the inner space, the inner container—using your expression—in which all of this is happening. And when he's talking about liberation, for example, he'll say it's the citta which is liberated.

And sometimes he uses the term *viññāna,* which is awareness itself. And in one text he says these three—*viññāna, citta, mano*—are essentially the same. They're synonymous terms. They cover the same territory, just depending on what angle you're looking at it from.

So in our case, we're looking at *viññāna,* awareness itself. And we start with the purely elemental, in its most basic simplicity: what is it? It's presence—the presence of something. But when we start to look at this quality of being present to the world, we can see that actually there's a lot involved here. It's quite complex. There's a lot of activity going on. So it becomes broader. The terms that we use can be a bit loose in that sense, but basically we're moving from the most elemental aspect of awareness—the pure presence itself—and we're opening up to the broader field of how we recognize a world and how we build a world, how we respond to it, what we are doing with this world.

Question from student: So is that like integrating the specific focus into a much broader awareness and seeing how it fits in relation to that, and modifying, fine-tuning your focused awareness according to how that fits?

Yep. That's pretty much it. And this is part of the journey into insight, into understanding, which is what the mindfulness practice is all about. If we were doing a straight serenity practice, we wouldn't be interested in all this stuff. It would simply be: here's the breathing, just hang onto it like a dog hangs onto a bone. And just use it to get more and more still—deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper. Period. That's it.

But if we're practicing for insight, we want a bigger picture. We want to see: how does all this work? What's going on here? So this is the insight project. But to do that, we do need a foundation of serenity. The mind needs to be clear and still.

Okay, let's stop theorizing. I'm sure you're fed up with all this blah, blah, blah. You just want to meditate. You're just sitting there ready to go like racehorses at the starting block.

Settle awareness in your body. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body. And from there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact on your cushion, your chair, your bench. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Now track the movements of your breathing. Aware of your breathing. Be interested in what is happening to your breathing. It is as if you are holding the movements of your breathing in your hand, keeping your hand steady and watching what is being held within it.

Now relax your grip on your breathing so your hold is more gentle, less intense. Allow yourself to become sensitive to the broader field of awareness around your breathing. Become interested in the space within which being aware of breathing happens.

Don't get too close to your breathing. Step back and give it room. Step back into your awareness with breathing.

Your breathing is moving and changing. Is your awareness also moving and changing? Become interested in your awareness—not so much what you are aware of, but how you are aware. In other words, begin to be interested in the mind that is aware of breathing.

For example, is it easy to be aware of breathing? Or difficult? Do you find breathing clear or subtle? Is your mind bright or dull? Are you working hard or feeling ease? You are aware of breathing. What characterizes this mind which is aware?

Sometimes breathing is clear. Sometimes breathing is not clear. Sometimes breathing is interesting. Sometimes breathing is boring. Clarity, obscurity, interest, boredom—all these are aspects of mind, not of the physicality of breathing.

As you are aware of the movements of breathing, can you sense the movements of the mind which is aware of breathing?

Don't do anything with your breathing. Just hold your mind steady. Breathing comes and goes. Be interested in this without clinging to it. Your mind changes all the time. Be interested in this without clinging to it. Awareness moves from one object to another. Be interested in these movements without trying to stop them.

Don't force anything. If breathing slips out of view, let it go. Just notice that it slipped away and what replaced it. Things come and go. Let them. Just stay aware that things are coming and going.

Open your awareness to the space within which things come and go. This is the space of your mind. What do you find in this space of your mind? Isn't it awareness itself? What is the nature of this awareness? Can you be aware of awareness?

We could see this practice as first establishing a physical posture, and from there establishing a posture of awareness. Then we become interested in that posture of awareness—even more interested in that than in breathing. And then we let breathing do what it wants.

If you get lost in thought, come back to your physical posture. Then come back to breathing. When you feel settled and stabilized, relax your hold on your breathing and open up to the mind itself, letting objects of awareness come and go as you maintain your posture of awareness.

Now, how did it go?

"With the visualization of the hands holding the breath, I didn't ever get a sense that I was holding the breath too tightly. It felt like my hands were covering the breath. And when I was losing my focus on the breath, it felt like my hands were sort of dissolving—not in the way that you've used the word dissolve, as in primary and secondary object

dissolve and there's just awareness. It was more like my hands were dissolving and I was losing that hold of the breath. So I felt I needed to bring my hands back in again to cup, to hold the breath.

"And then when you were saying to become aware of the space around breath, I felt I needed to—I realized I was holding it out there. It was a little bit distant. I needed to bring it inside of me so I could allow it to be inside with all of the rest that was going on around.

"And then as it was going on, I saw the image of being at the optometrist getting your eyes tested. They have the letters and they put these lenses in and they flick a lens and they say, 'Which is clearer? Lens one or lens two?' Have you had that experience where they flick this thing? It felt like when you were saying to understand the characteristic of the mind, I was trying to understand the characteristic of the lens that was clicking across, because the lens didn't change."

Using this as a metaphor. My breathing, yes, it changes, but the breathing is still there. Experience is still there. But it was the quality of the thing that was coloring my mind. Sometimes it was a bit fuzzy, sometimes it was clear, sometimes it was fuzzy, sometimes it was clear—like that lens that goes back and forth. And yeah, just trying to see that all within one great big container of awareness, and then trying to get the sense that there's another awareness that's aware of all of that that's going on."

"It sounds like it got a bit complicated."

"It might have, but it feels like life. Life is a bit complicated. Experience gets a bit complicated."

"But it held you. It held your attention."

"It held me. To varying degrees. There was the fuzz at times, and then there was the question: what do I need to do to move it back to the clarity?"

"It sounds like, because you weren't holding tightly to begin with, when I said relax your hold, it got too fuzzy. So you had to actually restore some bit of hold onto it."

"Yeah, bring it back in."

"But it sounds very good. The purpose of all these suggestions is just throwing out concepts in the hope that the mind will kind of bite on something and find it useful. And so I think that happened for you. It got you on a journey of seeing things about the nature of the mind which is doing the aware-ing. So that's very good. That's learning to bring the focus point of interest away from the object itself to the mind aware-ing the

object. And that shift is the central thing. Because then you get a sense of there really is this interplay between the two all the time. Sometimes it's the object which holds the attention. Sometimes it's the mind which is the aware-ing that holds the attention. Sometimes there's a flow between them. Sometimes there's a narrow focus on one aspect. Sometimes it's a big picture on the whole thing. All of these are just part of the natural movements. But yeah, I'd say you did quite well with that. Wombat stamp?"

"Yeah, definitely a wombat."

"Well, I was thinking of that, but I was thinking I should get a wombat stamp, because it was my skillful guidance that got you there."

"Well, we will give you a wombat stamp."

"I think some people in this room will be thinking, 'Wombat stamp? No chance. I had no idea what he was talking about.' Because that always happens. If you're talking about a meditation process, there's always going to be a certain proportion of the people who are thinking, 'What the hell is he talking about? I've got no idea whatsoever.'

This is why I like to say that it is impossible to teach meditation. It's just too individual. It is possible to learn it. It is impossible to teach it. So all I'm doing is tossing out possibilities. What you make of them is up to you."

Another student raised their hand. "So the hands was a beautiful image. I thought it was really powerful. But earlier today you were talking about walking meditation, and how if you slow down your meditation after walking, you get too rigid in the body. So even though I felt the hands was a good way to displace my intense focus on the breath—to help get a bit of distance—I still latch onto it. And I'm even noticing that now as I'm talking, there's still this desire to control and strangle the breath. I can't just allow it. So stepping back into the container of bigger awareness, I felt the continuity is found. It's easy, but it's like I have to trick my mind into pretending I'm not noticing the breath in order to be able to notice it without manipulating it. So I'm really struggling with that."

And all of that is mind, not breath. It's your relationship to the breathing. It's the concepts that are put on top of the breathing. And the habitual reactions that emerge once you start to notice the breathing—how the mind responds, including the habitual responses that come up.

Then there's also the aspects of physicality. Any tension that you habitually hold in the body, that will emerge once you start to pay attention. So we've got this complex interplay between body and mind that's going on all the time.

And sometimes, particularly with breathing, you've got to play tricks with it so that it doesn't get tight. Sometimes it's like you settle down to do mindfulness with breathing in which you're not going to be interested in the breathing at all. You're just going to be —I'm not looking at you. No, I'm not looking in your direction. I'm just aware of the whole body. Oh, you happen to be there. Well, that's okay. I'll just look the other way. Sometimes you've got to play tricks like that. And somehow it stimulates the mind into not going where it normally wants to go.

And all of that is working with mind. You're using breathing as the opportunity to work with the mind. So this is part of the rhythm between awaring and the aware. It moves back and forth very differently for each person.

Anyone for whom this made no sense whatsoever? I can feel the vibe. But we won't pursue it.

So again, I don't know if I've emphasised this, but when we do these exercises in the morning, they are games. Play with them. Don't take them seriously. Just play and see what happens. And if you find something useful, you can pursue it. If it's not useful, you can forget about it.

Good luck.

CHAPTER 70

What is Real

Patrick Kearney · 34 min

> *In this foundational talk from a vipassanā retreat, Patrick Kearney addresses the central question driving insight meditation: what is actually real? Drawing from the Dvayatānupassanā Sutta, he presents the Buddha's radical claim that what the world considers true, awakened practitioners see as false, and vice versa. This reversal of ordinary perception lies at the heart of the meditative project.*
>
> *Kearney examines how our view of reality is conditioned by factors beyond our control—birth circumstances, personal sensitivities, and the accumulated effects of kamma vipāka (action and its ripening). Central to this conditioning is moha or avijjā (delusion), which causes us to chase after what is not real and what does not satisfy. The talk explores how fantasy, fueled by emotion, creates a convincing sense of reality that dissolves upon examination. Thoughts charged with emotion survive presence longer than random mental wanderings, but even these cannot withstand sustained awareness.*
>
> *The practical instruction offered is elegantly simple: what is real is what survives the practice of presence. Rather than battling distraction as an enemy, practitioners are encouraged to recognize the natural flow between directed and undirected awareness, between presence and absence. Kearney shares his pivotal encounter with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita in Burma, who taught that while continuous awareness seems impossible, being aware of what is happening now is always possible. This immediacy—radical presence to whatever is arising—ultimately reveals that dukkha itself is not real, dissolving in the light of sustained awareness.*

Tonight we're going to talk about the question: what is real?

We're asking this question because the kind of meditation we're practicing is what in the tradition is called vipassanā bhāvanā, the cultivation of insight, or what we call insight meditation. If we are practicing for insight, the motive that we have is that we want to know what is really going on. And this project assumes that right now we do not know what is going on, that we are mistaken in how we see ourselves and how we see our world.

From the Buddha's perspective, how we see ourselves and our world is conditioned by multiple events which are out of our control. There are the circumstances in which we were born, including the place, gender, native intelligence, and so forth. Then there's the particular mix of sensitivities and capabilities that each one of us brings

with us. And of course, as we progress through life, our view is also being conditioned by the choices that we've made over time and the kind of life that we have led. This last one is all about what the Buddha calls kamma vipāka, action and its ripening.

For the Buddha, one major thing that conditions our view and our way of life is what he calls moha or avijjā, which gets translated as ignorance or delusion or illusion. Because of this condition—and we have no choice in the matter, this is simply human nature—we tend to believe things that are not true. For example, in our culture most people are conditioned to believe that our happiness and welfare are based on our income. But are they? Or does the dedicated pursuit of consumerism tend to lead in another direction?

If we are deluded, or if we live in an illusion, which is what the Buddha assumes, this means that we think we know what's going on, but we don't. As a result, we chase after what is not real, thinking that it is real. We chase after what does not satisfy, thinking it does satisfy. But for the Buddha, what we think is real is not.

There are a number of passages where he talks about this, but we'll just have this one. This comes from the Dvayatānupassanā Sutta, the Twofold Consideration. The Buddha says: "Whatever the world regards as 'this is true,' cultivated practitioners have clearly seen realistically and with complete understanding as 'this is false.' This is the first consideration. Whatever the world regards as 'this is false,' cultivated practitioners have clearly seen realistically and with complete understanding as 'this is true.' This is the second consideration."

This is one example of how the Buddha says that we don't know what's going on. This is the normal human condition. And this implies that what's actually happening may be what we least expect. This further implies that if we are to discover what is really going on, we have to be wary of our assumption that we already know, that we know what's going to happen next, for example. We need to be very careful in our practice because what we think will happen won't, and what we think is happening is not. As the practice matures, we are taken by surprise. Personally, I think a willingness to be surprised is essential for this practice.

So that's the problem that the Buddha lays out. What can we do about it? How do we find out what's going on?

We do this by practicing presence. We've been talking about this from the very beginning. This is sati, mindfulness practice—the felt continuity of awareness, or we could call it sustained presence. What we're learning to do is to be deeply, intimately present

to what is happening now without being led astray by any assumption that we already know what's going on. We train ourselves to be alert only to what is present. We train to stay with this which is present now and track it over time to see what it does.

When we start doing this, we quickly make certain discoveries. We learn, for example, that staying present is very difficult. In fact, most of the time, we are absent. We do something very simple, like following our breathing, and we find ourselves caught up in a fantasy. Gradually, we come to realize that most of the time, we are not here. A very important part of what we've called the secondary object is to show us, to demonstrate to us, that most of the time we are absent. No wonder we don't know what's going on.

Most of the time, or at least certainly a lot of the time, we are caught up in fantasy—in a situation that we take to be real, and right now we take it to be real. But then later we realise it was not real; it was fantasy. It can take a long time for us to accept that our fantasies are not real, because when we're caught up in them, they seem real. We may be filled with anticipation about what will happen in the future. Our fears...

About the future, our hopes, our expectations. But when we are clear, we can see that none of this is real. It's obvious that this is today, not sometime in the future. Yet when we are lost in fantasy about next week, we are convinced—because we are absent—that next week is real, even more real than today. And then at some point we realise, no, that's just a fantasy. We know that it really is today, not next week. But for a while, we were fooled.

We are fooled especially when our fantasies are fed by the power of emotion. That makes them seem particularly real. I might be fantasising a story about the future, and it's fairly easy to recognise that's not real—that's just a story I'm telling myself. But the emotion generated by the fantasy, or the emotion that feeds the fantasy, that is real because we are experiencing it now in the present. The fantasy is about the future, but the emotion is being directly experienced here and now in the sentient body. And the fantasy gets its sense of reality from the power of present emotion.

Even when we snap out of the fantasy, the emotion may stick around for some time before it fades away. And because it does eventually cease, we can look back and appreciate that that too was not real. So we were fooled again, but this time for longer.

We tend to get caught up in fantasy. So how do we know what's actually going on? How do we know what is real? For the purposes of this practice, we could say that what is real is what survives the practice of presence. When we come to working with the elements, we'll get a sense of this. But take, for example, the distraction of random

thoughts, which is pretty common. The moment we realise we're caught in them, they just evaporate immediately. They cannot survive presence, even for a moment. So they're definitely not real.

But when thoughts are charged by emotion, they survive longer. There's a sense in which we could say emotion is more real than just thoughts. But even emotion cannot survive presence for very long. When we are present, the false evaporates. What survives presence is real.

Now, this is a gradual process because our delusion has depth. We snap out of one illusion only to find ourselves in another one. This is because we are in the habit of being absent most of the time. And this brings us to the problem of distraction.

One of my favourite examples when talking about distraction is driving down familiar streets and suddenly realising that I have no memory of the previous three blocks. If I find myself in that situation and ask, well, what happened exactly? I was driving and present to my driving, and then, without warning, suddenly I'm absent—I'm out to lunch, as they say. I continue driving in that state of absence until suddenly, again without warning, I'm present. I know I am present in part because I can look back and realise that in the past I was absent from the scene. I am now present to my previous absence. This is an experience of what we would normally call distraction. And of course, when we practice meditation, we really get a chance to study distraction.

So why are we so easily distracted? If we go back to the driving experience, if the streets were entirely unfamiliar to us, if we were carefully navigating our way and anxious to avoid getting lost, would we be so easily distracted? Probably not. The key to the example is that the streets we are driving down are familiar. We know them like the back of our hand. We don't need to make any effort to navigate. We already know where we are and where we are going. At that point, habit snaps in and we drift off into thinking.

If we look at what most often destroys the quality of our engagement with the present, I think fundamentally it's habit. People sometimes say that the problem they have when they meditate is distraction. I don't think distraction is the problem at all. It's not the obstacle to our meditation practice. It provides a great deal of the content of our meditation practice.

The obstacle is habit. And habit contains the assumed conviction that we know what is going on. It also contains the responses that come from that assumption. So habit is central to delusion. When we're lost in habit, we react without awareness because we assume we already know what's going on. We go to sleep and then we act out of that oblivion.

So in the practice, it's very important that we refuse to take anything for granted—especially what we take to be real, to be normal. Because what is our sense of normality? It's the product of our blindness and our habitual responses. And as our practice deepens, we uncover what it is that conditions us and our sense of reality. These are our buried assumptions, our unconscious drives and needs. These are what the Buddha calls *āsavas*, which could be translated as influences. They come out of the deeper reaches of the mind, of the unconscious mind.

So our challenge when we're doing the practice is to not take anything for granted, but to stay radically present to what is happening now.

We often respond to distraction by dismissing it as an interruption to our meditation practice. We think that our meditation experience can be cleanly divided into two aspects: meditation object, which is good, and distraction, which is bad. But when we have that attitude, we're missing the point. The point is to find out what is really going on, including what's really going on with distraction. Because a lot of the time, that is what's really going on.

So it's important not to dismiss distraction, but simply return to presence. And of course, returning to presence includes distraction, because sometimes what is present is distraction. It's not a question of avoiding distraction, which is basically impossible anyway. It's a matter of cultivating presence. That's the key point. Learn to be present to distraction by recognising now what is happening. Now. The image we've been giving is: switch on the light of awareness, and switch it on now.

As we practice, one thing that structures our practice is what we've been calling directed and undirected awareness. When we direct awareness, we make a choice to turn towards and aware something. This is our meditation object. But when we do this, you probably notice that our mind fights us. It wants to roam wherever it decides. We do not decide to slide off into distraction—our mind decides. And it follows the well-worn paths of habit, habits that have been cultivated over decades. So we find ourselves in a struggle between meditation on the one hand and distraction on the other, and often we feel that we're on the losing side.

What's the alternative? One possibility, as we were playing around with this morning, is to play with the spectrum between directed and undirected awareness. When we're sensitive to the movement between these two, we find a flow between presence and absence and presence again. This flow is just part of nature. It's to be accepted as what's really going on, and it's therefore worthy of study.

When we are not sensitive to this spectrum, when we try to hold on to directed awareness exclusively, we find ourselves in a hierarchy of meditation object versus distraction, where again meditation object is good, distraction is bad. We try to avoid distraction, and when we realise we are distracted, we run away from that experience to something more acceptable. We may end up creating a situation in which meditation is work, and we want to take regular holidays. And worse, meditation can become a war in which the enemy is ourselves, and so we're bound to be on the losing side.

But instead of that, what we could do is cultivate recognition of what we already know. Cultivate recognition of what is already here. We played around with that with the recognition of posture. So right now, am I sitting? Do I know that I am sitting? Of course I do. I already know. But perhaps I forgot. How difficult is it to remember?

Not so difficult. And once I remember, do I have to deliberately direct awareness toward sitting? Well, I could. Or I could recognize what I already know.

Do we have to get back from somewhere, or have we already arrived?

When we learn to recognize what we already know, when we remember awareness itself, we may find ourselves in a situation where we don't have to struggle to maintain a practice. We're not struggling to be present. We are simply recognizing that we are already present.

So this brings us back to presence itself. And presence involves both directed and undirected awareness. If we place too much emphasis on directed awareness, we can find ourselves bouncing between meditation object and distraction, along with the attitudes of judgment that accompany this. But when we are present to the spectrum, to the flow between directed and undirected awareness, we may find a continuity between presence and absence. They're no longer opposites, but more like different sides of the same coin.

Because absence is inevitable. The real issue becomes how we transition between presence and absence and back again. And in this transition there's no need for any hierarchy of superior and inferior. There's no need for any judgment of ourselves or of our experiences being adequate or inadequate. There's just the flow of awareness, recognized now.

And of course, as we talk about this, we're reminded of the principle that presence is more important than what is present. In fact, we could say that our obsession with distraction is one aspect of our obsession with the content of our experience. We think certain things should be happening and certain other things should not. But in mindfulness practice, the important thing is presence itself, not what we are present to.

So that we are distracted does not matter. What matters is that we learn to become present—for example, to our distraction, whenever that is happening.

And of course, we can only be present to what is happening now. So presence involves immediacy, and immediacy does not care what is present, whether we think of it as distraction or whether we think of it as meditation object. Our meditation object can be useful because it provides a stable point from which we can look out at what is happening now, at the flow of experience. There's a sense in which our meditation object gives us something to do while we wait for something to happen. And what are we waiting for? We're waiting for what is already happening, which usually we're too busy to notice.

Immediacy is concerned only with now and with what is happening now. So don't get so caught up in progress that you miss what is happening now because you're waiting for the meditation to come good sometime in the future. Don't get trapped in images of what should be happening. Our question is, what is happening? Because what is happening is what is real.

Which of course brings us back to where we started.

The first time I got a sense of this was in 1984, when I first went to Burma. I'd spent a couple of years in India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal because Burma had been shut down for meditators. All the meditators had been expelled in 1982, just when I was about to go. Bad karma, bad timing.

At that period, you could only enter Burma on a one-week tourist visa. There were simply no meditation visas. So eventually I gave up and arrived on my one-week tourist visa. I went to the Mahasi Centre and basically knocked on the door and said, "Here I am, let me in." And they did.

There was a new teacher for the foreign students. He was also the head teacher of the whole place, and that was Sayadaw U Pandita. Because he was busy, he had one hour a day in which to teach the foreign meditators. At the time, there was one foreign meditator. That was me. So I had an hour to hang out with him each morning. It was a very interesting introduction to the whole thing.

After a few days—I don't know why he did this—but he decided to summarize the practice for me.

He said, "Your job as a yogi is to be aware of everything that happens throughout the day, from the moment you wake up in the morning to the moment you fall asleep at night, right down to the blinking of your eyes. That's the job."

What I thought was: *That is impossible.*

What I said was: "Yes, Sayadaw."

Because I'd only been there for a few days, but I had learned that vital lesson—that this is the only appropriate response to a Sayadaw.

So I went off and gave it a go. I gave it my best shot. And after a day or two, I could conclude without any doubt that it really is impossible. But what I realised was possible is to be aware of what is happening *now*. That's possible. That's always possible. Or, to be more precise, that's possible now.

This is a crucial lesson in doing this practice. We talk about the craft of meditation and we spend time learning it. We talk about grounding object, secondary object, directed awareness, undirected awareness, awareness and the aware, and all of this. But what it comes down to is: something is happening now. That's it. What is it? It's that simple. And in a sense, that radical—so radical that actually we're very slow to pick up that this is really what it's about.

Now, the aim of the practice, traditionally, is regarded as the experience of nibbāna. And nibbāna—or in Sanskrit and English, nirvana—is the complete cessation of dukkha, of pain.

As we've seen, the Buddha assumes that we are deluded, that we don't know what is going on. For him, that's the normal human condition. And because of our delusion, we generate suffering for ourselves and for others. Once we get a sense of this, we come to the practice of the Dhamma because we hope to do something about this situation. That's why we're here and not at the pub.

So we are driven by our dukkha, which means dukkha sets our agenda. However, the Buddha also says that dukkha is not real. This is one of the more radical aspects of his teaching. Dukkha does not survive presence. Our problem feeds on our absences. And the more continually and radically present we are, the more our problem dissolves. Ultimately, our problem is not real.

And if we ask, well, what *is* real? It's this. What's happening now. We could call it immediate intimacy, about which nothing can be said, because any words that we weave around it are just words woven around—not the fact itself. And this now is already available.

So the practice is to take refuge in the present, and when we do that, what we will discover is that our suffering dissolves.

Of course, presence cannot be postponed. Presence is not something that is going to happen tomorrow or next week or when I'm ready for it or after things calm down. Presence is happening now, or it's not happening at all.

So please use this retreat to cultivate presence. And if you want any hints about when to do this—it's now. Don't forget now. Now. But don't make a big deal out of it either. Just remember awareness. Now.

That pain arises because of conditions, and it ceases because of conditions. The chief condition that sets the whole ball rolling is presence. To be intimately present with our pain—this is powerful.

And of course, when the Buddha talks about dukkha in the dharmic sense, he's not talking about things like physical pain, like a sickness that causes physical pain. He's talking about psychological pain. He's talking about how we respond to physical pain, how we respond to the disasters of life. That's what he means when he says the problem is not real, not fundamental.

To be human is to be identified with a body which is marching relentlessly towards sickness, ageing, and death. This could make a person depressed if they thought about it. But here it is. And it's possible to live a fully flourishing life in the midst of this condition.

This is the cessation of dukkha.

CHAPTER 71

Impermanence of Breathing (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 59 min

> *In this guided practice session, Patrick Kearney transitions from the settling, serenity-focused approach of early retreat practice toward insight meditation (vipassanā). The key shift involves cultivating investigation and curiosity—the second of the awakening factors (bojjhaṅga)—rather than simply calming the mind. Through careful attention to breathing, practitioners are guided to notice change itself: how in-breaths differ from out-breaths, how each breath is new rather than a continuation of the last, and how the observing mind itself is constantly shifting.*
>
> *Kearney introduces the profound Buddhist understanding of impermanence (anicca) as more radical than simple change—it is the complete cessation of one thing and arising of another, like reciting the alphabet where A disappears entirely when B appears. This understanding challenges our deeply conditioned perception of permanence (nicca saññā), which we have cultivated since birth to create a stable, navigable world. The teaching addresses the common meditation experience of distraction, reframing it: rather than trying to return to how things were, we recognize that return is impossible because the past has completely disappeared. We have already returned—to this present moment, whatever it contains.*
>
> *The session includes rich discussion with practitioners about observing the observing mind, the relationship between body sensations and mental states, and how cognitive and affective dimensions of experience interweave. Kearney emphasizes that whatever arises in practice is valid—there is no correct experience one is supposed to have. The primacy of one's own experience remains paramount, as this perception of impermanence becomes the gateway into insight regarding the three characteristics: anicca, dukkha, and anattā.*

So this morning we're going to continue with anapanasati, mindfulness with breathing, but we're going to put a slightly different spin on it.

In the first few days of the retreat, the emphasis is on settling down. We once summarised the practice as settle awareness in the body and then see what happens. The settling awareness in the body is serenity, and seeing what happens is insight. So we've been looking at mindfulness with breathing primarily as a serenity approach, with the emphasis on settling into the body, settling into the experience of the breathing.

Now we're going to do the same practice, but we're going to edge towards the insight end of the spectrum, which in practice means investigation, or curiosity, becomes more important than before. This is something that characterises insight meditation, or meditation for insight. What drives it really is the quality of curiosity. This is the second of the awakening factors. It lives right next door to mindfulness.

We were talking last night about how, from the Buddhist perspective, we think we know what's going on, but we're wrong. That gives us a problem and a project. We want to find out, well, what is going on? That's investigation. That's curiosity. And if we've got that curiosity, if we've got that urge to understand, this is what drives the whole insight project. Whereas the serenity project is basically how do I become ever more still, calm, peaceful, but not necessarily much in the way of curiosity. People who get attracted to, get drawn to insight practices tend to be people who have this characteristic curiosity about what the hell is going on here.

So let's begin.

Settle awareness in your body. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body, the hardness and the firmness that you feel there. Lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders. Balance your head and become aware of what is happening throughout your body.

At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact at your base. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame, there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Breathe and relax. Feel your body, your whole posture, from the base to the top of your head. You can feel a field of sensations and movements. These sensations and movements are already happening. Notice that you are not doing anything to make them happen. They are already happening.

Now begin to be aware of the movements of your breathing, the movements of in-breath and out-breath. Are you trying to be aware of your breathing? Don't try. You already know you are breathing. Are you trying to make these movements happen? Don't try. The movements are already happening.

You may feel you need some special meditation-style breathing that will take you to where you want to go. But you don't. You just need to notice what you already know. Breathing in and breathing out.

As you feel your breathing, breathing in and out, can you notice any difference between in-breath and out-breath? Sometimes there is in-breath. Sometimes there is out-breath. Are in-breath and out-breath the same? Or are they different from each other?

Is this in-breath new? Or a continuation of the last one? Is this out-breath new? Or a continuation of the last one?

By now you have been aware of a number of in-breaths and out-breaths. Are the various in-breaths the same as each other, or different? Are the various out-breaths the same as each other, or different?

Notice how you are now aiming your awareness toward the fact of change itself. Instead of being interested only in your breathing, you are opening up to the fact of change as illustrated by breathing. Breathing changes. Can you direct awareness more towards the changing than toward breathing?

At the centre of your awareness is the breath, which is one single thing. This one single thing is changing, yet it remains the breath. This is what the Buddha calls change while enduring—something is changing, yet it remains that distinct something. Focus on change while enduring. It's the same thing, breathing, yet you can see it changing. So is it really the same thing? Or does it turn into something else?

And now step back with your awareness and open up to your mind which is tracking breathing—your mind which is aware. Is this mind which is aware of breathing also changing? For example, sometimes mind is focused, sometimes it is distracted. Sometimes mind is vague, sometimes it is clear. Sometimes mind is interested, sometimes it is bored.

Let the movements of breathing move from the centre of your field of awareness to the periphery, and let your aware mind move to the centre. As you continue to practice, how is your mind now? Is it stable? Does it stay the same over time? Or is mind itself changing? Is your experience of mind shifting from one flavour to another?

As you continue to practice, how is your breathing now? Is it stable? Does it stay the same over time? Or is breathing changing? Is your experience of breathing shifting from one flavour to another?

So you can see that in this exercise we start to get interested in the fact of change. Did anybody notice that? A little bit? This is the perception of impermanence.

We've been talking about the dyad of awareness and the object of awareness. And once we become familiar with it, we can see that no part of this dyad is still. Both aspects of this dyad are changing all the time. And this is, as we said, the perception of impermanence, *anicca saññā*. And it's this perception that constitutes for the Buddha the entry into insight. This is the gateway for him.

So if we talk about insight for the Buddha, he's not talking about psychological insight. He's not talking about finally figuring out why I've never liked my father or mother or whatever. He's talking about seeing into the three characteristics of experience: that all experience is changing, all experience fails to ultimately satisfy, and all experience is neither me nor mine.

These are the three characteristics—*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*—always listed in that order. So if we're using mindfulness of breathing as our vehicle into insight, we use breathing to open up to the fact of change, which is what we were playing around with this morning.

These three characteristics are linked with three perceptions: the perception of impermanence, of change; the perception of pain or unsatisfactoriness; and the perception of not-self. Here we're talking about, in particular, the perception of change.

And notice that it is a perception. Perception is something that we learn over a period of time. It's something that we practice. It doesn't simply fall from heaven. As far as the Buddha is concerned, we have been training ourselves in the perception of permanence

since birth, or from his perspective, from before birth. This is *nitya-sanyā*, the perception of permanence, of the absence of change. And we've learned this in very basic ways.

For example, when we look into a mirror, we've learned to recognize the face looking back at us to be the same face that looked back at us yesterday, or last week, or last year. We've learned to recognize the emotion that arises for us today to be the same emotion that arose for us yesterday, or last week, or last year. And we've trained ourselves to recognize that it's arising for the same person. All of this is perception. All of it is something we've developed, something we've been cultivating over time.

This perception is very, very useful, because what it does is build for us a stable world. The world is stable, predictable. I know who I am in it. I know who these other people are. I know how things work. I can navigate my way through my life. So, using the Buddha's language, we cling to permanence. And we find impermanence threatening. We resist it. Instinctively, we pull away from it.

One reason why it's threatening—and we'll talk more about this later—is because when the Buddha talks about impermanence, *anicca*, not permanent, he's talking about more than just change. This morning we've been playing around with it in terms of change. Is this changing? Is that changing? But when the Buddha talks about impermanence, he doesn't just mean that people and things change. He's talking about something much more radical.

Impermanence is more like one thing ceasing and another thing beginning. It's like reciting the alphabet. If we recite the alphabet, we go A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and so on. It is not that A turns into B. It's that when B appears, A has already disappeared. A does not become B, and B does not become C. In other words, the past has already completely disappeared. Right now, we are already new.

But we don't see this, or if we do see it, we resist it and push it away. We think we can go back to A. And we want to do this because we want to make it better somehow. But we cannot, because it's already disappeared.

So what we find is that sometimes we unexpectedly find ourselves at B. For example, we're tracking our meditation object—let's say the breath—and we are thrown into distractions. At first, we don't know that we are distracted. And then we realize, oh, I'm distracted. I've lost my meditation object. In other words, thinking we are at A, we realize we have arrived unexpectedly at B. And what do we do then? Usually, we try to get back to our meditation object as quickly as possible. We find ourselves at B and we try to get back to A.

This comes out in the way we talk about meditation practice. Someone wants to be optimistic about how things are going, and they might say, "I'm still distracted, but I'm getting back to the meditation object much more quickly now." Have you ever said that to anybody, or thought it to yourself?

Now, what are we missing here? It is impossible to get back to the meditation object. If I try to return to the meditation object, what is it that I'm trying to get back to? It's a remembered image of how things were in the past, before I was distracted. We try to return to our meditation object as it was before we were distracted. Or we try to return to the meditation that we had before we were distracted. Or we try to return to ourselves before we were distracted. In other words, we find ourselves at B and we try to get back to A. But this is impossible, because the past does not exist.

We cannot return to what happened before, even a moment before, because all we have is now. We have already returned. We are already here, and only here.

I think it's very useful when dealing with the fact of distraction to remember: do not attempt to return to your meditation object. Do not attempt to return to what was present. Instead, recognise what is already present. Recognise an awareness that is already here.

In the moment you realise you are distracted, recognise you have already returned. To what? To this distraction. The fact of it, the flavor of it, the feel of it, the texture of it, the compulsion of it, the yearning of it, the pain of it, the pleasure of it. From this point, which is here, that's where we begin the journey to the grounding object, which may be breathing or maybe something else.

This is the return to awareness, and it involves a willingness to accept whatever is happening now regardless of whether or not it is part of our agenda. What happens in the meditation practice has got nothing to do with our agenda. We are not in charge. What's important is this now. And when we start to pay attention, we may begin to recognise that this now is already different, already new. The only question is: are we present to it?

This is opening up to the perception of change, of impermanence.

Someone raised the point that people sometimes try to deal with this by talking about processes rather than things, but exactly the same issue arises. If you regard your breath as an ongoing process, you're still not going back to the same process. No, it's a new process.

This is why the perception of change is quite radical, much more radical than people normally think. "Yeah, things change. Yeah, I think I've changed over the years. What am I missing here?" In the meditation practice, when we're really paying attention, we get a chance to actually recognise this, to see it.

It's quite a common meditation experience. At some point in a retreat, people will say, "You know, the sky seems bluer, the air seems fresher, nature seems more natural." What they're expressing is the perception of impermanence, the recognition that this is new. It's never been like this before and it will never be like this again. This is new. And of course, once we recognise that, it's easier to stay with it, to be aware of it, because it's not the same old, same old.

Someone asked about the instruction of observing the observing mind, being aware of the aware mind. They felt they were tripping themselves up. It was as though the part observing the observing mind was almost retrospectively giving a weather report on what the previous observing mind was doing—whether it was cloudy or clear. They had a sense that the mind they were observing and getting curious about was the mind in the past, the one that had just happened, not the one in the present.

This opens up a really interesting issue about how the Buddhist tradition talks about change. Some people say you can never actually be aware of the present—you can only register the immediate past. There's a whole theory built on this. In orthodox Theravāda, they're committed to this idea. It's the doctrine of moments. When you look carefully at experience, experience lasts only for a moment, so even to register it means you've just passed it. In other words, people do experience this. It's quite a common experience.

Other people don't experience it that way. Personally, I don't. That's never made much sense to me. I have a sense of, no, this is happening now — which puts me outside the orthodoxy in the Theravada world. And also in the Mahayana world, where they are also committed to this doctrine of moments. But quite apart from the philosophy of it, what you experience is perfectly valid. It's what people do experience. They do have this sense of it being the immediate past. That's not a problem. That's what you experience.

But it is true that awareness being aware of awareness itself can trip us up. We can end up tripping over our own feet. It's like the proverbial centipede, trying to work out which leg goes first and can't walk at all. So that too happens. Sometimes it takes a while to get a sense of it. And usually when we first really get a clear sense of it, well, often it comes about as an accident. We just kind of notice it. Oh, that's interesting. And then it might become more available over a period of time.

That's one of the reasons why I talk about becoming interested in the experience of suddenly realizing, "Oh, I'm distracted." Because that's when we get a momentary sense of mind being aware of mind. And it's quite common, quite ordinary. It's not mystical or profoundly yogic. It's just, yes, this is what it is. But it can take a while to get a sense of this without it being artificial and without having a sense of tying ourselves up in knots trying to perceive this mystical, bizarre thing that doesn't make any sense.

So when you do these little guided meditations, whatever you come up with is good. The fact that you came up with, "Oh, I'm tripping over my own feet here" — that's a good result. Something's happening. Something's shifting in the perception. Questions are arising. What is this? And that helps to open things up a bit. But there's never a cor-

rect experience you're supposed to have. It's really important in this practice that whatever is happening is exactly what is supposed to happen, because otherwise it would not be happening. So always stay with that. Always stay with the primacy of your own experience. That's what's important. Not what someone on the throne is saying. Not what the guided meditation seems to want you to experience. That's not important. What's important is what you are experiencing. And if that's clear, the whole process will unfold by itself.

Question: Thanks for putting the emphasis on validating our individual experience. I think that's a really great empowering thing to do. I'm not really sure what I'm saying here, but this idea of the register — you're observing, so you have this sense of being, almost like a duality. How about just being? You're present, but you're just being. And it's almost like osmosis. You're present, but there's not really a sense of observing. You're just with the experience.

That's another flavour of the experience. So sometimes you do have a sense of... sometimes it's like you have a watcher, you have a witness.

And in some traditions, they emphasise this idea of the witness. So you have this sense of there's something happening and there's the witness here. And then you say, okay, pull back to see the witness again. And then you have a sense of the witness here, seeing this witness, seeing this. Some people like to play with this. I think among the people I've spoken to about it, the record is about five steps back. And then the whole thing becomes so complicated it just crumbles completely. So it can be an interesting game to play. But that's just one of the flavours of the experience.

Sometimes, as you say, you simply get the sense of being with it. It's just happening. And that's characterised by intimacy. It's probably more a feeling-based approach, whereas the very idea of watching is more cognitive. When the Buddha talks about experience, he talks about it in broad terms, in terms of the cognitive and the affective. And he draws the distinction between them. They're both happening all of the time.

So, for example, when he's talking about what is the fundamental problem that we have as human beings, sometimes he'll say it's ignorance or delusion, which is a cognitive problem. What's the solution to the problem? Enlightenment. Awakening. I now know what's going on. Cognitive. But sometimes he'll say, what is the fundamental problem we all have? Drivenness, taṇhā, craving, which is of the heart. What's the solution to the problem? Nibbāna, which is affective. It's of the heart. So he sees that there are both sides of human experience. And sometimes he'll talk on this side, on the cognitive side, using the words that he chooses. Seeing, I would say, is cognitive, whereas feeling is affective. So sometimes you talk about seeing something. Sometimes you talk

about feeling or touching something. And the second one has a quality of being more intimate. The first one suggests a degree of detachment. Sometimes what he says suggests creating space, detachment. Sometimes what he's saying suggests complete intimacy. And sometimes both.

One quality that emerges with mature practice is what in English is called equanimity, which is the perfect balance of both. It comes from the Sanskrit root *īkṣ*, to see, and the prefix *upa*, which denotes intimacy. So equanimity is an intimate witnessing. There's a witnessing, so it's not entangled in it, but it's witnessing from very, very close by, intimately. It blends both the cognitive and the affective.

When observing the mind, essentially you get different flavours again. You might be observing particular mental formations, a particular emotion, or you might get a purer sense of seeing awareness itself. If you give people that exercise, they come up with different answers, different experiences. I remember one time I did it, and my response was, there's no such thing as awareness. There's just something happening. Why would I add awareness on top of it? It just makes it more complicated. This was definitely not the correct answer, apparently. I thought, I better try again. But the next time I did it, what came to me was, oh, transparency. And I remember that's an image that the Buddha uses.

He uses the image of, let's say, coming to a clear mountain pool of water. You look into the pool and you can see right through it. You can see the pebbles on the ground, the water plants, the fish swimming around. Well, the pool is citta, the mind. The pebbles, the fish, and so on—these are the things that are happening within the mind. And awareness is the water. When it's pure, it has the quality of transparency. It just goes straight through.

For me it's very helpful because what we're developing is a sensitivity to what's happening in the mind. This is very crucial. But of course, what happens in the mind happens in the body as well. Body and mind are intimately interconnected. But we're doing it for a purpose which is fundamentally ethical. It's about the way that we live.

I'm sure everybody's had an experience of having an argument with someone and you say, "Why are you so angry?" And the person says, "I'm not angry!" At that point, you begin to think, hmm, maybe the self-awareness here is not quite up to scratch.

So if we can see things in the body, that's really useful in terms of how we live. Sometimes it's a movement that occurs within what we would normally think of as the mind, but we might first notice it in the body. And then we know, oh, something's going on. Simply by relaxing, it can dissipate.

One place where this is very useful is the problem of meditators who say, "I've been meditating for a long time, but I still think a lot." One way of working with thinking is to ask: if there's thinking—the kind of thinking that pops up in meditation—where does it come from? Basically, there's always a degree of restlessness in the mind. And restlessness is associated with some degree of tension, and there'll be some tension in the body. So there are those who would say that if the body is completely relaxed, it is impossible to think. It's just one thing.

So if you find yourself thinking, just ignore the thinking but look for the tension in the body, especially in the upper part of the body. Because up here, this is where we tend to get caught up. Can I find any tension in the upper body—shoulders, neck, head, face? Find the tension, relax. And sometimes what you'll find is you can feel relaxation and the thinking just disappears. So this body-mind connection plays a really important role. Becoming sensitive to movements within the body and how they connect with movements within the mind is extremely useful.

Question: Does the doctrine of mind moments talk about how they resolve—in stillness or longevity? Or is it just mentioned as something that happens: there's the moment, and then there's the recognition of the moment?

The doctrine is basically describing how fast change actually occurs when we start to pay attention. We can have the sense that change is happening, but it's happening slowly. But they would argue that when you really look closely, you see no, it's happening very quickly.

The Buddha talks about this. There's one discourse where he says that if you're going to identify with experience to construct a self, you're much better off identifying with the body because it lasts fifty years, sixty years, seventy years, eighty years. But the mind changes so rapidly—and he gives the image of a monkey leaping from branch to branch. How can you identify with it? Because by the time you've made the move, it's already gone. It's something else. So he talks about how rapidly mind changes compared to body.

But this gets taken up by the academics after the Buddha. They develop all this to the nth degree—one mind moment lasts X number of body moments, and so on. How much of it reflects actual experience and how much of it is philosophical speculation, I do not know.

But if you've got a question about it, this is useful because there's curiosity. What is it? Is it true? Is it not true?

Does it help? Does it not help? Well, that investigation can help the practice.

A follow-up question arose. Nirvana, you said, is "heartwood," while enlightenment is cognitive. Is that because nirvana comes from the idea of fire extinguishing?

Yes. That's the sort of imagery that the Buddha gives. For nibbana, essentially coolness is the central image. One image is that you're slogging through a potentially hot landscape, completely exhausted and thirsty, and you stumble into an oasis—soft grass, shady trees—and as soon as you enter, it's just... *ah*. And at the centre of the oasis is a pool of clean, cool water, and you just go in. This is nibbana. These are the kinds of images he uses when talking about nibbana. Whereas when he's talking about bodhi, which is awakening or enlightenment, he's talking about understanding and seeing. So he uses a different kind of language.

Another question came up about getting distracted. You try to bring yourself back to your original focal point, but the distraction becomes the new reality. The concern was that this could get out of control—moving from one distraction to another.

There definitely is a control in practical terms. We addressed this very early on when we were talking about the secondary object. I realise I'm distracted; that becomes my meditation object. This is what's happening now. And then the question becomes, well, how long do I stay with it? Certainly in the beginning, the answer is not long at all—just enough to acknowledge it. Oh, this is what's happening. And then move to the grounding object, but not assuming I'm going to find it the way it was when I left it. Being ready to see it as it presents now, which is different.

So I might have a style of practice that really emphasises the directed awareness, the grounding object, where I acknowledge the distraction briefly—I'm with it for that period of time, it might be just a second—but I'm with it. And then I shift awareness to the grounding object, but it's clear to me that I'm not going back to the way it was before. I'm interested in the way it is now.

Or you could start to move from distraction to distraction and begin to open up, having a wide field of awareness. Both approaches are valid. But for some people, they find they're much better off if they stay with the grounding object as much as possible. Other people find that if they do that, it gets really tight and claustrophobic, and the mind just rejects it. They find that when they open up, that's much better for them.

And the same person will find at some points in their meditation career that the mind naturally wants to stay with the grounding object. At other times, the mind will want to open up. So you learn to roll with it.

But when you start, and as you go through, it's always best to favour the grounding object. Give preference to that. Because that's the stability point. That's what gives you the stillness, the clarity, and the power to be able to penetrate into experience, to see what's really going on.

So if there's any doubt, grounding object. Should I do this? Grounding object. What should I do now? Grounding object. That's its job. But if something else—boom—there's something else there, fine. That's what it is. This is here.

And now it becomes a grappling object.

Okay. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 72

Three Aspects of Realisation

Patrick Kearney · 43 min

In this talk, Patrick Kearney offers a detailed exploration of the Buddha's three characteristics of existence—anicca (impermanence), dukkha (pain), and anattā (not-self)—presenting them not as philosophical theories but as empirical observations about the nature of experience. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that "whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease," Kearney illuminates how these characteristics are interlinked aspects of the same existential situation, like a three-sided coin.

Kearney carefully unpacks the Pāli term anicca, explaining that it points not merely to change but to the unreliability and inconstancy of all phenomena—nothing can be depended upon or trusted. This recognition naturally connects to dukkha: when we rely on what is inherently unreliable, disappointment is inevitable. The talk explores how genuine perception of impermanence generates anxiety, revealing our attachments and the futility of clinging. From here, the teaching moves to anattā, showing how the self we take for granted is merely a conceptual construction—stable only as an idea, not as present experience.

The practical dimension of this teaching is emphasised throughout. Kearney encourages practitioners to become "connoisseurs of change," attending to transitions, beginnings, middles, and endings in ordinary experience like breathing and thinking. He addresses the fear that often arises when practitioners glimpse groundlessness, reframing it beautifully: when there is no ground to fall onto, free-fall becomes simply freedom. The talk concludes with a description of stream-entry as the first glimpse into this reality—a turning point where the Noble Eightfold Path truly begins.

Tonight we'll talk about the three aspects of realisation, beginning with a quote from the Buddha: "These things play a part in realisation: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence, the perception of not-self in pain."

So this is what we're going to have a look at tonight, going through the three characteristics which characterize the Buddha's understanding of insight.

We start with change, which we were talking about this morning. As we discussed, this concept of anicca—impermanence or change—is central to the Buddha's teaching. For him, delusion is characterized by a denial of impermanence, and awakening is characterized by a clear perception of it.

Let's begin by looking at what we mean by impermanence. Well, two things that it is not. It's not a philosophical theory of change, although it's often treated like this. A philosophical theory may hold our interest, but it's not going to lead to awakening. Anybody who knows philosophers knows that. And equally, it's not our normal everyday sense of change, which we share with everybody else on the planet, because this also does not lead to awakening.

So what is the Buddha talking about? We'll start by looking at the word itself, because in Pali it tells us something that we don't get with this very bland, abstract "impermanence." The Pali word is anicca. The "a" is the negative prefix—not. Not nicca. But what does nicca mean? In everyday Pali, nicca means stable, constant, permanent. And in everyday usage, it refers to what can be relied upon. For example, dāna is gift, and a nicca-dāna is a perpetual gift, an endowment that can be relied upon for a very long time. Bhatta is food, so nicca-bhatta is a continuous and therefore reliable food supply. And so on.

So if something is anicca, not nicca, this means not just that it changes, but that it is unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable. Not to be depended upon, not to be trusted. And this is where we see the link between anicca and dukkha, where dukkha is pain, suffering, dis-ease.

When I first started reading the Buddha's teaching, I read about this business about anicca. I thought, that sounds reasonably straightforward. And because things are anicca, therefore they are dukkha. That, I have to say, I couldn't figure out. What is the matter with this person? Seriously—if you had life without change, that would be better? What is going on here? It just didn't click at all. It took a long time before I began to understand what the Buddha was talking about.

If we rely on something unreliable, what happens? Sooner or later, we are disappointed. It's built in.

Now, in the Buddha's time, the idea of the nitya—or in Sanskrit, nitya—the permanent, was very important in the dharma philosophies of the time. The permanent in the ancient tradition is the ground of things that gives them their stability. For example, in the Upanishads, the nitya, the permanent, is ātman, self—the essential self that underlies everything. In other traditions, if we move beyond India, the nitya might be God, for example.

But what the Buddha is saying is that we cannot find any such ground. It appears that there is nothing that underlies and stabilises our experience of the world. In other words, it's change all the way down.

And it's important, again, to get a sense of what he's talking about, where he's coming from. For him, this is an empirical statement. It's not an ideological statement.

So the Buddha is not saying believe that there is no ground that stabilises your experience or you will not be saved. He's not saying that at all. What he's saying is—if I can put words in his mouth—see if you can find anything in your experience that does not change. And by the way, good luck with that. I'm sure he wouldn't have said that.

So this is the Buddha's empiricism, and getting a sense of his empiricism is central to understanding what he's talking about. The Buddha is not teaching an ideology that will explain the world to us. That's not his project. What he's teaching is an open inquiry into the nature of human experience. And to aid that inquiry, he provides us with maps of experience. One part of the map is that he will map human experience into three universal characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anatta—change, pain, not-self. But these are characteristics of experience. He's not saying they are characteristics of the objective world. He's saying these are characteristics of experience, because his project is to encourage his students to look and see for themselves. Is he right about these characteristics? So for example, can you find some aspect of your experience that does not change?

We start with impermanence, change, which we also talked about this morning. And then we have this link between change and dukkha, pain. Because what happens when we begin to recognise that whatever we try to rely upon turns out to be unreliable? Well, obviously, we become anxious. That's the obvious response. And we could even say that if we have not felt anxiety because of impermanence, we haven't yet perceived impermanence to any depth. The perception of impermanence goes a lot deeper than anything intellectual. When we really understand the fact of change, when we really start to get it, this moves us in some way.

So for the Buddha, the perception of impermanence is linked to apprehension because it gives us a felt sense of the unreliability of things, a felt sense of the essential fragility of life itself. If we are not moved by our experience of change, we haven't yet perceived impermanence in the way the Buddha is talking about.

Another way of looking at it is to say that the perception of impermanence creates anxiety because it uncovers our attachment. What alarms me is not change as such, but the fact that things change away from the way I want them to be. Or they change in ways unpredictable by me. Or they change in ways that are uncontrollable. That's what alarms me. Life is uncertain, and whatever I seek to rely upon turns out to be unreliable—if for no other reason, then that it doesn't last. So when I look for security, what I find is insecurity. And this is what creates the pain in change.

As our practice develops, we move from the perception of impermanence to the perception of dukkha, the pain at the core of being. Or we could call it the disappointment which is inherent in clinging, in holding on. The perception of impermanence is linked to the perception of pain, and it's also linked to the perception of not-self. This is anatta. As we go deeper into them, it becomes increasingly clear that these three characteristics are interlinked. We could even say that they are three aspects of the same existential situation. It's like a three-sided coin, you could say.

Impermanence connects to pain in terms of the anxiety that it generates. How does it connect to not-self? As we practice and as our understanding of impermanence deepens, we begin to realise that what we regard as ourselves is also subject to change, inconstancy and unreliability. But of course this is difficult to accept, and we spend a great deal of energy resisting or denying our own impermanence.

So let's look at how we do that. What we do is we structure our experience to create the illusion of a permanent self. Now, just to point out again, we're talking about something experiential, not philosophical. When the Buddha says permanent, he doesn't necessarily mean lasting forever and ever and ever. What he's talking about is not changing over time—something that over a period of time does not change. This is permanent, regardless of the unit of time. And hence one reason why the Buddha is so preoccupied by what he calls self. What does it take to be a self? For example, to be a Patrick, a Dharma teacher Patrick.

What does it take to be that? Well, there has to be something in this self that remains unchanged over time. The Patrick who begins this talk has to be the same Patrick who ends it. The Patrick who is teaching this retreat has to be the same Patrick who has been teaching Dharma for a long time and plans to continue to do so into the future.

But if we're talking about experience, which is what the Buddha is talking about, what is there about this present experience of Patrick that actually remains unchanged over time? What the Buddha is betting is that if I have a close look at this, I won't find anything. Yet the self appears to be stable and, in the Buddha's term, permanent. And what gives it its apparent stability is concept.

So for the Buddha, the self that we take for granted as real, as ourselves, is real only as a concept. Now he's not knocking the concept. It's a useful concept. It's even a necessary concept if we're going to function in the world. But it is only a concept.

I relate to the world through a screen of concepts. And as we practice, we get a sense of this because we see the mind constantly throwing up concepts. What are these concepts doing? They're explaining to ourselves who we are and what this situation is. So the world for me is what I conceive it to be. I am who I conceive myself to be.

My concept of myself is very stable. I think of myself as the same person who was born all those decades ago, who was raised in that particular house, in that particular suburb, who went to this school and that university and so on. I have a past in which I exist. Yet if I look now for the present experience of that person I was in the past, I can't find it. The experiences have vanished, but the concepts constructed from the experiences persuade me that somehow they still exist, stored somewhere.

I've reached a certain age in which I talk to my friends and we find endless amusement in explaining to each other how our bodies are falling apart. I can remember looking at old people do this and thinking, "God, what a lot of boring old farts." And now I'm one of them. But sometimes the ultimate delusion comes out in these discussions, expressed something like, "But I feel the same inside." Sure. But this is the self. Oh yes, the body's falling apart, but I'm really the same as that person who could do this and that and the other which I can't possibly do today. This is concept. It's got nothing to do with present experience.

So we project onto our experience what it does not contain. We assume there is a stable someone who is experiencing all of this, this right here. Our perception is not simply that this now is happening, but rather this now is happening to someone. This is happening to me. Does anybody here get the sense that this retreat is happening to them?

This experience, this retreat for example, is about someone—it's about me. It's for someone—it's for me. And this is, of course, simply a projection, but it's this projection that tells me how important or unimportant this whole experience is. This projection is done through three interrelated activities that together, according to the Buddha, create a sense of a self, a permanent self. These are craving, conceit, and view.

So let's get back to the beginning: impermanence. You notice that this list—anicca, dukkha, anattā; change, pain, not-self—always appears in that order. Always. Why in that order? Well, partly it's because they're listed from gross to subtle, from the most obvious to the least obvious. Change is relatively easy to recognize. Dukkha, in the sense that the Buddha is using it, is much more subtle and more difficult to connect with.

And not-self is more subtle and completely counterintuitive. So it tends to be the most hidden.

There's also a sense in which it is possible to *do* impermanence. Our preoccupation with change—we are, in a sense, conjuring up the perception of impermanence. We can do that. But we cannot conjure up the perception of dukkha. I mean, we could get a hammer and bash our knees, but this would not be the perception of dukkha the way the Buddha is talking about. And we cannot conjure up the perception of not-self because who's conjuring it up? It just doesn't work.

So in the practice, what we're doing is uncovering impermanence. And we do this essentially by paying attention to change, to transitions. To do this, we go deep into the specifics of experience, the particularities of experience. We learn to attend to the most mundane aspects of our experience. And if we're attending to these aspects of experience, we're valuing them. So we start to value what normally we just completely overlook—like, for example, breathing. Because we're not interested in seeing particular things or having a certain kind of experience. What we want to do is to discover how experience itself moves.

We could compare it to looking for a needle in a haystack. The needle is very small and very mysterious while the haystack is very large. So the task is enormous to find that needle. And of course the needle represents enlightenment or some other kind of special insight. The hay represents our normal, everyday experience, which we have come to see as unsatisfactory—which is why we are here in this retreat looking for something, looking for something special, something to justify all the trouble we have taken to come and do this practice. So we're going carefully through the haystack, looking under each tiny blade, hoping one day to find that elusive needle.

Eventually, we realise that what we're looking for is hay. In other words, what we're looking for is already here. Impermanence, change, is already happening. It's just that we have trained ourselves not to notice it. So we need to return to the obvious. We need to return to what we assume we already know and learn to see it anew—which is what we've been talking about. And hence, this is why we've been so preoccupied with the experience of distraction, because it illustrates impermanence, it illustrates change very well.

I'm sitting and I'm keeping my awareness on my meditation object and suddenly I realise I'm thinking of something that happened yesterday or may happen tomorrow. Did I make a conscious decision? "Time to have a good think." Or did it just happen despite my intention to stay on the meditation object? Usually it's the latter. And if I go

through this experience enough, then I begin to notice that not only does experience change—it swings, for example, between meditation object and distraction—but I do not control these changes. They just happen.

When we begin our meditation practice, we assume that we are in charge of the project. If we persist in it long enough and go deeply enough, we realise we are not in charge of the project. If anything, the project is in charge of me.

So the practice of becoming intimate with distraction can show us all three of the characteristics. Everything is changing—impermanence. We are not in control of these changes—pain. And there appears to be no one at all in charge—not-self. These characteristics are here already in every experience. It's just that we tend not to notice them.

Now, getting back to the perception of impermanence, we begin with the observation that it is obvious that things change. But the question is *how* do they change? So our job as practitioners aiming for insight is to become connoisseurs of change. It's like people who are wine buffs and they can tell the difference between this wine and that one, and which is slightly better than the other. They're connoisseurs of a particular kind of experience. Our job is to become connoisseurs of change.

So we're interested in the fact that one thing becomes another. We're particularly interested in the intersections of experience, the transitions from one experience to another. Things arise and cease. They begin and they end. Experiences arise and cease. They begin and they end. Do I see the arising? Do I see the beginnings of things? Do I see cessation? Do I see the end of things? Or am I missing something?

And if I'm missing something, maybe it's because I'm in the middle of things. Remember we talked about change while enduring—the place between beginnings and ends. This is where I perceive a stability which I simply assume is there. But is it really as stable as I assume? When I look closely, does it move in any way?

This kind of work is very mundane. We're just staying with the elemental qualities of experience—the movements of breathing, the sensations of the body, the feel of thinking. But we discover that every breath, every thought has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If they had no beginning, they would not arise, and so they would never be noticed. If they had no end, they would never leave. And if they had no middle—the space between beginning and end—they would be coming and going so quickly that again, we wouldn't notice them.

Sometimes I have the experience that I'm staying with my meditation object and everything seems smooth. Does this smoothness itself change? And the meditation object—is it really the same as it was before, or is it different in some ways? Is it chan-

ging? If it is changing, how is it changing? Is it like waves? And if they're waves, are they choppy or smooth? Is the meditation object more strobe-like? And if so, are the edges clear or not clear?

When things change, awareness moves from one object to another. Does it move because the initial object just ended and a new one began? Or is it that the new object attracts me before the old one has ended? These are different flavours of change. When the experience is gone, is it completely gone with no trace remaining, or is something still lingering? Is there some kind of aftertaste?

And of course, another flavour of the perception of impermanence that we've already talked about is noticing that this experience now is new. The freshness of things is another flavour.

So these are all different aspects of impermanence. As we become interested in change—not looking for any of these in particular (if something grabs you then fine, run with it)—but simply being interested in the fact of change, being curious about it. Is this the same or is it different?

When we played around with this earlier, we looked at the relationship between the meditation object and the mind which knows the meditation object. The meditation object is changing, but so does the mind which knows it. Sometimes we like the meditation object. Sometimes we dislike it. Sometimes we think the experience is good. Sometimes we think the experience is bad. Sometimes we find meditation satisfying. Sometimes we find it unsatisfying.

And in the midst of all these changes, can we drop our obsession with how we think things should be long enough to see how they actually are and how they change? Can we drop our preoccupation with the object of experience long enough to check the mind that is aware of the object? Is that mind changing?

So as you can see, there's a lot in it. There's a lot in this perception of impermanence. And again, it is something that we do, or can learn to do. But the key point is just to become interested in transitions—to become interested in the fact that this now is different from what it was before.

So it's quite fundamentally simple, but there's an element of interest, of curiosity in it. What's happening now? What's new now?

How can we see into impermanence deeply enough to be transformed by it? And why is it transformational? Well, basically, it's when we recognize that everything changes, including the person who is experiencing the change.

When the Buddha talks about enlightenment, he talks about it essentially as process, and he has four landmark stages of this process. The fourth one is full awakening, which we won't talk about here because we'd just be caught up in theory. The first one is sometimes called in the early discourses the vision of Dharma, and sometimes it's called stream entry. This is the initial glimpse of what's really going on. There's a little Pali verse that describes this insight, appearing again and again: *yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ*—which roughly translated means, "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." Whatever has the nature of beginning, all of that has the nature to end.

Now, what this represents is an understanding of and acceptance of change all the way to the bottom—which of course reminds us of the old Indian story, apparently first reported by Europeans in the sixteenth century. I looked it up.

There's a learned Brahmin who's teaching his son cosmology, the nature of the universe. In classical Indian culture, the universe consists of four great continents—one to the north, one to the south, one to the east, and one to the west. India is the southern continent. In the middle is Mount Meru, and at the top of Mount Meru is the heaven of the gods of the thirty-three. Surrounding the four great continents, holding it all together, is the great ocean, and surrounding the great ocean, holding it all together, is the great wind. So this is the nature of the world as understood in the Buddha's time.

The learned Brahmin is teaching his son, and his son is very bright and very inquisitive. He's thinking about this and says, "But what's underneath all this? What holds it up?" The father is very pleased with his son's curiosity and intelligence, and he says, "Well, underneath each of the four great continents there's a big horse holding it up." Of course the son is really impressed by this. He thinks about it and says, "But what's holding up the horses?" "Underneath each horse there's a great elephant keeping it firmly in place." Well, that's a relief. "What's holding up the elephants?" "I'm glad you asked that question, my boy. Under each elephant there's a great turtle. It brings stability to the whole system." The young lad is really impressed by this. But then he asks the crucial question: "What's underneath the turtles?" At this point his father says, "My boy, it's turtles all the way down."

And this is the teaching of impermanence. It is turtles all the way down.

The perception of impermanence matures when the mind realizes the necessity of change—not just that things change, but the necessity of it. The fact that change is built into the very nature of experience itself. This is what makes it a universal characterist-

ic. Every experienced event arises and ceases, and it arises and ceases dependent upon other experienced events. Nothing happens in isolation. This is their nature. This is what defines them.

So the realization of the universality of change, and therefore the futility of resisting it, is the entrance into *aniccasaññā*, the perception of impermanence or the perception of change. As this perception becomes increasingly obvious, we begin to shed our attachments because the futility of holding becomes increasingly obvious.

Change is inherent to the very structure of experience, the very patterning of it, which means that the self—who we take ourselves to be—must also be impermanent and therefore not worth clinging to. If self itself changes, if nothing can be held onto as self, then holding on to it makes no sense. There's a natural tendency to let go.

But if it's turtles all the way down, if I have no ground as a self, and if holding on makes no sense, isn't this annihilation? Many people believe that the Buddha was teaching some kind of annihilation. When the perception of change is mixed with the perception of dukkha, of pain, what we have is a sense of the groundlessness of experience—but with this, a reaction of fear arises.

And this is a very natural response, one to be expected when we go deeply into this practice—this intuition of the groundlessness of experience. It arises in all sorts of quite mundane ways.

For example, it's quite common that people will suddenly slide into a samādhi state where the mind is completely still, where there's no thought, where everything is so subtle that you can't pick out any particular thing. It's very pleasant. You would think the response would be, "Oh, this is great! I think I'll just hang out here for a few hours." But often the response is, "Oh my God, what's going on?" And people will pull themselves out of the experience because of fear, a sense of alarm, because the familiar ground isn't there.

We could call it a fear of falling. If there's no ground, I'm falling into an abyss. And what happens then? This fear of falling is an existential rejection of not-self, because I feel I have to have a ground. If I don't have a firm foundation, I'm in deep trouble. I can't survive. So there's a reaction against free-fall.

But what happens when we find ourselves in free fall and realise there's nothing to fall onto? Because if there's no ground, there's nothing to fall against, and therefore nothing to fear. Free fall becomes free. What happens when we take the "fall" away from the "free"? What are we left with? Freedom.

This is the freedom of not-self. Self is attractive because what it appears to give is a foundation—to us and to the world. We construct a self because we need a ground, a solid foundation. But when we go through the anxiety of groundlessness and come out on the other side, we recognise that not only can we not find a ground, we do not need a ground. It's actually surplus to requirements.

When this realisation hits, when it really goes all the way to the bottom, as it were, this is what the Buddha calls the Dhamma Cakkhu, the vision of Dhamma. This is the first stage of awakening, the first glimpse into what's really going on. And life from there is different.

Though even at this point, there will be times when we forget this vision, forget what we've seen, and the view of self and clinging to it will reappear. But it will be much weaker than it was before. And once it's noticed, it will fade away again. Our baseline has changed.

At this point, we enter into the Noble Eightfold Path. You've all heard of the Eightfold Path, but you'll notice that sometimes people call it the Noble Eightfold Path, the Ariya Eightfold Path. Strictly speaking, the Ariya, the Noble Eightfold Path begins at this first stage of awakening. Until then, we're just on the Eightfold Path.

So there's been a significant, fundamental turning point in life and in the practice, but it is just a turning point. My teacher John Hale once commented—we were cheerfully gossiping about our fellow meditators, about who had attained the first stage and who had not—he frowned and said, "Stream enterers..." This is the other way of expressing it: to enter the stream. You're with the current now. You're not fighting against the current. You've been taken toward full awakening, and it's inevitable. You will get there. It might take a while, but you'll get there. And he said, "Stream enterers—they're almost as bad as ordinary people." I think he's right.

But how is life on the Noble Eightfold Path? I'm reminded of a Zen teaching given by my old Zen teacher, Robert Aitken Roshi, who once raised the question: What is the difference between an unawakened person and an awakened one?

Would you like to know the difference?

The unawakened person wakes up in the morning, goes to the bathroom, has breakfast, and goes to work.

The awakened person wakes up in the morning, goes to the bathroom, has breakfast, and goes to work.

And that's the difference.

So as you can see, it is a very significant difference.

With that final confusing thought, I think we've had enough for tonight.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 73

Tracking Elements (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 57 min

> *In this practice-focused talk from a retreat on the Way of Insight, Patrick Kearney introduces the contemplation of the four great elements (mahābhūta) as part of the first foundation of mindfulness—kāyānupassanā (body contemplation) from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. He emphasizes the Buddha's radically first-person approach: when the Buddha speaks of body, he means our direct experience of body, not our concepts about it. Through a simple hand exercise, Kearney demonstrates how our familiar conceptual world of 'hands' and 'fists' dissolves when we pay close attention, revealing instead the elemental qualities of experience —the dhātu.*
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> *The four elements are explored experientially: earth (paṭhavī) as resistance ranging from soft to hard; air (vāyo) as all forms of motion including pressure and vibration; fire (tejo) as temperature from cold to hot; and water (āpo) as liquidity and cohesion. Unlike the European philosophical tradition where elements were objective substances, for the Buddha these are elemental qualities of lived experience. Kearney guides a meditation systematically tracking each element throughout the body, using naming to aim awareness precisely.*
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> *This precision of awareness is presented as essential groundwork for vipassanā practice. The word vipassanā itself implies 'seeing apart'—the capacity to distinguish, discriminate, and tease apart what perception habitually fuses together. As practitioners develop this discernment, the familiar constructed world begins to dissolve, potentially triggering fear as cherished certainties give way. Yet this analytical phase prepares the ground for perceiving dependent arising (paṭicca samuppāda)—the Buddha's fundamental insight that what we take as solid reality is actually mutually conditioning events arising and passing within awareness.*

This morning we're going to talk about tracking the elements.

This is part of the first Satipaṭṭhāna, the first foundation of mindfulness, which is body. We've talked about the role of body before, how important it is. The Buddha outlines the practice and divides it into four sections: body, feeling, mind, dharma. So body comes first, and it comes first for a reason. It's the foundation for the whole practice.

There's an essential physicality to this practice. In the European tradition we have this sense of something which is spiritual, which somehow transcends the body. But this is alien to the Buddha's way of looking at the human condition. We are bodies. We

are sentient bodies. We are bodies that know, that are aware, and that feel. But we are fundamentally bodies. So we practice with body. The relationship with body is really important.

As we talked about yesterday, the Buddha's whole project is about the nature of human experience from the perspective of the one undergoing the experience. In other words, his teaching is first person. He's interested in how we experience whatever it is. So when he talks about body, what he's talking about is our experience of body. He's not stepping back out of it and taking a third-person view of the body, like a doctor might, for example. He's talking about what it is to be inside body, to be body. Whenever the Buddha says body, he means our experience of body. Whenever he says mind, he means our experience of mind, and so on.

Also, when he uses the term body, he can use it in a broad sense or a narrow sense. In the broad sense, body refers to the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. In other words, the entire experienced physical universe. But sometimes he focuses in on a narrow sense, the fifth of the five physical senses, which is sensitivity to touch, whether internal or external. As we sit here, external touch would include the touch of the body against the cushion, the bench, the chair. Internal touch would include any aches or pains in the body, the sense of stiffness and lift in the spine, and so on.

In particular—and this is something that especially in our culture we need to keep in mind—body does not mean our concepts about body. Of course we tend to live in our concepts; we live in a conceptual world which is separated from body. But even our experience of body is filtered by layers of concept. We are obsessed about how our body appears to ourselves and to others, all of which is concept.

We also find ourselves lasting in concept about body when we come to practice meditation. When we're given a basic instruction to make some aspect of body the meditation object, like breathing or movement in the walking meditation, we find ourselves not really being mindful of body, but mindful of our concepts about body. Have you ever been preoccupied by what you are supposed to feel in this practice? What is meant to happen? This doesn't seem right. It doesn't feel like what's supposed to happen. Do you ever have that experience? In other words, not paying attention to the body, but paying attention to concepts about body and taking them to be more significant than the actual physical experience itself.

A lot of the basic work of meditation practice is descending from our concepts about something to the direct experience. When we're working with the body, we need to get away from the concepts about the body and get to the actual experience itself.

One way that Upandita introduced this is he held up his hand one time and said, "What's this?" Of course everybody was paralysed and in shock because they knew this was a trick question. But it wasn't. The answer is hand. Then he said, "What's this?" The answer: fist. The bleeding obvious—that's a hand, that's a fist.

Very few people would care to dispute this, and those few would have had years of training in philosophy. Or law, as the case may be.

Then he would have us do an exercise. Let's do that now.

Use your hand as your meditation object. Simply have your hand out, close your eyes, and feel your hand. Don't look at it. Just feel it. And ask yourself: What am I actually experiencing?

Now start to curl the fingers and keep your awareness on your hand. What am I actually experiencing? Keep curling. At some point, you might find fingers hitting the palm. Keep curling. And all the way through: What is it that I am actually experiencing?

So what did you experience? Weight. Tension. Heaviness. Wetness. Dampness. Pressure. Tingling. "Airy nothing"—that's very poetic. One person said they couldn't feel it at all if they tried, but really it was just nothing. And yet there was a quality of air to it. Why "airy nothing" as opposed to simply nothing? "I don't know why. Maybe I just felt like I needed an adjective." But there was something there, I'm sure. It's surprising because you thought, "I can't actually get a hold of it. It's not really there."

So it can be difficult just to get a hold of. When we pay attention, what do we find? Do we find hands and fists? No, we don't find hands and fists. We find a series of sensations that have certain qualities—heavy, damp, airy, tension, and so on.

Now when we say this, of course, that's a concept. It's not that we can just transcend concepts entirely. If we did, we'd certainly have nothing to say to each other—which might be a good thing, particularly on a meditation retreat. Actually, if we had no concepts, we wouldn't even know what time lunch would be.

That would be catastrophic. So we need concepts, and concepts go very deep. But tension, dampness, heaviness—these are concepts, but they're concepts that are much closer to the actual direct experience, whereas "hand" and "fist" are more removed. This illustrates getting closer to what's underneath the concepts. What's the actual experience beneath the concepts? And this is what we're aiming for.

For the Buddha, this realm that exists underneath the concepts is what he calls the *dhātu*, which is usually translated as "element." Like a lot of these translations, it doesn't one hundred percent fit because he's coming at things from such a different angle, but it's pretty close. The elemental qualities of experience.

So we talked about, for example, what is real? Well, what is real, for practical purposes, is what survives presence. Hand and fist does not survive presence. Heaviness, dampness, movement—that survives presence. So these are the elemental qualities of experience, the *dhātu*.

Let's say I'm meditating with breathing as my meditation object and I get lost in my thoughts. I'm living in a world created by these thoughts, and this world is far away from here and now. Suddenly I know I'm thinking, and the world created by these thoughts disappears. So purely concept does not survive presence even for a moment.

I return to another world in which I'm sitting on my cushion and my left knee hurts and I really don't want to be sitting here—which is why, of course, I escaped into the world of thought in the first place. But I'm following meditation instructions, so I focus on the specific sensations that make up my painful left knee. They hold my attention. And after some time I realise that my world of "I don't want to be sitting here" has dissolved, because I'm absorbed in the sensations. So that does not survive presence. That turns out to be just a concept. Even my left knee will dissolve. And all I've got are a series of sensations that occupy space.

When we start to really pay attention to what's going on, the familiar world—which is essentially conceptual—that we're used to living in starts to crumble, and something else emerges. What emerges is the world of the elements. And this is the world in which insight can arise, which we'll talk more about later on.

So when we're tracking the elements, we're going to do this within the body. These are the elemental qualities of experience. The Buddha says that physical experience, touch sensation, breaks up into four elements which are particularly important. They're called the *mahābhūta*, the great appearances. Sometimes you see it translated as "the great things." These are earth element, air element, fire element, and water element. The four elements.

Of course, you probably recognise these from the European tradition. They have the same four elements. But in the European tradition, these elements are considered to be objectively existing things in the universe, as far as I'm aware. Whereas for the Buddha, they're elemental qualities of experience, which makes all the difference.

Earth element is the experience of resistance, which ranges from soft through to hard. Let's say I have my hands like this and I bring them together. There's some experience of resistance in the hand itself, which I feel as stiffness. But I keep bringing the hands together, and there comes a point where I encounter resistance when one hand touches the other. At first this is soft, but if I keep moving in the same direction, it gets harder. So that quality of resistance is earth, and it ranges from soft through to hard.

Air element is the experience of all forms of motion—pressure, vibration, expansion, contraction, and so on. As I'm bringing the hands together, what is predominant is air element, the sense of movement through space.

Fire element is the experience of temperature, from cold to hot. I'm bringing the hands together: air element, movement; some stiffness in the hand, earth. They touch—there's resistance, earth, but also the temperature goes up, fire.

And water element is the most obscure one.

This is the experience of liquidity and cohesion. Liquidity is wetness and dryness. And cohesion is stickiness and slipperiness. So these are the four great elements.

We're going to do a little meditation exercise exploring them.

Settle awareness in your body, and be aware of the sensations at the base of your body. From there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact on the ground. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Now turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel hardness. Where can you find hardness? Look for hardness. And when you find it, focus on it and name it: *Hard. Hard.*

Now turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel softness. Look for softness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Soft. Soft.*

Once more, open your awareness to your whole body, feeling your whole body.

Now turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel heat or warmth. Where can you find heat? Warmth? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Hot. Warm.*

Now focus on those parts of your body where you find cold or coolness. Look for cold, coolness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Cold. Cool.*

Once more, open your awareness to your whole body, feeling your whole body.

From there, turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel wetness. Where can you find wetness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Wet.*

Now focus on those parts of your body where you find dryness. Where can you find dryness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Dry.*

Open your awareness again to your whole body, feeling your whole body.

Turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel movement. Look for movement. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Moving.*

Now focus on those parts of your body where you can find stillness. Look for stillness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: *Still.*

Once more, open your awareness out to your whole body, experiencing your whole body. From there, tune into the flow of all the elements. Don't try to hold on to any one sensation, but allow all the sensations to flow naturally. Don't try to find anything in particular. Just be aware of whatever is happening within your body, without trying to control it.

So which one was strongest and clearest?

"In the form of hardness," someone replied.

Yes, hardness. Not really clear where the edge was when it became softness, but it kind of...

So there's no hard border between hard and soft. That's one of the comforting things about concepts—they have hard borders. They give us a sense of security. But often the experience does not.

"Well, it's difficult to find," they acknowledged.

I understand. Did you find dryness? Did you find wetness?

"Yes, but not dryness. Much harder."

Interesting. I find dryness much easier to find than wetness. I'm a very dry individual.

"I found often the opposite was adjacent," another student offered. "So the tip of my tongue was very moist, and then just around the lips, just right there, just a little dry."

"I found that with hot and cold."

So the opposites, we could call them, or the other end of the spectrum, is very close. They're very close to each other.

Did anybody find stillness?

"In my periphery—my hands as opposed to movement in my chest."

So in the core of the body is movement, but the periphery is stillness.

"And I think it's cold—it's different. Not even coolness. All warmth. A lot of warmth."

So these are the elements, and you notice that what we're doing is taking body, which is a general area of concept, and then breaking it down into discrete experiences. Even so, we've still got concept because we've got a name. But the concept is closer to the actual experience. Even there we can see that there are ambiguities involved.

Notice the use of the naming. If I want to aim at warm, now I want to aim at cool—the name helps. If I drop the name in, the awareness will head in that direction. Now it may or may not hit the target, but it helps to aim awareness. And this capacity to aim awareness where we want it to go is important. I think it's particularly important for insight practice, because it's all about discernment, discrimination.

The word that gets translated as "insight" is *vipassanā*. *Vipassanā* is seeing—that *vi* denotes separation, distinctness, distinguishing one thing from another. So it implies developing an awareness that can break things apart, that can see the differences between this and that. When we're talking about impermanence, for instance, we can see the difference between the beginning and the end, where this ends and that begins. This is all about accuracy, about aim. And so you notice that the naming can help with that.

When we want to have the continuity of awareness, which is mindfulness, of course you notice that it's easiest to do that if the meditation object is clearest and most obvious. So of these elements, which is clearest, which is obvious—that's the one you will tend to go to. If you find a particular element to be obscure, you won't stay long there. You'll stay with the obvious ones.

And usually, for most people, the two obvious ones are earth and air—so hardness, softness, movement, stillness. If you look at the bulk of meditation methods, these are the elements they focus on. Body sensation often involves hardness and softness. Breathing involves movement. For most people, these are the obvious ones.

When the Buddha talks about the elements, he uses them in the context of body. The tracking of the elements is found in the first satipaṭṭhāna, tracking body. But they can also be very useful for tracking mind.

Let's say you find yourself caught up in some mood or emotional state, and you want to make it a meditation object, but you don't want to be caught up in concept. You don't want to start thinking, "What's this about? Why am I agitated? Oh, I'm agitated because..." and away you go, lost in the world of concept.

But let's say I'm agitated. This sense of agitation—is it still or is it moving? Is it hard or is it soft? Is it hot or is it cold? Applying the elements to the mind can be extremely useful. Although, as I said, I don't think the Buddha actually does it that way—but I think we're improving on the Buddha. I shouldn't have said that with him sitting in the room. But it is very useful for that.

So your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to spend the day playing with elements. Or if that doesn't grab you, just don't worry about it. But you notice that in these exercises, the basic thing we were doing is being more precise in the awareness. And the precision is important. As the practice develops, as you settle and go deeper, the mind becomes stiller and more clear, and you want to be more precise when you can.

Now, if you make a point of doing this, you might find that it takes a fair bit of energy to be precise. And you might find that you can't do it all day long. Well, you don't. You just do it when there's energy in the mind. The way that you practice, the particular flavor of your practice, varies dependent upon conditions.

Question: I found with that practice that the concept of body started to dissolve. But I must have been aware of body to know that the concept dissolved. It's kind of like holding those two things at the same time. It's hard to describe, but it just felt like a dissolving of the body.

And what was there when the body dissolved?

The questioner: Well, that's when that contentless dread started to creep in.

That's interesting. The sense that we have of the body is the work of perception. Perception gives us a sense of "this is my body" and "this is what it looks like" and "this is what it feels like" and "this is how it occupies space"—and so on and so forth—and "that's your body" and "his body." So if the perception starts to dissolve, then that sense of body starts to dissolve.

In terms of the elements, you get people who talk about how the body disappears and what they've got are sensations occupying space. Sometimes they have a sense of location, so they could say, "These sensations are around the area where my hands would be, so they're probably sensations in my hands." But sometimes that dissolves, and all there is are sensations in space, and they can't tell where they are.

The familiar sense of this body and this physical world can dissolve away. And when that goes, it might trigger anxiety. Because what's going on? Where am I? Who am I? How can I navigate this world?

Insight meditation is very much about breaking up our normal perception of the world, because we want to come to a different way of perceiving—a way which for the Buddha is more accurate but also more satisfactory, giving us a better way of life. But in order to make that transition, we've got to give up what's familiar to us, what we seek to hold on to because it gives us a sense of security.

And paradoxically, of course, sometimes the very things that cause us a great deal of pain give us a great deal of security. This is familiar. I know who I am. I am the victim of the universe. You are the ultimate bastard in the universe. There's a stable world which has meaning here. And to give it up can be terrifying.

So it often emerges at some point in the insight journey—fear will arise because that which the mind habitually holds on to and constructs as familiar starts to give way. It's interesting that this happens with the hand exercise we did earlier. Even though what was happening was together and separate—and that teasing them apart—that's very much the action of vipassanā. You have to develop a great deal of discernment to be able to do that, and that discernment you can apply elsewhere, to other things.

If you look at the Buddha's fundamental framework, it's dependent arising. He says what we assume is happening is that there's me, and there's other beings, and there's things, there's a world—and this is what's real. In the Buddha's concept of dependent arising, he says no, that is all a construction of the mind. What's actually happening is mutually conditioning events coming and going within awareness.

Now in order to get to that view, I've got to take the view that I'm born with, as it were, that I've been developing, and start to tease it apart. So the first part of developing insight is what we could call analysis—not intellectual analysis, but taking things and teasing them apart. And then, once we've separated them, they can come together, but in a different way, which is especially the dependent arising.

So what we're talking about this morning is the teasing apart. And anything that develops the discernment and the sharpness and the precision of mind that enables you to tease things apart—that is a really important skill that you can apply elsewhere, because the mind just gets used to it and starts to do it and it becomes a natural thing.

Someone asked: "We're doing this practice because we're looking for something, as you said, but we understand the centuries of benefit people have obtained from it. I know that Buddha was looking for something, but what made him think that sitting down and meditating for hours or for long periods of time... it's not an intuitive thing to do. So what made him embark on that?"

Well, he inherited an already existing yoga tradition. So when he left home, he didn't just go out and invent something new. He plugged into something that was already happening. And we know that home was Lumbini, which was on one of the major trading routes—one of the roads leading from further west, the kingdom of Kosala and the capital city of Sāvatthī. The road went to the east through Lumbini, through his hometown, and into what is now northern India, in Bihar State. That area was at the time the Vajji Confederation, a tribal republic, but it used to be the kingdom of Videha, and that was the centre of the yogic tradition. That's where he went.

This was an area where the early Upanishads were developed. There was this whole yogic tradition that had been there for centuries. He went there and plugged into it, and it involved a lot of meditation. That's where he did his boot camp training in meditation. Then when he was dissatisfied with that, he went further south. He crossed the Ganga into what is now South Bihar, and he tuned into a different tradition of shamanic and ascetic practices. Then eventually he kind of put it aside and invented his own way.

But it would have been natural for him to go into the idea that we don't really see what's going on because the mind is too agitated. If we want to see what's going on, we have to still the mind, and that's meditation. That was really built into the culture. People just understood that. But it's not built into our culture. It's alien to us, to Western culture, which is very unfortunate.

I think one of the good things about why "mindfulness" has come to the West is that it's introducing and spreading the notion: if you want to find out what's going on, it might be useful to sit down and pay attention. This is a radical notion for us. As you say, it's far from intuitive. But in other traditions, it's bleeding obvious. Somehow we either missed it or quite possibly it was just thrashed out of us. The Catholic Church is very suspicious of yoga because the people who run it are bureaucrats and politicians, not yogis. If you look at Indian spiritual traditions, the people who run it are the yogis.

In the West, it's the politicians and the bureaucrats who run things. And they are threatened by yogis because meditators might have an experience that doesn't fit in their books. Then what do you do? Do you adjust the books, or do you burn the yogi? It's easier to burn the yogi.

The Protestant tradition was hostile to contemplative practices—you read the book and Jesus talks to you, or whatever. They've got a different approach. So this kind of direct experiential approach got drained out of the European tradition. Not so much in Eastern Christianity; in the Orthodox traditions, it's stronger there, a lot stronger. But in Western Christianity, it got kind of pummeled out.

One of the great yogis in the Catholic tradition is John of the Cross, San Juan de la Cruz. And he had to be really, really careful in what he wrote because of the Inquisition. Apparently—and I have to look this up, but this is something I somehow know from the past but can't remember where, therefore can't be sure it's actually genuine; it could be urban legend—but the Inquisition got really suspicious of him, and they sent out two investigators to where he was living, I think in a villa, to investigate him at a time when to be under investigation meant you were guilty.

They arrived and discovered that he had just recently died, and the townspeople had spontaneously proclaimed him a saint. So then they were faced with a decision: Are we going to smash this whole incipient movement to maintain the orthodoxy, or are we going to let it go? They let it go. But he died just in time.

Instead of being one of the great doctors of the Catholic Church, he could have been an executed heretic. The difference was paper thin in that culture. Whereas in India or China, he would have been venerated. People would have been coming to his door. But not in Western Europe.

In other words, we are barbarians. We are southern barbarians. We're not westerners, we're southerners. As the Fifth Zen Ancestor said to the young student who became the Sixth Ancestor—I think I've got my numbers right—one of the great ancestors of Chan, of Zen: This young man came from South China and went up north to the monas-

tery of the Fifth Ancestor. The Fifth Ancestor went to check him out while he was working in the kitchen. He asked, "Where do you come from?" The young man said, "I come from the south." And the Fifth Ancestor said, "Do southern barbarians have Buddha nature?" The young man replied, "There is no north or south in Buddha nature."

I find great comfort in this, knowing that I live in the southern barbarian land. But still, we can practice.

CHAPTER 74

Practising Toward Insight

Patrick Kearney · 43 min

> *In this talk, Patrick Kearney examines the crucial connection between meditation practice and the arising of insight (vipassanā). He begins by establishing awareing as the fundamental activity of practice—a curious investigation into present experience that cuts through our habitual conceptual overlay. Using the example of meditation difficulties, he demonstrates how we typically encounter experience through the filter of 'I' rather than directly investigating the felt sense of what is actually occurring.*
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> *Kearney draws on Mahāsī Sayādaw's framework distinguishing two forms of reality: direct first-hand experience (ultimate reality/paramattha) and indirect conceptual experience (conventional reality/sammuti). He explains that conventional reality, shaped by the three unwholesome roots (akusala mūla) of greed, hatred, and ignorance, entangles us in suffering. The practice aims to ground perception in ultimate reality—the world of directly experienced events where insight can arise.*
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> *Central to this journey is the cultivation of samādhi, which Kearney translates as immersion or integration rather than the traditional 'concentration.' He distinguishes between absorption samādhi (appanā samādhi), developed through exclusive focus on a single object, and momentary samādhi (khaṇika samādhi), cultivated by becoming absorbed into a continuous flow of changing experiences. This latter approach, characteristic of insight meditation, reveals the perception of impermanence (anicca-saññā). When we recognise that all fabrications (saṅkhārā) are impermanent, we encounter the structure of experience itself—opening the doorway to understanding that what is impermanent is unsatisfactory (dukkha), and what is unsatisfactory is not-self (anattā).*

So tonight we start a series of talks on insight. And this one is practicing toward insight. In other words, what's the connection between the practice that we're doing and this mysterious entity called insight?

We start at the beginning, which is what we've been talking about and what we've been practicing over these days: awareing. This is the basic activity of the practice. We could sum it up by saying, what is happening now? When we are aware, we are investigating. And this sense of curiosity, of investigation, is fundamental to meditation for insight. We don't take anything for granted. What we're trying to do is to cut through our habitual, conditioned, conceptual view of reality. We're trying to see present experience for what it is.

This, we discover, is difficult because we tend to get lost in our concepts about our experience rather than be intimate with the experience itself. To give a fairly common example: have you ever begun a meditation session and given up because it's just too difficult? If we ask, well, what happened? Our sense of discontent and restlessness—did it appear as "I don't like this" or "I can't do this"?

Notice that in this perception what dominates is "I," the one who doesn't like this or the one who can't do this. And of course I am extremely important in this situation because this practice is all about me. It's for me, the practitioner. So it's obvious that this is the way I perceive the situation. I'm having problems. I can't do this. But does this "I," who is absolutely central to this experience—does this "I" correspond to a distinct, discrete experience? Or is it just a convenient way of interpreting experience?

What we're training to do in this practice is to drop our habitual concepts about our discontent, in this instance, in this example. What we're trying to discover is: what is the felt experience of this discontent? Discontent is dominating the experience. So what is it exactly? Where is it? How does it present? For example, is it in the body? Does it have physical characteristics? Is it in the mind? Is it psychological? Is it both? And if it's both, what's the relationship between bodily unease and psychological discontent? And in all of this, do I actually encounter an "I" who is discontented?

Notice how we start with what is a very normal situation—I don't like this—but we refuse to take it for granted. We refuse to assume it's an accurate account of what is going on. Instead, we're interested, we're curious. And of course, this is investigation, which is the second of the awakening factors that lives right next door to mindfulness. We are directly aware of what is happening now, with curiosity. And the curiosity is really important. The situation may not be what we think it is. It may be something different. And the only way we can find out is by awareing it.

We could say that in this practice of awareing, we're moving away from what we think or assume is real—me and my world and all that gets caught up in it. We're moving away from that to how this experienced event, here and now, presents what it does, how it behaves.

But why is it important that we do this? Why should we move away from what we think is happening or assume is happening and start to dig deeper? Because if we stay in the habitual world of concept, we tend to become lost in judgment about what is happening.

What is happening now is good. What is happening now is not good. What is happening now is satisfying. What is happening now is disappointing—and so on and so forth.

But when we stay with what this experienced event does, with how we are experiencing, with how we are aware *in*, one thing we notice is the dynamism of the experience. We might allow ourselves to become interested in it as a new event—not something from the past—inherently dynamic, coming from somewhere and then disappearing, to be replaced by something else. And we may come to realise that this second way of experiencing feels more authentic than the first way.

So let's go to how Mahasi Sayadaw talks about this. Mahasi Sayadaw follows the Theravāda tradition when he says that reality, "quote unquote," comes to us in two forms. The first is what we directly experience firsthand through the senses—and this includes mind. The second is what comes to us indirectly, secondhand, through concepts *about* what we directly experience. These are the two ways that we experience.

In the Buddhist tradition, firsthand direct experience is associated with understanding and insight, while experience made up of secondhand concepts is associated with delusion or illusion—and the suffering that comes along with them. In the Theravāda, direct firsthand experience is called ultimate reality, while secondhand experience, concepts about, is called conventional reality.

We tend to live in the conventional world. In practising awareing, we are training ourselves to ground our perception in ultimate reality. This is the world of directly experienced events. This is the world where insight arises.

Normally, we live in the conventional world, the world of concepts. For the Buddha, this is problematic because this conventional world is a product of habitual conditioning from the past—conditioning that has been shaping us since at least birth, if not, for the Buddha, a lot longer. When we ask what forces accomplish this conditioning, for the Buddha these are the three akusala mūla, the three roots of the unwholesome: the famous greed, hatred, and ignorance. What this means is that the world presented to us in conventional reality is not just wrong, but it entangles us in pain and misery.

The job of the practice is to get us out of this secondhand conceptual world into a world that the tradition calls ultimate reality. I find this label a bit overblown, but what to do? It is the world of direct, firsthand experience—the world where insight and awakening can appear.

So we've got to make a journey. We have to get from the world of secondhand experience, of concept, to the world of firsthand experience, of events coming and going according to conditions. We do this through directly awareing this now—always coming back to the present, to what's happening now.

But this conventional world goes very deep. We've been working on it for a long time. So how do we cultivate the power and penetration that we need to cut through decades of conditioned habit? We do this through what the Buddha calls samādhi.

This is a term we've used a few times but haven't actually closely looked at. Samādhi is a key technical term, classically translated as concentration, although personally I'm not especially satisfied with that translation. It comes from the root *dā*, to put or to place, preceded by the prefix *ā*, toward, and before that the prefix *sam*, together. So: sam-ā-dā becomes samādhi. In other words, samādhi means to bring together, to collect.

It can be translated as absorption—a good translation, except that you have another term, jhāna, for specific samādhi states, which could probably also be translated as absorption. Bhikkhu Sujato uses "immersion," which I find really interesting. Imagine diving into a swimming pool—you are immersed in the water. So samādhi is a state of immersion within the experience. It could be translated as integration, or unification. Everything comes together as one.

The key point is that if we are in samādhi, all of our mind, all of our being, is engaged in directly experiencing this now. We're fully committed to it, fully in it, immersed in it.

We tend to think the opposite of samādhi is distraction. But essentially, the opposite of samādhi is division. Part of me is practicing, part of me is resisting, part of me is hoping for something better in the future—the heart-mind is divided. In samādhi, all of me is engaged in just this now.

And in our ordinary lives, we're most likely to experience samādhi when we do something that we enjoy, like play, where we relax and allow ourselves to become fully absorbed. It's one reason, I think, why sports are so popular—people experience samādhi on the playing field when they're really in the zone, as it were.

Now there are different ways to cultivate samādhi. There are all sorts of different techniques, and there are different types of samādhi that emerge out of these different ways of practice. This is really important: samādhi doesn't necessarily present always in exactly the same way. It depends on the conditions. And one of the conditions is what style of practice we are doing.

In this tradition, the kind of samādhi we cultivate is in the tradition called khaṇika samādhi—momentary immersion. So, roughly speaking, we could look at two basic categories of samādhi. We can cultivate samādhi by becoming absorbed into a single experience, like, for example, the breathing. We just absorb into this one thing and we reject anything other than the movements of the breathing. Something else pops up, just drop it immediately, absorb into the breathing. That's one way to develop it.

Or we could cultivate samādhi by becoming absorbed—and again, absorbed, immersed, this is in common to all forms of samādhi—but becoming absorbed into a whole series of different and discrete experiences, coming one after the other. Like, for example, playing a complex game. Or like mindfulness of ordinary everyday activity. Broadly speaking, these are two ways of developing samādhi.

Now, what's the difference between them? Absorption samādhi comes from an exclusive interest in what we call the grounding object, or the primary object. When we began, we really emphasised the importance of the grounding object because this is where we ground and settle awareness on a single, clear, obvious aspect of experience. We settle into this single experience and we ignore everything else. The mind becomes unified around this project and around this single experience. And this results in a state of absorption—what the tradition calls appanā samādhi.

We are so fully absorbed in our meditation object that we forget everything else. Remember we talked about forgetting in terms of the loss of mindfulness. Well, here we're so absorbed in doing something that we forget everything else. Have you ever had an experience, for example, where the practice is going very well and you hear the bell for lunch, so you think, "That's odd. I thought I began sitting some time ago and I must be making a mistake." And you look at your watch and you realise, no, time slipped by very quickly without noticing anything—because we forgot everything else, because we're so absorbed. This is absorption samādhi.

Momentary samādhi, momentary immersion, has a different dynamic. We do not try to exclude the world outside the grounding object. And we've been practicing this by including distraction. When we realise we're distracted, we don't just drop the distraction immediately and get back to the grounding object. We aware our distraction. We directly encounter it. And this becomes our secondary object.

So awareness widens to include the journeys our mind makes when it is distracted. And as we've been talking about, this is how we could say that distraction disappears—because distraction becomes the meditation object. In the same way, the practice does

not end when we get up off our meditation cushion and go about our normal activities. We practice mindfulness of everyday activities, which means that our normal everyday activities become our meditation objects. Again, it's the same process.

Samādhi develops by awaring first this, and then this, and then this, and then that, and then this—boom, boom, boom, boom. This movement, that sight, this thought, that feeling, but doing it without any break. Each event is an object of awareness. Each event is a meditation object. So the objects of awareness are changing, unlike in absorption, where it's always the same object. Here the objects of awareness are changing, but the awareness itself remains steady and continuous. And to get a sense of that—that's why we've been playing around a bit with the awaring as well as the awared.

Become sensitive to the aware-ing. And perhaps notice how the aware-ing can be continuous while what we are aware of is changing.

This practice blossoms into momentary immersion, *khaṇika samādhi*, which is absorption—but absorption into first this momentary experience, then that momentary experience, then the next momentary experience, and so on, without any break. And it's the "without any break" which is really central.

If we practice in this style, we maintain a continuous flow of awareness over a period of time. And of course, that's mindfulness. As mindfulness develops, samādhi strengthens. The tradition explains that mindfulness leads to samādhi. In other words, in this approach, we lead with mindfulness. The samādhi, the immersion, comes along as a by-product. It follows afterwards.

In other forms of practice, which we might call serenity practice, we lead with the samādhi and the mindfulness comes along as a by-product. So in every case, we're working with both the immersion and the mindfulness together, but where the emphasis lies varies. In this practice, the emphasis is on the mindfulness, and the samādhi follows behind.

When this kind of samādhi, this momentary immersion, matures, the meditation object becomes whatever is predominant now in any of the six senses. This is how it naturally opens out.

Now, we've been playing around with this by becoming familiar with the dyad of aware-ing and the aware-ed, where we can make the aware-ed our meditation object or the aware-ing. So that's an opening out. But notice the way we've been playing with it has been deliberate—hopefully playful—but deliberate. Let me check this. Let me delib-

erately open up. Let me see if I can aware the aware-ing itself as well as the object of aware-ing. But when the practice matures, this happens pretty much spontaneously. It simply happens.

This, of course, brings us to what we've been talking about: the perception of impermanence and why it's so important. Aware-ing momentary experience develops samādhi, momentary immersion. And momentary immersion makes the fact of change clear. It becomes obvious. This is the point where we make that transition into the world of insight and understanding.

So we're back to this dichotomy between permanence and impermanence, why it's so important, and why it's at the centre of the Buddha's approach. If we go back to the idea of direct first-hand experience versus indirect second-hand experience, let's have a look at this.

Indirect second-hand experience is concept. Let's take a Buddhist example—a concept of something we have not directly encountered, a pure concept. Let's say rebirth, or what I prefer to call life after life. This is really foundational to Buddhist teaching. Let's call it rebirth. Does rebirth actually exist? Is this doctrine true?

Some people believe it because authoritative texts say it is true, and authoritative teachers say it is true. Some people disbelieve it because it contradicts their belief in scientific materialism. We can find both of these positions among practitioners of meditation in the Buddhist traditions.

So we've got two positions that are diametrically opposed to each other. But what do they both have in common? They're both concepts—just concepts.

Has anybody directly experienced rebirth? Probably not. Now, some people claim to have memories of a previous life, but these memories are themselves concepts. Like any memory, they are creations of the mind in the present that may or may not correspond to an actually encountered first-person experience that occurred in the past. But how can we know?

So both of these positions—completely opposite, totally opposed to each other—what they have in common is that they're just concepts. And what do concepts have in common?

Even those that are totally opposed to each other, they appear as permanent. Remember, the Pali word for permanent is *nicca*. Now, they're not permanent in the sense that they last forever and ever, but in the way that the Buddha uses the term, they last unchanged over time. For the Buddha, something is permanent if it lasts unchanged over time, regardless of the unit of time.

So let's say, for example, that ten years ago or twenty years ago, I decided that the Buddha must be right—there is rebirth if he says so. I trust him. He wouldn't lead us astray on this. In contrast, let's say that ten years ago or twenty years ago, I decided that regardless of what the Buddha says, there is no rebirth. It is scientifically impossible. Just get over it.

Now, has this concept and my relationship to this concept changed over the past ten or twenty years? Well, apparently not. It seems to be the same. So it's permanent in the sense that the Buddha uses it—it lasts unchanged over time. And it is permanent because it is a concept. Concepts are permanent in the sense that they remain stable over time.

Now we don't spend all our time thinking about rebirth, but let's say that you are one of those who does not believe in rebirth. You come along to a dharma talk and the speaker is sitting on the throne explaining to you that not only is rebirth true, but that if you don't believe it, you cannot be a Buddhist and your practice cannot result in enlightenment. You're out.

What's happening during this dharma talk? You are having a direct, firsthand experience of listening to this talk and a direct, firsthand experience of agitation and irritation—a felt sense of dissatisfaction that the speaker is demanding you make an act of faith that you don't actually have, with the implied threat that if you don't, then you are excluded from enlightenment. This is the direct experience.

Now let's say that you are one of those who does believe in rebirth and you arrive at the same talk with this belief firmly in place. You are at the same talk and you are having a direct, firsthand experience of listening and a direct, firsthand experience of satisfaction—a felt sense of confirmation of your belief and a great deal of satisfaction that the truth is finally being put forward without any apologetics.

These experiences—listening to and responding to this talk—are direct, firsthand, and changing. They are not permanent. They do not last over time.

If you wandered into a different dharma talk the following night, and quite by accident someone is giving the same dharma talk you listened to last night, the concept would be exactly the same. But your felt encounter with the talk, the responses arising

in mind and body as you go through it, would be different from the night before. Perhaps this time there'd be some boredom because you're going over the same territory again and you're wondering why people think this is so important in the first place.

Direct, firsthand experiences are not permanent. They're not stable over time. But in contrast, concepts are stable. They remain unchanged over a period of time. The belief you hold or reject today could be the same belief you held or rejected ten years ago or twenty years ago.

Direct encounters with this right now—the world revealed by awareing—are unstable. They do not last unchanged over time. If you are listening to this talk and if, as a practitioner, you notice an affective or emotional response to these words, you may choose to aware the arising of that affective response as your meditation object. What would you find? Changing, shifting physical sensations and psychological responses. You would find change. You would find impermanence.

The practice of awareing reveals a world perceived as impermanent, as subject to change. This is the perception of change, or the perception of impermanence. And for the Buddha, this is the world where understanding may emerge.

Once this perception arises, the other perceptions will come with it. As we talked about last night, that which is *anicca*—impermanent and therefore unreliable—is *dukkha*, inherently unsatisfactory. And that which is *dukkha* is not self. The recognition of these three universal characteristics constitutes insight.

So what is it that we've done to approach this world? Momentary samādhi—momentary immersion. Immersion in first this, then that, then the other. We are cultivating a particular kind of concentration or samādhi or immersion which opens up this world of change and makes it, basically, bleeding obvious. Whereas if we're absorbing into just a single thing—

then our meditation practice is not associated with change, not at least to anything like the same degree.

So this brings us to the world of insight. And in one famous teaching, the Buddha declares that all fabrications are impermanent. *Sabbe sankhārā aniccā.*

Now, fabrications—this is a translation of the Pali word *sankhārā*. Sometimes you see it translated as constructions, and there are other translations. But these fabrications are experienced events that are conditioned by other events and in turn condition still other events.

One example of this, which we'll have a look at later in the retreat, is what the Buddha calls *cetanā,* usually translated as intention. But for reasons we'll go into later, I prefer to translate it as choice or decision. And this is, of course, the teaching of karma—the choices that we make determine the kind of life that we lead. They fabricate, they construct the kind of life that we lead.

So the Buddha says that all fabrications are impermanent. Now, let's look at what he's claiming. All fabrications are impermanent. You notice, from the point of view of the meditation practice, what a bold claim this is. As we've been talking about, what the Buddha is interested in is the nature of human experience. And human experience is available through this practice. We're studying our experience as it flows.

All fabrications are impermanent. Let's say I am a dedicated practitioner of insight meditation. Let's say that whenever I am aware, whenever I engage with a meditation object, I recognize that the experience I am having is impermanent—it is subject to change because of the influence of other events.

So in terms of my direct firsthand experience—and this is assuming I'm really sharp, really good at this insight meditation business—in terms of my firsthand experience, I could make the claim: whenever I am aware, whatever I am aware of turns out to be impermanent, subject to change. Okay? Great.

But what about all those experiences that I have not been aware of in my practice, which I can be pretty confident far outnumber the ones that I have been aware of? What about all those experiences, for example, that occurred before I started practicing? What about all those experiences that will occur in the future? I haven't examined them. I have no direct firsthand experience of them. Any idea that I have about them is a concept.

So doesn't that mean that I'm back where I started? I'm back into a belief. But this time, it's a Buddhist belief, which apparently is better than the other ones. So isn't it just a return to the world of concept?

Then how do I move from there, genuinely, into this world of insight and understanding? Especially since, according to the tradition, insight meditation strictly speaking begins when our meditation object is one or more of the three characteristics. But if the three characteristics are concepts, how does that work? Isn't insight meditation supposed to deconstruct concepts? Isn't it supposed to take us to a world beyond concept?

So as you can see, this is a bit of a tangle, but fortunately we're going to resolve it tomorrow night. So that's good news. Unless you're in the Zoom audience, in which case it's bad news. But what to do?

Any questions?

"You said we can look at change in terms of our direct experience, but what about the things that we haven't experienced? Do they still have the same nature? It seems to me just a funny question to ask."

It's just something that's outside of our field of experience, so why even talk about it?

If I enter into the world of insight, and it really clicks—and you find this among practitioners—there is a level of certainty. *This is the way the world is.* So what I'm inquiring about is: where does this certainty come from? How can there be this level of certainty if it's not just a concept?

The Buddha does resolve this, and I'll give you a preview. It's basically because what he's saying is that what we're seeing is the structures of experience. It's not simply that this and this and this and this change. It's recognising that the very structure of experience itself contains change. Therefore, it doesn't matter what the content is. This is what we're going to explore next—a certain universality of that experience. It's not just of that experience, because then you're talking about a content, a specific experience, but the structure of experience itself. This is what we start to actually get a sense of.

So another question came: you said that whatever changes is not-self. Is that because all three of the characteristics are built into the fabric of experience?

In the case of dukkha, what causes pain through change is the fact that we're not in charge of it. We're not in control. So it's not simply that things change, but things change in ways that I don't want them to change, and I can't do anything about it. I'm not in charge.

In this retreat we've talked about how we start off a meditation project thinking, "I'm in charge of this meditation project," and pretty quickly we realise, "No, I'm not in charge." It doesn't operate the way I want it to operate. But also, more fundamentally, what the Buddha talks about is that birth is followed by sickness, ageing, death. These are changes, and nobody stops to ask, "Are these the changes you would prefer, or would you prefer some other changes?" It's just built in. And the absence of anyone in charge is not-self. This is how not-self is perceived within dukkha—when we begin to recognise that the changes and the dissatisfaction with these changes is built into the fabric of the universe.

A follow-up question: do you think that experience of dukkha is also just built into, and our reaction to it, built into our very existence?

Well, that's the interesting thing about dukkha. What if I don't respond to what one would regard as a painful experience with aversion? What if I just completely accept it? And there is that sense in which the cessation of dukkha, the liberation from dukkha, is possible. So that makes that second characteristic unique. There is a sense in which we can move beyond it.

Now, the same flow of experiences continues, but we would not have the response of aversion. And consequently, a lot of the dukkha would disappear. So there's always, if you've got a physical body, you're going to have physical pain. That's built in. But dukkha, in the classic sense that the Buddha talks about in the Four Noble Truths, that's, in a sense, an optional added extra.

Equanimity becomes an option—to be completely balanced throughout all the ups and downs. And to be satisfied with it. Like it's okay, like it really is okay. And that imperturbability quality develops.

So dukkha is different from the other two in that sense. We can distinguish it from the other two.

Thank you very much. Goodnight, everyone.

CHAPTER 75

Tracking the Thought Stream (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 59 min

> *In this guided practice session, Patrick Kearney introduces a series of contemplative exercises for investigating the thought stream as a meditation object within the framework of satipaṭṭhāna (mindfulness meditation). Rather than engaging with the content of thoughts—the stories we tell ourselves—practitioners are invited to examine the activity of thinking itself: How do thoughts appear? Where do they arise? What is their physical manifestation in the body? What does it feel like to think?*
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> *Kearney explains that our addictive relationship to thinking, not thinking itself, is the source of suffering. The mind generates thought to create a meaningful self within its world, and we become entranced by these self-centered narratives. By shifting attention from what we think to how we think, we subvert our habitual identification with the world created by thought, opening the possibility of experiencing emptiness and not-self (anattā).*
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> *The session includes practical guidance on using thought as a secondary meditation object—briefly observing some aspect of thinking that is not its content, then returning to the grounding object in the body. Kearney emphasizes playfulness and lightness, warning against making the practice heavy or staying too long with this high-energy object. Participants share their discoveries: thoughts appearing as monologues, images, or feelings; their locations shifting or being absent entirely; the surprising enjoyment found in thinking; and the intimate connection between thought and bodily sensation. This exploration reveals why we cling to thinking and points toward freedom from that clinging.*

This morning we're going to play around with tracking the thought stream.

We're doing what the Buddha calls satipaṭṭhāna, mindfulness meditation. There are four sections to this, covering four aspects of human experience—basically all experience. First is body, and we spend a lot of time focusing on body because that's the foundation. Then comes feeling, which we've been kind of skipping over. Next comes mind, and when we get into the mind, we've got, broadly speaking, the cognitive aspect of mind and the affective or feeling aspect of mind. One part of the cognitive aspect of mind is the mind's determination to generate thought—what we could call the thought stream, the seemingly endless stream of thought generated by the mind. The mind does this for various reasons, but mostly to create a meaningful self within her world.

Now, thinking can, for some meditators, occasionally be distracting. It is completely natural for the mind to generate thought. In fact, if it didn't, we would be in serious trouble. But what we tend to do is become obsessed with our thoughts and invest all our sense of reality into them, into the stories we're telling ourselves. This obsession becomes a major source of our suffering, and of course it becomes a major distraction in our meditation practice. Thinking is natural, but our addictive relationship to thinking is neither natural nor necessary. When we're using thinking as a meditation object, this is what we're actually targeting—our relationship to thinking.

When we look at what the mind does, it throws up what we could call thought moments, continually, like sparks coming off a fire. Our awareness moves in to capture any one of these little sparks, grabs it, and turns it into a story. These stories have enormous variety, but they all have one thing in common: the star of the story, which is, of course, me. And despite the fact that these stories often contradict each other, for as long as they're playing themselves out, we believe them.

We might come into the meditation hall and have a really difficult meditation practice, just struggling and sweating and writhing and squirming. Every now and again we look around and everyone's completely still, eyes closed, blissful expressions on their face. One finds oneself telling a story: "I must be the worst meditator in this room. I must be absolutely bloody hopeless compared to these other people." We go out distressed, discouraged, have a nice cuppa, take a walk, take a break, come back in, sit down, and we're away—deep in the meditation practice, time passes. At the end, the bell goes, and we look around. These people have looks of relief on their face after they've heard the bell. And we tell ourselves a story: "I must be the best meditator in this hall." Despite the fact that one of these stories obviously cannot be true—it's extremely unlikely that either of them are true—yet while they're running, we believe them. We construct a sense of reality and a sense of self out of them. This relationship is the problem.

The payoff, of course, is that the stories give us a sense of identity. They tell us who we are and what the world is. This is why they are so entrancing. Tracking the thought stream, turning thinking into a meditation object, subverts our determination to identify with the world created by thought. It throws up the possibility of experiencing a world beyond thought and beyond concept—the world of emptiness and not-self. This is what we're going to play around with this morning.

As we've talked about, normally when we think, we assume that what is important is what we are thinking, what we are thinking about, while we completely take for granted the activity of thinking—how we think, how we construct a thought stream. But

when we're tracking the thought stream, we are not interested in what we are thinking about. That is of absolutely no concern whatsoever. What we're interested in is the activity of thinking. In other words, we are interested in thinking, not thoughts.

There's a little passage in the writings of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj where I think he sums up what we're trying to do. He compares the meditation practice to a mother watching her child play with a favorite toy. The child is absorbed with the toy, absolutely entranced by it, captured by it, you could say. The mother sees the toy, but that's not what she's really interested in. What she's interested in is the child playing with the toy. She's interested in the game itself.

So she's taken a step back and she's got a wider view. And when we track the thought stream, we are not interested in the contents of our thoughts—these are the toy. We're interested in their play, and our relationship to that play.

The basic method involves a series of brief exercises. They will be brief because thinking is a high-energy meditation object, and particularly in the early stages, we don't want to try to stay with it for too long. The basic method is this: find some aspect of the activity of thinking that is not the content of our thoughts, and make that the meditation object.

As I said, we're going to do a series of brief exercises, and it's really important that we play with these. Do not take them seriously, but be playful. Remember, it doesn't matter what result we come up with—that's irrelevant. But it would be nice if we enjoyed ourselves while we did it.

In each exercise, we're going to begin by settling awareness in the body. Then at some point, we'll be asked to direct our awareness to some aspect of the thought stream. If we get lost in our thoughts, we come back to the body, settle awareness again, and then return to the thought stream.

So we're tuning into the vibe of the thought stream, the feeling tone of it. That's one possibility—that would be one aspect of the thought stream, its feeling tone. We may or may not get that far, but that's actually a good one: what does it feel like to think? That's a very good question.

But the first question we're going to start with is this: how do you know you are thinking?

Settle with subtle awareness in your body, constructing your meditation posture. Settle into the contact of the base of the body, and from there lift up through the spine. Have your head balanced, relax your shoulders. And settle your awareness into your normal meditation object.

Are you thinking? If you are thinking, and if you know you are thinking, then thoughts must be appearing to you in some way. How do thoughts appear? Do they appear as words? Do they appear as visual images? Do they appear as feelings? Do they appear as combinations of these, or as something else altogether?

Study the flow of these thoughts. Don't focus on their content, what they are about, but on their appearance—how they present themselves to you. How do thoughts appear?

So, how do they appear?

"A tedious monologue."

A monologue, with a quality of tediousness attached. Incessant, perhaps.

"It's just constant. The monologue appears frequently, and it's almost as though I can feel the words forming in the back of my throat as they're forming in my head."

Do you have an audience for them?

"At times, yes. At other times, no. It's perhaps me talking to me."

I'm a monologist myself. Sometimes when people say it's mostly in words, I usually ask: is there a dialogue, or is it a monologue? Some people have dialogues, but I'm strictly monologue.

No one else gets a word in edgeways.

Anyone else? How did it appear?

So you have different ones that pop up and then they're connected, and then when you go off again, does that mean you develop that or you start all over again?

Hmm. And when you're putting all that together, what are you putting together? Are you putting words together or images together or both or feelings?

Words, images, feelings, everything. The whole package. All sorts of different things.

And so they're popping up all over the place and then you bring them together and off you go constructing something from it.

Yeah, good.

Very vivid imagery, like a dream, though I'm kind of more conscious of them than a dream. And that's just general thoughts, but then if there's a more analytical thought, it's a murky kind of image of my internal self.

So images, and when you engage in analytical thought, the images become more murky?

Yeah, because it's like an internal dialogue with myself. So it's like maybe it's an image of my brain or something.

But this dialogue is via images? What's going on inside the mind is all via images?

What do you mean?

Well, it's images that are—what's happening as you're thinking about something, it's images. Sometimes they're clear, sometimes they're not.

And then it changes slightly when it's more of a dialogue.

Are there still images in the dialogue, or words?

It's like a murky, dark space, which is kind of an image. But basically, you don't really know. It's vividly clear when it's just general thought, but then when you're thinking about something, it becomes murky, and you're not quite sure what's going on.

Yeah, good.

I have the sense of a thought space, and it can move on in different ways, but it often doesn't come together in any clear proposition. And at one point, I had the sense that my thinking was actually a feeling with a question mark at the end.

So you can see different things happen in different minds, which is interesting. But you notice the point of the exercise was focusing in on thinking—not being concerned with what we're thinking about, but with how thinking presents, how it appears.

The three modalities we mentioned were words, images, and feelings, because in the years that I've been doing this exercise, these are the three predominant things that people report. Occasionally someone will report something different, but those three seem to be predominant.

What we're doing is bypassing the content. We're not interested in what we're thinking about. We're shifting the aim to the appearance of the thought.

Now, that shift in the aim is very precise. It's taking the awareness—instead of being absorbed where it's normally absorbed—and going, no, I'll just go right here. When we were doing the elements yesterday, we were talking about how in insight meditation practice, we're trying to develop precision in the awareness. And this is an example of it.

If I'm going to go into the mind and look at thinking as a meditation object—now, normally when people first hear about this idea, they assume it must mean, oh, I just keep thinking but I'm aware of my thinking, because of the habit of identifying with the content. But actually, it's much more subtle than that. It's a shift of the aim away from the content, the story, to some aspect of how the story is being constructed. In this case, the appearance—how it appears.

Does that make sense?

This is the basic method. So you can see it's very delicate, very precise. And normally, particularly if you're new at it, you can't do it for very long. It's like you stumble over it—you lose the balance and bang, you're back in the content.

In the basic context in which we're working, we've got grounding object and secondary object. So we settle into the grounding object. But at some point we're distracted, so we make that the meditation object—not necessarily for very long. In this case, thinking will be the secondary object. I'm distracted by thinking. Whoops, I'm thinking. Bring your awareness to it, again to some aspect of the thinking which is not the content. Okay, that's what it is—and then come back.

So you might only be there for a few seconds. Particularly in the early stages, if you try to stay too long, you'll just get caught up in it. But you just have a look. Okay, this is how it is, and then come back. And in this case, we were looking at the appearance of the thought.

Shall we try another one? This time we're going to investigate the question which I'm sure has kept you up at night on more than one occasion: Where do you think?

Guided meditation begins

Once more, settle into your meditation posture, constructing your posture from the ground up. And from there, settle into your normal meditation object.

Are you thinking? Turn your attention to the place where you think. This is similar to finding where physical sensations arise. The difference is that physical sensations have physical location, while the thought stream may not.

People may experience their thoughts in the general area of the head, and it can be useful to begin there, but don't take anything for granted. Don't assume that you know.

Where do you think? Is there a specific location? Is there more than one location? Does this location change? Or is there no location?

Where do you think?

Meditation ends

So where are they?

Student responds: They're close by. They're not too far away. You can feel it kind of bubble up. Maybe it was a bit quick, but it felt like it was here, and then it was here, and then it was kind of like some rambling in the background, kind of faint sense of some kind of meaning around here. So it was close by.

But outside the body?

Student: Yeah, outside that.

Outside the body, but close by, and generally fairly high up in the body. So you felt it in the ear?

Student: That area, yeah.

But if it's a concept, it's internally generated. That's very, very internal. So it's still pretty internal even if it appears external. So it's sort of inside the head or around the ear for the morning?

Student: But concepts kind of make meaning inside my head.

So the concept's inside the head or further down?

Inside the head. So it's all happening in or very close to the head.

"But if it's conceptual..." someone began.

That's not conceptual—that's direct experience. A concept would be something made up, constructed. So direct experience is located where the sensation is located, but concepts tend to move up into the head area. And it would be lovely, I think it could be really helpful, if those concepts could just fragment and dissipate through your body.

We've already gotten onto this—the connection between the body and thinking. It's quite interesting.

"If it's an external thing," one practitioner shared, "I feel like my thought goes a long way out to that thing, whatever it is. And if it's a thought that creates a feeling, it goes straight to the body. For example, anxiety—if I have an anxious thought, it seems to happen so quickly. I don't know what comes first, the thought or the anxiety feeling in my body. It's almost as though the thought immediately goes to a part of my body."

That could be the feeling that regenerates the thought. So when it's an affective thought, like anxiety, then the physical sensation, the feeling, and the thought are all very closely linked, all located in the body. But a thought about something external will tend to be located outside. So different kinds of thoughts have different locations.

"When I'm trying to look at them," another person observed, "it actually feels like the thinking stops. I'm sure it doesn't, but it feels like it stops. And I realize a thought has come only in retrospect, but it feels like it's coming from the other side."

So you've got the back of the mouth and the palate, but when you look at thoughts, they tend to hide. It's not that they're gone—they're just hiding away. And as soon as your glance goes somewhere else, there they are. They're shy. It's understandable.

A few people have said over the years that thought for them actually begins in the heart and moves up to the head. Anybody find that?

"I had a distinction between where thinking was and where the thoughts were," someone offered. "Thinking was... and sometimes they move up and down. But the activity of thinking is located here, while the production is out there."

Now, you probably want to know which are the correct answers and which are the wrong answers, because there are wombat stamps involved here. Every answer is correct. It's just how you experience it. And with thinking, it can be a bit weird—you can get completely different situations at different times. That doesn't matter.

What matters is the game. The thought arises, and habit says: go to the content, live within the content. But the practice is no—look at some other aspect. For example, where is it?

Anybody fail to find a location?

One person indicated yes.

Anybody come to the conclusion that it's not that you could not find the location, but that thoughts have no location? That location simply does not apply?

"Something like that," someone responded. "You were talking about them hiding away. They were, but when I think about it, it was when I was trying to locate them—I went, oh... not really. Not really available in some way."

Because there's a difference between "I'm looking for something but I can't find it" versus "no, it's very clear to me, location does not apply." Both can be true. One can have all sorts of experiences. Sometimes that's the response that people have. And again, at one point there's absolutely no location. At another point, there is, right there. The experiences vary wildly. There's no right experience.

But notice what we're doing—we're playing a game with aim. We're deliberately sending the aim at some aspect of the thought stream which is not the content.

Now let's look at something which has popped up already, but essentially the physicality of thought. Do you think with your body?

So once more, settle awareness in your posture and settle into your normal meditation object. Are you thinking? Do you think with your body? In other words, does your body respond to your thinking? For example, do you feel any tension in your body as you think? You might check for sensation in the area of your face. Is there tightness in your jaw? Is there tension in your forehead? Alternatively, do you relax when you think? Does your posture change when you slide into thinking? For example, you may find you slump slightly. Look for how your body responds to your thinking. Do you think with your body?

Okay, is the body involved?

"Definitely. I just always find that thought and body have such a strong connection, and I cannot work out sometimes whether—or sometimes it's clear that thought has quickly triggered a body sensation or a bodily sensation."

That's an interesting one. Sometimes we get a clear sense that this is related to that. But which one came first? Sometimes it seems that one comes first, and other times it seems this one comes first. But it's very useful. Again, if you've got a sense of the embodiment of thinking, then that gives you a handle which is not the content, not the story. So you can track a thought without getting caught in the content. And you may even find you don't know what the content is if you're just really with the physicality of it.

"I often find my chin rises, my head goes back a little. I bring my chin down, my thinking stops."

So when thought comes up, chin goes up. Chin comes down, thought cuts. That's very useful.

"I have the opposite—I tend to contract, curl down."

And what happens when you notice that?

"I don't really notice it actually, but I notice it because of this exercise."

I often get—I should say I used to, it hasn't happened for a bit—but the thought will come up the back of the spine here. And there's a kind of curving, a slight curving of the spine and pressure here. And if I do the opposite, then the thought vanishes. So it's all in the body. There's been a period of time when that's been the case because experience has changed.

Anybody find that they relax when they think?

"Well, I tried to relax. I made my primary object just being relaxed. And I noticed that the thinking was there. It was quite subdued. It didn't really change the feeling of the body. And I could just kind of sit with a relaxed body."

So when you look for the feeling, the feeling is embodied. The thinking itself tends to have a quality of disembodiment about it. But the feeling of thought—that's in the body. That can bring you into the physicality, and it's very calm.

Another practitioner shared a different discovery: "There was a sense of suspicion that came up, like a playful suspicion. Kind of like if a mother has just told her child to pack the toys away, and as soon as the mother turns away, the kid starts pulling them back out again. So that kind of feeling—'What do you think you're getting up to?'"

So you had a playfulness about it?

"Yes, with that tone of suspicion."

Oh, good. Maybe you found the means of staying with the thought stream.

I'm so glad we played that last game, because I didn't realise—

I know I used the word tedious before, but I'm going to backtrack on that. I didn't realise how much I enjoy thinking. And it seems to give me, in inverted commas, a reality that I may never be able to achieve in the real world, because I can be whoever I want to be when I'm thinking. There's something really intensely satisfying about that.

I also do a lot of rehearsing when I'm thinking. I'm rehearsing what I've got coming up next in life, whatever. And it feels almost like the future me is thanking me for doing that thinking right now—"that was really useful, rehearsing." So again, there was a feeling of satisfaction that came with it: I'm doing something good by putting this effort into thinking. I didn't realise it was as enjoyable and satisfying as it is. I know there were some thoughts in that time just then that were not so satisfying, but the overall flavour was surprisingly enjoyment and satisfaction.

So now you know why you think a lot. It's pretty obvious, isn't it? But it's not necessarily helpful—except sometimes it is, because it's helpful in your office.

When the Buddha talks about tracking an object which is more affective than cognitive, he says look for what he calls the *āsāda* and the *ādīnava*. Look for the gratification. What am I getting out of this? There's something in it for me, otherwise I wouldn't be doing it. What is that? So that's the pleasure, the satisfaction. But he says when you're familiar with that, then do the flip side: what's the disadvantage of it? And being clear about that as well, so you get a balanced response to pleasure and pain.

A participant asked about not engaging with content, finding it a little confusing. Because to know what you're getting out of thinking, there seem to be different categories of thought—would you want to know the content?

Sometimes. This is a specialised meditation exercise. Sometimes the content is important—it's like I've got to figure something out. But what a lot of people find is that most of the thinking they do is actually completely unnecessary.

The example I like to give is that over decades I have trained my mind—it used to be three times a day, but now it's just two—for the mind to throw up the thought "it's time for another cup of coffee." What happens is there will be the arising of the knowing "time for another cup of coffee," and then I will explain to myself "it's time for another cup of coffee." Now that explanation is completely unnecessary. I already know, but I have to tell myself.

So a lot of our thinking is in that field where we don't really need it. We already know. But sometimes we do need to talk it through, as it were, with ourselves in order to figure it out. That thinking is necessary, and it's good.

But here, because we're working in the context of doing a meditation practice where I tend to be distracted by thought—if I'm going to solve a problem, I'll do it after the retreat. I won't do it during the retreat. I won't think about it now. So here, in a retreat

context, most of the thinking that we do is completely useless. So don't go for the content. Go for this. That's the basic technique. But that doesn't mean that all content is bad or useless. Sometimes content is good.

And what you find, if you practise and get a handle on the thinking process, is that over time the quantity of thinking will decline while the quality will go up. Because generally the more quantity there is, the poorer the quality. So in terms of your daily life, you might find a whole different relationship. You might find that you think less, but what you think is much more useful than what you were thinking before.

But the other thing is the more intuitive capacity of the mind—where the mind can know something without going "blah, blah, blah."

that direct connection with the knowing capacity of the mind without all the mental chatter getting in the way.

One practitioner shared an observation: "I was noticing that the talk arises in my mind and it's got a slightly different shape from what it had last time it arose. And next time it will have a different shape, and it's becoming more resolved. The production of the thought is essential for the continuing work that's going on, but it's not an end point in any way. It's just a sign that things have moved on."

I think that unconscious work is exactly what gets more developed through meditation practice. This is the wisdom factor at play.

Another question arose: "You mentioned at the beginning that contemplating the thought stream gave you a sense of emptiness or not-self. Can you say more about what you meant by that?"

The reason we're addicted to thought is because we're addicted to self. We use thinking to prop up the self. For the Buddha, the self is a construction project—and it's never actually finished. It's like renovators or builders. I don't know about your experience, but my experience is that the closer builders come to the conclusion of a project, the more they slow down. There's this horror in their minds of actually finishing something.

So there's this constant construction project going on, but it's really, really fragile—like it could collapse if I'm not paying attention to it all the time. The thought stream is this constant propping it up, patching it up, fixing it here, putting a bit there. That's why there's such resistance to not thinking.

Sometimes people will report this directly. On the one hand, they'll say, "Oh, if only I could find peace and the mind stops thinking in my meditation—that would be great." But then they get to a point where the thinking actually does stop, and the effect is, "Oh my God, what's going on? I'd better think about this!" There's a horror of this empty space.

It's like in our culture—it's clear that people are really distressed by silence. You go into any pub or any restaurant, and they're designed to be noisy. There's always something going on. It's as if the business owners know that if they want to lose money, they should provide an environment that's quiet. People will just run. They've got to have noise.

The mind is like that too. Meditators will find resistance to dropping thought because they feel a sense of insecurity without it. Who am I if I'm not thinking?

But when you actually can drop the thinking, when you're at ease without thinking, you have a clearer sense of life simply flowing under its own conditions—without me constantly having to jump in and take command. It's taking care of itself. And this is the sense of not-self.

I remember back when I was in Burma, I would go through these epic cycles of just endless thinking. At one time, my meditation practice basically consisted of wrestling thinking to the ground. I would get to the point where I could feel that the level of thinking was subsiding, really dropping. And then suddenly, panic would arise in the mind. Bang! And the thoughts were back again.

That really alarmed me. On the one hand, I really wanted to drop thinking. On the other hand, the last thing on this planet that I wanted was to stop thinking. Because then, who am I?

That's when I realised just how identified with thinking I was. So that was quite weird.

It's 10 o'clock.

So your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to be aware of your thought stream.

Now, again, play with it. Do not take any of this seriously. If you take it seriously, you make it heavy. Don't make it heavy. Play with it. Be interested. Enjoy it.

And when you go into the thought stream, don't stay there for very long. Partly because this is a very high energy practice and you can spin yourself out. Mind is incredibly energetic. And if you get in there and study it, then it can spin you out.

So you just go in, have a look, come out, back to the body. And then when you find yourself caught up in thinking again, go in, have a look, back to the body.

You're getting used to a landscape and learning how to visit it, find your way around, and exit.

So play with it. It can be quite useful.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 76

Seeing and Understanding

Patrick Kearney · 43 min

In this talk, Patrick Kearney delves into the mechanics of how insight (vipassanā) actually develops in Mahāsī-style practice. Building on the foundation of directly aware experience—the grounding object and secondary objects—he explores the crucial shift from perceiving individual experienced events (dhammas) to recognising the universal patterns they embody.

Drawing primarily from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and the Ñāṇavatthu Sutta (SN 12.33), Kearney illuminates how the chorus sections of the Satipaṭṭhāna describe a foreground-background shift in awareness. Initially, we track particular experiences while change remains in the background. Through sustained practice, this reverses—the nature of arising and ceasing itself comes to the foreground while particular events recede. This shift marks the entry into insight proper.

The talk explores how the Buddha's teaching integrates the Four Noble Truths template with Dependent Arising (paṭicca-samuppāda) to reveal causal patterns. Using the relationship between feeling (vedanā) and craving (taṇhā) as an example, Kearney shows how recognising these patterns allows us to navigate experience skillfully. While individual events are unique and particular, the patterns of conditionality are universal and stable over time. Importantly, insight cannot be forced—we can only create conditions that make us 'accident prone' to its arising. The three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa)—impermanence, suffering, and not-self—emerge as the foundational patterns underlying all conditional relationships.

Tonight we're going to talk about seeing and understanding, continuing to explore how insight works. I was looking at this material before I came down and I thought, this is way too big and way too theoretical—I'm going to explode their brains. But I'll try to make it coherent.

Yesterday we talked about how we design a practice in order to gain insight. In this lineage, the basis of the practice is directly aware-ing whatever arises in any of the six senses now. That's basically it. Mahasi structures the enterprise in terms of grounding object and secondary object. The grounding object is what we stabilise on. This is where we gain our stability, where we cultivate, in particular, samādhi.

The secondary object is different. It's about, essentially, change. We find that our meditation is unstable and the awareness slips off somewhere else. What this means is a gap, a break. What we want to do is cultivate continuity of awareness, because it's the continuity of awareness which is mindfulness. And it's the mindfulness which is going to develop the samādhi power to get us through. It's the mindfulness which is going to develop the kind of samādhi power that we want—what we talked about last night, momentary concentration.

So distraction is a problem. The way Mahasi deals with it is he simply says, well, make the distraction the meditation object. Is there something getting in the way of the practice? It will be something which arises in the body, or arises in the mind, or has elements of both. It's just another meditation object.

One way in which this was expressed very clearly was by Sayadaw U Janaka. He had a small centre, Chanmyay Yeiktha. The word yeiktha is usually translated in English as meditation centre. In Burmese, it literally means shady place—although often they're anything but shady. When the Burmese started developing meditation centres, including for lay people, which began in the early twentieth century, they had no word for meditation centre. The idea of getting a bunch of people, monastics and lay people together for the purpose of learning meditation was so alien to the culture they didn't even have a word for it. So they decided they would call them yeiktha, shady places.

Janaka's shady place didn't have a great deal of shade, but what to do? It was right on the main north-south highway leading out of Rangoon. Incredible truck traffic passing to and fro. On the other side of the street was a shopping centre, just waves of noise and pollution going right through the centre. Foreign meditators would come and sometimes they'd get a bit agitated and they would complain to the Sayadaw. They would say, "Look, I can't meditate here. It is so noisy. It is unrelentingly noisy." And the Sayadaw would smile and he would say, "You are so lucky—you have so many objects to note."

It sums up the principle. It doesn't matter what it is. It's just a meditation object. And if it's getting in the way—I can't meditate because of this—then this is an excellent meditation object. Because isn't it clear? Isn't it obvious? What more do you want?

In this way, by working with distraction, we work with the grounding object, and then we realize we're distracted, so we've lost a bit of awareness, but as soon as we realize we're distracted—bang, meditation object. We're closing the gap. We're making the awareness as continuous as possible. We're developing momentary immersion or momentary concentration. We have a continuous flow of awareness covering a discontinuous flow of events.

And as we do this, we become increasingly sensitive to the difference between what we directly encounter in awareness firsthand and what we experience secondhand through concept. This becomes clear, and we begin to recognize that concepts, by their very nature, are concepts *about* what is actually happening here and now—not what is actually happening.

Moving to this new perception is difficult because we've spent our lives training ourselves to take as real and significant the world that consists of concepts about our experience rather than the actual experience itself.

For example, I don't know if you've ever been a tourist. Let's say you're a tourist and you go to a place famous for its beautiful views. You're standing there looking at it. What am I doing? Am I simply seeing? Well, maybe I'm preoccupied by my perception of how beautiful this view is, or isn't, and how it compares to other views. Perhaps I feel that this experience of visual beauty must be captured, so I've got to take a picture of it. Then I can take it away with me, preserve it for the future, show it to my friends and maybe even my children. So the visual scene itself is actually less real to me, less salient, than the concepts I build around it.

I picked the example of a view because—and I have to confess this is particularly my experience in Korean tourist spots—there's a famous view, there's a crowd of people, and there are many more people looking at this view through cameras than there are people looking at it through their eyes. The cameras are often pointed at people looking at the view, or people in front of the view looking at the camera. It's clear that there's a lot more going on than just seeing. And this "more going on" is very much creating a conceptual world more real, more salient, than the actual direct experience.

But in this practice, we're learning to drop beneath the world of concept to the world defined by the flow of directly experienced events. This brings us to the perception of impermanence that we've been talking about, because this world of concept—one of the reasons why it's so attractive—is that it appears as permanent. Remember that for the Buddha, "permanent" means lasting unchanged over time.

We talked about how in particular we can see this in the sense of self. The one who comes to see the view is the same one who's enjoying the view, or alternatively disappointed by the view, and is the same one who leaves, and is the same one who provides an image of it to their friends six months later. The same one. This is the self, and the self is steady throughout time. It is permanent.

But the Buddha might ask: is there in all of this a directly experienced, firsthand event that corresponds to this sense of me? Or, if we're directly aware of what is happening as it happens, do we instead find a flow of changing experiences—seeing, feeling, responding, thinking, and so on—that make up the broader category of "seeing a beautiful view"?

When we're not paying attention, when direct awareness slips, the dharma adventures of this I, this me, are more real than the actual experiences of hearing, seeing, feeling, and so on. When we do pay attention, these actual felt experiences become more real than the concepts we've wrapped around them.

You notice again—which we've already talked about—the practice means we are staying close to the ground. We're learning to stay close to the ground of our direct experience. This is the essential discipline of the practice. And in the process, we're learning to recognize the fact of change.

This happens. We don't have to try to do it. We suggested some exercises you could do, but you don't actually have to try to do it. It just becomes obvious. It just becomes obvious that this turns into that.

How many people here, since they've arrived at the retreat, have had a consistently same experience every day? Any takers? How many people have found that the days vary enormously? Even the morning varies enormously from the afternoon. Sometimes I can do it, sometimes I can't. Sometimes nothing seems to be getting in the way. Sometimes something's getting in the way so much I can't even do it anymore. Change. It's just obvious.

So one way of looking at it is that we're learning to recognize that this that we experience right now is already turning into that, another experience. Now, this world of direct experience is the world of the particular, the specific, the individual—this breath, that thought, this movement, and so on. But the world of insight is the world of the universal. It's not that this now is changing; that's the world of direct experience. The world of insight is: *everything* changes.

So how do we get from the particular to the universal? This is the problem we raised last night. Let's look at how the Buddha talks about this. We'll do this by having a look at the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which is the root text of our practice. The practice is divided into four trackings: body, feeling, mind, dharma. We'll just look at an example from the body, the first one.

And the Buddha describes the basic discipline of the practice, which we've talked about already: "Here a practitioner, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful."

Now, we didn't have a look at what he means by "body as body." Why doesn't he just say "lives tracking body, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful"? Why does he say "body as body"? What's this all about?

This is about the direct, first-hand connection to physical experience. This physical sensation is just this physical sensation. It's not good, it's not bad, it's not satisfying, it's not disappointing, it's not mine, it's not somebody else's. It's just hard, soft, moving, sharp, and so on. This is the first-hand world of experienced events where one sensation segues into another.

Technically, this is the world of the dharmas. When you see the word dharma in the plural, these are the events—the experienced events that come and go. So "tracking body as body" refers to cultivating mindfulness through a whole series of events. "Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world" refers to the work of again and again dropping our slide into the world of concepts and all the emotional entanglements that this world involves. This is the basic practice.

At the end of each section, the discourse is divided into four categories, but there are thirteen separate modules that make up those four categories. At the end of each module—for example, breathing is a single module—there's a chorus.

Remember, these discourses were not written down. They were chanted. They were sung. This is an oral tradition. These are songs, and of course songs are structured with verses and chorus: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, and so on.

Now, if you're a great fan of a particular song, so that you actually remember it, and if you kind of forget about it and twenty-five years later it comes back to mind, what's the part of the song that you're most likely to remember? The chorus. In a sense, the chorus provides the essence of the song.

Here we also have a chorus, and each chorus is exactly the same—you just have a shift in one word to refer back to the previous verse. So here we have the first appearance of the chorus:

"The practitioner lives tracking the nature of arising as body, or she lives tracking the nature of ceasing as body, or she lives tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body."

Now you notice the change of language. And with it, the practice has changed. The practitioner is no longer aware in body as it comes and goes—she's aware in the nature of arising and ceasing as body. This is the entry into insight, the movement from the particular to the universal.

"Arising and ceasing" is code for change, for impermanence. Something arises, it begins; it ceases, it ends. Change. What's happening is I'm tracking my experience, keeping to the ground: just this, just this, just this. This is the basic boot camp. And as I do this, I notice things change. The experience changes. It's unstable.

One way of looking at this is we could say that attention has a certain structure—a foreground and a background. Let's say my meditation object is breathing. I'm directly aware of the breathing, but other things are present as well within the field of awareness. There's the other sensations of the body, there's the sounds, there's the thoughts, but they're in the background. In the foreground is the meditation object, say the breathing. In the background is everything else. I'm actively aware in the foreground; I'm deliberately going to it. All the stuff in the background is coming to me.

I'm not going up to it. So my awareness is undirected, receptive. The meditation object receives active awareness; everything else receives receptive awareness. This is the basic structure.

But every now and again, you get a foreground-background shift. Let's say you're with the breathing, and a truck rumbles up this narrow road. It's very loud, moving slowly. At first you register it receptively, and then you become more preoccupied by it. You begin to wonder how they could have such a noisy truck right next to a meditation hall. When they were actually working on this road, it was fantastic—the hall itself would shake because they had all this equipment pounding the road. It was quite alarming.

Anyway, the noise occupies a greater and greater space until suddenly you realize that actually, what you're directly aware of is the truck, the noise, while the breathing has slipped away into the background, or possibly disappeared altogether. There's been a foreground-background shift. What was in the foreground has gone into the background. What was in the background has come to the foreground.

The same happens with thinking. I'm following my meditation object. I notice there's a bit of thought in the background, but no worries. And then I realize, no, I'm completely preoccupied by my thinking, and the meditation object has receded to the background. Again, a foreground-background shift. So what do I do? Reverse it. Bring the

meditation object to the foreground, let the thinking drop to the background. This structure of foreground and background is part of the field of awareness, and this field is big enough to take both.

Now, what the Buddha is talking about in the Insight Chorus is precisely this foreground-background shift. The practitioner lives tracking the nature of arising and ceasing as body. Before, the meditation object is whatever the verse is about—let's say breathing. And in the background, I notice that the experience is changing. The experience of the breath is changing, the experience of sitting here following the breath is changing, the experience of the weather is changing, and so on. Foreground, background.

So the foreground is this now—dynamic, never still, already changing into something else. The background is the fact of change itself. And then there's the shift, the reversal, where what comes to the foreground is the fact of change, and in the background is now the particular this-now which is changing. That is the entry into insight.

One way of looking at this is in terms of the relationship between uniqueness and patterns. The unique, the particularities of experience—this right now, which could not have happened before and will never happen in the future. We talked about this in the sense of sometimes getting a feeling for the newness of things. I've been in this hall before, I've listened to dharma talks before, but my experience of it now is different from what it was before or what it will be later. It's unique, specific, particular. This is the boot camp training we're doing.

And then there's the patterns of experience—how the particularities, as they flow, form different patterns, and the patterns are consistent over time.

Before we practice, we don't really appreciate the unique, the specific, the new. We tend to miss it or gloss over it because of our habit of viewing our present experience as an expression of what has always been here, always the same. "Yep, yet another dharma talk. Same." But what we're training to do is cut through this habitual concept to see the particularities.

Normally, this day is just like yesterday. The perception of sameness is the perception of identity. There's a stability in this perception—the same thing popping up again and again. This is our normal everyday perception of permanence. The practice subverts this by drawing our attention to uniqueness.

And as we settle into this, at some point we begin to notice that there is a stability within experience after all. But it's not in the experienced things themselves.

It's in the patterns of their movements. It's what the Buddha calls their arising and ceasing. So it's not that this right now is the same—it isn't. It's new, it's unique. But there is a pattern in the regularities of its movements, how things arise and cease. And these patterns are dynamic and they are causal. They show how one thing gives rise to another.

It's not the regularities of identity, of sameness. It's the regularities of causation, of conditionality. Roughly speaking, it's like the weather. Our experience of the weather here now is unique—particularly around here, where it's constantly changing. But the patterns of hot and cold, wet and dry endlessly reproduce themselves. Each individual experience is unique, but it's part of a broader patterning, and the patterns are relatively stable over time. This is what the Buddha is getting at when he's talking about the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing—he's talking about the general patterns of experience.

So we start by having a meditation object at the centre, studying it, noticing its changes, and then at some point there's a shift, and what we're actually looking at are the patterns of change as they appear in this particular experience. Now, this shift is subtle—very subtle. Sometimes it's big, but usually it's quite subtle. And it's not something that we can do. What we're doing is the practice. And so to do it, we make a choice to do it. We sustain that choice. We develop effort. We work at it. This is the realm of choice, of our agenda, of what we are doing.

But we do not do insight. Insight just happens. Insight is not part of our agenda. It always arrives from outside, as grace. We cannot make it happen; it just happens. Or alternatively, it just does not happen. But we don't do it. All we can do is set up the conditions that make insight possible, or even likely.

My old Zen teacher, Robert Aitken Roshi, once said that meditation does not produce insight. Insight always comes about as an accident. But meditation makes us accident prone. So this is what we're doing—we're creating the circumstances in which we might possibly have an accident.

Krishnamurti expressed the same thing. He said insight is like the breeze that blows. You can't control the breeze. You can't make the breeze blow. But what you could do is open the window, stand in front of it, and wait.

So this shift—this foreground-background shift from seeing this and noticing that it changes, to seeing change and noticing it happens with this—this is not something that we can do. And the movement into insight is subtle. Usually it does not announce itself with bells and whistles, although often when we start we have this fantasy that it will.

It's quite unusual for that to happen. In fact, it can be so subtle that the practitioner doesn't even notice it. It happens, for example, that practitioners can develop a vague sense that something has changed in the practice, but they don't really know what. And then maybe one day they're hearing about impermanence, or they're thinking about the changes that they've been experiencing, when it occurs to them: Oh, that's what's happening. I'm recognizing change itself. Change itself is my meditation object. And this perception can be so subtle that once having been recognized, it then disappears.

Only to reappear when it thinks no one is looking. But over time it begins to weave its way into our habitual perceptions until it just becomes part of the furniture. It can be a gradual and very subtle process that we don't really recognize all that much as it's happening. Then simply at some point, for some reason, it clicks, and we realize that something has changed.

So this is how the Buddha describes the emergence of insight.

Let us look at another discourse. This one is called "Grounds for Understanding," and it's one of these very complicated technical discourses that nobody in their right minds ever reads. But these discourses are particularly interesting because they're basically designed for an oral tradition. Again, these are chants. You have certain discourses that go through different categories meant to be sung and memorized. And by memorizing them, you begin to absorb what is being spoken about in terms of patterns—not of individual things, but of patterns. So this is one of the discourses that reveals a pattern.

What it does is take two fundamental templates that the Buddha uses. One is the four truths—everybody's heard of the four noble truths? Dukkha, the arising of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, and the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. One, two, three, four. This is the subject of the Buddha's first formal teaching.

The other formula is the twelve-fold formula of dependent arising. Dependent arising is his basic way of looking at the universe and experience. There are multiple versions of it, but the standard one is the twelve-fold formula.

In this discourse, he takes these two templates and brings them together. He presents forty-four different situations in which, first of all, we are presented with an experienced event—a dhamma, a this-now—and then along with how we understand it. The pattern is exactly the same regardless of the event. So we can just look at one of these events and get a sense of the pattern.

In the twelve-fold formula, you start with ignorance and move on until at some point you come to craving, and then from craving to clinging, and so on. "When a cultivated student understands craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessa-

tion"—you notice that four-fold structure comes from the four truths. A cultivated student is a mature practitioner. When they understand craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation, "this is understanding into the experienced event."

In Pali this is *dhammañāṇa*. What he's talking about is direct, firsthand awareness. But there's an ambiguity in the Pali that does not come out in the English. The translation here is "understanding into the experienced event." *Dhamme ñāṇa—ñāṇa* is understanding, *dhamme* is "into dhamma." And this can be read as a single experienced event, which is how I've translated it, or it could equally refer to the universal law of nature itself. It could mean the particular; it could mean the universal. This ambiguity is built into this word *dhamma*, which has both of these meanings, and different translators will pick different meanings.

So Bhikkhu Sujato chooses the first meaning—he translates it as "knowledge of the present phenomenon," this this-now which we've been talking about. Bhikkhu Bodhi chooses the second meaning, so he translates it as "knowledge of the principle"—the principle as in the universal.

Now personally I prefer Sujato's reading, so I translate it as understanding into the experienced event. But it's ambiguous. And the Buddha's audience would have recognised this ambiguity. We don't, but they would because it's their language. They would understand the subtlety of recognising that a discrete, experienced event is also presenting a universal pattern or principle. And this universal pattern or principle is not separate from the discrete experienced event—it's bound up with it.

Here the pattern is the pattern of the four truths: the event, its arising, its cessation, the path leading to its cessation. So understanding into the experienced event gives us direct first-hand encounter with this now.

The Buddha then goes on to say this experienced event, seen, understood, instantly attained, penetrated, leads to past and future in this way: "Whoever in the past directly knew craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation—all of them directly knew it in exactly the same way that I do now. Whoever in the future will directly know craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation—all of them will directly know it in exactly the same way that I do now."

This is inferential understanding, anvaya jñāna. So there are two different types of understanding being presented: individual-specific understanding and universal. The individual is directly encountered; the universal is inferred.

Now this does not mean that the practitioner moves from direct experience to thinking about. Inferential understanding indicates a recognition that while the individual events that come and go are unique—they appear only in the present—the patterns that each unique this-now presents are universal and they extend over time. Arising, craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. Just as this particular event has a beginning and an end, an arising and a cessation, so every event has a beginning and an end, an arising and cessation. And to the practitioner, this appears as obvious. If events did not begin, we would never experience anything. If events did not cease, nothing new would ever happen.

And then finally we recognise a trajectory, a path, a path leading to the cessation. We realise, in other words, that these patterns of experience are normative, stable over time—which means we can learn to navigate them. Because the patterns are stable while the individual events that make up the patterns come and go in great profusion. The events within the pattern are individual; the patterns themselves are universal.

What the Buddha is talking about here is the pattern: feeling conditions craving. This is from Dependent Arising. Feeling conditions craving. What feeling is he talking about? He's talking about this feeling right now. What does he mean by craving? He means this particular sense that I must respond to this feeling.

So where I find craving, which appears as a sense of urgent necessity, I will find feeling. Now the many instances of craving vary enormously. The many different feelings vary enormously. But the pattern remains the same: feeling conditions craving.

Insight emerges as the recognition of these patterns and how they behave. And they are causal. They bring into existence certain events and not others.

So let's look at this one, between feeling and craving. All instances of craving, of urgent necessity, of drivenness, arise because of feeling. All of them, without exception. And this is a universal pattern. If there's craving, there has to be feeling. Always.

However, it is possible to have feeling without craving. This particular relationship is not inevitable. You can have the feeling without the craving.

But if you've had the craving, you've definitely had the feeling. And so this relationship is particularly important in meditation practice, because in meditation we're training to be directly aware of feeling so that it does not blossom into craving. But if there is craving, it came from feeling.

So these conditional relationships vary in their nature. They're not all the same. And the later Theravāda tradition mapped out twenty-four categories of conditional relationships. These were the scholars after the Buddha died who got together and tried to make a complete system. They said, "He's definitely talked about different kinds of conditional relationships. How many did he describe?" Research teams were trying to work it out, and they came up with twenty-four.

You are all familiar with them visually. Could anybody recognise the Indian flag, the official flag of the Indian Republic? It's a tricolour, and in the centre is a wheel. The wheel has twenty-four spokes. These are the twenty-four conditional relationships. This is the wheel of Ashoka, the Emperor Ashoka—the Ashoka Chakra.

The conditional relationships vary. For example, in some cases you have event A causing or conditioning the arising of event B, where B arises after A. It might arise immediately after A. It might arise a long time after A. It varies. There are conditional relationships in which if you have A right now, you have B—bang—no time gap. And so on.

But what all conditional relationships have in common—every single one—is that they are impermanent, they are painful, they are not-self. All of them. This is where the characteristics come in. These three characteristics are foundational patterns. They are the patterns of what is happening here, now.

And insight emerges from the movement from the particular to the universal. It moves from seeing the arising and ceasing of this, now, to understanding the universal patterns of how arising and ceasing works.

Tonight we've had a heavily theoretical presentation of this, so you may feel your head is about to explode. Tomorrow night we'll talk about it in much more practical terms, and hopefully it will make more sense. But we had to go through the theoretical foundations first. Well, maybe we didn't have to, but I like doing it.

CHAPTER 77

Tracking Heart-Mind

Patrick Kearney · 49 min

> *In this dharma talk, Patrick Kearney examines the third foundation of mindfulness—citta, often translated as 'mind' but more accurately encompassing both heart and mind, the cognitive and affective dimensions of inner experience. He clarifies that unlike the Western concept of mind as purely rational, the Buddha's citta includes mood, emotion, and our most intimate sense of self.*
>
> *Kearney presents a practical method for working with disturbing emotions when they arise as distractions in meditation. Drawing from his own experience with anger and sorrow, he teaches that emotions are complex phenomena with physical sensations, feeling tones (vedanā), and narrative content. Rather than engaging with the stories we tell ourselves, the practice involves locating the emotion in the body and attending to its elemental qualities—hot or cold, energetic or gentle, rough or smooth. He shares how anger often manifests as hot, energetic, and red, while sorrow appears cool, wet, and blue.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that this approach reveals the emptiness (anattā) of emotions—they arise and cease according to conditions, not because of who we are. When we see the actual moment of an emotion's cessation through direct awareness, it leaves no aftertaste. This leads to emotional fluidity rather than identification and clinging. Kearney notes that the Burmese teachers never directly addressed working with overwhelming emotions, so this method represents his own experimentation within the Mahāsī noting tradition. The goal is not to solve emotional problems but to discover that emotions are natural processes flowing through the sentient body, not permanent fixtures of identity.*

This morning we're going to talk about the third satipaṭṭhāna, citta, or mind. But we're doing it in a particular context—the context of the method that we're applying.

Yesterday we looked at the thought stream. The thought stream is also part of the third satipaṭṭhāna, the mind, but in particular it's part of the cognitive aspect of mind, which is concerned with thought, perception, and understanding. Today we're going to look at the affective aspect of mind, which is concerned with feeling and emotion.

The structure that we worked with yesterday, and that we'll talk about again today, is that of grounding object and secondary object. The grounding object is where awareness makes its home. This is where we get the stability and the depth that we need to start looking at what's really going on. The way that Mahasi talks about distraction, we

utilize distraction—we turn it into a meditation object. Something pulls us away from the grounding object, takes us somewhere else, and we are distracted. As soon as we know we are distracted, that becomes another meditation object, a secondary object, and then we return to the grounding, and so on.

When we were looking at the thought stream, we were looking at it when it appears as a distraction. "I can't settle down because I'm thinking all the time. I'm distracted. I've got to do something about it. What do I do about it?" I turn it into a meditation object. That's how we were working with it yesterday.

Today we're looking at the affective aspect of mind, again when it presents as a distraction. I'm distracted by disturbing feelings or emotions. What do I do about it? It becomes a meditation object. It's always the same response.

The expression that Mahasi Sayadaw taught was obviously in Burmese, and then his Burmese-speaking students translated him into English. What we've been calling "awaring" is what they translated as "noting." Burmese has an ordinary everyday verb meaning to note or be aware. English doesn't have quite the same thing. So the Burmese translators thought, "What can we do?" They chose the verb "to note." In classical English-speaking Mahasi circles, we talk about noting.

This approach of how to deal with a distraction really hit home to me one time in the eighties, when we invited Sayadaw U Pandita out to Australia. He ran his first retreat, which I think went for six weeks. It was quite popular. A lot of people turned up because his reputation had spread; he had become an international guru. But I think the Australian punters had absolutely no concept of what was about to hit them. Most people had a very difficult time.

The manager of the retreat was John Hale. I'd originally met him in India, in Bodh Gaya, but I'd got to know him in Burma. We practiced together for three months. He was the most advanced practitioner that I've ever known, and he was the manager. One of his jobs was that if the meditators needed something urgent and someone had to go to the shop to get it—something like more chocolate, for example—then it was the manager who would do it. He had a time each afternoon where if you wanted something, you could go and tell him. He was available to the meditators at a certain time each afternoon, and these sessions quickly turned into meditation counselling sessions.

I found out about this because the retreat was held at an old Catholic nunnery south of Sydney in the southern highlands. I had established a favourite place for walking meditation, and my route between the meditation hall and the walking place went down a breezeway. In the afternoon there was a lounge there, and that's where John

would have his counselling sessions. I would walk past, and there'd be John and a disturbed meditator. When I was finished, I would walk past and there'd be John and another disturbed meditator. Of course, I noted "hearing, hearing" as I walked past.

Every encounter had the same basic structure: a disturbed meditator.

And at the other end of the sofa would be John, sitting there saying nothing but simply radiating compassion. Eventually the meditator would stop talking, and when they fell silent, John would say, "And did you note that?"

That's the only thing he ever said, as far as I could tell. But it summed up the whole situation. That's the method. "I've got this terrible problem. I can't possibly meditate because I've got this problem. What do I do?" You note it. That's the meditation object.

So this is the context in which we operate. You can see it's radically simple. And its very simplicity is what makes it difficult. I remember one time I was explaining that this practice is really, really simple, and one of the meditators objected. "No, it's not. It's really hard." I said, "Yes, it's really hard, but it's really simple." "No, it isn't. It's hard."

What that particular person was missing was that it is its very simplicity that makes it difficult. The conceptual mind is constantly making things more complicated, and we've just got to drop all of that and keep it really, really simple. That's one of the things that makes it so difficult. It also makes it so powerful, because it just cuts through everything. I think it was John who said that this practice is the ultimate paint stripper. He was a builder by trade.

Let's apply this to the affective aspect of mind. But before we go any further, we should talk about this concept of mind. The term being translated here is *citta*, and traditionally it's been rendered as "mind." But that doesn't quite work, because in the European tradition, mind is essentially cognitive in its nature. It's the centre of rationality. Most people, if you asked them what the mind actually does—once they recovered from their surprise at such a bizarre question—might say something like, "Well, it thinks." And if asked to point to where the mind is located, most people would point to the head. In normal conversation, people often use the terms mind, head, and brain interchangeably.

So we have a very cognitive concept of what mind is, which makes the Buddha's teaching sound very cognitive, because he's always talking about the mind. But for the Buddha, *citta* is not just the centre of rationality. Certainly it is the centre of rationality, but not only that—it's also the centre of mood and emotion. This is the aspect of experi-

ence that, in the European tradition, most people would call heart. *Citta* covers both equally, embracing head and heart. Broadly speaking, you could say it refers to our inner experience.

If you look at the six senses, the first five tend to be public to a certain extent—we share them. So if someone was sitting here this morning complaining about the heat, strongly anxious that the fan should be turned on and the back door opened to let the heat out, most people would be wondering, "What is the matter with this person? Do they have a problem?" Because it's obviously not hot, is it? We share a certain aspect of our experience, and so we have a social consensus about what's going on.

But what any of us thinks about the conditions in this hall is private. Nobody knows what we're thinking. This realm of private experience—this is the realm of the *citta*.

We could call it the inner space within which things happen, and in particular thoughts and feelings. Citta could be translated as "mind" — it works in a lot of contexts. It could be translated as "heart" — in certain contexts, that seems to be clearly what the Buddha is getting at, and sometimes that's what I do, sometimes I'll translate it as heart. Personally, I think the best translation by far is "soul." But that doesn't quite work because the Christians have taken it over and put all this theological meaning on top of it, and we'd have to disentangle all of that. But really, I think soul pretty much sums it up. What you find these days, and what I generally use, is the compromised term "heart-mind" to cover both the affective and the cognitive.

When I say soul, what do I mean? It's all of those things — internal experience. That was the way it used to be used in the European philosophical tradition. I think Aristotle wrote a book on the soul. Ancient philosophers would talk about the soul. I don't know what the Greek word is, but I think the Latin is anima. And, for example, it's what we most tightly identify with as "me" or "mine," looked at from a Buddhist perspective. So who am I? When I say "me," what am I referring to? Partly I'm referring to the body, this particular body, but in particular I'm referring to the citta.

Let's say I go home after the retreat and discover someone has burgled my house. I would feel very offended and I would feel like I have been violated. Well, I'm not talking there about the body, am I? I'm talking about the inner state. This is the citta.

When the Buddha introduces heart-mind, citta, in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, what he talks about is understanding whether or not the citta is coloured by desire or aversion or delusion. He starts with what is the fundamental colouring of the citta, of the heart-mind, as it presents now. And of course, citta — heart-mind — and vedanā, feelings, these are very closely entwined and cover pretty much the same territory.

So we're talking about what we do when we're distracted by the heart-mind. People sometimes stumble into this when they become aware of disturbing emotions or moods that distract them from their practice. These are quite common. Fear, anger, anxiety, irritation, desire, and so on — these are examples of heart-mind coloured by desire and aversion. What we need to do, again, is become intimate with them, to use them as the meditation object.

Some emotions have a flavour of delusion. Personally, I think boredom has this. It adds to boredom its sense of restlessness, a vague sense of dissatisfaction, and not knowing what to do about it. Usually, emotions flavoured by attraction and aversion are the easiest to notice and the easiest to work with — they're clearer. But emotions flavoured with delusion are more difficult to get a hold of.

So when emotions disturb, when they get in the way of the practice, how do we attend to them? How do we make them a meditation object? The essence of the practice is awareness, as we've been saying, and fundamentally it doesn't matter what the object of awareness is. What matters is the quality of the awaring. If emotion is present and dominant, then emotion becomes the meditation object.

As in working with thinking, when we're working with emotion we're not getting caught up in the content of the emotion. We don't care what the emotion is about. We don't care what story we're telling ourselves — that is irrelevant. It's the felt presentation of the emotion itself that we're looking for.

The other thing, of course, is that mindfulness and emotional difficulties go hand in hand in popular culture because mindfulness has been colonized by the psychology industry. Sometimes people get the idea that if they want to solve their emotional problems, they could practice mindfulness and that would do it. Which is nice, you know—it's good that people are getting into it. But what's important from a meditator's point of view is that when we're working with emotion, we are not trying to solve our emotional problems. That's not the project.

What we're trying to do is become intimate with the fact of the emotion itself. When we do this, we understand the emptiness, the not-self quality of emotion. Emotions are not me and they don't belong to me. They're just natural process, natural phenomena that come and go according to conditions. This is what the practice can reveal. It can't solve our emotional problems. But to discover the emptiness of emotion, we have to be intimate with them and not hold anything back.

Now, one thing which is interesting if we're working with emotion from a Buddhist perspective is that in Pali and Sanskrit there is no word that corresponds to the English word "emotion." The Buddha never talked about emotion because he didn't have a word for it. And this is not surprising because in English, "emotion" was introduced into the language I think in the late eighteenth century and became popular in the nineteenth. So if you study your Shakespeare, apparently you will never find the word emotion. It doesn't exist because it really didn't exist back then.

The word "emotion" was developed by people who were, particularly in Britain, trying to establish a new supposedly scientific psychology—the science of psychology. And psychology up to then had been the province of religion. The psychologists were the clergy, really, and the language they used was borrowed from theology. The new profession of psychologists wanted to separate themselves from that. They wanted to create their own vocabulary, and they developed this term "emotion." And thus it entered into our language.

For the Buddha, it doesn't work because it's too broad, too general. You notice that we've been working with precision in the awareness. And "emotion" is just too big a target, too vague. We've got to zero in on something. Emotion is complex.

I'll give the example of the emotion of anger. I choose anger because in my meditation practice, the two really disturbing emotions I went through were anger and sorrow. Decades ago, when I was embarking on this practice, I would do these week-long retreats. The first two or three days I would gradually be settling in. And just when I was getting good, suddenly I'd get an upsurge of anger. I'd be really pissed off. I'd be pissed off with people who weren't there. I'd be pissed off with people who were there. And this would be quite disturbing. Then that would fade, and it would be replaced by sorrow. That dominated. Then that would fade, and then the retreat would end. So I never knew what was on the other side.

It was only when it clicked: anger, sorrow—they're both aversion. Anger is aversion directed outwards. Sorrow is aversion directed inwards. But they're both aversion. So when I practice, what becomes clear to me is aversion. Not surprising. Of the three basic movements of the heart—attraction, aversion, delusion—the one I'm most sensitive to, you could say my favorite one, is aversion. I'm definitely an aversion type. So hardly surprising that's what I experienced.

These are the categories of emotion I worked with the most, the ones that were the greatest barrier to me. That's the ones I talk about because that's the ones I'm familiar with. But of course different people have different sensitivities, and different emotions would arise for them.

Let's talk about anger. First of all, we cannot have anger without tension in the body. It is impossible to be angry if the body is completely relaxed. So there's always a physical aspect to emotion.

It's part of the first satipaṭṭhāna, body. And since all body sensations have physical location, we can speak of experiencing anger in the body—in our heart or in our gut. Normally somewhere in the torso, that's where the emotion will appear. So there's a physical aspect to it.

Emotion also has a strong feeling charge, generally either pleasant or painful. Now, I'm completely ignorant about Western psychology, but for me, I wouldn't say that something which is neither pleasant nor painful is an emotion. A mood, I'd call it a mood, sure. But for me an emotion is going to be either recognizably, reasonably strongly pleasant, or recognizably, reasonably strongly painful—one or the other.

So anger, for example, can be experienced as pleasant. I can enjoy it. I enjoy it when it gives me a sense of power, like the energy—I can harness the energy of it. When I get to see that person next, I'm really going to let them have it. And there's pleasure in that experience. Or anger can be experienced as painful, and usually for me it's when a sense of powerlessness accompanies it. We have the expression "impotent rage"—acutely painful. So there's a feeling aspect to it. This is vedanā, which we haven't talked about actually. This is the second satipaṭṭhāna, the realm of feeling.

Emotion also usually includes some kind of narrative in the mind, some kind of story that I'm telling myself. And this provides the intentionality of emotion—what the emotion is about. So let's say I am angry. Then I'm angry at someone or something, some situation, about something. And this intentionality appears as a story that I'm telling myself, a story that paints me as the victim of some kind of injustice. There's a sense of values built into the story. So this is quite a complex narrative structure that's part of the emotion, an aspect of mind.

So emotion is complex. Very different things come together and then we call that "the emotion of X."

When we're working with emotion in meditation practice, I found that it's best to zero in on the felt essence of the emotion. And I might add, by the way, that in Burma, the Sayadaws never addressed this side of the practice. Never. What they were interested in was the fine detail of the physical sensation or the mental states or whatever. And if you were rocked by disturbing emotion, well, you couldn't do that. It was just impossible. And they had no real advice except "do mettā," which is very difficult when

you hate everybody. Basically, they'd just leave you alone until you came out of it, and then you could come back and resume the project. So I had to figure out for myself what to do. This is just my own experimentation that I'm presenting.

I make as my meditation object the felt essence of the emotion as revealed in its elemental quality. And here we're using the elements that we played with in the body, but applying them to the mind, to the citta.

I begin by locating the emotion in my body. Where is it? Where does it live? And if I can't find any particular location, I keep awareness in the heart area. Then I'm directly aware—so I'm aiming at the body, but my target is not the sensation. I'm aware-ing through the sensation to the other side. And when you begin, this might be partly imagination—going through the sensation and looking for the felt elemental quality of the emotion that lies underneath.

So, for example, with anger, I found it to be usually hot, but sometimes cold. I've got a feeling that the most dangerous variety is the cold variety. It's energetic, often highly energetic.

One time I was aware-ing the experience of rage. This was in Chanmyay Yeiktha, in the men's meditation hall, which is quite big. Women always have their own meditation halls in Burma. As one Sayadaw explained to me, "Men and women together in a dance hall, yes. In a meditation hall, no." And they're quite strict on that. I think it's really good for the women. Not so good for the men. At Chanmyay Yeiktha, the meditation halls were the same size because it was one building—the ground floor meditation hall for the women, top floor for the men, because the men included the monks. You can't have lay people of any variety above the monks.

So the men are on the top floor. And to get to the men's meditation hall, you would walk along the veranda and then up the external staircase. As you're walking along the veranda, slowly, mindfully, receptively, just to the right is the women's hall, full of meditators, and you could feel the blast of energy coming out. It was extraordinary. And then you go upstairs, you walk into the men's hall, and it's flat. Not surprisingly, fewer people there, and the energy just didn't compete. So I think the women are better off with their own meditation halls.

I was up in that hall and I was just getting right into rage. I did it in the standing posture because there's so much energy—I didn't want to sit. I made sure that I had plenty of space around me, eyes wide open, and I could just feel this energy of rage pouring through me. And I was naming it: rage, rage. It was really interesting. I was thoroughly enjoying myself. Very strong samādhi. I don't know if anybody seeing this would have

thought, "Oh, he's really getting into it," or whether they were feeling the waves of rage coming out. I don't know. But it felt good. As I said, it was really enjoyable to be just so much with it. And of course at that point I didn't even know what the story was—I was just so fully into the actual elemental quality of it.

And then of course it goes: angry, as I said, usually hot but sometimes cold, always energetic, restless, moving, dry, rough, sharp, sometimes pleasant, sometimes painful. And if I had to put a colour on it—and here we're really getting into the world of imagination—I would say red.

Sorrow, in contrast, I've experienced to be cool, wet, gentle, smooth, and often very strangely pleasant. And if I had to put a colour on it, I would say blue. When I was doing this practice and playing around with it, I asked, "What colour is it?" Oh, it's blue. And it clicked. All those popular songs which I never understood—"I feel blue"—I could never work out why blue. But now it made sense.

So that's the elemental quality. And throughout the whole exercise, I am not interested in the stories I am telling myself. Again and again and again I get sucked into the story, and as soon as I notice it, again and again and again I drop it and just go back to the body. The story tells me nothing useful, except the one bit of useful data it presents: it tells me what emotion currently possesses me. That's useful data. And the rest of it is rubbish.

The work is done in the sentient body, in the feeling body. It's not done in thinking and in perceptions. It's not something we think our way through. The sentient body—this is where we find the sensitivity that lies at the centre of the citta, of the heart and mind. And it's in that central aspect of sensitivity, of vulnerability, that the work is done.

We talked about the Buddha's concept of a sentient being. Our circle of ethical concern extends out to all sentient beings—not with the border at the human species, but beyond that. And the first quality of a sentient being is that a sentient being feels pain. That vulnerability at the centre of the citta—that's what we're aiming for. That's where the work is done, not in the stories.

And if we find this sensitivity, and if we're intimate with it, one thing which is obvious about it is that it changes. So, for example, at some point, the emotion ceases.

Normally, we don't see the cessation, the ending of an emotion in real time. For example, I know I am angry, and then later on I realise I have already calmed down. But I usually don't see the moment that the emotion ends. And equally, we tend not to see the arising of the emotion. Suddenly I realise I am already angry, but usually I've missed the moment it began.

In this practice, however, we get to see the actual moment of cessation and, perhaps later on, the moment of arising. And when we see that moment of cessation—because we're tracking it over time and then it's over—it leaves no aftertaste. Normally, if I emerge from a strong emotion, then for some time thereafter I have a disturbed mood and gradually the citta calms down. But if I'm directly engaged with the elemental quality of the emotion, I see it end and in that moment it's gone completely with no aftertaste. Like I'm in the midst of this storm and then—oh, the storm's over. Sun shining. Oh, that's good. And there's nothing left over.

Tracking all this weakens my determination to identify with the emotions. I don't see the emotion as part of me or as belonging to a particular situation. One time—this was after Burma—I was doing my own meditation at a place in Malaysia. I was doing walking meditation in the evening and suddenly I was ambushed by a disturbing emotion. I forget what it was, but it was very, very familiar. Too familiar. And I was quite shocked because I hadn't experienced this for twenty years. What is going on? Have I made no progress in twenty years? What is this?

But as soon as that alarm arose, the mind went click. And I could see it's got nothing to do with progress because it's got nothing to do with me. When conditions are such, this emotion arises. When the conditions change, it ceases. It's not about me. It's not about my meditation. It's got nothing to do with progress or lack of progress. It's just that when the conditions are there, this emotion will arise. When the conditions change, it ceases. That's it. And as soon as I saw that—click—and it was over, because the conditions just changed.

This is what I mean by seeing the emptiness of emotion. Of course, being human, emotions flow through the sentient body. But we don't grab onto them and build an identity out of them and cling to them ferociously because "this is me and this is who I am and this is what the world is." Rather, oh, there it is—and now it's like a wave that passes through.

The result is a state of what could be described as emotional fluidity. Emotions flow easily and I don't get stuck in any of them. Normally, there are particular emotions that are my favourites because I am particularly identified with them, and as soon as they arise I feed them with my thinking and use them to construct an identity which is permanent, fixed, stable. As a result, the emotion itself cannot express its natural impermanence. It gets bogged down. It's like there's a stream of emotion flowing through the heart and I'm building a dam, blocking it. No, I'm not going to let it go. And the water level builds up and up, and the pressure builds up and up.

But if I can use the emotion as a meditation object, they just flow completely naturally through the citta. And they're no longer problems because they're no longer about me. They're just events.

I heard something interesting from Joseph Goldstein—I call it "Cowboy Dharma." I was actually doing this last night with obsessive thinking. I'm just so sick of these stories, and I don't know how to handle them, so I sort of started waving at them in the most annoying fashion, going "Ah, bugger off!" And it was quite effective, but I'm not addressing the underlying theme. The Joseph Goldstein technique—this was to a group of beginners, mind you—he was saying that sometimes with loop thoughts, you get out your gun and you shoot the thought. You basically blow it out. Sometimes you've just got to do that.

Which is completely different from what we're talking about.

But it might give you a breathing space. Because basically this whole activity is supremely pragmatic. If it works, it works. Sometimes certain methods work sometimes but not others. For example, because there you're using imagination, you're conjuring up an image to deal with a situation. And I find that if you do that kind of thing, it works best the first time because it's a bit of a shocker. But if the mind gets used to it, it shrugs it off. "You're trying to distract me with that gun? Go ahead and blast away at anything you like. This is what I'm doing."

So as we said before, there's always an element of creativity in this practice, always an element of experimentation. Try something out, see if it works. Whatever works is great. And there's probably no end to the different things one could do. This is what I did. This is what I found successful. That's why I talk about it. But I'm not suggesting it's the only way.

Is there ever any benefit in understanding the story? For example, I've experienced a lot of shame, and it does give you information about skillful behaviour and speech—things you might do differently in the future.

Oh yes, definitely. Particularly once you—we're talking about context. In the context of actual practice right now, "What do I do with this?"—then the story is rubbish and you're staying with the felt elemental quality. But at some point that episode is over and you can reflect back. And that's where you get a clearer narrative sense of what's going on.

So, for example, the story that helped me when I was plagued with these emotions was simply: "Of course these are expressions of aversion. I am sensitive to aversion. So it's quite natural that this should happen." That story really helped because I wasn't

blaming myself. I wasn't thinking, "I'm going crazy" or "I'm incapable of meditating. Most people can meditate; I can't." It was a story that made sense. And it helped settle things. But it didn't stop the problem from arising.

So the context here is that when we're doing the direct aware-ing, the story just gets in the way. But when that's over and we're reflecting on what's going on, then stories can be very useful. And once you clear out the rubbish from the *cinta*, you get a much clearer story of what's going on. Much clearer. And that's very helpful.

So sometimes when you're doing this kind of practice—and the emphasis is on dropping the thinking, dropping the reading, minimum notes, and so forth, just staying with the experience—sometimes either a pressure builds up or something happens and you think, "I've got to reflect on this. What's going on here?" And that kind of reflection can be very useful and very valuable. But you've got to be careful with it, that you don't get caught up in addictive thinking.

So what I would do is make what the tradition calls *adhiṭṭhāna*—determination or resolution. I simply say to myself, "Okay, right now I'll drop the meditation practice and I will think about X." I create a clear boundary. I'm not mixing the practice with thinking. And then I go: think, think, think. I might even write it down. Then, okay, that's done. Now I'll drop the thinking and go back to the practice. I create a border.

And if I'm wondering when to stop? Well, one thing for sure—as soon as I begin repeating myself. Because then it's going around in circles. But the juicy bit is before the repetition comes. And if I look at the notes later on, I think, "Yeah, that was good."

"You said that if you've been aware of the elemental qualities of the emotion deeply, it will often completely drop away in a moment?"

You're potentially there to see that. I wouldn't say it's inevitably going to happen. But once you get into it, you're present the moment it stops. And you can see it. Bam.

"So the period of time where the aftertaste might linger could be very long, but you're aware of that and you notice when it ends?"

In my experience, if I see that moment of cessation, that moment of ending, there's no aftertaste. It's like the mind just moves on. "What's next?"

"So my question was whether if there is an aftertaste, that indicates you're not necessarily deeply..."

That just means the aftertaste is now the meditation object. Keep it simple. Don't start making judgments—"Oh, I wasn't good enough. Oh, I haven't quite got it." This just confuses the issue. There's an aftertaste. What is it? How does it feel? Where is it? And maybe I'll see the moment the aftertaste ends. It might be a boom, a click, or it might be something that fades out of view. It's like looking at the sunset—gradually everything becomes darker, and at some point you realise now it's night.

These are the different flavours of impermanence. I mentioned the complete cut because for me that was the most dramatic and interesting—it really cut through the identification quite strongly. "Oh, there it is, it's gone. So what is it exactly?" But impermanence expresses itself in all sorts of different ways. You may get a clean break or you may get a fading, but at some point in that process you realise it's gone. And it really is gone.

And remember, when we talk about impermanence, we're not trying to make something end. We're not saying, "Go away now." We simply notice that it ends.

With the fading, when you have these more subtle movements of the heart, they are important. And as the practice develops, you become more attuned to the subtleties—you can tune into them more readily.

Perhaps what you hadn't noticed before, now you're noticing. And it just becomes part of the landscape.

So, for example, the sweet taste of dukkha. Sometimes there's a quality in pain—there's a sweetness to it. I don't know quite how to describe it, but one of the things about pain is that it points to you as a person who is susceptible to pain. So it says something about the more enduring quality of being human. And it points to that which I share with the whole of creation, the whole of sentient life. That which binds, that holds me together with all other beings. Because if it's not about me, it's universal.

Okay. Thank you very much.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to go forth and suffer—and note it. But if you're not ready for that, you just be aware.

What if it's not an aversive emotion? Is this only for aversive emotions?

If you're feeling happy, just note it. It'll go away.

That's good advice, isn't it? Look for the color.

CHAPTER 78

The World of Insight

Patrick Kearney · 51 min

In this concluding talk of the insight series, Patrick Kearney examines the relationship between direct experience (dhammas) and the conceptual world we typically inhabit. Drawing on the Mahāsī Sayādaw's method of vipassanā, he distinguishes between 'seeing' (dassana) – our immediate encounter with present experience – and 'understanding' (ñāṇa) – the perception that emerges from this seeing and extends across time and space.

Kearney explores how perception (saññā) develops through the interplay of facts and interpretation, using domestic and historical examples to illustrate how the same raw experience can generate vastly different meanings. He contrasts the perception of permanence – our default mode characterised by assumptions inherited from the past – with the perception of impermanence cultivated through insight practice, which remains firmly grounded in present-moment awareness.

Referencing the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38) and the Buddha's teaching on dependent arising (paṭicca-samuppāda), particularly the relationship between birth (jāti) and ageing-and-death (jarāmaraṇa), Kearney demonstrates how understanding natural law transforms our relationship with past, present, and future. He concludes with important cautions about the dangers of mistaking conceptual knowledge for genuine insight, drawing on Burmese teaching methods that rigorously test practitioners' claims to experience, and Mahāsī Sayādaw's warning that 'deliberate contemplation and reflection impede pure awareness.'

So tonight we're going to have the last of our series of talks on insight. This one is called The World of Insight. We'll start by revising what we've been through so far and bring it to a conclusion.

We started with the basic practice that we're doing, which is Mahasi Sayadaw's method of insight meditation. In its essence, this is being directly aware of whatever is arising in any of the six senses, as it arises. What we find is a whole flow of discrete, experienced events coming and going. In the tradition, these are called, in Pali, *dhammas*—in Sanskrit and English, *dharmas*—always in the plural. This could be translated in English as phenomena, as simply things that appear in experience. These dharmas are experienced events that come and go, that arise and cease according to conditions in general. They constitute the world of direct first-hand experience.

We talked about how our habit, and largely our preference, is to live in the world of concept. This is very different from the world of dharmas, of direct first-hand experience. The basic difference is that concepts are *about*. Let me give an example which I hope you all appreciate: a thought about a good cup of coffee is not a good cup of coffee. If you ever work in a cafe, I think you need to be really clear about that. The customer is sitting there wondering where their coffee is, and you explain, "Well, I just imagined this fantastic cup of coffee." So this is the world of concept. It's the world of second-hand experience that is about what is actually happening, that points toward whatever is actually happening.

For the Buddha, this world of concept is characterized by the perception of permanence. Remember that for the Buddha, permanent does not necessarily mean lasting forever and ever, but lasting unchanged over time. And of course, the classic example is the self. I come to a dharma talk, I listen to it, I leave, later I talk about it with my friends. This is an ordinary, everyday way of framing the experience of listening to a dharma talk. But it's framing the experience in terms of an "I" that lasts unchanged over time. I am the one who thought I should go to this talk. I am the one who turned up. I am the one who listened. I am the one who left. I am the one who talked about it later with friends. The whole thing is wrapped around, framed by this sense of I. And in all of this, the fundamental assumption is that this I is the same throughout the three periods of time: past, present, future. I act as if this I is actually more real than the talk itself. How I responded to the talk is more real, more significant to me than the actual experience of listening to it.

All of this is living in a second-hand world of concept in which I project all the importance and significance into that realm of concept. This second-hand world of concept, like everything else, arises because of conditions. It's constructed. And what is it constructed from? What are the basic raw materials? The three roots of the unwholesome: greed, hatred, ignorance. This is the world of saṃsāra, the world of suffering and confusion. As we've seen, it's characterized by the perception of permanence, while the world of insight emerges from the first-hand world of direct experience, which is characterized by impermanence.

When the Buddha talks about how we relate to all this, he uses the terms seeing and understanding. Seeing is *dassana*, understanding is *ñāṇa*. Often you see this compound in Pali, *ñāṇa-dassana*. Sometimes when you translate the compound, what's last in the compound in Pali is actually first in English—that's the structure of Pali compounds. So: seeing and understanding.

Now what does he mean by these? Seeing indicates the direct first-hand encounter with what's happening here and now. When we see something, when you look out at the world, are you seeing the past? No. Are you seeing the future?

No. What we're seeing is the present. So seeing is all about the present. It's always and necessarily here, now, in the present.

Understanding, on the other hand, represents a perception that arises out of seeing, and it embraces past, present, and future. It embraces here and there. So it's much wider. One way of looking at the difference between seeing and understanding is to compare them with the difference between facts and interpretation.

Let's say that we want to understand what is happening in the world. How do we go about doing it? Well, we begin by finding sources that we feel we can trust. And so we read or watch our chosen media. We may notice, as we do this, that what we get from them is a mixture of facts and interpretation of those facts. Sometimes facts and interpretation are very clearly delineated: here are the facts, and this is what we think about them. This is, of course, old school journalism. But sometimes facts and interpretation are meshed within the same report. In fact, they can be meshed and mixed even in the same sentence.

Together, facts and interpretation build a perception. So we feel we know what is going on in the world, although most of what we "know" is actually an interpretation wrapped around a few facts. This is one reason why different people can come to different conclusions even when they get their information from the same sources. Let's assume that two people are getting information from the same sources. One person may doubt the statements that are being presented as facts. Another person may have no problem with the facts, but doubt the interpretation being placed on those facts. The result: two quite different views of what's going on in the world.

You notice that facts alone are never enough to tell us what is going on, because for facts to provide meaning, they must be interpreted. They have to fit within some kind of coherent narrative that provides the context for each fact.

The first time I came across this expressed was in my university days when I was studying history, reading a book—I think it was called *What Is History?* One of the questions that arose is: what is an historical fact as opposed to an ordinary, everyday fact? The example given was this: in 49 BC, Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River from north to south, in northern Italy. Now, thousands of people crossed that river. In 49 BC alone, thousands of people crossed that river. But these crossings, although they're

facts, are not historical facts. The historical fact is that Julius Caesar crossed the river in 49 BC. Why? Because it's a crucial fact that fits into a much larger framework that we call the history of ancient Rome. Does that make sense—facts versus interpretation?

Now let's apply this to the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha talks about saññā, what we translate as perception. Perception is the mind's recognition of experience. Let me give you a domestic example. At my house, every now and again—in fact pretty much on a daily basis—I enter my front room, located on the east side of the house. When I do that, I might notice a sideboard against the north wall. And on that sideboard is a wooden statue of someone sitting on the ground. Now, what is that statue? Well, for some people it's an exotic work of art. For some people, it's a bit of bric-a-brac that's obviously been around for a long time because it's a bit chipped on the top. But for me, it's a Buddha image. And it shows the Buddha in meditation. It's not just art. It's more than art.

It represents something sacred, something that conveys supreme importance. And its presence makes this particular room a meditation room—which means it's a sacred space.

Notice that it's not the piece of wood on top of the sideboard that makes this room sacred. It's my interpretation of the meaning of that piece of wood that makes this room a sacred space. Does that make sense?

So we have the same facts, the same way the eyes see the structure on the sideboard. And yet we can have very different interpretations of these facts. When these interpretations are fully internalized, they become perception. I walk into that room and I don't have to think about it—I know, I see, that this is a sacred space where certain forms of behavior are appropriate and certain other forms are not.

Notice how perception is something we learn over a period of time, because the same facts, the same direct first-hand experience, can be received and interpreted very differently. The facts generate the world of perception, and the world of perception is a second-hand world of concept. Now, it's not concept in the sense of thinking about—I don't need to think about this—but it's still concept. Concept buried very deeply, concept that seems to the perceiver to be inescapably entwined with direct first-hand experience. But nevertheless, it's concept.

If we've got some work to do in that room and a tradie walks in, I very much doubt he would step back and think, "Oh my God, this is a profound and sacred space. I can feel the vibes, man." It's very unlikely that would happen. For him, it would just be a weird room with kind of odd furniture.

So again, facts alone do not provide meaning. Facts have to be interpreted. And this interpretation, when internalized, becomes perception.

The Buddha is saying that all our lives we have been busily cultivating the perception of permanence. I've learned to perceive the room I woke up in today as the same room I fell asleep in last night. I've learned to perceive the person who woke up this morning as the same person who fell asleep last night. I've learned to perceive that today is another day of the same retreat, the retreat I was attending yesterday.

This perception of permanence is very useful because it gives us a sense of stability, meaning, and a sense of being the traveler through the journey of our life. This is the world of me and mine, where "I" stay the same throughout the drama of my life. We all take this for granted as the truth, and we do not notice that actually it's the mind's fabrication. It's a fabrication that we work on every day. It's an interpretation, not a fact.

For the Buddha, any interpretation based on the perception of permanence is wrong. And he doesn't like it for two reasons. First, it conflicts with the facts of change once we start to pay attention to them—for example, in our meditation practice. But the other reason is that this interpretation leads us to pain and distress. It leads us to dukkha.

From the Buddha's perspective, if we are going to live flourishing lives, we need another perception, another interpretation. The facts may be the same, but we need another interpretation. And so the perception we're developing during the practice of insight meditation is the perception of change, the perception of impermanence.

We do this through cultivating momentary immersion or momentary concentration —khaṇika samādhi—tracking the permutations of the six senses over time. As we do this, our perception of the world changes.

One flavor of this perception of impermanence is quite common: practitioners report stepping out of the meditation hall and suddenly being struck by the fact that the sky is bluer than it's ever been before, the grass is greener than it's ever been before, the air is fresher than it's ever been before. Nature is more alive than it's ever been before. And they notice that actually none of this is stable—it's very much subject to change.

In one interview I did some time ago during a retreat here, the person had walked up that path into the interview room, and she said that as she was walking, the garden kept flipping. At one moment it was full of life and blooming. The next moment it was decaying, dying, falling apart. Then blooming, going great guns. Then decaying, falling apart—all as she walked up the path.

This is an example of the perception of impermanence, of change. Notice that if this happens, or something like this happens, it's not that we actually enter into another garden, magically substituted for the one that was there before.

There's no Harry Potter magic around here. The facts are the same. What's changed is the interpretation. And you notice that this new interpretation is not something I'm thinking about—it simply presents itself. Because the mind has been training to notice change, and at some point, the penny drops. Click. And you have a different perception.

We've talked about how the entry into insight comes through the perception of change, which opens up also the perception of pain and of not-self. But as we said, the perception of change here is the perception of universal change. Change all the way down, in every time, in every place, in every circumstance. Yet we do not experience events in every time and in every place and in every circumstance. So how can we know that they are all, without exception, subject to change? How does that come about?

This universal characteristic of change reveals itself as a perception, which, as we've seen, is a balance between facts and interpretations. So we've got two perceptions: the perception of impermanence, of change, recognised as universal and regarded as the entry into insight; and the ordinary everyday perception of permanence, disapproved of by the Buddha but constituting the world in which we normally live. So what's the difference between them?

If you look at the perception of impermanence, what we find is a fine balance between fact and interpretation. And in this perception, the balance is weighted very firmly towards the present. Right now, events are coming and going, and when I look, I can see this. This is direct, first-hand experience, and the interpretation built upon it is not based on a failure to see clearly what's going on. It's not based on awareness drifting away from what's happening right now to a memory emerging from the past or to an anticipation prophesying the future. It's based on a clear seeing now of this event as it comes and goes. This is the perception of impermanence.

In contrast, with the perception of permanence we find again the balance between fact and interpretation—but here, the balance is weighted firmly towards interpretation. Just as a mundane example: have you ever been embarrassed by a friend who says, "How do you like my new hairstyle?" And you realise you haven't actually noticed. In fact, you realise to your embarrassment that you still don't notice. Is this person having me on? Doesn't she look like she looked before? Or is there a change? This is the perception of permanence. We have memory—in this case vague, unclear—but it domin-

ates present experience. We assume something. And even when challenged, we're reluctant to question our assumptions. Maybe she's having me on. So our perception is based on a concept from the past rather than an encounter with the present.

This is the difference between the two perceptions. The perception of impermanence is confirmed here and now by what is happening here and now. The perception of permanence is not confirmed by what's happening here and now—it's confirmed by habits inherited from the past. Both are perceptions. Both are conceptual. But the perception of impermanence is firmly grounded in the directly seen present.

When the Buddha talks about this understanding, he talks about it in terms of dependent arising—the fundamental framework of the Buddha's teaching. This is a kind of systems view of reality: everything is connected, and the connections are causal.

Let me illustrate with a little story. When I was at the University of Queensland many years ago, one of my friends used to go to Stradbroke Island—Straddy, as we say—to hang out with the traditional owners, only the blokes, of course. One day he was going through a forest with a young fellow who was, I think in that clan, called a dugong man—a man of knowledge. Walking along a path on some errand, in the course of conversation the young man says, "We should go fishing tomorrow. The mullet are running."

My friend had the presence of mind to ask, "How do you know the mullet are running?"

And the man of knowledge stopped and pointed to the ground, where there was a line of hairy caterpillars crossing the path.

And he says, when you see those, the mullet are running.

Now, what was he saying? Was he saying that the hairy caterpillars caused the mullet to run? No, he wasn't. He's saying that the way nature works on Stradbroke Island is according to certain patterns that are consistent throughout time. Because his people have been living there for perhaps 20,000 years, they've observed how it all works. They've observed that when you see those hairy caterpillars, you're going to find the mullet. They're recognizing patterns that are stable over time, and yet any event within those patterns is dynamic, shifting, changing.

This is an illustration of how dependent arising works. In fact, it is very much part of the way traditional cultures view nature. So when the Buddha developed this teaching, he would have been drawing on existing traditions.

In the classical presentation of dependent arising, the Buddha goes through twelve conditional relationships as they play out over time. We looked at one last night: feeling conditions craving. Tonight we're going to again zero in on just one of them—the conditional relationship between birth and ageing and death. In other words, the teaching that ageing and death are the natural result of birth.

This is what he says: "What is dependent arising? Birth conditions ageing and death. Whether awakened ones appear or do not appear, just this endures—the stability of Dharma, the reliability of Dharma, specific conditionality." Specific conditionality refers to birth conditioning ageing and death. "This is what an awakened one awakens to. This is what he realizes. After awakening to and realizing it, he explains, teaches, declares, lays out, reveals, analyses, and clarifies it, saying: Look."

Of course, this is the instruction to practice. This is what we're looking at. The Buddha is saying that when we see the movements of events, we begin to recognize that events come and go, arise and cease, according to natural laws that are stable and reliable in how they work themselves out. In this case, a being who is born will develop naturally towards death.

Now this is just nature. It's not me. It's got nothing to do with me, in the sense that this is not a situation I have created, nor has it been created for me, nor is it something I can control. It's just the flow of nature.

So let's look at this in terms of seeing and understanding.

First, we see. We directly encounter the facts of our own lives—how the body's cruising along quite nicely and then bang, something happens. We realize we can't do this anymore. Or we get sick and the whole system collapses. We see in our own lives how we are subject to sickness, ageing, and death. This is seeing—direct experience.

It reminds me of an encounter John Hale had once with a longtime meditator who was going through a period where she was very worried about the future. She was talking to him about her concerns, and John finally said, "Look, I can tell you exactly what's going to happen in the future." She said, "Can you?" He replied, "You're going to get sick, you're going to get old, and you're going to die." Because he was dead set right.

So that's seeing. And then understanding—we understand that this movement from birth to death is an aspect of natural law, and it extends throughout the entire universe. It's entirely reliable. In contrast, for example, the different possibilities of how long I might live before sliding into inevitable death are uncertain, and so I might do everything I can to postpone that time. Lives will be lived very differently, but it's entirely, absolutely reliable that whatever I do is going to end in death.

What we see are discrete events, coming and going, arising and ceasing. What we understand are the patterns of this coming and going, arising and ceasing. This understanding goes way beyond our direct first-hand experience, yet it is confirmed by every mindful encounter that we have with our direct first-hand experience.

So our understanding—and here we're focusing on the understanding of change—remains firmly grounded in the facts of direct experience. The result is that a meaning and interpretation of these facts emerges: the universal characteristic of impermanence. This meaning is not divorced from the actual experience. It appears reliable, natural, lawful—and yet it's a concept.

So how does this play out in our everyday lives? Let's look at Majjhima 38, the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta, the Longer Discourse on Dissolving Craving.

And in one little section of it, I find it quite interesting. Because when I first read it, I realised I was listening to the Buddha interview his meditation students.

Now, the language is very formulaic because this was memorised and put into chanting form so it could be recited, so it could be sung. But this is how it goes.

The Buddha says, "Seeing and understanding in this way, would you run back to the past? Were we in the past? Were we not in the past? What were we in the past? How were we in the past? Having been what in the past, what did we then become?"

And the students say, "No, Bhante, we wouldn't do that."

"Seeing and understanding in this way, would you run forward to the future? Shall we be in the future? Shall we not be in the future? What shall we be in the future? How shall we be in the future? After being what in the future, what shall we then become?"

"No, Bhante, we wouldn't do that either."

"Seeing and understanding in this way, would you now be inwardly confused about the present? Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

"No, Bhante, we wouldn't."

So this is the dialogue. And what it's touching upon is the experience of understanding, of insight—how it feels from the inside.

These practitioners are tracking their experience over time. They've entered the world of ñāṇa, of understanding. Their perception of the three universal characteristics is clear, and the natural law of dependent arising is clear to at least some extent.

So how does this affect their relationship with time? Remember how we asked: How can I know that everything in the past and everything in the future, which I am not aware of, is impermanent when this is beyond my experience?

This is an answer to that question. Would you run back to the past? Would you run forward to the future? Would you be inwardly confused about the present? In all instances, the practitioners simply say, "No, that's not going to happen."

Notice that what's being presented is not a matter of doctrine. The Buddha is not asking them to confirm their faith or their beliefs. It's simply that these practitioners have become so firmly grounded in the felt reality of the present that they've lost all interest in the past and the future. It's like it's not interesting anymore.

Not in the sense that they do not learn from past experience, and not in the sense that they do not plan for the future. But even when they remember the past or plan for the future, they're doing it grounded in present experience. And they are fully satisfied with present experience.

Because what we find is that the present is wide and rich and enough.

For these practitioners, the present includes their memories of the past remembered now. It includes their plans for the future created now. They're not swept up into the emotional distress that comes about when they start feeding their concepts about their fates in the past and the future, where their fates in the past and the future become more real to them than what's happening in the present.

They're very clear about the nature of present experience, which includes memory and anticipation. And they're satisfied with this experience in the present, which includes memory and anticipation.

All they need is here now, the present. But this direct experience of the present is held in an understanding that extends throughout space and time—and even in this case, beyond space and time.

So this is the world of insight, of understanding—a kind of glimpse into how the Buddha talks about it and how his students talk about it.

But just to end on a negative note, as they say, we can see that the path to insight does contain dangers. Seeing is direct first-hand experience. Understanding is interpretation. And there is an inescapable element of concept within understanding. Isn't it

quite clear to us that we are easily seduced into the world of concept, where that world becomes so vivid and so compelling that we take it to be real, even when it contradicts our present experience?

So again, we live within a blend of fact and interpretation. And our default deluded perception—which for the Buddha means our perceptions of permanence, satisfaction, and self—is characterized by an over-reliance on interpretation.

Of course, the same problem can occur in our meditation practice. Practitioners can fool themselves into believing that they have attained understanding when in fact they have not. This is a real possibility. In Burma, the Sayadaws are very aware of this danger and they respond to it in different ways.

One approach might work like this: let's say you come in six days a week for an interview. This goes on for months. The interviews are quite brief. You simply report directly what happened—usually they ask you to describe what you felt was your best sitting period and your best walking period over the past twenty-four hours, giving a detailed analysis of what occurred.

Now let's say that even unknown to yourself, you report something which is actually quite significant. What would be the response? Sometimes the response is a frown and a glare, followed by an interrogation: "You didn't experience that. You're just telling me. You've been talking to other practitioners, haven't you? They've told you about their experience and now you're regurgitating it because you think you'll get gold stars. You must never do that. You must never give a false report to your teacher. It is grossly disrespectful to the teacher, to the centre, and to the Dhamma." And you get really scolded.

Now, if you say, "Oh, oh, I'm so sorry, this is terrible," and you crawl out the door—well, what to do? But if you say, "Sayadaw, with all due respect, I know what I experienced. That's what I experienced"—then the atmosphere changes. The temperature goes up, having dropped below zero. Big smile. "Congratulations. Welcome to the club. That's great." But they really want to be sure that you are sure about this, that it isn't something you've conjured up.

I could see where they were coming from when I was teaching in Malaysia, because the Malaysians, like the Burmese, are very social and communal. They all gossip to each other about their practice and get the idea, "Oh, I'm supposed to experience this." And so they go in and say, "Oh, I experienced this." Not everybody, but sometimes. And you start to get suspicious. You start to get a feeling: I'm not sure about this. So a bit of cross-examination is necessary.

But you can see the danger that the teachers see, and they really emphasize this. You've got to be clear about the experience. They will push you. They will challenge you to see if you stand up and say, "Yes, Sayadaw, with all due respect, this is what happened. I don't know what it means, but this is what happened."

So this is one way that they recognize this problem.

We need to be very careful in how we estimate or judge our understanding, so we don't fall into the pit of believing our concepts when they're not supported by experience.

How would this happen? Well, let's say you become interested in Dharma and start reading different books written by famous and authoritative teachers. Let's say you are attracted by these teachings and these personalities, and are inclined to believe them. Have you ever done that—reading Dharma books? So you're attracted and inclined to believe. You take up the practice and hear talks about impermanence, for example, from people you trust. Then you mix with experienced practitioners who seem to have some insight into the mystery.

For example, one of them quietly leans towards you during a retreat with a knowing look and says, "Ah yes, the weather has changed again." And you're aware of the deeper meaning here—a meaning that someone outside the circle of adepts would be oblivious to. They would think it's just a routine statement. Your recognition of this deeper meaning puts you into the exclusive club of those who really understand what's going on.

If one is susceptible to this sort of thing, then over time your normal conceptual world comes to include universal change. Could you find yourself believing in the universal characteristic of impermanence and thinking you have experienced it when actually you have not? I would suggest quite possibly yes—it does happen.

So be very careful with your assessments of the practice, remembering that our habit, our default position, is to take the conceptual as real. We can do that just as easily in our meditation practice as in our everyday lives. Be careful.

My first encounter with this attitude came indirectly when I started practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita. I went there first in 1984. You could only get a one-week visa, so it was just an introduction. But I seemed to have passed his test, because when I went in to say goodbye at the end of the week, he said, "Before you leave, go to the office and apply for a long-term meditation visa."

I made a mistake here—I dropped the ball. I said, "But Sayadaw, the country's closed to long-term meditation visas." There was just a brief moment of irritation. And he said, "Before you leave, go to the office and apply for a long-term meditation visa." Then I realised I'd blown it. I said, "Yes, Sayadaw."

So I went to the office and applied, and they brought out the forms. It turned out the government had just changed its mind and re-established these long-term visas. Off I went to Thailand, hung out, and eventually got back. When I arrived this time, I had to fill out a form about my background—religious background, practice background, and so on. So I put it all in.

At the first interview with the Sayadaw, he's reading the form. I think, "Oh, this could be problematic." He looks down at me—because I'm on the floor and he's up here—and says, "So, you're quite an experienced meditator." A deva whispered in my ear, and I said, "Oh no, Sayadaw, I don't know anything. I'm here to learn." He smiled, and I realised I'd said the right thing.

During that retreat—I practised with him for three months—he only ever gave one Dharma talk. He never explained anything. I realised that's the way he really likes it, because nothing's polluting the mind of the practitioner. Ignorance is bliss. It minimises the possibility of false interpretation, because you've got no data upon which to make any interpretation. All you know is, "Man, weird things are happening."

At the Mahasi Centre, when they assign teachers to interview the different categories of students, the most difficult category to teach are the learned monks—the monks who have finished their academic studies of traditional Buddhism and have come to meditate. Only the best teachers are given that job, because these monks are tough nuts to crack. They think they already know, and that makes it difficult to teach.

So concepts can be a problem. In his *Manual of Insight*—the book that Mahasi Sayadaw published in 1945—he talks about the arising of understanding as a mutual supporting of experience and concept. He warns that practitioners who are, quote, "intelligent, knowledgeable and prone to contemplate things," unquote—anybody recognise themselves here?

Such practitioners may get caught up in thinking about their experience and so lose touch with the actual experience. And he says, "Deliberate contemplation and reflection impede pure awareing. Therefore, be careful."

These are wise words for the practitioner. Therefore, be careful. Stick to the experience, not the concept.

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A participant offered a reflection rather than a question, referencing the movie *Good Will Hunting*. There's a scene where the psychologist keeps telling the main character, "It's not your fault," referring to his childhood. The character responds, "Yeah, I know. It wasn't my fault." The psychologist says it again: "It's not your fault." And again: "Yeah, I know. It's not my fault." This repeats several times until something clicks. He goes from that intellectual acknowledgment—"Yeah, I know it wasn't my fault"—to a bodily experience of weeping, suddenly *getting* it at a completely different level.

The participant sensed that this applies to what we've been discussing. On one level, there's the response: "Yeah, I know, change. Of course it's inevitable. I'm getting grey hair, things are changing, it's happening." But it felt like I wouldn't have talked about change to this depth over the week if there wasn't some bodily felt shift that transforms it from "Yeah, I know, change happens" into something much bigger.

This makes perfect sense. It *is* bigger. Recognising change is big. It's obvious on the conceptual level. But at the experiential level, it is very big. It turns around your whole universe.

This is an ongoing thing. You can get a kind of glimpse of it. It starts to filter into the way you experience and the way you live, and then it opens up more, and then it opens up more and more over a period of time. If you read the classic texts, you encounter people who have the big bang experience—bang, everything's completely different. But that's unusual. Usually it's a crack, and then it gradually gets wider and wider over years.

When you really start to absorb it, it's very big. And with change comes dukkha and not-self.

I hope your heads are firmly on your shoulders. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 79

Tracking Choice: Cetanā and the Practice of Intention

Patrick Kearney · 54 min

In this dharma talk from a retreat at BMIMC, Patrick Kearney examines cetanā—typically translated as intention but more accurately understood as choice or decision—as the foundational concept underlying the Buddha's entire teaching on kamma-vipāka (action and its ripening). Kearney traces how this concept appears throughout Buddhist psychology: as sammā-saṅkappa in the Eightfold Path, as adhiṭṭhāna (determination/resolution), and as saṅkhāra in the five khandhas.

Kearney addresses the paradox that while cetanā is fully conditioned, the possibility of making alternative choices always remains—this is what makes the Buddha's teaching fundamentally optimistic. He explains why the Buddha so strongly rejected ākiriyavāda (doctrines of non-action or fatalism): if transformation were impossible, the entire path would be meaningless. Even deeply habitual patterns like obsessive thinking are, at their root, conditioned choices that can be changed.

The practical teaching focuses on learning to track choice as it manifests: as an impulse, as a decision between possibilities, or as the movement of awareness toward an object. Kearney offers specific exercises using adhiṭṭhāna during walking meditation—such as resolving to catch the moment thought arises, or to not think for a set period. He emphasizes treating these practices as playful experiments in refining one's aim rather than as goals to achieve, noting that even apparent failure cultivates greater precision of awareness.

This morning we're going to talk about tracking intention or choice. This, again, is part of the third satipaṭṭhāna, the tracking of the citta, the heart-mind. But we're going to focus today on one of the central teachings of the Buddha, the foundation for his ethics: the idea of kamma-vipāka, action and its ripening. In Pāli it's kamma; in Sanskrit, and these days in English, karma. Action and its ripening.

We won't go into the details of this because the text moves off in a different direction, but the question is: what is the basis, the foundation for the Buddha's understanding of karma or action? It's choice, or decision, or intention—in Pāli, cetanā. The Buddha says, "I declare that choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing."

When the Buddha starts off a teaching saying "I declare," he's basically highlighting it. It's like italics, bold. This is important. Pay attention to this one. Choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing.

The idea of choice is really foundational to the Buddha's teaching because we construct our lives through the choices we make. One thing about the Buddha's understanding of the human condition is that it's quite optimistic. He rejects views that give priority to the past—the idea that we are prisoners of the past. Any kind of doctrine based on that assumption he completely rejects, in part because if we actually believed this, transformation would be impossible. We'd be trapped, basically. We couldn't do anything. But he always feels that although the past is fixed, the future is open.

In this interplay between past and future, he zeroes in on what he calls cetanā, because this is the way we construct our lives. This is the way we get hold of the steering and start to move away from the iceberg.

You find this concept popping up in different ways throughout his teaching, and there's a series of technical terms that centre around these concepts of choice, intention, or decision. What they all have in common is that they're all about how we direct the mind, how we send the mind somewhere.

In the Eightfold Path, for example, the second factor is sammā-saṅkappa. This is one of those interesting terms that gets different translations from different people. Sometimes you see it translated as "right intention." Often you see it translated as "right thought." When you see these different translations, what it shows us is that there is no English equivalent. This is something different, and people are groping for a concept. Saṅkappa, in every case, refers to the direction in which we send the mind. Of course, if you send the mind somewhere, the body goes along as well.

These directions can range from the fundamental decisions of our life—the really basic life decisions that send the mind off in a certain direction—right down to microscopic decisions. For example, some young, bright, enthusiastic person finishes school and contemplates going to university. What will I study? I could study economics or law or commerce or something like that. Or I could study the Buddha. And they choose, let's say, economics, and their life is ruined. I'm exaggerating. And also, of course, in Australian universities these days, you can't choose to study the Buddha because he's been wiped from the curriculum. There's no money in him, apparently.

So the really fundamental life decisions send us in particular directions, and an enormous amount follows from that, right down to the microscopic decisions. For example, when I'm meditating, where do I send my awareness? Where do I aim my

awareness? Do I aim it at this or at that? Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, when he translates this second path factor in the context of meditation practice, translates it as "right aim," which I think really captures it, particularly in the meditation context.

We also have the term adhiṭṭhāna. If you've done Goenka courses, you know about adhiṭṭhāna—where you make an adhiṭṭhāna to sit for an hour without moving, or two hours.

Two hours, good. A bit weak, that should be at least three.

But adhiṭṭhāna could be translated as resolution or determination. So this is a deliberately created intention, choice, or direction. It implies a certain oomph behind it—this comes from the *adhi* at the beginning. To perform a specific action, you make a determination: I'm going to do this. Or in the context of meditation practice, you might make an adhiṭṭhāna for a specific experience to arise. We haven't talked about that because it's pretty advanced, although we're going to play with it this morning.

And then, of course, there are the five aggregates. This is one of the Buddha's basic templates for the human condition, and the fourth one is saṅkhāra. The aggregates are the khandhas, so we have saṅkhāra khandha. Saṅkhāra can be translated as construction or fabrication. In the schema of the five aggregates—and the five aggregates are the raw materials from which we construct an identity—saṅkhāra represents the choices that we make that form or construct our identity, that develop who we are or who we become over time.

And finally, we have this term cetanā. This is the one that we're focusing on this morning.

Saṅkhāra comes from—the *kāra* is the stem of the verb that comes from the root *kṛ*, to make, to do. So a *kāra* is a maker, a doer, or making and doing. For example, a builder would be a house-*kāra*, one who does a house, one who makes a house. Then you have *saṃ* in front as a prefix, and this implies together—to bring together, to bring raw materials together to construct something. So a saṅkhāra is anything put together out of parts. This hall is a saṅkhāra. This body is a saṅkhāra. This retreat is a saṅkhāra. But in the context of the five aggregates—and the aggregates are all about how we construct an identity, how we construct a self—there the saṅkhāra is in particular the choices that we make.

So let's look at cetanā. Now, this is a word classically translated as intention. The early translators used this term, and people still use it today. But the way the Buddha uses cetanā doesn't quite fit the way we use the English word *intention*.

For example, we believe that it is possible to act against our intentions. We have the saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." In other words, our intentions are taking us in one direction, but we are going in another. Now, for the Buddha, if you think cetanā is intention, that is not only wrong—it's incoherent. It just doesn't make any sense. If the cetanā is going that way, we are going that way. We can't possibly be going in another direction. It's just completely incoherent.

Also, intention, the way we usually use it, is too wide to fit what the Buddha means by cetanā. Intention is quite general. I come down the stairs this morning with the intention to give a good talk about cetanā. But while I'm speaking, I am making multiple specific decisions. I'll look at my script now, not later. I'll wave my hand in a circle rather than chopping it in the air in order to emphasize a point. I'll walk over in that direction rather than in this direction. I'll choose this word rather than that word. Each of these decisions is an example of cetanā.

And of course, finally—and this I think is probably the most important—cetanā goes much deeper than words.

what we normally assume intention does.

So, for example, take thinking. Let's say that one is trapped in obsessive thinking. You're trying to meditate and you just can't—the mind will not shut up. And so you go to the teacher for advice: "What is the magic bullet by which I can overcome this obsession? Preferably quickly and without pain."

And the teacher smiles and says, "As a matter of fact, I've got the perfect solution. It is guaranteed. It'll solve your problem instantly with barely any effort whatsoever."

"What is it? What is it? Tell me, tell me!"

"Just choose to stop thinking."

Would you find that advice useful? But it's absolutely true. Thought arises because of a decision, a chaitanya, to think. This makes no sense to us because we feel trapped by our thinking. But for the Buddha, the determination to think goes very, very deep and has become habitual. At its heart, though, it's a choice. It's a habitual choice, but it is a choice. And all we have to do is choose to stop. As soon as we choose to stop, it stops.

A student asks: Doesn't that conflict with the idea of non-self? The idea that the mind, at least at our stage, is not under our control? It's generating thoughts the same way your heart is generating heartbeats. Does the heart choose to beat?

This brings us to the problem of habit, which I think is the key to what you're talking about. Chaitanya, choice or intention, is part of dependent arising. It's conditioned. So our choices are conditioned. They are a product of habit, and in turn they make new habits. When we're really locked into a habit or an addiction, we are locked into it because we have carefully constructed it from the choices we have made over time. So it's deeply conditioned.

But because habit and addiction emerge from choice, there is always the possibility of making another choice—that's just built into the situation. Old habits go very deep and are very persistent, but they remain habitual choices. And if choice is involved, there's always an alternative. The Buddha is very strong on this.

So this is a paradox that in European culture we find particularly difficult to grasp: choice is conditioned, but it's always possible to make another choice.

This brings us to the question of free will, which sometimes unfortunately pops up in these discussions because it's one of these things that spins around in circles and never gets anywhere. I know people who are quite experienced in Buddhist practice, quite learned in Buddhism and in the Western European tradition, who have explained to me in all earnestness that free will is at the very heart of the Buddhist teaching. And I've had other people who are equally learned and experienced in Buddhism and European tradition who have explained to me in all earnestness that there is no place for free will in the Buddhist teaching.

It's astonishing. I can't think of any other issue on which people have completely opposite approaches and understandings—and these are people who know what they're talking about. It's very interesting.

But I think it's got something to do with the way free will is talked about in the European tradition. What we have absorbed unconsciously, even if we know nothing about philosophy, are the attitudes and the language that have been developed by philosophical debates. In the European tradition, the concept comes out of the idea of God, creator of the universe, from which we get the scientific notion of the laws of nature—which are thinly disguised laws of God. The idea is that if God decides something, we can do nothing about it. It's already decided.

So there's been earnest philosophical debate about this issue: if God knows what you're going to have for breakfast tomorrow, does that mean you don't have any free choice to choose your breakfast? You've got this world of nature which is conditioned.

But does that mean that we're just slaves? That we've got no more choice in the matter than an ant?

And so the idea of free will is that there's this faculty of will which exists outside this conditioned creation over which God reigns. Outside there, there's a free will, and therefore the possibility of making a choice. And if you take away that outside—if you take that free will and put it back into the system—it's not free anymore. It's no more free than an ant choosing what to do today.

But for the Buddha, everything is covered by this conditioning, including choice. Although it's conditioned, there's some practical movement—we can make alternative choices. We can go against the habit. This is why cetanā is so important.

So if thoughts appear just to arise, and there's some idea that they just arise, but now we're bringing in this idea that there's choice before the arising of a thought—what there is, is this: we remember we talked about the thought stream. It's like thought bubbles, or thought sparks, are constantly being generated. Now, I don't think there's any direct choice there, but they're a product of the restlessness of the mind, and we could make choices that reduce the restlessness of the mind, so fewer of these sparks would be thrown up.

But the point is that the sparks are thrown up, and the mind is scanning the inner landscape, and it sees them, and it sees one of them: "Oh, that's interesting." And it goes there, and it grabs it, and it turns it into a story. All of that is choice.

"So it's the self that's making the choice?"

Yes. It's the choosing that gives the impression of a self. If there's a choice being made, the assumption is there's someone making the choice. And so my thinking gives me the sense of a self who's thinking. "So that's interesting"—I assume there's someone who's interested. And then I grab it and run off with it. All of these are matters of choice.

It's interesting—the whole problem of effort that we've been talking about. How much effort is involved in the meditation practice? Some people find that they're labouring away at the meditation until they feel "enough already, I've got to take a break." So you go and get a nice cuppa, sit on the veranda, look at the lovely view, and relax by having a good think.

Have you ever done that on a meditation retreat? "Get me out of here, let me just have a nice think." Have you noticed that the amount of effort you spend in having that nice think is exactly the same as the effort you make to meditate? Because it is the same process.

When the Buddha talks about the jhānas—these are the absorptions—what he does is analyse what happens in the mind as the meditation develops. At the most surface level, at the beginning, how do we approach the meditation practice? We choose a meditation object—let's say breathing. We send the awareness to the meditation object. That is initial application of the mind. And we keep doing that. We do it again and again and again. Eventually momentum builds up and the awareness stays with the breathing over a period of time. This is sustained application.

So: initial application—put it there. Sustained application—keep it there.

In Pali, this is a compound: vitakka-vicāra. Initial application, sustained application. When you start the meditation, this is the energetic, active, working aspect of the meditation—the "do it, do it, do it" part of the practice.

When the Buddha talks about thinking, in the normal sense of the word that we use, what's the term that he uses? It's a compound: vitakka-vicāra. Exactly the same. Initial thought: "Oh, that's interesting." Sustained thought: the story that follows. Send the awareness to the object and keep it there over a period of time.

It is exactly the same activity, and it takes up exactly the same amount of effort. The difference is that one of these efforts is habitual and the other is not. But the activity is the same. The energy involved is the same. The application is the same. The only difference is that one is habitual and the other is not.

And you probably have experience of this. If you get caught up in rumination, at the end of the day you're exhausted. It's like, "Oh God, I've been thinking all day." It's hard work.

So this is an indication of how the Buddha uses this concept of choice. It's conditioned—the conditioning goes very deep. But fundamentally, there's a choice involved. And the conditioning can be changed, given the right circumstances, given the right conditions.

A question arose about what lies beyond choice—is that the not-self? If the sparks just arise and you witness the spark, it's hard to say "not choose a spark" because, of course, you just chose not to choose, which is a choice in and of itself. So is the witness of the sparks the self?

In some traditions they would say the witness is the self. In the Indian yoga traditions—some of them, at least—they say the self is the witness. I think it's the purusha in those yoga traditions. What the Buddha is saying is that the fact that there is witnessing creates the illusion that there's someone who's doing the witnessing. So he doesn't go

along with the self business. But if you were inclined toward a self-doctrine, that's where you would find it—in the witness. And from the Buddhist perspective, it's the chooser.

When the Buddhist tradition talks about the self, one term they use could be translated as "the overlord," or "the boss"—that's a more culturally relevant term. The one who's in charge is the self. The one who decides, "Okay, I'm out of here"—it's the self who decides that.

Is that an illusion or delusion? Well, from the Buddhist perspective, it is. But for the Buddha, that's how it presents itself to us. He says that when you look closely, there's no one in charge. There's just a whole series of processes. But other traditions are saying, "No, no, there is someone in charge." And that's where you get the doctrinal disputes, which from our point of view aren't really important. Because what we're interested in is how the actual experience unfolds.

This teaching about choice is one reason why we can see the Buddha's teaching as fundamentally optimistic. Because for him, there's always an alternative. There is always something we can do to make the situation better.

When the Buddha conducted debates with teachers from other traditions, or talked to his own students about the teachings of other traditions, the traditions that he was really down on are what he calls akiriyavāda. Vāda means teaching, and akiriya means non-action. By non-action, he means fatalism—the belief in various forms that there's nothing we can do, that we're stuck. He's really down on those teachings. And he's down on them partly because he thinks they're wrong, but in particular because if we actually believe that, if we actually internalize that, we would give up. And for the Buddha, you never do that. There's always something you can do to improve the situation. It's just a question of finding it and doing it. So he teaches kiriyavāda, the doctrine of action.

Anyway, we're getting very philosophical, which tends to happen in this talk.

Depending on the audience, some audiences are philosophically uninterested while others want to jump in and debate.

Anyway, these are the reasons why I personally translate *cetanā* as "choice" rather than "decision." Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as "volition" — he's being a bit more abstract in his language. Ajahn Ṭhānissaro translates it as "decision," which I think is very interesting: the decision to act. But I'll stick with "choice."

And this brings us to the practice, which is tracking choice, decision, intention. This is quite important because it's through the choices that we make that we construct our lives. So getting to know them is important.

Mahasi Sayadaw talks about the importance of this. His English translators translate *cetanā* as "intention," and he feels that getting to understand it is really central for the arising of insight. Now, what does he mean by *cetanā*, by intention or choice or decision?

For Mahasi, it has two parts. First is the choice to be aware of something. And the second is the movement of awareness toward that something. So for him it covers both territories — the initial decision and then the movement of awareness toward the object. If we ask what is the source of each action of being aware, for him it's *cetanā*, it's choice, it's decision: the choice made now to be aware of this.

And you notice that this is not effort. We are not trying to decide to be aware. We are choosing to be aware, or we are choosing not to be aware. Either way, we're choosing.

The classic example, I think, would be if you're meditating and you slide off into thinking. Because it's habitual, you don't notice it. And suddenly you realize you're thinking. In that moment, you're presented with a choice. I could get back to the meditation object. Or I could just finish this story off. I think I'll just finish it off first. And all of that takes place automatically, in less than a second. Bang! Because the mind is so quick. But when you look at it, it's quite clear: I've made a choice. I had two possibilities and I chose that one. And then the awareness goes in that direction.

In that, there doesn't seem to be any effort. The effort comes later. The effort appears as the commitment to continue this choice over time. So choice sends awareness on its journey.

In the practice, we learn to see the choice, to feel the movement of awareness, and what arises as a result of that choice. So if we're looking for it, how does it present?

I think there are basically three ways in which people feel that they can see choice. One way is as an impulse — the impulse to something, the impulse to think, for example. The impulse can be physical or mental, impelled by the body or impelled by the mind. The impulse to look at something, or the impulse to reach for something, or the impulse to listen to something, the impulse to think something.

So it can present as an impulse, but it can also present, like in that example I just gave, as a decision between possibilities. Suddenly I realize I'm distracted and I'm presented with two possibilities. I could keep going with the meditation, or I could just take a break and keep thinking. For a split second, they're both there right in front of me, and I go — bang — and I choose one or the other.

So: impulse, or a decision between possibilities. And finally, the third way is as the movement of awareness as a result of that choice, the way that your awareness moves.

If we're looking for *cetanā*, where might we look for it? In terms of the body, we can find it in the movements of the body.

So, for example, a change of posture. One thing which is particularly evident in this kind of schedule that we've got, which is quite open: I'm sitting in meditation and at some point I decide to end the session and move. At some point I decide that's enough— I'm out of here. Can I see that decision? Can I make it quite clear that it arises right now and this is what it feels like?

We tend to move the body habitually. In the tradition they say we do that because it covers up the pain, the inherent pain of the body. At the beginning of the retreat we talked about posture and how to construct a posture, and we mentioned Patañjali's Yoga Sutras where he says posture, āsana, is steady and comfortable. To maintain a posture over a period of time that is steady and comfortable is a big challenge. And why is this? Because the body is inherently painful. Have you noticed how often we move? Even when we sleep, we move. And why do we move all the time? Mostly it's because I want to get comfortable. Well, if I move because I want to get comfortable, what does this tell me about my situation? I am uncomfortable. There's the dukkha of the body and I will cover it up by moving. And so most of these movements are habitual and we just don't notice them. We pay no attention.

So we can start to see choice if we deliberately look for those choices, and one area where it presents quite obviously is when we decide to end a meditation session and move out of our posture.

Then there are non-routine changes of movement. Let's say I'm doing walking meditation up and down one of those paths. I start by standing and then I'm about to move. How do I know I'm about to move? There must be choice or decision in there somewhere. I'm walking down the path and I know I'm about to stop. How do I know I'm about to stop? There's something going on. I stop, stand, I'm about to turn around. How do I know that? And so on. We can start to look for choice there in non-routine movements.

We can also see it in routine movements. When I'm walking from here to there, I can feel the flow of choices that keep me going—the continual sending of awareness to move.

Then we can also see it in movements of mind. When we're directly aware of an object, we can feel the choice to be aware and the movement that follows that choice. And of course, as we mentioned before, thinking—which is the one that I personally find most interesting because I like to think.

It might be good to play with this in the form of walking on one of those paths because it gives you bite-sized pieces. I'm going to walk from here to there. So you're standing and you make the adhiṭṭhāna, you make the resolution, the determination: from here to the end of this path, I will catch the moment thought arises. And then you start walking. When you're working with adhiṭṭhāna, with determination or resolution, you just drop it into the mind. Boom. Like you would drop a stone into water. Boom. And then you forget about it. You just let it do its work. And off you go. Now you can be pretty sure that between now and there, some kind of thought is going to arise. And you've made the determination: when it does, I'm going to be right there. I'm going to catch it as soon as it arises. So you get to the end of the track, stop, stay and turn, and then review what happened during that journey. Did it work?

Did it not work? What did it feel like?

And then you're standing there and you make the determination: from now to the end of this path, I will catch the moment thought arises. And off you go again. Stop, review what happened. Keep doing that and see what happens.

If you're feeling more ambitious, you could make the determination: from here to the end of this path, I will not think. And then off you go and see what happens. And again, review what happened just then.

I was introduced to this practice many years ago in Burma, in a different form. I was going through a period of particularly obsessive thinking, and a friend of mine who was also doing the same retreat but at the branch monastery had come to the main centre for some purpose. He dropped in and asked me, "How's it going?"

Now, he was and is a very advanced meditator—way more experienced, way more talented than I am. So I thought, good, I've got someone to complain to. And so I said, "I've got all this obsessive thinking. I don't know what to do with it. I've been trying to stop, but I can't stop."

And he said, "No problem. I'll tell you exactly how to solve the problem. This is what I do—you just do the same. I get up very early in the morning, say at four o'clock. I'm standing at the beginning of the path ready to do my two hours of walking meditation before breakfast, and I make the determination: from now until breakfast, I will not think. Then you just do two hours of walking meditation, and two hours of walking without any thought really clears the mind and sets you up for the day."

And I said, "Wow. Thanks for that."

Actually, decades later I confronted him with this. He did have the good grace to be embarrassed and said he was exaggerating a bit. But essentially that's what he would do—make the determination not to think, but not for two hours. It would be for a shorter period of time.

So it's a fun game. If you play with it, don't take it seriously. Just see what happens.

Tracking choice or decision is a question of aim. Instead of tracking the movement of the body, I'm aiming for the stream of choices generating the movement. Instead of tracking the thought stream, I'm tracking the stream of choices producing the thought stream. It's a very subtle shift in aim. And refining one's aim is very important in this practice, especially when working with the mind.

If we see this as an exercise in aim, then even if we fail, we succeed—because looking for choice cultivates aim and precision. One very common thing that people will say in the interview, if they try tracking the choices made during walking meditation—the choice to move the foot and so on—is, "Well, I never found it. I could never quite find this mysterious choice. But the aim of my awareness on the actual movements of the body became a lot stronger." Because the aim is getting better.

So treat it as an exercise in aim. Treat it as a game. Do not take it seriously. Just play with it.

Now, if it doesn't grab your interest, then don't worry about it. Just keep doing what you're doing. If it does grab your interest and you play with it for a while but then you think that's enough, drop it. Come back later on. It is quite interesting. It can be very useful once you get the hang of it.

Any questions?

Question: I've got a question about what happens when—you said, for example, if you're meditating, there's a choice to not follow the thought and to return to the object of meditation. If you're not practising focused meditation—if you're practising open meditation—then it's not just deciding not to follow thought, it's also trying to figure out which sensation is predominant...

Multiple, multiple sorts of choices. Does that make sense? So sometimes you can end up thinking about what sensation is predominant and then you get lost in all those choices.

The choices are very quick. Bang, bang, bang. So you certainly can't afford to take time off to think about them. And this is one area where adhiṭṭhāna might be helpful. Let's say that you can narrow the field. Let's say you're interested in a particular aspect, like the thinking. So when you begin the sitting, you can make the determination: during this sitting, I will be particularly focused on noticing the thought arising. Or on what is the strongest sensation. So you can use the resolution, the determination, to drop in a target during this period of time and see if that helps.

The adhiṭṭhānas are very interesting. Some people have a talent for them and they make a choice, and their mind will go there and it just happens. Some people find them very difficult. It's like they make a determination to do this and they're doing the exact opposite within five seconds. They have an effect, but it might be a very slight effect on you. So this is why it's important to explore it, not to be too heavy with it, not to expect any particular result, but just play with it and see what happens.

Many years ago, after I came back from Burma, I visited Tasmania to visit John Hale, who was living there. He had built this little primitive meditation centre in a gully outside of Hobart. I went along to a weekend retreat that he was running, and then I stayed on for my own meditation practice for about a week afterwards. Just the day before it ended, he came to visit. He said, "Check up on me." And he said, "When you're doing your last sitting, make the adhiṭṭhāna: may the best experience that I had during this week arise during the sitting."

So I said, "Oh, okay, I'll try." Anyway, I finished the retreat, went to his place for visiting. He said, "How did that adhiṭṭhāna go?" I said, "It didn't work." He looked kind of vaguely disappointed. And I said, "I have never had an adhiṭṭhāna actually work." He was shocked. He said, "I have never had an adhiṭṭhāna which did not work." But he had a talent for it.

So this is why I feel it's really important you don't get caught up in results. Because most people don't get the result that they're looking for. And the books tend to be written by the people who are really good at it. They just have a whole different set of assumptions.

A participant shared: "I've been tracking my choices, especially around choosing food and how much to have. One of the things I've been noticing is how impersonal the choices are, that the processes are. It feels as if I watch myself moving in one direction or another. I have the sense that I have an override command if I want it—I'm going to have another spoonful whether I want to or not—and I suspect that's a loser, but I don't know. But it's a very strong sense of not-self. And as such, very, very interesting. It's just watching this person, now, in this place, moving towards a second spoon of porridge or not. And it's very liberating, and there's a sense of flow. You observe underlying habits. So I noticed yesterday morning—say I'm going to have two spoons of porridge—I always have just a little bit more afterwards. I have two and a half. Or I have not just one big one, but one little one and a little bit more. Going back into my past history, I know exactly why I do that. And it was incredibly significant."

Yes. Because we assume the one making the choice is self, this is a way of seeing not-self.

"Yeah, very strongly that."

Another participant asked: "Would you be able to possibly unpack a bit—in the walking meditation, this notion that you can respond to the intention or note the intention to move, raise the foot, lower the foot, whatever it might be?"

It is really elusive. I haven't been playing with that this retreat.

But could you unpack that a little bit, for example, how you may have experienced that and what to look for?

So this is the standard practice. If you go to a classic Mahasi centre with Burmese Sayadaws and so on, by about the end of the first week the instruction will be given to note intention in the walking meditation. So if you're doing the classic slow walking meditation, you are aware of or noting the lifting of the foot, the pushing of the foot, the placing of the foot—this is what I call the classic Mahasi three-step. And then you'd be told, now be aware not of the lifting, pushing, and placing of the foot, but the intention to lift, the intention to push, the intention to place.

And I have to confess, I couldn't do it. It just never happened for me, except finally one day I'm doing walking meditation before breakfast, up and down this hallway, and suddenly it was there. And there was this flow, like a stream of little intentions, flowing down the hallway, and very much not-self. There was no one walking. It was just this little stream of intentions flowing up and down. And I thought, Eureka! And I reported it, and it's never happened again.

But I think partly it was because I actually misunderstood, because I was confused by the word intention. But I think what they were getting at was feel the stream of awareness going there.

Okay, so Pannavaro is the one who really taught me this a million years ago. And he was so precise about it—you have to see the arising, it's almost like a conscious thought prior to the minimal thought. So I would find myself suspended in the air for quite some time, waiting for the impulse, and I had no impulse at all. So I'm not moving.

Yeah, that's often how you can tell someone's practising intention in walking meditation—they're just frozen. That happens quite a lot.

And when you experienced that flow of intentions, was it a bodily sensation you were aware of, or was it in your head, in your mind?

It was in the mind. It wasn't in the head. It was actually down on the floor. It was down on the floor, but it was something you were conscious of. It was the awaring itself. Not the movement, not the body, but the mind. An awareness to go forth and make the next movement.

Yeah, and they were much smaller than three. It was a boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.

But some people have the kind of mind that can do that. Pannavaro has that kind of mind. But some people just don't have that kind of mind, and it's just asking too much of them. Certainly Mahasi Sayadaw seems to assume that people can do it, but I've come to the conclusion that Mahasi Sayadaw was an incurable optimist.

It sounds to me like it's very intertwined and strictly linked with strengthening our ability to notice vedana.

Yeah. Because if we're really aware of that, then we might be more aware, more easily aware of the choices that we make following on from that initial hit of vedana.

Feeling in general—we haven't talked about it much, but feeling is the recognition of, in broad terms, the recognition of an experience as being either pleasant, I want that; painful, I definitely don't want that; or neither—therefore either not seeing it at all because it's not worth looking at, or if I see it, I don't know what to do about it. Should I grab it? Should I reject it? And so on. But vedana is always associated with response. If there's a feeling, there is a response.

So you're talking about seeing the choice involved in the response?

Yeah. And that can often then lead to the decision that we make to take a certain action being still based on what came before that.

Yeah. So this is the area where satipatthana is so useful, because you have a specialised exercise like doing it with the walking meditation, but it's much, I think, designed just to get you used to it, open it up. But where you really find it useful is in everyday life—like at mealtime, for example, or in dealing with other people. Like in having a conversation and you've got something to say and you've got the impulse to speak, but the other person won't shut up, and you're left with this... But you can see the impulse, the intent to speak, and then you might check what's underneath it. And sometimes it's just, look at me now. Look at me, me, me, me. It's my turn.

Me, me, me, me. And then you realise it's not particularly important after all.

So it's seeing choice in everyday life, in everyday activity. I think that's the most important aspect of it. Doing it in walking meditation is a kind of specialised exercise to get you into it, to get you to see the territory.

Question: At what point are you imagining the future? You're walking and you think, "I'm going to get to that door soon," and you're noticing the intention within that process. At what point, when you're noticing intention, are you jumping forward?

Yes, and that's why you've got to be careful about how you do it. That's why people talk about how to use adhiṭṭhāna—you just drop it into the mind and then forget it. You let it do the work rather than thinking about it. If you're thinking about it all the time, then as you say, you get caught up. You're not simply acting; you're constantly thinking about your acting. The way to do it is just drop it in the mind and forget about it.

Okay, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to play around with choice and see if you can see it. Sometimes, as I said, adhiṭṭhāna could simply be the decision: today I'll be sensitive to the choices I'm making. Just make that decision, drop it in the mind, and carry on. But play with it rather than make a big deal of it. And if you're not interested, just forget about it.

Okay, thank you.

CHAPTER 80

The Cook

Patrick Kearney · 46 min

> *Drawing from the Sūda Sutta (the discourse on the cook), Patrick Kearney illuminates a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of meditation practice: the importance of reading the signs of one's own heart-mind. Just as a competent cook pays attention not only to preparing food but to how customers respond to it, a skilled practitioner must attend not merely to technique but to what is actually happening within the citta as practice unfolds.*
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> *Kearney explores why practitioners who do everything correctly—following the method, making effort, putting in the hours—may still find their practice stalled. Using the example of Venerable Anuruddha, who despite attaining the divine eye and reaching the third stage of awakening remained blocked by subtle conceit (māna), restlessness (uddhacca), and remorse (kukkucca), the talk demonstrates how even advanced practitioners can lose sight of the sign of their own heart-mind. The discourse clarifies that samādhi is not narrow focus but rather the unification of all one's energies into complete presence, and that kilesa (defilements) literally means 'stuckness'—being trapped rather than free.*
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> *Practical guidance is offered for two common obstacles: restlessness manifesting as thought explosions (requiring spacious awareness) and dullness during sitting (requiring investigation and adaptation of technique). The key teaching is that meditation is a craft requiring intelligence, creativity, and the willingness to adapt—not merely reproducing a technique but intimately feeling what is arising and responding skillfully. No one can prescribe exactly what to do; the practitioner must learn to read their own experience and take responsibility for their own awakening.*

Now that we're coming to the end of our retreat, it's time to introduce the most important topic, which obviously is food.

The talk is called "The Cook," and we're looking at the Sūpa Sutta, the cook. Food comes in because according to the Buddha, meditation is very much like cooking. And this of course reminds us that cooks are in fact very important. In the East Asian tradition, the monastery cook is one of the highest positions in the hierarchy.

If you think about our situation, let's say you turned up here to do a retreat, and you're gathered in the hall on the first evening, and the manager comes in and says, "Regrettably, the teacher can't make it, but not to worry. You can just practice. We've got all the places set up." Well, you can do it and probably have a better time. But if the

teacher was there and the manager came in and said, "Unfortunately, there are no cooks. You'll have to fend for yourselves." At that point, you'll be out the door—because you can run a retreat without a teacher. You cannot run a retreat without cooks. So cooks are important.

In the Sūpa Sutta, the Buddha launches into a description of a cook operating at the top level. But this first cook is not top level. He says: "Suppose a foolish, incompetent, incapable cook presented a king or royal minister with various kinds of curries—sour, bitter, pungent, sweet, sharp, mild, salty and bland. That foolish, incompetent, incapable cook does not pick up the sign of his master's preference: 'Today, this curry pleased my master,' or 'He reached for that one,' or 'He took a lot of this one,' or 'He spoke in praise of that one.' That foolish, incompetent, incapable cook does not gain clothing, wages and bonuses. Why? Because that foolish, incompetent, incapable cook does not pick up the sign of his master's preference."

So this is the beginning. Now this cook cooks for a king or royal minister, representing the top level of society in the Buddha's time. This cook has very important customers. The equivalent in our society might be the chef of an expensive and fashionable restaurant. But although this cook has had a distinguished career and has risen up, still this cook is foolish, incompetent and incapable because he does not pick up the sign of his master's preference.

"Sign" here translates *nimitta*, which is a technical term that appears in different contexts. But here it indicates a way of reading or interpreting the customer's response. The customer responds to the food. And what does that response mean? What's the significance of it? As the cook, do I know? Do I even care? Yet surely, as a cook, I should be paying at least as much attention to the responses of my valued customer as I do to the actual cooking itself.

The incompetent cook pays attention in the kitchen but is not interested in what happens after the food leaves the kitchen. And of course, we've all been to restaurants like this where the kitchen is concerned with churning out food according to the formula, and whether anybody likes it or not, they neither know nor care. As a result, this cook does not do well. He alienates his customer base.

The Buddha goes on: "Suppose a wise, competent, capable cook presented a king or royal minister with various kinds of curries—sour, bitter, pungent, sweet, sharp, mild, salty and bland. That wise, competent, capable cook picks up the sign of her own master's preference: 'Today, this curry pleased my master,' or 'He reached for that one,' or

'He took a lot of this one,' or 'He spoke in praise of that one.' That wise, competent, capable cook gains clothing, wages, and bonuses. Why? Because that wise, competent, capable cook picks up the sign of her master's preference."

So this is the competent cook, the successful cook, who is the opposite. She does pay attention to her customers and their responses. She's concerned with what people eat, what they do not eat, what they like, what they don't like.

This reminds me of an incident that occurred when I was living in Brisbane the first time, doing a PhD at UQ. I was living in West End, and in those days not everything was online, so we used to get this big glossy magazine about what's on in West End, which of course I would study carefully each week. One issue there was an advert for a new coffee shop on Boundary Street. The advert showed photographs of a cheery young couple who were going to run it. But the essence of the article was a pledge, a public pledge made by the two owners, that every cup of coffee served in this cafe would be made by one of these two owners. Guaranteed.

And I thought, this looks good. Because I'm sure you know that if you're looking for a good cup of coffee, one way to do it is to walk in and sit down and delay for as long as possible, and you check out who's making the coffee.

If it's the waitress, you walk out. Not that you've got anything against the waitress, but she's at the bottom of the hierarchy. So the management thinks that making coffee is something for someone low down in the hierarchy, whereas obviously being a barista is right up there.

So I thought, this is good. I'll check it out. I went down there the next time I was on Boundary Street, and sure enough, there was this young fellow behind the counter who I recognised from the photograph. I ordered a cup of coffee and he said, "Right away." I sat down, calmly waited, and he produced the coffee. I have to say, it was very good. Very good.

I finished the cup and was sitting back feeling pleased when suddenly there was someone standing beside me—it was him. He said, "How was the coffee?" You know how sometimes people ask you that question and you think, "I've got to be polite before I run out the door"? But in this case, I could honestly say it was excellent. So he's definitely a good barista.

Then I found out he was also a very good businessman, because he pounced and said, "Would you like another?" I said, "OK." So I was trapped.

A while later, I met a couple of friends of mine who were also living in the area and who were very fussy about what they ate and drank. Very fussy. I told them about this place, thinking they might be interested. They said, "Oh, yeah, we've already been there." I said, "How was it?" They said, "Well, we went there for lunch. The food was OK, but it was only OK." And the young man had appeared after the lunch asking, "How was the lunch?" They looked at each other and thought, "We'll tell him." So they critiqued the lunch.

Now, it happened that the café next door was consistently, over that period—this is in the nineties—consistently one of the most popular in West End. I never actually ate there because every time I went past it was full and I was too impatient to hang around. But clearly very successful. My friends said, "You know, the place next door is pretty good. Why don't you do what they're doing?" The young man looked a bit discombobulated, as you would under such circumstances. Anyway, they left.

A while later, they thought, "We'll try it out again." So they went back to the original café, sat down, looked at the menu—it was just like next door's. And it was very good. He paid attention to the sign of his customers' preferences. When he went up and asked someone "How was it?", he actually meant it. He listened. And he adapted accordingly. Of course, that café did very well. So he's definitely an example of a wise, competent, and capable cook.

So why are we going on about food and coffee? The Buddha moves on to talk about how this situation can be compared to meditation practice. He says, "So too, some foolish, incompetent, incapable practitioner, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful. As he lives tracking body as body, his heart-mind does not become concentrated, his defilements are not abandoned, he does not pick up the sign." And he goes on through the other satipaṭṭhānas: "That foolish, incompetent, incapable practitioner does not live pleasantly in this very life, nor does he develop mindfulness and clear understanding. Why? Because that foolish, incompetent, incapable practitioner does not pick up the sign of his own heart-mind."

The foolish, incompetent, and incapable practitioner does not do well. He does not become concentrated, and he does not develop insight.

Now, you notice that the Buddha does not mince his words with this practitioner. You get the impression that he would have been a pretty demanding teacher. In that sense, he rather reminds me of Sayadaw U Pandita. U Pandita had a reputation as a very tough and demanding teacher. But I noticed that sometimes he was clearly frustrated

with some of his students because he was more committed to their awakening than they were—and he found this really frustrating. But when he met somebody who was fully committed, he was delighted and doubly tough and demanding.

So let's look at this foolish, incompetent, incapable practitioner. The first thing to notice about him is that he's doing all the right things. The formula the Buddha uses —"surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, he lives tracking body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful"—this is the standard formula to describe this practice. In other words, he's not doing anything wrong. He's doing all the right things, and he's working hard. But the practice does not work. The practitioner does not gain samādhi; his heart-mind does not become composed or unified.

We've talked about samādhi before. Let's just briefly get a sense of what the Buddha is talking about. It's not focus, and it certainly is not strain. It's about bringing together, the unification of, the heart-mind. All the different energies and desires of the heart-mind are gathered together and collected into one single activity. We are completely here, completely committed to this now.

Samādhi is often confused with focus. Sometimes when people talk about samādhi or concentration in the context of meditation, they mean focus. But that gives the wrong impression, because the heart-mind may be unified but not necessarily focused —though of course it depends what exactly we mean by "focused."

The classical image for the focus of samādhi, which I read about and heard about in my young days as a meditator, is using a lens to bring the rays of the sun together on one spot. Because it's gathered together at one spot, it has great energy, and you can start a fire with it. One of the classic examples: put a sheet of paper on the ground, hold up the lens, and you can set the paper on fire.

But what characterizes samādhi is not that we are narrowly focused on one small spot—for example, some aspect of the breathing. What characterizes samādhi is that all of me is committed to doing whatever I am doing here and now. I don't have part of me heading in one direction and another part heading in another direction. So samādhi is not defined by its object, whether that object be small or large, but by the state of the heart-mind—its state of absorption, of unification. Focus implies bringing awareness to a singular point, but samādhi refers to an awareness that is unified, whether the field of unification is very narrow, very wide, or anything in between.

"His heart-mind has not become concentrated, his defilements are not abandoned." I don't think we've introduced this term, defilement. This is a translation of *kilesa* or *upakilesa*. In English books on Mahāyāna, there's a different translation: they use "affliction." They talk about the afflictions. In the Theravāda, they talk about the defilements.

This is because Mahāyāna uses the Sanskrit *kleśa*, whereas the Theravāda uses the Pali *kilesa*, and they're actually derived from different verbs. *Kleśa* in Buddhist Sanskrit does come from a verb meaning to be afflicted, to be in pain. But *kilesa* in Pali comes from the verb *kilesati*, meaning to stick or to adhere.

So the image is this: let's say you have a white cloth, and you throw mud at it. The mud strikes the cloth and sticks to it. The cloth is stained, dirtied, defiled. The reason is because the mud is stuck to the cloth. So *kilesa*, classically translated as "defilement"—such a gloriously Victorian word—but essentially it refers to stuckness, to being stuck anywhere.

Where this comes from is that for the Buddha, his ultimate, his key value is freedom. The opposite of freedom is the state of being trapped, of being stuck. And of course, being stuck is to be afflicted. It's painful.

So if I'm caught up in an obsession or an addiction, I'm stuck in that state. In that situation, I'm not free, and therefore I'm suffering. These are the defilements.

What the Buddha is talking about here is someone who is doing the practice, putting in the hours, making effort, following the method—and it still doesn't work. He's getting nowhere. He just gets bogged down. And why is this? What is the problem? He does not pick up the sign.

So that foolish, incompetent, incapable practitioner does not live pleasantly in this very life, nor does he develop mindfulness and clear understanding. Living pleasantly in this present life refers to serenity, to calming peacefulness—in other words, the function of samādhi, of concentration. We cultivate states that are blissful and therefore very pleasant to live in. This is the pleasure of meditation.

When we were doing the ānāpānasati in the early stages, there was a lot of emphasis on not trying too hard, relaxing into it. This is an attempt to bring out the pleasure of serenity. Otherwise, meditation might be a bitter pill that has to be swallowed rather than a genuinely pleasant thing to do. This is one of the reasons why we talk about being playful, why we emphasize being relaxed. What we want is to learn to enjoy the practice, because if we enjoy it, we'll naturally do it.

"Nor does he develop mindfulness and clear understanding"—this refers to insight. Living pleasantly is serenity; mindfulness and clear understanding is insight. This practitioner does not develop a continuous awareness of the flow of events and does not generate insight as a result. Neither serenity nor insight arises from this practitioner's practice—in other words, no one-but stamps whatsoever. And why? Because he does not pick up the sign of his own heart-mind.

In another discourse, we get an example of this, and the example comes from Anuruddha. Now, Anuruddha was one of the major disciples, a cousin of the Buddha, a generation younger. A very talented practitioner—very talented. Deep concentration, great insight. He had attained the third stage of awakening.

We briefly mentioned that for the Buddha, awakening, like everything else, is a process. The first flash of it is called the vision of Dharma, or stream entry, and that gets you started on the Noble Eightfold Path. The third stage is described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta as where the heart-mind has just a touch of clinging remaining. So almost there, really deeply awakened. It would be quite remarkable to meet such a person.

But Anuruddha felt that he had got bogged down. He had made it this far, but he couldn't move on. Something was getting in the way. So who does he approach for advice? He approaches Venerable Sāriputta.

Sāriputta was one of the Buddha's two chief students. Often, if you see paintings of the Buddha—and sometimes you see this on altars—you have the Buddha at the center with a smaller figure on the right and one on the left. The figure on the right is Sāriputta, foremost in wisdom. The figure on the left is Mahāmoggallāna, foremost in power. I think we talked about this earlier in the retreat. So Sāriputta is right up there, foremost in wisdom of all the Buddha's students.

Anuruddha knows who he should go and ask. He explains his problem to Sāriputta. He says, "I have attained the divine eye with which I can see the thousandfold world system." Now, the divine eye is the power to see beyond the physical and to see how other beings are reborn into their various existences. To attain the divine eye, you've got to have incredible samādhi power, as well as a great deal of talent for the—what do they call them?

The iddhis, or in Sanskrit, the siddhis—literally the successors. These are the special powers that might arise from a meditation practice.

So Anuruddha had attained the divine eye, and he had a huge reputation for that. He was foremost among the Buddha's students in the divine eye. And he said, "I have established continuous energy and mindfulness, a calm body, and a concentrated and

unified heart-mind." Pretty good. I mean, you can't argue with that. And then he adds, "Yet I am still not fully awakened. What is getting in the way of abandoning all clinging? Because a touch of clinging has remained." He's still hanging on. How can he let go of that?

Sariputta has no problem diagnosing the problem. He explains that Anuruddha has three barriers that stand in the way between him and full awakening: conceit, restlessness, and remorse. In Pali, mana, uddhacca, and kukkucca. And it's obvious—bleeding obvious—that he's got these three barriers because they are revealed by his very description of the problem.

Sariputta explains, "Look, you've got mana, you've got conceit." And this is demonstrated by Anuruddha's self-congratulation about his attainment of the divine eye. "I'm so great, I've got the divine eye."

Now, conceit is the translation of mana, which literally means measuring—from the root ma, to measure. Again, the English doesn't really capture what's going on. Mana is measuring. And this manifests as the determination to compare oneself with others, or even with oneself. To feel superior to others is mana. To feel inferior to others is mana. Even to feel equal to others is mana, although much more subtle. And here Anuruddha is comparing himself to others who are not as talented in samādhi and in the power of the divine eye, yet they're doing better than him. So, conceit.

The second problem: restlessness. This is demonstrated by his preoccupation with his energy, mindfulness, calm, and concentration. And this very preoccupation—"How is my meditation going? All this is happening, but it's not quite good enough"—his preoccupation with progress is an indication of restlessness, and it's getting in the way.

Finally, remorse is revealed by his concern that he has not yet attained full awakening and still has a touch of clinging remaining. Both restlessness and remorse point to his agitation about his lack of progress. He thinks he's got a problem—which means he's got a problem, essentially.

In other words, here you have someone, one of the great disciples of the Buddha, a practitioner on the very edge of full awakening, blocked in his practice as soon as he lost sight of the sign of his own heart-mind. We're talking about something which can be very, very subtle. This foolish, incompetent, incapable practitioner—relatively speaking, relative maybe to the Buddha—might actually be doing very, very well, but is still stuck in some way.

And then the Buddha goes on to the competent practitioner: "So too, some wise, competent, capable practitioner, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful." The same, exactly the same. "While she lives tracking body as body, her heart-mind becomes concentrated, the defilements are abandoned, she picks up the sign. That wise, competent, capable practitioner lives pleasantly in this very life, and she develops mindfulness and clear understanding. Why? Because that wise, competent, capable practitioner picks up the sign of her own heart-mind."

Just as the competent cook learns to pay attention to the responses of her customers, so the competent practitioner learns to pay attention to the responses of her own heart-mind as she practices. In other words, the practice is not just a matter of reproducing a meditation technique. That's not good enough.

The first clear teaching I had of that principle actually came to me not from a teacher, but through a side door—from a fellow practitioner at the Mahasi Centre. It was during a period of walking meditation, doing the walking outside the meditation hall. Over to my right there was one of my fellow practitioners, also ordained, a fellow Australian, who was also doing walking meditation, moving very mindfully. And I was moving very mindfully. I'm walking up and down my path, and out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that my friend had stopped.

And then he started moving again, but at a different angle, at what appeared to be a diagonal angle. I mean, I didn't want to stop and stare—I was meditating. But it seemed to me that he was heading in my direction. And it was pretty slow, so nothing dramatic, but I couldn't help but feel that something was going on.

And sure enough, eventually I come to the end of my walking track, and there he is, standing right there, facing me. And I say, "Yes, Venerable Sir, do you have something to say?" And he said, "I do." And I said, "What is it?" And he said—actually, I've got to remember—ah, that's right, he had a question for me. He said, "Venerable Sir, I've got a question for you." I said, "Go ahead." "What is the difference between insight meditation and the airline industry?"

And I said, "To be completely honest, Venerable Sir, I have no idea. Could you explain it to me?" And he said, "Insight meditation, unlike the airline industry, is not simply a matter of bums on seats." Whereupon he turned and went back to his walking.

And of course I stood there in awe at the power of this teaching that had just been delivered to me, and I've never forgotten it. It's a valuable lesson. In other words, it's not enough to reproduce the technique, no matter how hard we work. It's possible to do

all the right things, to work really hard, but the project in its entirety does not succeed. What's missing is that we need to read the sign of our own heart-mind. And this involves opening up the field of awareness to see what's happening within us as we're doing the practice, what's happening inside the citta.

So what is the result of my performance of the technique? Am I becoming more collected, composed, concentrated and so on, or not? And if not, what's getting in the way? And it's really important to identify what's getting in the way, because in this practice, that becomes my meditation object. And that's going to provide the entry into deeper practice.

Now sometimes, what's getting in the way is obvious. For example, I might be struck by a massive thought attack. Have you ever had one of those on a meditation retreat? Or what's getting in the way might be very subtle—might be a slight shift in mood, like a generalised restlessness with nothing that can be identified as being wrong. Something has changed within the heart-mind and that's where I need to be paying attention.

So I might push myself through all the motions but that won't get me very far. What I need to do is to cultivate intimacy and to feel: what is this? What is going on? And if I do that I may discover something quite unexpected. For example, I may find that self—when it appears as a concern with success and failure, or when it appears as an identification with habitual responses—that self blocks intimacy. And self is always characterized by separation or conceit, māna. This can appear disguised as something very subtle, as a felt sense of "this is happening to me." In other words, there is an "I" separate from the experience. There is someone to whom this experience is happening, and this someone is either a very good practitioner—wombat stamps for me—or a bad practitioner, whatever miserable number of wombat stamps I've managed to accumulate having all been taken away. But either movement is māna, and it blocks the progress.

So let's look at just two examples of blocks in the practice that are very common in retreats. One is restlessness, such as revealed in a sudden outburst of thinking, and the other is dullness, such as revealed in a tendency to zone out.

One thing that commonly happens during a retreat is that a practitioner is building concentration, things are calming down, and suddenly there's a thought explosion for no apparent reason. What this has to do with is what the Buddha calls air element, or what in the yoga tradition is called prāṇa, or what in general language we tend to call energy. What can happen is I've been building energy throughout the practice and at some point the body-mind can't handle it and it blows up. The energy's got to do something so it'll just generate huge amounts of thought, burning itself off.

Now, if I'm just focused on the technique and on my success or failure with the technique, then all I can see is that suddenly I can't do it. I was doing the practice successfully this morning and now it's impossible. Oh my God, I've blown it.

It's a complete disaster. So what to do? Well, I should try harder. I'll just focus more. But this doesn't work because it's more likely to just blow up in my face. So I'm in a pickle.

What I could do is read the sign of my own mind. What's happening? Well, a lot of thinking. Okay, what's the characteristic of the thinking? For example, is there an emotional obsession? That will generate a lot of thinking. No, I'm not obsessed about anything at the moment. I've got this determination to think, and I don't care what I think about. I've just got to think about something. So could it be just energy? Well, it does feel very buzzy. And there is a sense of urgency. And it doesn't seem to matter what I'm thinking about. I just need to think. Energy—that's what it is.

So how do I work with energy? Well, the basic rule for excessive energy is to give it space. Room to move. Open the awareness up. It's like giving a wild horse a big paddock so that it can move about freely, but it's held within the boundaries of the paddock. In Australia, we'd say a horse. In India, of course, they'd say an elephant.

Now, as we said, samādhi is the state of being collected. So here it refers to the space within which the mind is collected being very wide, but the mind is collected within that space. It is bounded within that space. There's lots of space, but there's a sense of this is the boundary. It might be very wide, but it's held. It's contained.

And there's a safe distance between the aware-ing and the energy that is being aware. I don't go in, I step back, give it room, like watching it from a distance and not getting involved. I'm not paying any attention to what I'm thinking about—that's obviously not where the action is. I'm just feeling the energetic, buzzy feel of the flow of thinking itself. And as I do this, it starts to calm down. This is reading the sign of my own mind.

Or I might have an attack of dullness, which is the opposite. I sit down, I start to meditate, I build some concentration, and then the mind dulls out. And this is going to happen again and again. I may actually even fall asleep sitting upright. The meditation becomes impossible. I try again and again, but nothing works. I'm tempted to give up. It's too hard.

Or I could read the sign of my own heart-mind. If I get up and walk, for example, am I still dull? Well, if the answer is yes, then probably I'm sleepy. The best thing I can do is take a rest. So let's check it out. Try and see.

So I lie down, and very lightly, without making any effort, I feel the movements of the breathing. Now, if I am tired, I will fall asleep. And then when I wake up, I resume, feeling refreshed. If I'm not tired, I will not fall asleep. And then I'm just doing a session of lying down meditation and finding a balance.

But let's say that I realize I'm dull only when I sit. All other times I'm perfectly awake, but when I sit, I get dull. So I can work on the assumption that the problem lies with my approach to the meditation practice.

Firstly, what is my meditation object? Is it the breathing? And often it is, in this particular situation. Perhaps my relationship to breathing causes an imbalance between energy and concentration. Well, actually, one thing to check—to see if it is the breathing—is to check whether the dullness emerges on the in-breath or the out-breath. Often when people are complaining about dullness, the first thing I would do is ask that very question. And if they say, "I don't know," I frown. And I say, "Please come back in the next interview and tell me. Pay attention."

But often it's on the out-breath, because it's on the out-breath that the body relaxes. And so if there is an imbalance, that's where you'll see it.

One way of testing this is to drop breathing as a meditation object and use the posture itself as the grounding object. Let go of the breathing, construct the posture really upright, open but relaxed, and then move my point of awareness from one sensation to another to another—always looking for the clearest, most obvious sensation, what we were playing with in the beginning.

Now, I'm moving the point of awareness from one place to another. I don't know where the next one is going to be because I don't know where the next obvious sensation will be. So I have to be paying attention. And the moving of the point of awareness itself requires energy and it generates energy. If I find that things are beginning to stabilize, I can say, "Oh, that's it." And I may find, after a while, that the breathing just kind of comes back into view. In which case, okay, just stay with it lightly, and as soon as there's a touch of dullness, drop it. Come back to moving from one point to another. This is what Mahasi Sayadaw calls sitting touching.

Sometimes there might be a variation. For example, let's say I keep with the breathing, but if I realize I get dull on the out-breath, I weave: in-breath, body sensation, in-breath, body sensation, in-breath, body sensation—just avoiding the out-breath until I can feel the energy coming back into balance.

Now, these are two quite common examples. But the key point is that no one can tell you what to do. There's an unpredictability and a creativity that's part of this whole project. So I try something. Like the cook who follows the recipe and discovers that her customers don't like the dish. Why? That's never happened. We'll try it again. No, it doesn't work. Something's changed. I have to abandon the recipe and try something new.

So we have a basic method, usually quite simple. And the method gives us a framework for the practice, a structure against which we can read the experience. And we also have a language. So we can speak with others about what happens during the meditation practice and understand them, but also we can speak to ourselves and understand ourselves when we're analyzing what's going on.

What is our relationship to this method? We play with it. Because this is how we learn. No one can predict what the mind will come up with. So learning to read the sign of your own mind and adapting the practice to the situation—this is what distinguishes the capable practitioner from the incapable practitioner.

In other words, this is about the craft and understanding involved in meditation practice. Meditation is a craft, and you will get better at it over time if you apply your intelligence to the job. But some people don't.

Sometimes, for example, in Asia it can be because practitioners have so much faith. "If I just do what the teacher says, everything will be fine"—even when, obviously, it isn't fine. But we have to bring our intelligence to the project.

And of course, all of us bring different sensitivities and different capabilities to this practice. I spent five years doing Zen in the late seventies and early eighties. I picked that up again years later, but that's a different story. I abandoned Zen and went back to the Theravāda, and eventually stumbled into Burma. The reason why I left Zen was that they didn't really teach how to meditate. It was all the poetry and the realization and the mystical stuff, but there was precious little about the actual technique.

And some people got it. Some of my colleagues from those days are now Zen teachers, and I'm just astonished that they could somehow intuit their way into a deep meditation practice. I couldn't. There's no way I could have learned it that way. I needed someone to teach me the craft. And that's what I found in Burma. So that's what I've tried to specialize in—teaching the craft.

We begin the practice, and at first we're just absorbed with simply holding on to the meditation object. Later, as things calm down, we begin to realize that there is a lot more going on than we previously thought—a lot more than just hanging on to a medit-

ation object. In this case, the Buddha is emphasizing how important it is to understand what is happening in the heart-mind and adapt the method accordingly. This requires creativity, learning to deal with the unexpected, and of course it also involves taking responsibility for our own experience.

CHAPTER 81

Review

Patrick Kearney · 28 min

> *In this closing talk from a retreat on insight meditation, Patrick Kearney distills the essence of the practice into its simplest form: 'be aware.' Drawing on the Buddha's final words about the decay of all conditioned things (saṅkhārā) and the importance of wakefulness (appamāda), he explores how sustained attention naturally reveals the perception of impermanence (anicca saññā). Referencing the Mahārāhulovāda Sutta (MN 62), he explains how cultivating this perception leads to abandoning the 'conceit I am' (asmimāna) — code for full awakening.*
>
> *Kearney discusses the craft of meditation, emphasising appropriate attention (yoniso manasikāra) as the key to directing awareness skillfully according to circumstances. He addresses the spectrum from receptive to active awareness, encouraging practitioners to maintain a posture of natural awareness grounded in curiosity about the present moment. The talk includes a memorable analogy about childhood discovery of Santa Claus to illustrate how insight permanently transforms our perception — once we see something clearly, we cannot unsee it.*
>
> *For integrating practice into daily life, Kearney offers practical guidance: release expectations of repeating retreat experiences, establish sustainable routines rather than ambitious goals, observe the choices we make through the lens of kamma, and maintain connection with spiritual community (kalyāṇa-mittatā). He emphasises that forgetting is inevitable — what matters is remembering and beginning again, cultivating what Dōgen called 'beginner's mind' as the pinnacle of practice.*

This morning we're going to review the practice that we've been doing this past week.

I'm reminded of a retreat I did in Bodh Gaya decades ago with Christopher Titmuss. We had this huge crowd, ninety people, most of them English as a second language. One time he got up on the stage to give a Dhamma talk and he said, "I will give you the complete instructions for the practice. Be aware." Then he turned around and headed for the door. But feeling the ripples of discombobulation, he stopped and explained. He said, "That is it. That is the complete instruction for the practice. But the problem is concepts. What do you mean, be aware? What does it even mean? Be aware of what? Be aware when? Why? How?" And from all this questioning comes the meditation method. But basically: be aware. Or you could make it more complicated: be present to what is happening now. That's it. That is the complete practice.

And if we do this, what we discover at some point, what we kind of bump into—or what bumps into us—is the observation that what is happening now is already changing into something else. This brings us to what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence, *anicca saññā*. He tells his son Rahula—this is in Majjhima 62, if anybody wants to look it up—"Cultivate the perception of impermanence, for when you cultivate the perception of impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned."

We talked about this last night. Rather than "conceit," we could literally translate it as "the measuring"—the separate sense of "I am," in brackets, separate from the rest of the world. Cultivate the perception of impermanence, because that will take you to abandoning that sense of separation. And abandoning the conceit "I am" is code for full awakening. So it takes us all the way.

Be attentive to what is happening now, and in particular, be attentive to transitions. The intersections of experience, the places where one thing becomes another—these are always of particular interest to anybody practising for insight. You notice that these transitions, it doesn't matter whether things are going well and changing for the worse, or changing for the better. It's completely irrelevant. The fact is, they're changing. That's the interesting point.

And that, of course, is more complicated than that in practice, so this brings us to the role of technique. Probably the expression that covers what we would call meditation method or technique in Pali would be *yoniso manasikāra*, which is variously translated. Again, it's one of these terms that has no exact English equivalent. I like Ṭhānissaro's translation, "appropriate attention." Everybody agrees that *manasikāra* is attention. It's just the question of what does *yoniso* do to it. But he has "appropriate attention," and I think that really works—directing awareness in a way which is appropriate to the situation. This is what we've been calling the craft of the practice. This is what we've been doing.

As we're going through a transition from the retreat to the alleged real world, we might begin by looking at the last words of the Buddha. He said, *Vaya dhammā saṅkhārā appamādena sampādetha*. So don't forget those words. Roughly translated: everything constructed decays; stay awake. I think this pretty much sums up the whole deal.

This staying awake—in the old translations, this is translated, very Victorian Christianity, as "strive on with heedfulness." When I first read that, I thought, what the hell is heedfulness? Anyway, I prefer "stay awake" to get at what the Buddha is talking about. And we get a sense of this in the Pali word *appamāda*. It's a negative term—*a* is the "not."

So not pamada. And we get a sense of the meaning of appamada when we look at its opposite, pamada. We are familiar with this word from our chanting of the five ways of training. The fifth way of training, we commit to abstaining from the carelessness caused by intoxicants. And this carelessness is pamada. So appamada is the opposite.

Pamada, the carelessness, represents forgotten mindfulness that we've been talking about. We don't know what's going on. We're stumbling about in the dark, crashing into things, blind, driven by our fears, our drives, and our obsessions. In this state, we harm ourselves and we harm the people around us. And this is, for the Buddha, pretty much the normal human condition.

Appamada, its opposite, represents a stable wakefulness. It keeps us real, keeps us authentic, and it's a guard rail, as it were, to prevent us from being sucked into the affective conceptual world of obsession and misery created by concepts. Wakefulness keeps us clear and present here and now. This is the key point.

Wakefulness is interesting in that it's both something that we train, cultivate, and develop, and equally it's an expression of the natural state of the mind. Because as we've talked about, it is the mind's nature to be aware. Mind is already aware, mind is already awake. But do we notice this or do we forget it?

To practice wakefulness could be described as maintaining a posture of natural awareness. We talked about awareness on a spectrum from receptive to active—what Mahasi calls noticing and noting, undirected and directed. This posture of natural awareness is perhaps closer to the undirected, receptive end of the spectrum. We were getting a sense of that at the beginning of the retreat when we were cultivating the habit of asking ourselves from time to time questions like: What am I aware of now? What is clear now? What is obvious now? What's happening now?

Developing that curiosity, possibly using the questions themselves, dropping them in every now and again—or without the questions—but developing this curiosity about what's going on now. What is this now? This question grounds us in the present. And the present, as we've been talking about, is where the practice takes place, and it's also where awakening takes place. Awakening does not take place sometime in the future. It takes place in the present. It takes place now.

So this is our summary of what we've been doing. As we head out, you may be wondering: what have I gotten from this retreat? And of course, the best and most enlightened answer to that is nothing at all. But we won't go there. Let's look at this question more pragmatically.

Two things we take with us. One is an understanding of method and technique, an understanding of the craft. Meditation practice is a craft, and of course it's not easy. There are few people on this planet who are naturally gifted at it, who dive into it relatively quickly and relatively easily. But most of us struggle. At times it seems impossible. But we plug away. And as we were talking about, we need to plug away intelligently. We are developing a craft, a skill, and it involves a degree of creativity, a degree of play, and of course persistence and commitment.

I think we can say that everybody in this room is better at it than they were a week ago. And this is progress. This is something which is going to develop over a period of a lifetime. The sooner one starts, the better, but it's never too late. As time goes on, we will get better at it. And as we get better at it, our lives will change as a result. I think that's a major thing that we take away with us.

And the other thing has to do with our insights. Here, of course, as we talked about, we cannot take our insights with us. All of them, I'm afraid, have to be checked in at the office because they're not ours. They don't belong to us. But what we take with us is the effect of having seen something.

To illustrate this, I sometimes tell the story of the fat man. Some of you have already heard it, but some of you have not, so I'll tell you the whole story.

This story is about a fat man—a very fat man. He lives at the North Pole. He's got a big beard. He doesn't like shaving for some reason. Maybe the water is a bit cold up there. And he dresses in red. Apparently when he was very young, his mother told him, "You look really good in red," and he took his mother's advice to heart.

He seems to be a man of independent wealth, and he's a very generous fellow. To fill in his time, he has a big workshop where he spends the year making toys for kitties—especially good kitties, kitties who have behaved themselves. And once a year, he goes on this massive delivery run where he circumnavigates the globe multiple times, delivering these presents.

Now, how does a fat man living at the North Pole manage this incredible logistics feat? Well, fortunately, he has a big sleigh that he can load all the stuff into. But how does he get the sleigh to move? He's got these reindeer—twelve of them—and he hitches them up, and off they go. But I can hear your rational mind storming in and saying, "There is no way a bunch of reindeer can circumnavigate the globe multiple times. It's not going to happen, mate." What you didn't know is that these reindeer fly. And this enables him to complete the trip.

Despite the fact that he only goes on one trip a year, he's incredibly skilful with this vehicle. He can land on roof peaks. You wouldn't think that a bloody great sleigh and twelve reindeer could balance on top of these roofs, but he can do it. And then he takes off perfectly.

But then, of course, he's got the problem of how to get into the houses to make the delivery. His favourite way, his traditional way, is to enter and exit via the chimney. This is quite remarkable, partly because chimneys tend to be very dirty, but when he emerges, his red suit is untouched. It's just as clean as it was before. I find that very impressive. But what I find even more impressive is that the fat man is about this wide and the chimney is about this wide, and somehow he manages to slide in and out. You've got to admit, it's pretty impressive.

He starts at the North Pole, goes around and around and around, and eventually makes it to Australia. We're at the end of his delivery run, so by the time he gets here, he's getting pretty tired. In our house in Sydney, we felt a certain amount of compassion for him. What really impressed me was the fact that he not only did this entry and exit via the chimney, but the fireplace was boarded up and it didn't even slow him down. He always left it perfectly, just like it was before. Really considerate.

So we would prepare for his advent. We would organise a nice bottle of beer beside my father's chair and a nice cake to put out. And by the strangest coincidence, the fat man's favourite beer was the same as my father's favourite beer, which made it even more convenient. We would set it all up and then go off to bed.

And there you are, lying in bed, and you can't sleep. There's an edge of excitement in the air. An edge of agitation. And you haven't yet developed to the point where you can just be mindful of it. So your senses are alert. And sure enough, late at night, you hear a sound. It seems like that sound is coming from the living room. So you creep out of bed and look down the hall, and sure enough—

The door to the living room is ajar, and there's light coming from it, and sound. This is your opportunity. So you creep down the hall and push the door open just a little bit and look in. There's your father in his armchair, quaffing the cake and the beer. There's your mother arranging the presents around the tree. You look at this and profound existential shock fills your entire being. You close the door very quietly, creep back down the hall into bed, and stare up at the dark ceiling. And you are faced with the first ethical problem of your life: Will I tell?

This is the moment that economists are born—because you realise, no, I will keep my mouth shut and take the goodies.

So finally you fall asleep and wake up Christmas morning. Everybody gets up, rushes to the room. There are the presents, and there's the evidence of last night's activity—empty bottle, a few crumbs. You open the presents and have a great time, but you've seen something. And Christmas will never be the same again. You can never go back. Even if you want to go back, even if you want to unsee what you've seen, you can't—because you're living in a new world. And in this world, all of that is complete bullshit.

This is the world of insight. We enter into a different world because we've seen something. And once we see something, we cannot unsee it. In the progress of insight, it is true that sometimes we rather wish we could unsee it. We rather wish we could go back sometimes, because this new world is going to be quite strange and difficult to adjust to.

So this is the insight aspect. It's not something we possess. It's not something we take with us. We find ourselves living in a different world.

In terms of how we maintain the practice, one thing that is quite useful to do, as we've been talking about, is to be open to seeing the choices that we make. Choices are very important—see the choices we make in our ordinary lives, what conditions those choices, and what are the results of those choices. Or you could say: what feeds our choices, and what do our choices feed? This is the teaching of kamma and its ripening, which is really central to the Buddha's ethics, because this is what constructs the way of life that we lead. And of course the question is: Is this the life I really want? Or is it perhaps different from what I've got?

So that's important. And of course, being guided by the five ways of training that we've been chanting each evening. Again, we're noticing that what these are about is harmony—social harmony and psychological harmony. That harmony, the absence of conflict in our lives, makes practicing the Dhamma a lot easier.

The five ways of training remind us that meditation is part of a much broader path, traditionally listed as dāna—giving, or generosity; sīla—ethics; bhāvanā—cultivation of the heart and mind, what we call meditation; and paññā—wisdom.

Now, in terms of having a daily meditation practice, I think the first thing is to drop all expectation of repeating what happened here. If you've had some really good meditations, make sure you've said goodbye, because the whole situation is already crumbling. And you can feel it, can't you? There's restlessness, agitation. It's already crumbling. Because what we accomplish in a meditation retreat is the product of a whole set

of particular conditions. Change the conditions, you change the experience. This is dependent arising. So don't try to repeat the past. Just be attentive to what's new, what's happening now.

Given that meditation is a basic training, it's good to have a regular practice. As for how much—well, there are different answers to that. One time I was finishing up a retreat here. It had gone quite well, and I was feeling a bit frisky. One of the meditators asked, "In my daily meditation practice, how long should I sit each day?" And I cheerfully said, "Four hours is good." Which is unquestionably true. But she was very alarmed and agitated, and no matter how much I backtracked, I realised that I had said the wrong thing.

So that's one possible answer.

But another possible response—this is another story that was told to me in Hawaii when I was practising Zen there.

Now Hawaii is of course in the middle of the Pacific. Starting in the fifties and going through the sixties and beyond, Japanese Zen teachers would go to the US to run retreats. They would fly across the Pacific, and often they would drop in at Hawaii, run a retreat, and then take off and head on again. One of the visiting teachers who had a big influence on Hawaiian Zen in the early days was Yasutani Hakuun Roshi. He was a legend—one of these tough old samurai Zen characters of the old school. He used to run very strict, very traditional Zen retreats.

In one of these retreats there was a young man who signed on for his first ever meditation retreat and found himself plunged into this completely alien world. He saw the light, got converted, and thought, "This is fantastic. This is going to change my whole life. This is wonderful." Towards the end of the retreat, he was concerned about this question: How much meditation should I commit myself to if I'm going to be on the path of Zen? So he asked to see the teacher for a special interview to ask him this very question. And he made the determination, the resolution, that whatever the old master said, he would do it, no matter what.

The interview begins. The old roshi is in his Japanese formal robes, looking customarily fierce, and the young man is there. The Zen master says, "Yes, I understand you have a question." The young man brings up his courage and says, "Yes, Roshi, my question is: how much meditation should I do each day?" He sat back to wait for the answer that would change his life. The old man glared at him and said, "Five minutes." The young man was shocked by the answer—it wasn't what he was expecting. The old man saw the young man's shock, but misinterpreted it, and said, "Three minutes?"

So that balances the four-hour approach. You can see the answer lies somewhere in between. But I think the point is that clock time is not the issue. The issue is simply sustainability. You set something up, some kind of routine that you know you can sustain over time. That's the most important thing. How long, under what circumstances, what part of your day—all of this depends on your particular circumstances. But sustainability is central.

And it's important to become part of a community. As we said, the five ways of training are based on building a harmonious community. It's very difficult to maintain this practice alone. If you're committed to meditation practice in this society, you are part of a cultural minority, and that's unlikely ever to change. Support is necessary. So become part of some kind of community.

The Buddha talks about "association with good friends" as the foundation of the training. When he describes how people begin on the path of the Dharma, it's clear that Dharma practice does not begin with belief in certain doctrines and from there proceed to associating with people who believe these things. That's not the way it works at all. Rather, we begin with the heart being moved by people. Sometimes it's people we've met. Sometimes it's just people we've heard about—we read books about famous yogis or gurus and we are moved by that. I know people whose life has changed simply by looking at a photograph of Ramana Maharshi. That was enough to turn them towards the Dharma.

The heart is moved by either people we've actually met or people we've simply heard about, or a combination of both. And we become interested. How do they live? What's behind this way of life? What is going on here? That gets us started. Then we might look at what they believe. But belief is fairly minor, certainly in the beginning.

So that gets us started. And of course, what we find is that no matter what our good intentions are, we lose momentum. We have a good retreat, we go home, we've got our cushions set up in a nice little corner, maybe we've got a little Buddha image. Every day we meditate and we're very pleased with ourselves and things are going well. And then one day we just forget. We're going to bed and we realise, "Oh, I forgot to meditate." Never mind. Tomorrow. And then one day, sometime in the future, we realise it's actually been a few days. Never mind, we'll start again. It's okay. And then one day we're cleaning the house and we notice this thick layer of dust on the cushion. At that point we think, "Oh, it's hopeless. I'll do a retreat next year and get started again then."

But that's taking the wrong attitude. We forget—we do forget. We've been talking about this. The opposite of mindfulness is forgetfulness. We forget. That's the normal human condition. So it's hardly surprising. It is going to happen. It is guaranteed.

What's important is that we remember. That's the important thing. We remember, and so we begin again. And it doesn't matter for how long we've forgotten. We might have very good samādhi going and we forget and fall into the thought stream for a few seconds, and then we remember—"Oh, distracted"—and continue. We could have been absent for a few seconds, we could have been absent for a few minutes, for a few hours, days, weeks, months, years. It makes absolutely no difference because the moment we remember, all of that is in the past. It does not exist. What exists is this now. I just remembered. So always come back. Always start again, start again, start again.

People sometimes say, "I feel like a beginner." And I'm tempted to tell them about the Zen tradition, particularly Dōgen Zenji, and what he calls beginner's mind—which is considered the peak of meditation practice. It's very good to be a beginner.

CHAPTER 82

Introducing Natural Awareness (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 56 min

> *In this opening practice session of a nine-day retreat, Patrick Kearney introduces his 'natural awareness' approach to meditation, drawing from teachings he received from Sayadaw U Tejaniya. Rather than launching into intensive practice with expectations and anticipation, Kearney invites practitioners to relax into meditation, allowing awareness to settle naturally in present experience.*
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> *The core instruction is remarkably simple: relax body and mind, and let awareness do what it naturally does. Using the metaphor of 'tapping the light switch of awareness,' Kearney explains that we don't need to force or create awareness—it arises naturally. Our task is simply to remember to be aware and to know what we're experiencing in each moment. He distinguishes this undirected approach from directed techniques that focus attention on a chosen object like the breath, instead allowing whatever presents itself to become the object of awareness.*
>
> *A key feature of this practice is cultivating no preference for one meditation experience over another—whether tiredness, restlessness, boredom, or bliss, all are equally valid objects of awareness. Kearney emphasizes practicing in all four postures the Buddha taught (sitting, standing, lying, and movement) and maintaining continuous awareness throughout all waking activities. He shares personal stories of learning this approach, including discovering that striving too hard creates imbalance, and that genuine continuity of mindfulness requires dropping expectations about what meditation 'should' look like. The invitation is to treat retreat days as simply days in one's life with more conducive conditions for practice.*

Good morning.

Here we are at the beginning of a nine-day retreat. This may be stirring up various feelings—anticipation, excitement, trepidation perhaps, a sense of the beginning of some kind of journey or adventure. And perhaps also a sense of expectation, a sense of what we want to get out of the retreat. Maybe this is to taste more fully something that we've glimpsed in our practice previously, or maybe it's to come away from this retreat with a surer sense that we're progressing on the path.

All of this is perfectly normal, of course, but it's not a particularly helpful basis for the practice. If we have a sense of anticipation or expectation, then we're already reaching into the future. And of course, the basis for the practice is here and now. It's letting

the moment-to-moment flow of experience unfold around us. So the sense of anticipation and expectation is something to notice and be cautious about. In the early part of a retreat, it can catapult us straight into too much effort in our eagerness to make the most of this precious opportunity. And if we apply too much effort early in the retreat, then we may well have to deal with the fallout of this in a few days' time.

This is something I know very well from many repeated experiences, actually in this very hall. Arriving on a retreat, determined to really get stuck into it—go, go, go, go—and then coming up for interviews after a few days, collapsing into the room and saying, "I don't know what's happened. It seemed to be going well, and now there's been an explosion of thought and I just can't meditate." And Patrick would look at me wisely and say, "You've generated too much energy too fast. Go out and go for a walk." And so off I would go, and things would gradually settle.

So I want to invite you with this retreat to relax into the practice—to relax into it rather than launch into it. Spend the next few days not doing, and allow awareness to naturally settle in the present experience and to gradually build momentum. Get out of the way, relax, and let the practice take care of itself.

"A tangle within, a tangle without. People are entangled in a tangle." That's how the Buddha put it, and that's how we have arrived on this retreat—like a cat tangled in string, all the different strings of our lives. So rather than thrashing and struggling to try to free ourselves from the tangle of our lives in these first few days of retreat, let's instead relax, be still, and allow the tangle to naturally loosen and fall away.

This morning I'm going to introduce the introductory instructions to this approach that I call natural awareness. A caveat here: I know many of you are experienced meditators, so take these instructions and do with them what you will. You can ignore them completely and continue to do your own practice. You can play with them, play with integrating them into what you're already doing. Or you can throw yourself wholeheartedly into them and take this opportunity to really give this approach a good go, since we have a decent amount of time to practice.

Basically, the natural awareness instructions are very simple. We relax body and mind and let awareness do its job. We don't have to do awareness because it simply arises naturally. Are you aware now? Are you aware now? I should hope that we are aware. We're aware of sitting here in this hall, the other yogis, the sound of my voice. Awareness happens naturally.

So now, could you please stop being aware, just for ten seconds or so? Ah, sounds like someone was successful—an advanced practitioner out the back. But no, awareness happens. It's what the mind does. The mind knows objects.

Our job is to simply tune into this natural awareness, to know that I am aware. We start by relaxing, resting back, and finding a sense of ease or not-doing, a sense of getting out of the way and just letting experience unfold and knowing that it's unfolding. We allow this body, this heart, all the movements of the mind—we're just allowing them to be here as they are. And our job is to simply be aware of them. Am I aware? What am I aware of?

If you're new to this approach, it can help to visualize a spectrum of meditation techniques from directed to undirected. Most meditation techniques that we're taught, particularly the introductory techniques, are directed techniques in that we're given or we choose a meditation object—something like the breathing, or a different sensation in the body, or a mantra, or a visualization.

And the effort in meditation comes from placing our attention on that object, and then whenever it wanders away, whenever we're distracted and we notice, we place the attention back on the object. So that's a directed approach.

An undirected approach is where we don't choose the object we are aware of or investigating, but we let it choose us because it is what presents itself to our awareness. This doesn't mean we're trying to be aware of many objects all at once. If I open up to what I'm aware of right now, I'm aware of the sound of the rain, the sound of my voice, the sight of you all sitting here, various physical sensations—the touch of my clothes, the pressure of the cushion, and so on. But it's not the job in natural awareness to try and hold all of these things, but instead to notice which one is interesting, which one catches my curiosity, which one is the primary distraction that keeps getting in the way. And then follow that, be interested in that, know that I am aware of that.

So we're not trying to control our experience. And because of this, we can practice in any posture and any activity, because there's always something available to be aware of, no matter what we're doing. This is what I mean by being aware: simply noticing what is going on in my experience right now.

There's natural awareness, and then there's knowing that I am aware. We can contrast this to times in our life—many times in our life—when we're not knowingly aware, when we're not really aware of what's going on in our experience.

An example that always sticks out for me is hanging out the washing at home, because it's always something I forget to do. The laundry's downstairs. We'll be about to go out and I suddenly remember, oh, I haven't hung out the washing. There's a bit of time pressure. Maybe there are other things I've got to get done before we get out the door. I run downstairs, put the washing in the basket, go out to the line, and I'm hanging the washing out. And I can catch myself. I might be in some sort of fantasy about the future—maybe just listing the other jobs I still need to get done when I get back upstairs before I get the kids in the car. Or maybe it's something even less connected, something to do with what's happening at work.

And it strikes me sometimes that that inner world is actually more real to me as I'm standing there hanging out the washing than the experience I'm having in the moment. The thing about hanging out the washing for me is that my washing line is in this beautiful spot. It's under flooded gums that sometimes have koalas in them. There's a grove of Bangalow palms, and there's a currawong who nests above the washing line and flies to the Bangalow palms to eat the little red fruits. So it's quite a rich and beautiful experience to be standing where my washing line is. It involves whole body movement—the bending down to pick up the clothes, lifting up and then seeing this canopy above me, the birds flying, and so on.

So it's really quite interesting when I catch myself in this fantasy world where something that's happening at work next week is more real to me in this moment than standing here under these magnificent trees, moving my body, connecting with the sensations of the wet washing. And I'm sure this is familiar to all of us. Habitually, this is what we do. We check out. We're not aware. We don't know what we're experiencing right now.

We can demonstrate the quality of awareness we use in a natural awareness approach with a simple exercise I learned from my teacher in this approach, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. Right now, are you seeing? Everyone seeing? Yes, we've got some definite positive seeing. So we can all agree that we're seeing. And are you aware that you are seeing? Some more nods. We're aware that we're seeing because I've directed your awareness to it. I've asked the question and now we're all thinking about it, and we realise, oh, I am seeing, and I'm aware that I'm seeing.

But before I asked you the question, were you aware that you were seeing? Most of us were not. Some of us were. So we were seeing, but most of us were not aware we were seeing, because we weren't holding that knowing in our mind. We were kind of checked out to the fact that we were seeing, even though of course we were seeing, re-

ceiving visual objects. This is the distinction between not knowing and knowing what we're aware of—experiencing and knowing what we're experiencing in the present moment, or being oblivious to it.

And it's simple, right? It's simple to know that I am seeing. It doesn't take a lot of effort, because we're not forcing the attention here or there. We're simply receiving what's in our experience and knowing what we're seeing. But it does require that we remember to be aware.

So in this introductory stage of the practice, we're simply remembering to be aware of whatever I'm experiencing right now. We can think of awareness like a radar that receives objects. We're not trying to be aware of everything all at once, but simply noticing what objects are appearing most clearly in our radar-like awareness.

When we practice in this way, it doesn't matter what we're aware of. It doesn't matter what our experience is. We're cultivating no preference for one meditation experience over another. This becomes more important later in the practice, but even as we get into it, mindfulness and concentration are not yet well developed. So the flavor of today's practice may well be overwhelmingly one of tiredness or restlessness or boredom. If that's what shows up, then that's what we can be aware of. No preference for one object over another. We're not practicing to make something happen, and we're not practicing to make something go away. We're just noticing what is here in order to get to know it and understand it.

The effort comes from remembering to be aware. When we remember, we're immediately in touch with what's going on—just as when I asked you, "Are you seeing?" you were immediately aware that you were seeing. The light of awareness immediately comes on.

We can think of awareness like a light, and remembering to be aware is like tapping the light switch. Simply remembering—"What am I experiencing now? Am I aware now? What am I aware of now?"—we're tapping the light switch of awareness and the light momentarily comes on. We're in touch with our present moment experience.

But then, because we're so habitually accustomed to checking out, drifting back into the thought narratives of past or future, what happens is that at the beginning of practice, the light doesn't stay on for long. It's just on momentarily. Then before we realize it, we're in the darkness again. We remember, "Oh, what am I aware of? What am I experiencing right now?" And so we've tapped the light switch and the light comes back on.

Because this is a natural process, what happens is that as the momentum develops, as we get into the retreat, the light starts to stay on for longer and longer each time we tap it. But our job is just to tap it whenever we remember.

Let's do a brief guided meditation to get an experiential taste of this approach. If you'd like to get into a comfortable posture for a brief guided meditation.

Relax into your body. There's no urgency. Give yourself permission to rest into the practice. Awareness is not difficult, and it's always available.

You can start by asking yourself: Am I relaxed? Just know this. Am I relaxed, or is there tension? Just knowing this is enough. If I know whether or not I'm relaxed, then awareness is present.

Relax and be aware. What does it feel like to inhabit this body? There's no rush, no urgency, no need to get anywhere. Just be here now with whatever experience is unfolding.

Relax and be aware. What are you aware of? What is most clear in your experience now? It could be anything at all—a physical sensation, a sound, a feeling, thinking. It doesn't matter what it is. Whatever it is, allow it in. We can be aware of any experience.

What are you experiencing now? Has it changed? It's natural for awareness to move. You don't need to try to keep it anywhere. Just notice where it goes. Just be interested in the present moment. That's enough.

Be gentle on yourself. It doesn't matter what you're aware of. Whatever is here, you can welcome it—the tiredness, the restlessness, doubt, irritation. This practice gives you permission to be with any experience in a skillful, wise, loving way. There's no need to strive for a different experience to the one you're having now. Just notice what's happening now. What am I aware of now? What am I experiencing now?

If you find yourself getting lost or distracted, you can use a question like this to bring yourself back to awareness. Whenever you remember, tap the light switch of awareness and notice your present experience. That's all.

Awareness is always available. It's natural, not difficult. It's okay for it to feel like not much is happening, because awareness is very ordinary—just knowing what is going on now. Simply relax and be aware. It's okay to forget. That's also natural. When you remember, simply tap the light switch of awareness. That's all you need to do. By tapping the light switch of awareness, we're cultivating wakefulness.

So these are the introductory instructions for the practice. The very relaxed, open, and flexible way that we can employ this remembering to be aware—simply tapping the light switch of awareness, welcoming any experience as the object of our awareness—means that we're really inviting and encouraging you to practice throughout your waking moments while here on retreat. To practice in all postures and in all activities.

This kind of gentle, light-touch awareness that doesn't take much effort—just knowing what I'm experiencing now—is a type of awareness that is not limited to special meditation postures or formal sessions. It's something we can bring to all of our moments on retreat. When you get up and leave the hall, your awareness can be just as clear as when you're sitting here practicing.

With the open schedule, of course, it's up to you what you do between mealtimes and the teaching sessions. Whatever you do—whether you come in here to do a formal sit, or you're doing some walking, or brushing your teeth, or sitting on the veranda with a cup of tea—you can bring the same quality of awareness and the same intention to remember to be aware to all of the activities.

I'll speak a little more about this tonight, but really the invitation and the opportunity is to be as natural while you're here on the retreat as you can be. Treat the retreat not as something separate from your life, but as part of your life. This is another nine days in your life, and you're fortunate to have particularly conducive conditions for focusing on the practice. But I invite you to think about the retreat as simply days in your life where you have more space and opportunity for practice, while essentially going about your daily life and bringing awareness to everything that you're doing.

Now, a few words about posture and relaxing the body.

Meditation is, of course, an embodied practice. We often think of meditation as something esoteric and transcendental, something we do with the mind. But we are embodied beings, and meditation is something we do in the body and through the body. The relaxation of the body is therefore fundamental to the relaxation of the mind. And when the mind is relaxed, that's when we are naturally in contact with our present experience. That's when our awareness naturally settles on unfolding present experience.

To speak about meditation posture: Patrick mentioned last night, though most people may not be aware since it's not necessarily emphasized, that the Buddha in fact taught four postures for meditation. Sitting, yes, but also standing, lying, and movement—which tends to get interpreted in the later traditions as walking, but in fact it's movement. If we think about it, these four postures encompass all human activity. Everything we do as humans, we do in one of these four postures.

During this retreat, we're going to suggest that you flow between these four postures as you need to. In these open practice periods, it's up to you to decide which posture is going to best support the light of awareness, which posture is going to best support this mind-body system to come into balance, for the energy to be in balance, so that you can most effortlessly stay connected to the unfolding present moment experience.

Check for any signs of tension or strain or dullness or drowsiness in body and mind. If they are present, particularly in these early days of the practice, I would suggest adjusting your posture. Try something different. Go for a walk. Lie under a tree if you don't mind getting a little wet. Have a cup of tea and watch the birds. But do it with the intention of remembering to be aware, noticing whether what you're doing right now is supporting this intention or actually encouraging you to be checked out—which can be equally true whether you're having a cup of tea on the veranda or sitting cross-legged in the hall. It just depends on the internal conditions.

This is training us to have confidence in what we know about our own internal conditions and our own choices about our practice—to have independence in the practice. You might recognize: "Right now, continuing to sit here in the meditation hall is probably not the most conducive thing for continuity of awareness, for staying connected to the present moment. Because if I'm honest with myself, for the past fifteen minutes I've been chewing over something that happened at work last week. Maybe what's needed is for the body to get moving, to use up some of that excess energy. I'll try that and see how it goes."

So it doesn't matter what your body is doing; what matters is whether you're remembering to be aware. The aim is to bring this gentle and curious awareness to whatever you're doing, with no preference for one object over another. We might have an idea that we'd like to be in the meditation hall until the bell rings for lunch, resting in a state of thought-free bliss. But if that is not what is presenting to our radar-like awareness this morning, then instead we go with what is happening. We notice it, we welcome it in, and we see what we need to do to adjust the postures of mind and body to stay present to it, to not lose the thread and become checked out.

Now, the effort in this practice—if you're used to a more intensive way of generating momentum and concentration at the beginning of a retreat, this can sound quite radical. People can be skeptical: "How am I going to generate momentum in this retreat if I'm just wandering around and kind of remembering to be aware when it occurs to me?" But what this approach does is allow our natural, innate capacity for awareness to be-

come continuous, to become effortless, and to make that the basis, the foundation, of the practice. When we can ease into the practice this way, we find right effort, wise effort—a balanced effort that sustains the practice.

I'll talk about this more later, but this approach allows a mindfulness to develop that is more flexible, that is not dependent on particular conditions, that can stay continuous even when conditions are changing.

The effort in this practice comes from the intention to develop continuity of awareness, which is different from those directed techniques I spoke of earlier. With directed techniques, the effort comes from bringing the awareness back again and again: "Breathing is my object. I bring my attention back, I keep it there, it drifts off, I bring it back." With this approach, the effort is that we're aiming ultimately for continuous awareness throughout every waking moment of consciousness, from when we wake up in the morning to when we go to sleep at night.

Do you think it's possible? The invitation is: try it and see.

This is the effort. And the really skillful thing built into this approach is that if we try it—if we decide to adopt that as our goal, if we say, "Okay, if that's the project, that's what I'm going to do; I'm going to be continuously aware from the moment I wake up to the moment I go to bed"—the only way we can come close to succeeding is if we have a genuinely relaxed and balanced approach to the practice.

I learned this when I went to sit with one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. Over the first few opportunities to have an interview with him, I did as I was...

accustomed to doing, and I was working really hard in between sessions. Then I would curate the best and most impressive meditation experiences into a short, concise summary that I could regurgitate when I got into the interview. It took several successive interviews with him before it really dawned on me that he was actually completely uninterested in my most impressive experiences on the meditation cushion.

I would go in—and they were group interviews, so I would see him doing this with other people as well and start to learn the pattern—and I would report, "This happened and that happened." He would listen, and then at the end, he would lean over and look at you really piercingly and say, "And afterwards, were you continuously mindful?"

After a few of these repeated experiences, I started to realise he was genuinely not interested in the special meditation experiences. All he was interested in was whether I could be continuously mindful.

Being a very conscientious and goal-oriented person, I thought, "Right, I will make that my project. I can do that if that's what he wants." So I tried to do that, and what I found was that the only way I could even approach some sort of continuity over the whole day was if I dropped all of my expectations about what meditation looked like and the kinds of experiences I should be having.

I actually discovered—and luckily this was supported by the meditation center I was in—that I needed to spend hardly any time at all in the hall. I had developed a relationship of strain with the hall. I would go into the hall and have these intensive sessions, and then I would be out of the hall and awareness would fall, the continuity would go, while I kind of recovered. Then back in for another session in the hall.

So instead, I felt like I was just wandering around the meditation center. I felt like a detective, following the awareness wherever it went. "Okay, we'll go over here if this is what's needed to balance it. We'll go and walk around the stupa a few dozen times. And then we'll go and sit here."

It was summer in Yangon, so the humidity was like 150%. I ended up doing quite a lot of sitting meditation in this little bathroom that I shared with a Swiss nun. There was just a little plastic stool and a plastic cup. So the majority of my sitting meditation for some days was sitting there on this plastic stool, just tipping lukewarm water on myself. "Am I staying? Am I aware? Yeah, okay, I think I'm still aware."

So the effort comes from remembering to be aware and from having this intention. But it doesn't matter what we're aware of. It doesn't matter where we are aware. It doesn't matter what we're doing with our body while we're aware.

That's the invitation to you for this first part of the retreat: relax, be aware, and enjoy.

Any questions?

"Yes, thank you for that. It's probably a technical question, but I noticed at the beginning you used the word attention, and then you shifted for most of the talk to awareness. I'm wondering—I see there's a difference in my experience—but I'm just wondering if you're equating those two."

This is a good reminder, actually. I often use awareness, and when I'm talking about awareness, I am talking about mindfulness. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, uses the term awareness, and I do interchange the two, so this is a good clarification to make.

When I'm talking about awareness, I'm talking about mindfulness—knowing the experience in the present moment and having a continuity of that knowing. Attention—and I think maybe Patrick will be speaking about this tomorrow or sometime soon—the way I'm using it is the deliberate or focused placing of awareness.

We can place our attention somewhere. At the moment, if we take the visual field right now, my experience of the visual field is that I'm aware of this whole visual field that extends nearly 180 degrees and incorporates the whole hall and all of you. But in answering your question, my attention, my visual attention, is focused on you.

So that's the way I'm using the distinction. Attention is something we place somewhere, or sometimes our attention is caught somewhere. It's this more focused quality of awareness—like when awareness is beamed like a torchlight, as opposed to a wide and diffuse light, which it also has this nature. It reflects the depth that awareness has, which is something I think we'll explore later.

"From here, there's a spaciousness. You were talking about the visual field, and while I have my attention on you, I'm aware of other visual objects."

Yes, and the experience—like many experiences in meditation—is one of a spectrum. At various times we can have our attention on one thing but also be aware of the spacious whole field. Sometimes we can just be really wide open and feel like the attention isn't in any one place, but we're just holding this great sense of spaciousness. And then other times, such as when concentration is particularly strong, we can go right in to the exclusion of the wider field.

So it's a spectrum that we flow through.

When we're observing thinking, the important thing is that we're observing the activity of thinking that's happening now. We're not observing the content of the thoughts. That's a key distinction. And yes, awareness encompasses the whole gamut—not necessarily what we might consider ideal, but the whole gamut nonetheless.

And that's one of the key things about this approach. Taking this open approach and not choosing particular objects means that we genuinely don't have a preference for what becomes a meditation object. So it can be thinking. It can be sleepiness. It can be boredom. When something arises, we can make it our meditation object. We can place our attention on it. We can really think, "Oh, boredom—well, that's quite interesting. What is boredom? What's the experience of boredom?" And we can work with that, but we're not having a preference. We're not spending that session trying to make the boredom go away so that we can have a different, better quality experience.

Someone mentioned "thoughtless bliss" or "thought-free bliss." Well, maybe that's something to explore—if it arises. But I think we often hold various ideas and ideals about what good meditation is. Thought-free bliss is a bit of a trope that seems to bring people to meditation retreats. But what is it? What is the actual experience? Is it an actual experience? This approach is simply that we're not chasing after one thing or another.

One person reflected, "I'm aware that I do have preferences, so I guess I need to be aware of having preferences."

Exactly. And try to be aware without getting into that tangle of "Oh no, I'm aware that I've got preferences. I'd rather not be aware." Yes, that's right, because that's another preference. But I do. Yes, exactly. Just allow the awareness of the preferences rather than pursuing them.

We're going to do a whole morning workshop on precisely this. It's a really good question because of course we do have preferences in our practice, just like in the rest of our lives. The thing is, we often don't notice the preferences because we're so focused on the meditation object that we've chosen.

But one of the features of this approach is that it starts with this very undirected quality—whatever arises. As we get further into this approach, we do take specific meditation objects, and one of the main ones we take is precisely this preference that we have for the meditation to be different. So we work directly with the heart and mind, noticing exactly that: the preference that's here at the moment, this sense of "I don't want this current experience" or "I want a different experience."

And of course, the key to working with it is that we see it, and by seeing it we're opening up the possibility of understanding it. So we welcome that. We don't create another preference that the preference isn't there. It's not about getting rid of the preference. It's not about noticing, "Oh, I'm actually craving the experience I had yesterday, which was thought-free and blissful—I better drop that." It's not "I better drop that." It's just noticing. Oh, yeah, that's the nature of the heart. There it goes again. Craving, even here in the practice. Okay. Relax and be aware.

CHAPTER 83

Wise Effort

Patrick Kearney · 44 min

This dharma talk challenges common assumptions about what constitutes 'good meditation,' addressing two fundamental problems with idealized notions of practice: the artificial separation between meditation and daily life, and the tendency toward strained, goal-oriented effort. Drawing on the Soṇa Sutta and the Buddha's own journey from extreme asceticism to balanced practice, the teaching emphasizes that wise effort (sammāvāyāma) manifests as a relaxed body, curiosity-driven engagement rather than craving-based striving, and an attitude of surrender to whatever arises.

The talk examines the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's structure, noting that of its 28 sections presenting 13 meditation exercises, only one specifically recommends sitting posture—the breath meditation. The Buddha's repeated instruction is simply to 'abide' or 'live' while tracking experience, suggesting meditation as a way of being rather than a special activity. This natural awareness approach doesn't privilege any posture, making practice seamlessly applicable to all activities including speaking, listening, and even using screens.

Practical guidance addresses how to recognize unwise effort—relief when bells ring, difficulty maintaining a home practice despite good intentions, and harsh self-judgment. The teaching offers three approaches to cultivating balanced effort: maintaining a relaxed body (referencing the Buddha's own realization under the Bodhi tree), engaging genuine curiosity about difficult experiences like boredom or dullness, and surrendering preferences about what arises in practice. This balanced approach enables sustained momentum in mindfulness while dissolving the paradox of 'clinging to letting go.'

The end of the first day. This can be an interesting point in the retreat—sometimes a time of self-judgment or dissatisfaction that things haven't panned out quite how you were anticipating before you started. Maybe some doubt or confusion about this very open structure and very structureless technique that was presented this morning.

So if any of those kinds of doubts have been your experience today, then a couple of suggestions for anyone who's newer to meditation. I think some sound advice is that if you're trying something and it's not working, try something else. As most of us in this room probably already know, meditation is very much a trial and error process. So if you've been sitting, try walking. If you've been walking, find a place to be still. If you've

been focusing hard with eyes closed, go and sit on the veranda, and so on. It's never wasted to try something different because every time we learn a little more about what works in particular conditions.

My other suggestion is that if you are attuned to what's going on in the heart and mind, then take note of this as we're going through these early days of the retreat. So if there's frustration or dissatisfaction arising, can we make that the meditation object? What does frustration feel like? How is it experienced in the body? What are the physical sensations, the energetic quality? Tuning in to these subtleties of the heart and mind.

What I want to do tonight is challenge some of your assumptions about meditation. I want to start with a question: Do you think you're a good meditator? You don't have to answer out loud or publicly. But our answer to this question can reveal some of our assumptions about meditation—assumptions that we're often unaware we even hold.

For example, if I ask you now, what does good meditation look like? What comes to mind? Is it someone sitting in the cross-legged posture, nice straight back, blissful, serene expression on their face? What if I ask, what does good meditation feel like? Is it something tranquil, peaceful, thought-free, blissful?

I want to outline two problems with these very common ideals about good meditation.

The first problem with these ideals is that they set up a dichotomy between meditation and the rest of our lives. We assume that meditation is this special spiritual practice that takes place in special conditions. And yet I often hear meditators say that they're frustrated or disillusioned because when they face difficult situations in their lives, they're not necessarily able to apply the tranquility and equanimity and insights that they've gained on the meditation cushion in the midst of those challenging moments, and stop themselves from reacting in painful ways.

This may be something that resonates for you. But if you think about it, it's not that surprising. If we have spent years or even decades cultivating serenity and equanimity on the cushion with our eyes closed, then it's unlikely to be available when we're arguing with our partner or rushing to meet a deadline at work. Like anything in life, we get good at what we practice. If we practice mindfulness on the cushion, then that's what we get good at. If we practice mindfulness while arguing or mindfulness while rushing, we can get good at those things too. With practice, we can be mindful during any activity, including relating to others, but only if we recognize it and prioritize it as legitimate practice. Because it takes effort and it takes skill.

This is what the Tibetans call adding wood to the fire. It's the idea of taking the meditation practice outside of the retreat container, off the meditation cushion, to meet the challenges of life and see if we can stay centered in their midst—see if we can still maintain our practice when the fire is blazing. Not just nurturing a tiny safe flame of awareness under retreat conditions, a little candle wisp of a flame that will blow out with any sudden gust of emotion, but deliberately stoking the flames with the fuel of life's challenges so that awareness radiates out into our life like a fire consuming the darkness.

But instead, what happens is that mindfulness in daily activities tends to be treated like a nice little added extra. It's like the complementary side dish to the main meal of sitting. We don't really take it seriously or invest our effort in it. It doesn't meet our ideal about good meditation. This is a hugely wasted opportunity, and it's based on our misunderstanding about the purpose of meditation.

We often assume that meditation is about achieving a state of calm, ideally thought-free and blissful. But vipassanā meditation is about developing wholesome mental qualities, insight and wisdom. It's about seeing and understanding the nature of reality. This is what ultimately frees the heart from suffering, not temporary states of calm. When we define it like this—seeing and understanding the nature of reality—then it's apparent that these qualities of mind can be developed in any posture, during any activity.

Absolutely anything we experience can be an opportunity to develop wholesome states and wisdom. Sleepiness, restlessness, frustration, grief, self-judgment—all these things that show up in our meditation practice that we tend to push away because we judge them to be the wrong kind of experience. With this approach, we welcome them all in because they're all fertile conditions for cultivating understanding and wisdom.

So we welcome the chaos, we welcome the messiness, but also the joys, the elation, and the mundane moments. We use them as grounds for the practice. No opportunity to develop wisdom is wasted.

That's the first reason to challenge our ideals about meditation: to dissolve the dichotomy between meditation and everyday life, so that all the times we react unskillfully, all the times we perpetuate painful habits—all those really juicy moments in our life where we have the most to learn—are not wasted, but instead become the foundation of the practice, the foundation for developing wisdom.

The second problem with holding on to unrealistic ideals about good meditation is that our practice can become strained and goal-oriented. When we hold an ideal about what good meditation looks like or feels like, we tend to judge ourselves by whether we can attain it. We try to emulate the serene meditator sitting in the cross-legged upright posture, and tension and strain can creep into our practice.

This may be something you recognize in yourself. Do you judge yourself harshly as a poor meditator? This alone is an indication that the effort factor is likely out of balance. But there are subtler signs as well. Who has ever felt relief when the bell rings at the end of a meditation session? Or how about this: have you ever set up a beautiful, serene little corner in your house with a nice meditation cushion, maybe a statue of the Buddha or some flowers, with a very strong intention that you're going to spend some time there every day, and then over time found that it's actually getting harder and harder to make it onto that cushion? Both of these are examples that the effort factor is out of balance, that there is some strain in the practice which makes meditation feel like work we need to take a break from. Hence I like to say that the most common daily practice by meditators is guilt about not practicing at all.

This tendency to strain was recognized by the Buddha among his own students. Some of you may be familiar with the Sona Sutta, where the monk Sona is practicing so ardently, so diligently, walking back and forth in walking meditation, putting so much effort into the practice that the soles of his feet are cracked and bleeding. But nonetheless, despite his ardency, he is still feeling very frustrated by his lack of progress on the path—so frustrated that he's considering disrobing.

So the Buddha comes to have a chat with him. The Buddha makes reference to the fact that Sona, before he joined the community, was a musician who played an ancient Indian musical instrument called a veena, a string instrument. The Buddha says to him, "Sona, you used to be a veena player, didn't you? So you know about playing the veena. How was it to try to play the veena if the strings were strung too tight?"

Sona says, "Well, no, it's no good. You can't play it if the strings are too tight."

And the Buddha says, "And what about if the strings are too loose?"

"Well, no, of course you can't play it if the strings are too loose. You need the strings to be just right, neither too taut nor too slack."

And the Buddha says, "Yes, and it's exactly the same with meditation."

The Buddha is basically telling Sona that he's trying too hard. He's like a lute that's strung too tight. If we're trying too hard to be a good meditator, then we're not applying what the Buddha calls wise effort, and we are in fact just reinforcing our sense of self. Because *I'm* the one who's the hopeless meditator. *I'm* the one who just needs to try a bit harder, sit up a bit straighter, sit a bit longer, get a bit more samādhi.

Without realizing it, we tightly control our practice, not recognizing that this in itself is an act of selfing. Our practice becomes yet another project of the self, something we want to achieve in, something we want to master. There's nothing surprising about this because this is our habitual way of engaging in activities in our life. But it does mean that we may practice for years or even decades, paradoxically clinging to our goal of letting go.

So this is the second reason to challenge our ideas about meditation: to ensure that we don't get entangled in a relationship of strain and striving in our practice, and that we don't use it to solidify our sense of self.

How can we practice in a way that is both relaxed and dissolves the separation between meditation and everyday life, and yet still has the strength and depth to develop insight and wisdom? That's what this natural awareness approach aims to do, by offering an approach to meditation as a way of life, a way of being, seamlessly interwoven into everyday life.

I'll be introducing successive instructions on natural awareness over the course of the retreat, but tonight I want to emphasize two aspects of this approach that relate to these two problems I've just outlined.

The first aspect of the natural awareness approach—and this relates to the problem of separation between meditation and everyday life—is that this approach doesn't privilege the sitting posture. This actually sounds more revolutionary than it is. The Buddha in fact teaches four postures for insight meditation: sitting, standing, lying, and movement.

And it's no coincidence that these four postures encompass all human activities.

In fact, if you look carefully at the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the seminal instruction for vipassanā meditation given by the Buddha, he opens with an overview of the practice, and then the structure of the sutta is that he gives thirteen specific meditation exercises—ways to cultivate mindfulness for insight. Each recommendation, each exercise is separated by a refrain that's repeated, a bit like the chorus of a song. And then there's a conclusion. So twenty-eight sections to the sutta in all, presenting these thirteen different exercises for cultivating mindfulness.

Can you guess how often in those twenty-eight verses he recommends a sitting posture in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta? One—for the specific exercise of tracking the breathing. But for tracking postures, activities, anatomical parts, elements, the decomposing body, feelings, mind, hindrances, aggregates, sense spheres, awakening factors, and noble truths, he doesn't specify a posture. What he repeats again and again is that a practitioner should *live* or *abide* tracking these aspects of experience. Meditation as a way of being.

So natural awareness is done in any posture, and this is what makes it so adaptable to everyday life. It allows us to cultivate mindfulness in any activity, not just in formal postures that are separate from our everyday lives. It does take a lot of deconditioning to take this aspect of natural awareness seriously, because we are so programmed to think that serious meditation happens in a seated posture on the meditation cushion.

But what is the point of only practicing sitting meditation if we never practice speaking and listening meditation, for example, or seeing meditation? We're often in the habit of closing our eyes when we practice, but all the rest of the time that we're engaging in activities—when we're conscious at least—we have our eyes open. So how can all the activities that we do with our eyes open be used as a basis for developing wisdom if we have to first close our eyes in order to collect our mindfulness?

People often ask, particularly towards the end of a retreat when we're in that transition phase thinking about moving back into our everyday lives—a very common question is how can we possibly maintain mindfulness while we're interacting with a screen, doing our work on the computer or watching our device. It's like people don't seem to believe it's possible to be aware while you're on a screen. But awareness is always available, and we get good at what we practice. So if we practice awareness of seeing, this is really helpful for activities where the predominant sense is seeing, such as using screens.

So that's the first aspect I wanted to mention tonight: the equality of all postures in this approach.

The second aspect, which relates to the tendency to be strained and goal-oriented in our approach to meditation, is the importance of right effort or wise effort—sammā vāyāma.

Wise effort is a central focus in this approach because the thing about straining and striving is that it's very slippery and easy to miss. Most of the time we don't notice it because we're so caught up in our meditation object, so focused on it, that we fail to notice

the quality of the heart and mind that is aware of the object. It's easy to be oblivious to the fact that we're actually straining, and that this effort is winding us tighter and tighter instead of allowing the self to unravel.

In this approach, we put an emphasis on cultivating wise effort right from the start of the retreat. Having a balanced, relaxed, light-touch approach to our practice is what enables us to develop sustained momentum in mindfulness. The effort comes from the intention to maintain continuous awareness throughout all of our activities, but the effort required in each moment is quite minimal—such as just the effort required to know that I'm seeing. What we're working towards is continuity through our waking moments. And if we meditate with a mind that's strained, resistant, or disengaged, we won't be able to maintain that continuity. We'll find ourselves crashing and burning after intense sitting periods and unable to maintain awareness during times of transition.

I want to focus a little on this concept of wise effort, sammā vāyāma, and offer a few different ways to think about it and apply it in practice, in the hope that one or another of these will resonate for you and give you something to play with.

One way we can think about wise effort is as a relaxed body. Body and mind are energetically interwoven, so if we're practicing with tension in the body, we can be sure there will also be tension in the mind. This will lead to unbalanced effort. This is actually something the Bodhisattva Gautama had to learn for himself when he was striving for awakening. Many of us will be familiar with his story, but at one point before he became the Buddha, he was convinced that the path to liberation lay with conquering the material body and mastery over physical pain. At that time he took himself off to the forest and undertook the most extreme ascetic practices you can imagine.

When he's reflecting on this later and teaching his students, he describes what he was thinking—his rationale, his attitude to practice at that earlier time. He describes it like this: "It occurred to me: Why don't I, with teeth clenched and tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, squeeze, squash, and scorch mind with mind? So that's what I did, until sweat ran from my armpits. It was like when a strong man grabs a weaker man by the head or throat or shoulder and squeezes, squashes, and crushes them. In the same way, with teeth clenched and tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I squeezed, squashed, and crushed mind with mind until sweat ran from my armpits."

My energy was roused up and unflagging, and my mindfulness was established and lucid. But my body was disturbed, not tranquil, because I'd pushed too hard with that painful striving.

So what do you think? Is that a good description of right effort? Anyone have a go at that at some point today? I can't see too many sweat stains.

No, of course, this is not wise effort. And in fact, this extreme dedication to these ascetic practices nearly kills him. It takes him to the brink of starvation. And just in time, he realizes the mistake in his approach. He eats some food, and he finds a good place to sit and meditate at the foot of a huge old Bodhi tree.

Again, when he's reflecting back on this time later to his students, he describes his state at that moment, sitting under the Bodhi tree, like this: "My energy was roused up and unflagging. My mindfulness was established and lucid. My body was tranquil and undisturbed. And my mind was immersed in samādhi."

So he'd learned the lesson about the importance of wise effort. The difference between the two descriptions is that in the first instance, his body was disturbed by his painful striving, while in the second, his body was tranquil and undisturbed. In both descriptions, he had unflagging energy and lucid mindfulness, but these couldn't support the development of samādhi and wisdom until the body was relaxed.

And now here we are, two and a half thousand years on, in this beautiful meditation center. We've got so many comforts for our bodies compared to the Buddha, who wore a robe made of rags and went to practice in the forest, sitting on the bare ground at the foot of a tree, exposed to the elements, to wild animals, to bandits, to insects, relying on alms for food. And yet, despite the relative comfort in our circumstances, how often do we find ourselves practicing with a body that's disturbed and not tranquil? How often do we push through signs of tension in the body?

If we take the example of the Buddha's own path, this is not the way to cultivate wise effort. So that's one way of thinking about wise effort: wise effort as relaxed body.

Another perspective I want to offer is that wise effort is driven by curiosity and not by craving, aversion, and delusion. When we engage our curiosity in the practice, this generates an effortless energy. When we're curious, we actually don't have to try. We don't have to pump energy into the practice. Instead, the curiosity pulls us along and creates a momentum of its own.

Say, for example, it's the early days of the retreat, maybe the evening of the first day. I'm feeling a bit dejected because I can't yet see the fruits of my labor. I'm not really sure that my mindfulness is getting stronger. And if I'm honest about it, my mind just feels quite tired and dull. This feels dissatisfactory—not the meditation experience I came to the retreat for. It's obvious that the energy factor is out of balance; there's not enough energy in the system.

In this situation, there are two ways of generating more energy. The first is driven by aversion to the tiredness and dullness: to pump more energy into the system, to really focus hard, to be determined to sit through it. The second is to get curious about the experience of tiredness and dullness. What is that experience? What does it feel like? If we can hook our curiosity onto that experience, then before we know it, the energy is naturally amping up because it's actually quite interesting.

Have you ever had that experience of watching your mind falling asleep, but the watching part is quite alert and fascinated by this? I had a really clear example of this. I had an opportunity to do a retreat last year. I don't get many opportunities to do retreat at the moment, but I did one at Jhāna Grove in Western Australia—beautiful natural surroundings, lots of paths to walk, beautiful eucalypts, and all the big gum nuts they have there.

I was just wandering around on the paths in the first couple of days, very relaxed approach, letting mindfulness collect and settle. And then after—I don't know, maybe on about day two—I got to this point where I started thinking about the meditation hall. I think I should go and have a good sit in the meditation hall.

I found this curious because I was outside under a gum tree, and I prefer to practice outdoors. The meditation hall there is almost bunker-like—a very indoor sort of environment. So I was curious about why this sudden thought arose that I should head to the meditation hall for a good concentrated sit.

And I realized that the mind was bored. It was only about day two, and not much was happening in the practice. So the mind was bored. I thought, "Oh, that's interesting. I won't go and have that concentrated sit. I'll just go and sit on my bed in my room—a very unstimulating environment—and I'll see what happens with the boredom."

So I went and sat on my bed, and it was the first time in years that I'd really sat with the experience of boredom. It was fascinating. It was so painful. We think of boredom as being kind of bland, a bit dull. But to actually sit with it and not run away from it—I found it excruciating. But it piqued my interest, my curiosity. So I sat there with it, sat there with it, and eventually the lunch bell went or whatever. I emerged from my room, and the energy had been roused, the concentration had been sharpened, and my curiosity was engaged with the practice. I'd achieved what I was wanting to achieve, but drawn by curiosity rather than out of a sense of dissatisfaction about what was going on in my practice.

The final approach to wise effort that I'd like to offer tonight is wise effort as surrender.

The beautiful thing about this practice is that it allows you to be as you actually are. It gives you permission to be fully yourself, to bring every part of ourselves and our experience to the meditation. You're tired, you're restless, you're agitated, you're emotional, you're wound up—so what? No problem. The meditation practice is simply to know this, simply to be aware of what's happening now. No preference for what we're aware of. It doesn't matter. The trembling heart, the doubt, the insecurities, the anxieties—there's plenty of space in the practice for all of this. It's all the basis for cultivating mindfulness and wisdom.

This practice is one place, one activity, where we don't have to be anything other than who we really are. We just show up with all our messiness. Surrendering is this attitude of no preference for whatever shows up in the meditation. I think I quoted Chögyam Trungpa this morning: chaos is good news. When we surrender to whatever is arising, then we genuinely welcome chaos into the practice. And it leads to a balanced effort because we're not using unnecessary energy trying to push away some experiences, trying to grasp onto other experiences, trying to manipulate the meditation experience.

So wise effort as relaxed body, wise effort driven by curiosity, wise effort as surrender—making this sum of wise effort a central focus right from the start sets us up to have a balanced energy in the practice.

Are there any questions at this point?

"First of all, I would like to say thank you for the very generous sharing. It's very interesting, and I appreciate it so much. You mentioned last night that somebody asked about the difference between paying attention and awareness, and you explained it well. Just now you also mentioned mindfulness and awareness. How do we really differentiate those?"

Awareness and mindfulness—I think I mentioned this. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, uses the word awareness in the same way that we are most familiar with mindfulness. So I do tend to use them interchangeably. We could say that mindfulness is a continuity of awareness over time. Awareness is knowing what is happening now, and mindfulness is having that continuity over time. We're cultivating that remembering so that it develops into a momentum. But I have to say that I am probably a little looser with how I use the terms, and I often just use the two interchangeably because I have

two main traditions in my training. One is the Mahasi tradition, where we're more familiar with the term mindfulness, and the other is Sayadaw Utejaniya, who uses the term awareness. So when I'm talking about awareness, I'm usually just meaning mindfulness. Both of them are remembering in the present, and they're remembering what is present.

They're both translations of the Pali word *sati*, which is usually translated as mindfulness. *Sati* literally means memory. And what we are remembering—so it's an act of remembering—is we're remembering the present. Like when I was talking this morning about the distinction between remembering what's going on now while I'm undertaking an activity, versus undertaking the activity—hanging out the washing—and not remembering what's going on now. I can be completely checked out, inside some sort of thought narrative in my mind. So the act of remembering is important to mindfulness or awareness. Watching your mind falling asleep—this is the act of mindfulness or awareness. I'm using them interchangeably, mindfulness and awareness, both translations of the word *sati*. That act of watching the mind falling asleep, or watching the mind being bored, or watching the mind being dull—that's the quality of remembering to be aware of the experience that's unfolding now, whatever that experience is.

The question of letting go of goals—that's the place where I have to think a little deeper. It's so habitual to have this relationship of clinging. So we come to meditation and we still have this same relationship of clinging to a goal. But if you don't have a goal when you come to meditation, if you don't come here wanting to improve, to be a better person, a happier person—then you won't come at all.

That's the paradox. We do have a goal. In fact, I think I'll be talking about this in another dharma talk in a few nights' time. We have a goal, and yet paradoxically, the only way to achieve that goal is if we can let go of the clinging to it. This is the core of the Buddha's teaching. It's the relationship of clinging that is the problem.

Who has the goal? Indeed.

I have a few more words to offer, then—a few practical suggestions about steadying the heart and finding a balanced and sustainable practice as we ease into the retreat.

In the absence of a retreat structure, you may find yourself imposing a structure on your own day. I think we mentioned that last night when we introduced the open schedule. There's nothing wrong with that if it's helpful for you, particularly if it helps you to settle in during the early part of the retreat. Some people need structure. Some people work better with structure. So a perfectly valid response to a lack of structure is to create one for yourself.

But I would like to offer a few words of caution about your motivations in sticking to your own schedule. It's worthwhile to investigate or to ask yourself: are you doing it out of a sense of confidence that it is developing the momentum in your mindfulness and developing the steadiness in your mind? Or is it contributing to unwise effort? Are there subconscious fears that if you don't follow a schedule, you will have failed, or you're not trying hard enough?

And similarly, what's your relationship to the meditation hall? Sometimes sitting in the meditation hall is an expression of wise effort. It provides a container for practice, it provides a community to practice with, and these are both invaluable supports—particularly when the internal energy is low, or when the energy is balanced and the practice is flowing smoothly. Then the hall provides a really quiet and contained, conducive environment to support the practice going deeper.

But sometimes sitting in the hall is an expression of unwise effort. Sometimes the reason we go to the hall is because of our craving to be a good yogi. Sometimes we head to the hall to escape from self-doubt or self-judgment or a fear that we're failing or wasting our time—which are deeply unpleasant experiences to be with.

Or we feel a social pressure to turn up—you know that niggling worry that everyone else will notice that you're only in the hall for half the amount of time that they all are. And it's inevitable that wherever you've positioned yourself in the hall, there will be someone in your immediate vicinity who is always sitting still and silent when you arrive and manages to out-sit you every time.

I don't know if you've ever had the experience of entering the hall and determining that your sitting session will last until you have out-sat your neighbour who arrived before you. I certainly have, many times in my early meditation experience.

So it's important to notice whether we're practising with wise effort. I'm not saying don't go to the hall. I'm just saying that you don't have to go to the hall to be a good yogi, and that sometimes it's a more skillful choice not to go.

When you find yourself wanting to come to the hall, I encourage you to look at what is driving that impulse. Am I going to sit because I'm chasing something? Am I after some tranquility, some bliss, some confirmation that I'm a worthy meditator? Is showing up in the hall an expression of wise effort? Or do I need to be adopting a different posture or a different activity that will better support my connection to the unfolding present experience right now?

What matters is that we're cultivating awareness. And to do that, we need to find a balanced effort and a steady heart. It doesn't matter what that looks like from the outside, or where we do that. Find what supports you to nurture your connection to the present moment and to nurture the continuity of your awareness through your waking moments.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 84

Awareness and Mindfulness (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 1h06

> *In this practice-focused session, Patrick Kearney returns to the essential foundations of meditation: the nature of awareness itself and its relationship to mindfulness (sati). Through accessible analogies—comparing awareness to light that reveals without being seen, or to transparent water in a mountain pool—he guides practitioners toward recognizing that awareness is not something we do, but the presence of whatever is present. The teaching emphasizes that we are already aware; the question is whether we remember that awareness.*
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> *Kearney introduces the crucial distinction between awareness (which happens naturally and continuously) and mindfulness (sati), drawing on the Pāli etymology connecting sati to memory. Mindfulness, he explains, is not remembering the past but remembering the present—maintaining felt continuity of awareness rather than letting it fragment into gaps filled by habit and distraction. He references Susan Blackmore's research showing that while 'Am I aware now?' yields 100% yes, 'Was I aware just then?' does not—illustrating how mindfulness transforms sporadic awareness into something stable and sustained.*
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> *Through hands-on meditation exercises, practitioners explore momentary concentration (khaṇika samādhi), learning to use a grounding object like bodily touch as a home base while allowing awareness to move freely. Kearney shares insights from his teachers in the Mahāsī Sayādaw lineage, including Sayādaw U Tejaniya's observation that feeling one's hands requires virtually no effort—suggesting that authentic practice involves remembering awareness rather than forcing it. The session concludes with practical guidance for daily life: move without hurry, notice clumsiness as signals of lost mindfulness, and regularly ask 'What is clear now?'*

This morning we're going to go back over what we were talking about yesterday, essentially to get the basics down. And when we talk about what constitutes the basics in meditation practice, it comes down to awareness or consciousness.

If we want to know what awareness is, or what we mean by it, we'll start with awareness in its elemental simplicity. Awareness is the presence of whatever is present.

So as we played around with yesterday, if we ask the question, "Right now, are you seeing?" Well, if you've got your eyes open, my guess is the answer will be yes. Only the most recalcitrant and philosophically educated yogi would try to argue otherwise.

So what does it mean to see? Doesn't it mean that this hall and these people are present to you? Present in the visual field.

Now, one thing we could do—and this is a highly advanced meditation technique, but I invite you to experiment with it—you can make everybody in this hall and the hall itself vanish. Like that. I'll show you how. Just close your eyes. Try it. Gone. Open up your eyes. Back again. Present. Absent. Present.

So when we're talking about awareness, we're talking about the quality of presence. Something is present to me; I am aware of that something. Something is absent; I'm not aware of it. Awareness is the quality of presence.

We can compare awareness to light. In English, we have the expression, "He saw the light." But actually, if you look around, we don't see light. What we see is the room. We see parts of the room that are particularly bright. I look out that side; there are sections of the outside view that are particularly bright. So there appears to be more light there than there is in that corner over there. But we don't see the light. We see the world. Yet we see the world because there is light. Without light, we couldn't see the world.

So how do we know that right now there is light? Because we can see. Therefore, there must be light. We step into a dark room at night—what is present to us? Just darkness. We switch on the light and the room and everything in the room is now present. How do we know there is light? Because the room and the contents of the room are present to us.

So awareness is not the contents of the room. Awareness is the appearance from darkness of the contents of the room. Awareness is not something; it's the presence of something.

But of course, where there is presence, there is something which is present. And we call this something the object of awareness. This is what makes awareness so slippery. On the one hand, it's the most obvious thing in the world. If we experience, we have awareness.

But on the other hand, it's incredibly slippery and mysterious because we never actually experience presence itself. It's the fact that something is present. So it can be both obvious but very difficult to get a hold of.

"Could it be both? Like you said, it's not... The thing itself is the presence of something. But what if it's both the presence of something and something in itself?"

Could be, yes. Because what we're doing is trying to put into some kind of coherent word system awareness and its object, since this is important for meditators. But no verbal formula is actually going to capture it. You could use other formulas.

I remember once doing a meditation experience exploring what is the experience of awareness. So look for awareness. And the teacher, who happened to be Emma, asked the question, "What's your experience of awareness?" And my answer was, "There isn't any." Because in terms of the visual field, well, I'm experiencing you. That's what I'm actually experiencing. So to say that there's awareness as well is kind of adding something extra on top, which strictly speaking just seems a bit clumsy.

So I could run with the theory that there is no awareness—there's just the world. Or I could run with the theory that, no, there is awareness, but awareness is the quality of transparency, which is the way the Buddha talks about it. He gives the example of a mountain pool, a pool of water, and the water is completely clear. You look into the pool and you can see down to the bottom. You see the rocks and the soil at the bottom. You see the water plants. You see the fish swimming around. He says the whole pool itself is the citta, the mind, the heart. The rocks, the plants, the fish—this is what's happening inside the mind, the heart. And the water is awareness. When the water is clear, is pure, it's transparent. It disappears. But when it's agitated or cloudy or murky, that's when you see it. Normally we don't notice it because it's completely transparent. That's another way of looking at it.

"It seems to me if you can be aware that you're aware, there's an awareness of awareness. Then it's more something than nothing."

So you're saying you can be aware of awareness, we can aware awareness itself, and that's more than nothing. There's something there.

"Yeah, and it's like that clear water, like it's... How can you... It's hard to quantify, isn't it? But it's something."

Yes, it seems to be. What we're interested in as meditators is not to come up with a philosophy that captures this, but rather to get a sense of what is the experience I'm heading towards. Sometimes we do have a clear experience of, "Oh, this is what they're talking about." And sometimes we have no idea what they're talking about. It sounds like a nice theory, but I don't experience it. As meditators, what we're interested in is what we're experiencing and being curious about that.

As Emma was saying yesterday, it's the curiosity that drives this. This is interesting: Is there awareness? What is it exactly? How do I know there's awareness? When we ask these kinds of questions, it really doesn't matter what the answer is. What matters is that the question itself sharpens the investigation. And you come up, and there's something, as you say—there's something there.

There's something happening. And clarifying that something—that's the job. So although there's a lot of theoretical discussion, it's not about the theory. The concepts will hopefully point us towards something useful. What I'm trying to do with that example is to separate awareness from the subject, which for meditation purposes has practical application. To be able to distinguish between "that's the object of awareness" and "this is the awareing of it." In the tradition, this is considered quite useful—to be able to make that distinction, to be able to move between one and the other. That's why I give that analogy. But again, I don't claim that it's correct.

Someone asked: could you say that awareness is an experience rather than an object? Awareness itself, yes. You experience it, but do you experience it as an object? It's not an object. A lot of people would say that is absolutely correct—it's not an object. When we talk about an object, we're implying a subject-object dichotomy, and awareness doesn't quite fit into that dichotomy. So again, language fails. That's the reason why in the yoga traditions you get so many different philosophies, so many different ways of talking about what everybody experiences—because none of the conceptual frameworks actually precisely, one hundred percent, fit. It's just a question of whether there's a framework which is useful, and then we use it.

One person said they thought they were okay with it until they heard all this theory. Now they were completely bewildered. They wondered if I could give them one example to hold onto and throw the theory out.

An example of what? Well, the awareness and the seeing. I thought Emma's question yesterday was very good, when she asked: is anybody here seeing? Before I asked, did you know you were seeing? Or was there a qualitative difference in the experience? You were seeing, and then she says, "Are you seeing?" What changed? Something changed. And that's where you would find this business of awareness itself. That's the area where you would look for the experience.

The example that I like to give, which you'll be hearing more of: when you've been meditating, have you ever been distracted? Have you ever slid off into thinking? When you slid off into thinking, did you know you were thinking? Or do you sometimes wake up with, "Oh, I've been thinking for the past five minutes. Whoops." Yes? So you look

back, and you can remember—yes, I was thinking about this or that. So you must have been aware. But you didn't know you were aware. You weren't aware that you were aware. And suddenly, you're aware of your awareness.

Same thing with driving a car. You're driving along, and you suddenly realize: where am I? I was off in a dream. So you were driving the car and aware—it's a reasonable hypothesis because you're still alive. But you didn't know you were aware. You weren't aware of the awareness. Something has changed. It's in that something that this is what we're interested in. What is that something, that mysterious something, that shift? As meditators, we start to get interested in that.

There are different ways you can talk about it, but that's what we're interested in. So for me, when I teach meditation, I emphasize being genuinely interested in distraction. It's a really interesting experience, so start to pay attention to it.

That's what changes. We're seeing, and then the light is on the subject. There's a subject and an object, and now the subject is becoming an object. The light is being shone on the subject, which was hidden.

It's quite interesting the way you put it: "Oh, I'm thinking." You could have the emphasis on the thinking, or the emphasis could be on the "I'm thinking." And if it's "I'm thinking," then you've suddenly got this subject-object duality, and you're aware of the subject. So who's aware of the subject? And so on. It gets incredibly complicated.

It's quite interesting territory, but you can see how we can go around and around in academic circles. None of it is particularly useful. What matters is being interested in the fact that these are the shifts and changes within awareness itself. As meditators, that's what we're interested in.

As has come out in our discussion, when we are aware, we are aware of something. If I'm seeing, I'm seeing something. If I'm thinking, I'm thinking something. There is the object of awareness. In meditation practice, we often talk about the meditation object, and what we mean by that is what we are aware of when we're meditating.

Another way to look at this is to see awareness working as a dyad. I'm carefully using the word "dyad," not "duality," because duality has all sorts of connotations that I want to sidestep. I think there are philosophically sophisticated people in this room who are not going to let me get away with any sidestepping, but I'm going to try.

So, a dyad. Where if you have one, you have the other. If there's awareness, there's an object of awareness. If there's an object of awareness, there's awareness. If I'm seeing, there's an object. If I'm seeing, there's awareness of seeing. But they come about always as a package. Awareness and its object arise together and operate as a partnership.

One way to explore awareness is to examine its object. This is what Mahasi Sayadaw himself talks about—the stern-looking fellow whose picture sits beneath the Buddha. He's regarded as the founder of the lineage, and he lived from 1904 to 1982. He was one of the great Burmese reformers, part of a broader movement to make serious insight meditation available for lay people as well as monks and nuns.

Before this movement began in the mid-nineteenth century in Burma, meditation in the Buddhist world was for a tiny, tiny elite, mostly ordained people. But the Burmese started a movement to open it up to the whole population, and Mahasi Sayadaw was part of that movement. Hence, we have meditation here in Australia.

He talks about how one way to get a sense of awareness is to start with the object. If the object is clear, the awareness will be clear. That approach has never one hundred percent worked for me, but this is what he says. So let's play around with it, shall we? Let's do a little meditation exercise in which the meditation object, the object of awareness, is the touch of our hands.

So just sit holding your hands together. This is a very advanced meditation, but let's see if we can do it.

Sit comfortably and settle your posture. Hold your hands together. Close your eyes and ask yourself: can I feel my hands? If the answer is yes, then ask yourself another question: am I making any particular effort to feel my hands? Is this hard work? Take your time. Relax. Just feel your hands and check how hard you have to work to feel them.

Any luck? Did anybody succeed in feeling their hands? Well done. Anyone else succeed? Universal consent. Did anybody have to work particularly hard to feel their hands? Was it hard work? Was it difficult? Did you have to really sweat and strain? Was sweat pouring from your armpits? Maybe not.

So this is getting back to right effort, or wise effort, that Emma was talking about yesterday—the quality of effort involved. We are already aware. Awareness simply happens. As the tradition says, it is the mind's nature to aware an object. That's what it does, and it does it all of the time, regardless of what we feel about it. Sometimes we'd rather wish it wasn't, but it continues to do so.

This is where I like to give the example of a cult, very popular in Australia, that is devoted in the higher stages of practice to the complete abolition of awareness, and therefore the complete abolition of suffering. There are practice centres scattered throughout the country devoted to this. Often you see them on street corners where a lot of people pass by, particularly after work at night. Devotees pour into these practice centres and engage diligently in the practice, which consists of reaching out with one hand, grasping a glass full of magic liquid, and pouring it down their throats. What they find is that the more liquid they consume, the more the grip on awareness starts to loosen. And for those who have really advanced in the practice, they will wake up the next afternoon thinking, "That was a good night. I've got no idea what happened."

You can see the popularity of this—that awareness can be painful, and people try to escape from it. But it's very, very difficult. You could try that practice yourself, but I do not recommend it. For starters, it's very expensive if you really devote yourself to it. And secondly, it's very bad for the health. But it's an illustration of how determined the mind is to aware.

So awareness is already happening. The first time I did that little exercise with the hands was during Sayadaw U Tejaniya's first visit to Australia. When he opened up the retreat, he was talking about how he teaches meditation. He did that exercise and asked the question: how much effort are you making? The answer being, bugger all. And then he added—which quite shocked me—he said, "That is all the effort you ever have to make in a meditation practice. You never have to make any more effort than that."

I found that a very interesting statement, and I put it to you to be interested in, because we tend to make a big deal out of the effort involved. And so that's why we talk about effort, this quality of effort.

Question from participant: You said Mahasi Sayadaw said "clear object, clear awareness," but that hasn't worked for you so much. I'm just trying to understand where you went from there. Is that because that's a very "holding on a single point" approach? You're saying for you it worked more as a choiceless awareness?

Yes, that's in terms of approach to practice. You get approaches which are very object-oriented. So you'll be told, "What I want you to do is sit down and track your breathing without a break from now until we ring the bell." Now, simply by phrasing it like that, you've taken the object of awareness—in this case the breathing—and you've assigned it immense importance. This is really, really important. As if you stuff up this breathing over the next thirty minutes, you are stuffing up your meditation, and your chances of enlightenment are just plummeting. So it's really, really, really important.

Now, our habit is to always project importance into the object of awareness. The classic thing is when I'm thinking, what I assume is important is what I'm thinking about. But in meditation practice, if you start to examine the process of thinking, what you discover is that what we are thinking about is probably the least important aspect of the whole process. It's the thinking itself. It's the awareing itself which is actually much more significant.

But if we have an approach to meditation in which so much importance is attached to an object, that for me reinforced the habit of ignoring the awareness and focusing on the object. So I didn't see it. I could read Mahasi Sayadaw—yes, yes, you see the awareness—and I thought, "I don't see the awareness. I either see the object or I miss the object." So I had to really step back and loosen my hold on the object, and then I could begin to notice the awareness.

So it was a clash between what Mahasi was saying and taking for granted that people would notice, and what I'd experienced when following instructions. My main teacher was Sayadaw U Pandita, and he was very object-oriented in his approach. So it took a while to figure it out.

It's very tricky figuring out what I'm supposed to do when I'm meditating because, for a start, it's incredibly difficult. So I like to say that it is impossible to teach meditation practice. It is possible to learn it, but it's not possible to teach it. Because as a meditation teacher, if I give a particular piece of advice to a room full of meditators, the odds are there will be at least one person in this room for whom that is the worst thing I could have said, and it'll completely screw them up. But there's no getting away from it.

And especially when we're talking about these modern meditation techniques—they are designed for mass production. So if you have twenty people in a room and you're teaching meditation, and these people are working people who've taken a week off from work, time is precious. You can't muck about. You can't do the traditional thing of "join the community and in five or ten years you'll gradually figure it out." That's not good enough. You've got to get them into it soon, so you need a technique. But because you say "do this" to everybody, you're presenting a technique. And then the technique gets placed on the altar and everybody's worshipping it, including those people for whom that technique simply doesn't work. And they're vigorously worshipping it as well.

So this is why it's really important that as meditators, you take responsibility. It's up to you to figure it out. If I say something and you think, "Nah, that's wrong"—great. Fine. I won't necessarily change what I'm saying. This is the way that I see it, the way that I express it. But that's just the way that I express it. If it doesn't work for you, just drop it.

Question from participant: When you say if you have a meditation object and it's breathing and you're told to track your breathing—isn't the purpose of that, when you wander away, that you strengthen your awareness when you remember that you've wandered away and come back to the breathing?

Yes, what you do is you strengthen, in particular, samadhi—classically translated as concentration, though I don't think it's a very good translation. I notice Ajahn Sujato now translates it as immersion, which quite works for me. I quite like it.

Imagine jumping into a swimming pool. You're immersed in the water. You're jumping into your experience, immersed in the experience. So the heart and the mind are unified. All of me is just breathing—not part of me thinking about lunch and part of me feeling restless and part of me checking out the breathing, but all of me. This is samadhi.

So the basic boot camp training for that is: you send your awareness to the breathing, you realize it's wandered off, you bring it back. It wanders off, you bring it back. It wanders off, you bring it back. Again, again, again, again, again. And you try to immerse yourself in it. So that's a samadhi-oriented approach, and that's one of the standard ways in which people undertake a meditation practice.

And you notice that in what we're teaching, the natural awareness approach, we actually don't do that. We've got another approach.

"The only thing I find with natural awareness—I think I have a bit of an idea about it—but what I find is when you become aware of one thing, then you become aware of another thing, then you become aware of another thing. And then when you say have curiosity and focus on one thing, it's kind of like I don't know what to focus on, because there's so much happening."

And this is exactly the question we're going to address tonight, where we bring Mahasi Sayadaw in from the cold and talk about his concept of the grounding object.

Basically, we need a central reference point. Most people need a central reference point. Otherwise, as you say, it just gets completely scattered. And usually the central reference point is some aspect of body—why that is, we'll talk about.

But even if you've got a central reference point, you notice the awareness moves, goes somewhere else. So it's the difference between: my awareness has gone walkabout—oh, it's gone walkabout—drop it immediately, get back to the grounding object. Versus: my awareness goes walkabout—oh, it's going walkabout, that's interesting, what does that feel like?—then come back to the grounding object. And that's a big difference. This is what Mahasi in particular is very strong on, but we'll talk more about it as we go through.

You're right though—you've picked out a problem that people have if you just begin by opening up. Some people just get lost; there's so much going on. Other people find themselves at home, like they're just swimming around in it. But some people get hopelessly lost. So again, you modify the method according to your own circumstances.

Shall we carry on? Awareness. But next we come to mindfulness, and this question arose yesterday: what's the difference?

Sayadaw U Tejaniya is a bit loose in his language. U Tejaniya was not a scholar—or is not a scholar, he's still around. He's not a career monk. In Burma, the career monks, the big Sayadaws, are women and men who ordain when they're children—ten, twelve years old. They go into the monastery as novices and undergo a monastic education. They get highly educated, then they become meditators, then they become meditation teachers, and they're kind of walking encyclopedias of Theravada Buddhism.

And so they tend to be very careful and precise in their doctrinal formulations.

Utajaniya was a layman. His family lived in Rangoon, a business family. His parish church, as it were, was Shwe U Min's monastery, and he used to play with the children there. He made a connection with Shwe U Min's abbot, who happened to be a great meditation master, and learnt meditation. As a young man, he would go into the monastery, do a retreat, ordain temporarily—because this is the custom—and then leave the retreat and go back to lay life. Come in, go out, come in, go out. It was a typically lay approach. Eventually he just got fed up and went in and didn't come out.

So he hasn't got the classical education that most of the Burmese meditation teachers have, which some people would argue is a great advantage. For starters, he really understands lay life.

I remember one time—I forget which retreat it was; I've done two retreats with him, both in Western Australia. At one point he was talking about mindfulness in everyday activities, and he described how when he would go to work, he would walk from his home and his route would take him down a street where there must have been various pubs or nightclubs. When he was a wild young man, there were places on that street

where he would go and get stonked and be outrageous. As he would walk down this street later in life, remorse would arise at what he did in his youth. And he would take the opportunity to meditate on the nature of remorse as he walked. It's just typical of his approach—you work with whatever is there.

I went to the interpreter afterwards and said, "I get the impression that before the Sayadaw ordained permanently, he was a bit of a lad." And the interpreter said, "The Sayadaw says there is no drug I have not tried." This is pretty unusual for Burmese monks. So he's really got this very clear sense of lay life. Whereas the great masters—my main teacher was Sayadaw U Pandita—I mean, he entered the monastery probably by the time he was ten. He had no idea about lay life. Absolutely no idea about it. Different approaches.

Anyway, I digress. Mindfulness—that's what we're talking about.

Awareness is the presence of that which is present. It's part of nature. Are we experiencing something now? If the answer is yes, we are aware. But are we mindful?

The practice that we're doing in Pali is called satipatthana, which could be translated as the applications of mindfulness or the domains of mindfulness. Mindfulness in Pali is sati. This is a style of meditation practice that puts mindfulness at the very centre of the project.

To get a sense of what is meant by that, let's do another little meditation experiment. We'll have the same meditation object: holding your hands.

So sit comfortably, settle your posture, hold your hands together, and close your eyes. Ask yourself: can I feel my hands? This is not some special meditation exercise that you might fail if you don't work hard enough. Just feel your hands. This experience of feeling my hands is awareness—the awareness of feeling my hands.

Keep feeling your hands. Is your awareness of your hands continuous? Or do you notice any breaks in your awareness of your hands? Is your awareness of your hands discontinuous?

You may notice thinking in the background of your mind and then suddenly realise thinking has taken over. Did you lose the touch of your hands? You may be listening to my voice and suddenly realise you have lost the touch of your hands.

Just feel your hands. Check to see if there are any gaps in your awareness of your hands. Are there any gaps? Or is your awareness of the touch of your hands continuous?

Okay. So could anybody say their awareness was continuous without any gaps? One nodding, one shaking. How many people would say yes, continuous, no breaks? How many people would say otherwise?

Very interesting.

Many years ago there was Susan Blackmore, an English researcher in consciousness and a Zen practitioner. She wrote a book years ago called *Ten Zen Questions*. Since then there's another edition with a different title, I think, but I read the original one. What she would do as a Zen practitioner was create her own koans, her own questions, and work on those. There were ten of them, and the experience of working with them made up the book.

What interested me were the first two questions. The first question she worked with was: Am I aware? It could have been: Am I aware now? She worked on that seriously—did retreats, really working on this. And what she came up with was 100% yes. That was the answer to that question.

Then she moved on to the second question: Was I aware just then? Again, she worked on it seriously. The result was undoubted—nowhere near 100%.

So how could that be? How could the answer to "Am I aware now?" be 100% yes, but the answer to "Was I aware just then?" be nowhere near 100%?

I found that interesting because to me it showed the difference between awareness and mindfulness.

Mindfulness is *sati*. *Sati* is a word from memory, from the verb *sarati*, to remember. We'll talk more about it tonight, I think. But mindfulness is memory in terms of remembering the present, not the past.

If we came up here from Sydney on the train—and I find trains very dharmic because they have signs that say "Mind the gap"—you've seen those signs. What the signs are asking you to do is remember there's a gap between the train and the platform. But it's not asking you to remember that hours after you arrive at your destination. It wants you to remember that in the very act of stepping into or out of the train. That is mindfulness the way the Buddha talked about it—remembering the present rather than the past.

So, remembering awareness. One way of looking at distraction: How is it that I'm doing something really simple, really easy, like feeling the touch of my hands, and suddenly—thup—the mind goes away and I'm thinking about something? How did that happen?

I forgot. I forgot my hands, or I forgot that I was aware of my hands. In that forgetting, the mind slips into autopilot, into habit. My awareness will go where habit takes it. So if I'm in the habit of thinking blah, blah, blah, that's where it'll go. I'm thinking and I don't know that I'm thinking because I've forgotten.

Then suddenly I remember—oh, wait a minute, I'm supposed to be meditating. Ah, and I'm back again.

That action of remembering is mindfulness. When we train it—in a sense you could say meditation training is memory training—we get into the habit of remembering awareness so that the awareness is genuinely continuous.

If we ask the question, how do I know if I'm mindful? Mindfulness is the felt continuity of awareness—the felt continuity. We experience it. And when people hit it, they talk about it because it feels qualitatively different. I'm just maintaining the awareness over a period of time.

It feels very different. And you know it—you can see it.

So this is mindfulness. Mindfulness is awareness, but it's awareness over time. And therefore it becomes stronger.

One image that's used is this: imagine you're at a beach, close to the water's edge. You've got a stick, and you draw a line in the sand. The next wave comes in and erases the line. So you draw another line. The next wave comes in and erases that one too. You draw another line—gone. Draw another one—gone. Draw another one—gone. Gone. Gone. That's normal everyday awareness.

But when you draw a line and it stays there—that's mindfulness.

Let's do one more exercise. What would happen if, on the one hand, we remember our awareness, and on the other hand, we do not try to force it to stay on any one particular object, but allow it to move if it wants to? What would happen then? Shall we give it a go?

And again, the same meditation object.

Sit comfortably and settle your posture. Hold your hands together. Close your eyes.

Feel your hands. Be aware of the touch of your hands, the different sensations that are playing out there. Don't try to do this. Don't try to feel your hands—it's not a special project. You already know you are feeling your hands. Just feel them.

Does your awareness move to something else? For example, do you find yourself being aware of other sensations in your body? Or of the sounds around you? Or of your thoughts sliding here and there? Don't try to stop any of this happening—just watch and see what happens.

If something is happening, that's awareness.

Let your awareness move from one thing to another. In other words, let what you are aware of change. Just stay aware of these movements and changes.

Use the touch of your hands as a home base—somewhere you leave and return to. But do not try to cling exclusively to the touch of your hands. Let the touch of your hands come and go. Sometimes you are aware of it, sometimes not.

Just watch whatever is happening. Is something happening? That's awareness.

You are using the touch of your hands as your home base, but not holding tightly to it. Just hold your mind steady. Let things come and go. Just stay aware that things are coming and going.

So how did it go? To some extent? Was it more or less strain, just letting things roll? Or no difference?

"For me it was incredibly strange because normally I'm like... and then I was like, oh, sorry, I love to go here gently. So I think there's an element of my meditation which is more disciplined, where I tell myself what to do. So that's quite odd, an unusual experience."

It sounds like less stressful.

"Yeah, way less. I'm like, oh, okay."

We'll be talking more about this particular approach. This is what in the Mahasi tradition is called *khanika samadhi*—immersion into momentary experience—where you allow the objects to change, but you maintain the awareness itself. It's a different approach to samadhi, as opposed to what's called absorption samadhi, where you have a single object and you absorb into it. So there are different ways of getting that immersion, that absorption. In this style of practice, we're training ourselves to open it up.

But particularly in the beginning, it can be very useful to have a sense of a home base. And particularly if we're looking for a home base—again, especially in the body, especially in the early stages—body is really useful. Because body sensation is fairly clear, it's kind of pretty obvious. And body sensation is always now, always in the present. If I'm aware of body, to the extent I'm aware of body, to that extent I am in the present. Mind time travels, but body is always in the present.

So I'll just finish with a few basic tips that I like to give. Number one: do not be in a hurry as you move about your day. Nothing to hurry for. I mean, how can you be late for anything? Now notice when you find yourself hurrying, because you may find some tension underneath the hurrying. So feel the tension, relax, and check to see any difference in your body when you do that. So don't be in a hurry.

Be graceful—which in practice means be committed to noticing those moments when you realize you are clumsy. So when you unexpectedly drop something, or bump into something, or make a loud noise doing something, just be interested in those moments. And you may notice that a moment of clumsiness is conditioned by momentary loss of awareness, of mindfulness—when you lost awareness of your body and your awareness went off into habitual concepts. So again, stay grounded in the body.

Remember awareness. When you're practicing, do not try to be aware—just remember you are already aware. Using the image of just switching on that light: click, up, aware. And ask yourself every now and again: What is clear now? What is obvious now?

Okay, we've run over time. Any final questions? Questions or comments?

"Actually, may I ask, what is the ultimate goal of meditation?"

Liberation. Freedom. Liberation from suffering. The cessation of *dukkha*. So we practice strengthening mindfulness eventually just to end suffering. And the wisdom—the wisdom is important.

Any kind of mindfulness practice is oriented towards wisdom. Why that is, we'll talk about more as we go through. But the Buddha in the Satipatthana Sutta, which is the root discourse, makes it quite clear this is the direct path to enlightenment.

So enlightenment is when you can actually end something. You can come and then... then you're not quite fully enlightened. But enlightenment is a process like anything else. You can have a glimpse of it. You can have a little bit of it. You can gradually deepen it and go more and more into it. Usually in the tradition, when they talk about enlightenment, they mean full, one hundred percent enlightenment. In the Theravada tra-

dition, this would be someone who is an Arahant. These are rare. Mahasi's teacher was supposed to be an arahant. But there are stages of enlightenment which are not as deep, but they're much more accessible.

According to the tradition, the Buddha takes for granted life after life. And once you've entered upon that path, once you've had the first glimpse of the Dharma—what he calls the Dhammacakru, the vision of Dharma—that's it, you're on the way. It may take a number of lifetimes, but you're on the way.

How do we know that we are doing it?

You'll find out when you are. It's an experience. It becomes clear. No doubt.

The practice for the rest of the day is to have a touch and to watch it?

Well, what would be your meditation object normally?

A mantra.

Do you prefer mantra over breathing?

Yeah, I do.

Okay, stick with the mantra. But again, notice when the awareness goes and where it goes to. In other words, don't grip it. It's like you're holding it, gripping it. Loosen your grip and let it go. Let it go, come back. Let it go, come back. This relationship—this is what you're setting up. So you don't have to change your meditation object. It's the way that you relate to it that you're starting to play around with.

And of course, become sensitive to posture. What is the body doing right now? If you're using mantra, you may not pay a huge amount of attention to the body when you're sitting because you're absorbing into the mantra. But when you're going about your daily activity, be really aware of what the body is doing, particularly touch. For example, in everyday activity, feel when the feet hit the ground and feel anything the hands touch. Be particularly sensitive to those two areas.

Do you do walking meditation?

Yeah.

So walking meditation. Do you do mantra in the walking?

I've only started to, literally, in the last couple of days.

Some people find it very useful.

Completely new.

Yeah, play around. Check it out. In the walking, the mantra would be the way you develop samadhi.

Whereas the body would be more mindfulness. So you're getting a balance. You're changing your relationship to your meditation object. You don't have to pick your meditation object, throw it out the window, and get another one. That's not necessary.

Good. Anyone else? Anybody puzzled about what they're supposed to be doing here?

Always.

Okay, I'll give you the standard answer: Be aware.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 85

On Method

Patrick Kearney · 49 min

In this foundational talk from a retreat setting, Patrick Kearney presents the meditation method developed by Mahāsī Sayādaw of Burma, tracing its lineage through teachers including Sayādaw U Paṇḍita and Shwe Oo Min Sayādaw. Kearney explains why method matters—a framework that is neither too loose (leading to vague "it's all one" attitudes) nor too tight (reducing practice to mechanical drills)—using the analogy of choosing between watercolours and oils in painting.

The talk outlines four essential elements of this approach: maintaining the felt continuity of awareness over time (sati as remembering in the present moment), establishing a grounding object as a stable home base, learning to track transitions as awareness moves between objects, and ultimately focusing on direct experience rather than conceptual narratives. Kearney shares his formative experience with Sayādaw U Paṇḍita at the Mahāsī Centre in 1984, where he received the instruction to be aware of everything "from waking to sleeping, down to the blinking of your eyes"—seemingly impossible, yet reducible to the simple practice of being aware now.

Practical guidance covers working with secondary objects (distractions that become teachers), the skillful use of naming or noting to clarify experience without feeding it, and how to approach physical and emotional pain in meditation. Kearney emphasizes that distraction reveals impermanence (anicca), the gateway to insight, and that as practice matures, the distinction between grounding and secondary objects dissolves into the continuous flow of experience leading toward intimacy with citta—the heart-mind that knows and responds.

Tonight we're going to talk about the meditation method that we're using tonight. Yesterday we looked at awareness and mindfulness, but without much concern with method or technique. Basically, "remember awareness now" is pretty much largely what we've been communicating. And tonight we're going to move on to a specific method or technique, a specific approach to meditation, originally developed by Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. So as we said, that's him in the picture.

My main teacher in Burma was Sayadaw U Pandita, who was part of that lineage. In Zen terms, he was a grandson in the Dharma of Mahasi Sayadaw—he was a student of a student of Mahasi Sayadaw. And Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who developed the way of natur-

al awareness, was a student of Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, who was a great meditation master and who was in turn a disciple of Mahasi Sayadaw. So he also was a grandson in the Dharma of Mahasi Sayadaw.

Shwe Oo Min was in the early fifties on staff at Mahasi Centre teaching. And after about five years or so, he basically resigned. He said to Mahasi Sayadaw, "I don't want to become a big Thai meditation teacher." So he went back to his monastery in suburban Rangoon and just became a suburban monk. But people had heard of him. Every year he would go off and do a lot of meditation, and when he was in residence, people would come and say, "I understand this is a meditation center." He would say, "No, it's not." They would say, "Could I meditate here for a while?" "Sure, of course, absolutely." "And I understand you're a meditation teacher." "No, I'm not." "Can I come and talk to you about my meditation practice?" "Sure, of course you can." He was quite low-key in that sense. And he was the teacher of U Tejaniya.

So it all begins with Mahasi Sayadaw, and it began with a book called *The Manual of Insight* that Mahasi published in 1945. He wrote it during the war. It was this book that made his name throughout Burma as a great expert in insight meditation, as a result of which he was invited to come to Rangoon by senior figures in the political party that formed the first government of independent Burma after the war. They installed him as the head teacher of a centre which eventually was named after him. In Burmese it's the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha, which is usually translated as the Mahasi Centre. *Yeiktha* is a Burmese word that literally means "shady place," but it's used to mean meditation center. It is interesting that in Burmese Buddhism, there was no word for meditation center until modern times when they opened it up to lay people.

The question becomes, of course, why do we need a method? Basically, the meditation method provides a framework. It provides a set of boundaries within which our practice can occur.

Now, if the framework is too loose, where there are no boundaries, this kills creativity. Because there's nothing to bump up against, nothing to challenge, nothing to be challenged by. You find this approach in some people who, when they're talking about meditation practice or doing meditation, say, "Look man, it's all one, it doesn't matter, it's just one," or "There is no such thing as a good meditation or a bad meditation," or "One must never judge one's practice." You hear these attitudes, and this is an indication where the framework is too loose. It's basically the Dharma attitude of "she'll be right mate, don't worry about it"—when in fact, sometimes it isn't all right. So with too loose a framework, we get lost and creativity is killed.

With too tight a framework, where the boundaries are too tightly defined and too tightly constricted, this also kills creativity because there's no room for one's own decisions. The emphasis is on obedience and the endless repetition of familiar drills. But one of the problems with this approach is that in a dynamic world, which is the world we live in, there's no such thing as repetition. One thing we learn when we start to pay attention is that this moment now is new. We've never done this before. But when we're working to carry out a predetermined drill, we fall into habit. And habit is what kills meditation practice.

So to get a sense of what we mean—not too loose a framework, not too tight a framework—let's compare it to painting, which I'm very reluctant to do because I know nothing about painting. I had to look it up in Wikipedia.

So let's say you decide to take up painting. Will you paint with watercolours or with oils? This initial decision presents you with a whole variety of demands that will condition how you paint, what specific skills you need to develop to work within the boundaries of your medium.

If watercolours, you paint on paper. If oils, you paint on canvas or wood. If watercolours, you make quick decisions because the paint dries quickly. If oils, you can take your time and you can rework as much as you like. If watercolours, you start with the lightest colours and then layer the dark colours on top. If oils, you can add light colours to dark and dark colours to light. There's a whole different set of demands for each medium. But the boundaries of each medium set the conditions within which the craft develops. And the craft comes from using the materials available in new ways, in skilful ways. We respect the limits, but we develop creative ways to work within them.

This is what we do when we embark on a meditation practice and learn a particular method or technique. So what shapes the boundaries of this practice, of this particular approach?

The first thing, the central thing, is the felt continuity of awareness over time, which we've already spoken about as mindfulness. Maintaining awareness over time is absolutely essential to this practice. We do whatever it takes to experience the continuity of awareness. We abandon whatever habits condition the discontinuity of awareness. We focus on the present, cultivate sensitivity to awareness now. This is the distinguishing characteristic of mindfulness training—really any approach that puts mindfulness at the centre. The felt continuity of awareness over time.

Then we use a central reference point, what Mahasi calls a grounding object, that structures the continuity of awareness. The grounding object's job is to provide a home base. This is where we live, and to this we return. It becomes our centre of gravity and draws us back again and again whenever our awareness goes walkabout.

Keep in mind that when we talk about a grounding object, this is not a thing—it's a function. Basically, whatever grounds the heart and the mind can serve as a grounding object. It's not that there's one thing we're supposed to focus on. In theory, anything at all can be a grounding object, but what it must do is ground us, give us a centre of gravity. Different practitioners can use different grounding objects, and any one practitioner may use different grounding objects over time. Remember, if we're talking about a meditation career, we're talking about something that extends for decades.

The grounding object gives us a firm foundation. From that foundation, we can allow the practice to take us where it thinks we need to go. This trajectory, this direction, is provided by the third aspect: transitions.

So the first element is the felt continuity of awareness over time. Second, a central reference point, a grounding object, which is our home base. And third, we learn to focus on transitions. This is central to any style of meditation aiming to develop insight.

As we've already talked about and experienced, awareness moves from one place to another. We could express this as saying that awareness moves from A to B. Our experience of body moves from A to B—I start with breathing and then I'm preoccupied by pain in the leg. Mind moves from A to B—I'm with the meditation object and then suddenly I'm off with the pixies.

As the practice develops, as we become more sensitive to what is going on—and how do we become more sensitive? Through the continuity of awareness—we become interested in these transitions. We may come to recognise that transitions are always happening. In fact, we may discover that there is no final position. There are only transitions. And so we become interested in the fact that we move from A to B.

And then we learn *how* we move from A to B. In learning to maintain this continuity of awareness through transitions, that's how we learn the craft of the practice.

So: felt continuity of awareness over time; a grounding object as a central reference point; focus on transitions. And then what we might find is that tracking the flow of experience over time brings us to the mind that awares experience and the heart that responds to experience. These become central, and they may in fact become the grounding object. This is what the Buddha calls *citta*—mind, or heart, or heart-mind.

The grounding object itself matures over time, and this maturity arises naturally through our interest in transitions, in changes. Often what becomes predominant is *citta*, heart-mind, because it's the mind which fabricates experience for us.

And then finally, as we practice, we focus on the world of direct experience rather than our habitual concepts about our experience. We're going to talk more about this as we go through the retreat. At the moment, it might be quite obscure what this means. But essentially, from the Buddha's perspective, the pain of our lives is found in the world we live in, which is defined by narrative—the stories that we tell ourselves endlessly. All of these stories revolve around a single character: self. Liberation is found in the world which, for the Buddha, is defined by the three universal characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*—change, pain, not-self. Here our narratives do not revolve around self, but around our directly seen and understood experience.

Again, this is pretty obscure at the moment, but we are going to explore this later on. The key point is that we're interested in direct experience. We are not interested in the stories we are telling ourselves about experience. And normally that's the world we live in—our stories, our judgments, our discernments, and so on and so forth.

The first demand of the practice is to maintain the continuity of awareness. And as we've spoken of, in theory this should not be a problem because we are already aware. It is the mind's nature to aware. So why is maintaining the continuity of awareness difficult? It's because of our deeply ingrained tendency to forget our awareness.

We talked about this in terms of distraction. Think about how you are distracted. You're tracking your meditation object and then suddenly you realise that you've been thinking for the past five minutes and you didn't even notice it. This is a routine experience for meditators. But have you ever thought about how strange this is? How positively weird it is?

I'm practicing and I am aware. And then suddenly I slide into thinking, and sometime later slide out of the thinking. It's only in that moment of sliding out of the thinking that I realise, whoops, I'm thinking. In other words, for some time I was thinking, but I did not know I was thinking.

If I ask myself, was I aware as I was thinking? The answer would probably be yes, because I can remember that I was thinking. I can even remember, more or less, what I was thinking about. I was aware as I was thinking, but I was not aware of the fact that I was thinking. I had forgotten my awareness. And then I remembered.

This remembering, this realisation—oh, thinking—takes two forms. I can suddenly remember that I am aware: "Oh, I'm supposed to be meditating, but I've been thinking." Or we can remember what I am aware of. Have you ever had the experience when you develop some momentum in the practice, you get lost in thought, you suddenly realise you're thinking, and the mind goes bang, straight back to the meditation object? There, we are remembering the object of awareness. But the other flavour is remembering awareness itself: "Oh, I'm thinking."

These are the two flavours that we find. But in both cases, I remember. This explains why the English word "mindfulness" translates the Pali word *sati*, which literally means memory, from the verb *sarati*, to remember. It's like the signs at railway stations that say "Mind the gap"—be mindful of the gap between the train and the platform. What it's asking us to do is to remember that gap in the very act of stepping into or out of the train. To remember in the present.

When we talk about the continuity of awareness, one way we could express it is that the job is to maintain continuity of awareness all day long.

The first time I discovered this demand was in 1984, the first time I went to Burma and to the Mahasi Centre. In those days, you could only get a tourist visa to enter Burma, which was for one week. So basically I turned up at the gates of the Mahasi Centre and said, "Let me in." And they did, for some reason.

I was assigned to Sayadaw U Pandita, who had recently become the head teacher of the centre and had taken over the job of teaching the foreigners. Because he was a busy man, head teacher of the whole centre, he only had an hour a day to teach foreigners. But at the time, I was the only foreigner. So I had an hour a day each morning from eight to nine.

At one point he explained to me. He said, "Look, this is what you're supposed to do. Be aware of everything that happens to you and within you from the moment you wake up in the morning until the moment you go to sleep at night, right down to the blinking of your eyes."

And I thought, that is impossible.

But I said, "Yes, Sayadaw." Because if you ever work with a Burmese Sayadaw, there is only one acceptable response: "Yes, Sayadaw."

So I gave it my best shot. I really tried. But I came to the conclusion that I was right—it is impossible. What I realized, however, was that one thing is possible. What is possible is to be aware *now*. That's possible.

And I think this is the essence of it. To remember awareness now. We don't worry about all day or all week. It's just now. That's the essence. And when we do that, we discover that quite naturally awareness becomes extended through time. And that is mindfulness.

So we compared awareness to the light that illuminates a dark room at night. We realize we're in darkness, and as soon as we do that, we flick the switch and turn on the light. The practice becomes flicking the awareness switch. Aware of what now? What is clear now? What is obvious now? What's happening now?

And it does not matter how long the light of awareness stays on. In the early stages, it doesn't stay on for very long at all. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that we become sensitive to when the light goes out. And when we recognize that—flick—turn it on again. That's it. It's very simple.

This is the essential simplicity of the practice. You could say simply: be aware now. That's the job. And if we do that, then the continuity of awareness will develop, the mindfulness will get stronger, and away we go.

But as we said, we structure our practice by developing some kind of central reference point, what Mahasi calls a grounding object. This structures the continuity of awareness. Now, this grounding object can be anything at all. Breathing, for example—very popular. The entire universe, for example—not so popular. And anything in between.

Why is there such diversity? Because normally, I think—well, not always, but often—when you go to learn meditation, you're given something to be aware of. "Be aware of the breath." And sometimes even very specifically, "Be aware of the breath at this part of the body." In Theravada, they really like following the breath at the nose tip. In East Asia, they like following the breath in the abdomen.

Mahasi, strangely enough, recommended following the breath in the abdomen. Basically because he thought that for most people, most of the time, the movements in the abdomen as we breathe are easy to find, and once we find them, relatively easy to stay with.

I found this very interesting. I practiced Zen for some years before I went to Burma, and there I learned to focus on the breathing down here in the belly, which I quite liked because up here was full of tension and thoughts, and down there was kind of more relaxed. So when I went to Mahasi and they said, "Note rising and falling of the abdomen," which was the instruction, I thought, "Yeah, this is no problem." Off I went.

And I did wonder: why did Mahasi say that? Because it's not very Theravada. If you talk to an orthodox practitioner of Theravada Buddhism and they say, "I do breathing meditation," what they mean is, "I follow the breath here, at the nose tip." Because that's what the tradition says. So why did Mahasi go against the tradition and say something very different, which got him into a lot of trouble? He received a huge amount of criticism.

I once asked Sayadaw U Janaka about that. U Janaka was a long-time disciple of Mahasi Sayadaw. I said to him once, "Why did Mahasi Sayadaw recommend following the breath in the abdomen?" And he gave me a very illuminating answer. He said, "I don't know." Perhaps Mahasi himself was never asked to explain.

When Mahasi was criticized for this, what he said was, "Oh, this isn't breathing. No, no, no. Breathing's up here at the nose tip. What we're following in the abdomen is the air element. So this is part of the tracking of the elements. It's fine. Relax. Don't worry about it." He would have made a good lawyer. Some people say he would have made a very good mathematician. Apparently he was very skilled at maths.

Anyway. There's such diversity in grounding objects because the grounding object is not a something—it's a function. Whatever grounds the heart-mind serves as the grounding object. Mahasi Sayadaw summarizes mature insight practice as being aware of whatever is predominant now in any of the six senses. That becomes the grounding object eventually, but that's for maturity.

In the beginning, it's important that we allow mind to settle. It takes energy and it takes stability to remember awareness over time. It's not easy. So one way of approaching the project is by giving ourselves a grounding object—giving ourselves something which is clear, relatively stable, generally easy to find—and saying, "This is what I'm going to focus on." For most practitioners, this is some aspect of body. It could be the breathing, again very popular, or it could be the posture itself, just being aware of the whole body as you sit and what's going on in the body. It could be any strong individual sensation, moving from one sensation to another to another.

So there's no universally compulsory grounding object. And if we come back to our first boundary, maintaining awareness over time, what we notice is that what is central is awareness, not the object of awareness. It's the awareness which is central. But we want to ground our awareness, to stabilize it. And the easiest way to do this is through some aspect of body or mind that we can easily find and settle on and stay with.

This is what we need to establish as we develop a practice: Where can I most readily rest my awareness so it will remain relatively still over a period of time? This is my grounding object, and this is what my awareness will learn to call home. Particularly when you get started in a meditation practice, this is what you need to find out. And again, usually you'd find it in the body.

So we use the grounding object to settle and stabilize. We focus on what is clearly available to us. And then we track it over time.

Now, when we do this, what do we discover? What every meditator in this room is already an expert in: distraction. And distraction is really important because it shows us transitions, which is another essential aspect of the practice.

As we've seen, awareness moves from one place to another. Body and mind move from A to B and back to A again. So we are practicing, minding our own business, and then suddenly we realize we're caught up in distraction. Awareness just moved. We have recognized a transition.

What to do? We actively aware the distraction. The distraction becomes the meditation object. And we call this the secondary object. The grounding object is our central reference point, but every time we are pulled away and we realize we're somewhere else, that something else becomes the secondary object, and we're directly aware of that. Our distraction becomes our teacher.

Distractions are very good teachers because they show us exactly what is going on in the mind. And that's what we want to find out. Using the language of the Buddha, what it shows us is impermanence, change. Impermanence, the perception of impermanence, is the first of the three universal characteristics. And for the Buddha, the perception of impermanence is the gateway into insight.

So what we do is aware our grounding object until awareness moves. Awareness may move because of distraction, or it may move simply because it moves. But wherever it moves to becomes our meditation object, our secondary object. We actively aware this secondary object, and then we come back to the grounding object, to our center of gravity. Awareness moves away, we aware that, we come back. Awareness moves away, we aware that, we come back.

When practitioners are introduced to this method, which for some people sounds a bit unusual, one question that pops up is: how long do we stay with our secondary object? What I usually say is that in the early stages of the practice, briefly. Because we want to stabilize the mind. If we start spending too much time with secondary objects,

we won't stabilize the mind—or at least we will, but it will take much longer. So we aware our distraction just briefly: this is what's happening, got it, and then we come back.

Sometimes our secondary object will not let us go. Pain, for example. If you've ever been sitting and pain develops, you just keep coming back to it. You can't let it go, so you stay there longer. Obsessive thinking—you stay there longer. Because you've got no choice. That's where the awareness is going, and it's not going to move from there. How long we stay with the secondary object—these are questions of skill, questions of the craft. This is what we'll be exploring as we go through the retreat.

So we're tracking the grounding object, we realize awareness has gone somewhere else, we're aware of that, come back to the grounding object, somewhere else, aware of that, come back. As the practice settles, as we become more sensitive to what's going on, we become interested in these transitions. We may come to recognize that transitions are always happening. In fact, we may discover there is no final position. There are only transitions. That's all there ever are.

We become interested in the fact that we move from A to B, and then we learn how we move from A to B. In studying this, we develop the craft of the practice. What happens as the practice matures is that this distinction we've been making between grounding and secondary object evaporates. It ceases to be relevant. The meditation object simply becomes the flow of experience itself, where conceptual distinctions between grounding and secondary are no longer needed. But that comes naturally over time as the practice matures.

For now, early in the retreat, it can be very useful to employ this distinction between grounding and secondary to map the movements of your mind, to see: what is the mind doing?

And as you do this, you favour the grounding object. You come back to the grounding object.

Now, we briefly mentioned that one thing central to this practice is learning to focus on the world of direct experience rather than our habitual concepts about experience. And paradoxically, one way of doing this is by using concepts—particularly by naming the experience that arises in awareness. This is naming, which is characteristic of Mahasi's approach.

Naming places a concept, a label, on the object of awareness. It could even be in the form of a question: "What is clear now?" That's a concept, but it can direct the awareness to recognise, "Oh, this is what's clear." What the naming is meant to do—and what it does when it works—is clarify the experience.

Let's say we're distracted by thinking, and we realise we need to be actively aware. It can help to name it. In naming it, we're objectifying it, making it an object of awareness. The name can be very brief—just "thinking." Or it could be longer, especially if we have a tendency to get entangled in our thinking. We might name it as, "A thought is just a thought." And then return.

The name could even be a question: "Past or future?" This can be an interesting question with thinking, because the mind time-travels. A lot of our thinking tends to be either about the past or about the future. So it can be interesting just to drop in that question—past or future? "Oh, future again." Come back to the grounding object. And it tells us something about the journeys our mind is making.

But whether it's a name, a statement, or a question, the purpose of adding concept is to stimulate accuracy of aim. This is what I'm aware of.

We can also use this with the grounding object. Let's say I'm using breathing as a grounding object. I want to stay with the specifics of the breathing—breathing in, breathing out. So I could name it: in, out, in, out. Another method that people use with the breath in particular is breath counting. They count their breaths, and there are different ways of doing it. But it's another way of adding a concept to the experience in order to clarify: this is what's happening, not that—this.

A question arose: "Doesn't naming the secondary object give it more juice, more energy?"

It depends on the name. Let's say you're thinking about something that really emotionally involves you. You don't name it as, "Oh, this person did that, and blah, blah, blah." Because that's just more thinking. You name it simply as "thinking." It's just a thought—that's all it is. Thinking. Period.

Or you could name the emotion that arises with it. Sometimes a thought arises, and what's really predominant is the emotion that accompanies it—wanting, anger, impatience, whatever. Name that. And if you do that, if you've got an emotion, you look for it in the body.

But where is it in the body? Just name it, in a very neutral way. So for example, name "anger"—not "that bastard did this to me and I'm going to get him." It's just "anger." Period. Full stop.

That's not feeding it. Once you've crossed the border into feeding it, you're back in the world of concept. This is the danger with naming—you don't want to use it as a bridge to get back into the world of concept. It's a way of stepping *out* of the world of concept, acknowledging "this is what's going on." And again, briefly. Then come back.

It takes time to get used to this, because particularly with thinking, our habit is to get sucked into it. It's a very strong habit. It's not going to disappear just because you decide, "I'm meditating now." And if you notice that—if you notice, "oh, sucked in again"—use the name "sucked." You're just naming the experience.

You can use your imagination with the names. What does it feel like to be in this? It feels "bleh." So you can name it "bleh." That would work. Then come back to the grounding object. Again, it's that quality of creativity that always pops up in the meditation. "Gone"—that's a good name. Or "that didn't happen"—just something I'm fantasizing. These work well.

People find their own favorite names. I remember one time I was doing my own retreat and my mind was pretty active. Every time I was distracted by thought, I would name it as either "positions" or "noise." Noise is blah, blah, blah—just mental chatter. Positions is "this is what should be happening, they should have done this, they will do that, I'll explain it to them." Taking a position. That had more juice to it, so I would just note, "Oh, position. Well, that's another position."

There is creativity with the names. The other thing about names is that some people find them really useful—they truly serve to clarify the experience. Other people find them, at best, a distraction, and they just don't connect with them at all. If that happens, if it doesn't work for you, okay—don't use it. It's not compulsory. If it works, great. Its job is to clarify the experience. If you find that you're just adding more complexity on top, well, it's not working, so just drop it. Some people who are intellectually inclined may be tempted to pile more on top.

When you touch that pain, do you just let it live its life physically? Or do you examine it? What's the nature of the investigation?

With pain, it can hold your attention. And sometimes it's like striking gold. If it's existential pain or psychological pain, then it's really good just to stay with the felt quality of it. And you will find it somewhere in the body. So you don't go to the story around it

—the story around it is rubbish. But it's the pain itself which is interesting. Where is it? What is it? Does it move? Is it hard? Is it sharp? Is it soft? Is it hot? Is it cold? This kind of inquiry can be really useful. But we'll talk more about it later on.

So the context here I'm using is fairly early on, when people are just settling in. But as you get settled into this, certain secondary objects come up. They come up because the mind is throwing up what we need to be paying attention to. So we stay there over a period of time. This is part of the process as we go deeper into the heart-mind. The mind cooperates—it sends up what we need to be paying attention to. And so we stay with it over a period of time. But again, it's a question of craft. If you find that you're just getting caught up in thoughts about it, then drop it, go back to the body. But if you can stay with it, great.

And if it's physical pain? There will be physical pain. So you stay with it. If you name it, do not name it as "pain," because that carries the judgment. But how do you know it's pain? What is the actual sensation? So it could be heat, throbbing, pulsing, whatever. You just stay with that.

Another thing which is interesting: let's say this is getting too much. This is pain in the body we're talking about. Then you switch the mind. Why is that sensation painful? It's because there's aversion in the mind—I don't want this to happen. So then, when you feel you can, you switch your awareness to the aversion itself. The "I don't like this" quality of that sensation. And again, that you'll find in the mind, but also in the body. I used to get a lot of pain in the lower part of the body, and I would notice that my body would go up, like "get me out of here." Oh, that's interesting. So it's the aversion itself that you start to look at.

Now, when you're dealing with physical pain, at some point, that's enough. Cut. We didn't mention this in the sitting posture workshop, but especially if you get pain in the knees, don't push it. Because usually, in most cases, when people are getting pain in the knee, it's not because there's a problem with the knee. It's that they don't have enough flexibility in the hip and the upper leg.

And so that tightness there comes out in the knee. And the knee is delicate in the sense that the knee joint only works one way—not this way, but this way. So if you're stressing it out, danger. You've got to live with those knees for the rest of your life. Respect that and change the posture. I've got meditator's knees; they crunch on a regular basis. Just as there are sports injuries, there are meditation injuries. You've got to be careful of that.

So let's summarize. Basically, settle awareness in the body and then see what happens. The body usually provides the grounding object. From there we can see what the mind does, how the mind moves in real time. And we do this in whatever posture we have, in whatever activity we engage in. As the practice matures, what we learn to do is to be aware of whatever arises in experience, regardless of what it is.

But here's the basic framework. Cultivate the continuity of awareness, which, as we talked about this morning, entails becoming sensitive to the discontinuities of awareness. When we see the discontinuities of awareness—that's very important. Becoming aware of how awareness wanders, where it wanders. Become sensitive to distraction. And when distraction emerges, pay attention to it. It's interesting. It has a lot to teach us.

Secondly, we cultivate a grounding object—some aspect of our experience that we can easily find and then stay with, and then notice when we lose it. For most people, this would be some aspect of body: breathing, sensation, posture. As the practice matures, as transitions become central, the grounding object will become whatever is clear to us in this moment.

And then, as we track the unfolding of experience, we learn to focus on transitions. When we do that, distraction is no longer a problem. Because what we normally call distraction is just a transition—but it's a transition that we disapprove of. That's why we call it a distraction. So we become interested in the fact of change. And by learning to maintain awareness through change, we learn the craft of the practice.

Over time, as we become more sensitive to awareness and the aware, we become intimate with the mind that knows experience and the heart that responds to experience. We settle into whatever is predominant now, and we may find this is what the Buddha calls the citta, the heart-mind. And finally, we start to drop beneath our habitual concepts into the world of insight. We'll talk more about this later in the retreat.

Okay, that's it for tonight. Any questions?

A yogi asks: How do yogis normally differentiate between the narrative story of their experience and direct experience? Can you elaborate a little bit more about how to differentiate that?

I will as we go through. But for the moment, if you find yourself in an interesting story, drop it. It's a delicate thing, quite subtle. And I think we have an entire talk about it, so we'll get into it. It's very interesting—quite fascinating, actually. And it's really central to understanding how the practice works.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 86

Tracking Elements (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 49 min

> *In this practice-focused session from a retreat on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, Patrick Kearney introduces element meditation (dhātu) as a foundational approach to mindfulness of body. Drawing from the Buddha's understanding that we are fundamentally sentient bodies who feel, Patrick explains how sustained awareness allows us to move beneath our concepts about body—including body image and expectations about practice—to discover the elemental qualities of direct experience.*
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> *The talk explores the four great elements (mahābhūta): earth element as resistance from soft to hard, air element as movement, fire element as temperature from cold to hot, and water element as liquidity and cohesion. Through Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's famous 'hand becoming fist' demonstration, Patrick illustrates how concepts with clear borders dissolve under close examination, revealing instead a flow of discrete sensations. The guided meditation that follows offers practitioners direct experience of tracking these elements throughout the body.*
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> *Patrick emphasizes that this practice develops the precision essential for insight (vipassanā)—literally 'seeing distinctly'—as opposed to serenity practice where such precision is unnecessary. He notes how different practitioners may find certain elements easier to locate and sustain attention upon, encouraging each person to 'play to their strengths' by focusing on what is clearest. The teaching concludes by noting how element awareness can extend beyond body to working with emotions and thoughts, and acknowledges the philosophical point that while 'hard' and 'soft' remain concepts, they represent concepts closer to direct experience than our usual conceptual overlay.*

So far we've talked about the meditation practice in pretty general terms, and today we'll start looking at particular aspects. This morning we're going to look at tracking the elements.

Where this fits in is as an aspect of mindfulness of body. The root text of the tradition is the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, and it lists four areas for mindfulness, with body as number one. So this is really important from the Buddha's perspective of what meditation is all about. It's very much a body-based activity, and it is so because the Buddha's view of human nature is essentially that we are bodies.

In the traditional European view, there's a tendency to separate out body over here, mind here, spirit there. There's a tendency to feel that what characterizes the human being is rationality, and that rationality somehow transcends the body. But for the Buddha, we are fundamentally bodies—sentient bodies. A sentient body is a body that feels, but in particular feels pain. So we come to this practice as bodies and we practice as bodies. This is very important. We're not catapulting beyond the body into some spiritual realm.

When the Buddha talks about body or about anything else, he's talking about it from the point of view of experience. When he says body, what he means is our experience of body. He's always coming at it from a first-person perspective. What he's interested in is the nature of human experience. So he's not really a philosopher. He's not speculating about the human condition so much as examining what is the experience of being human, including what is the experience of body.

When the Buddha talks about body, he talks about it sometimes in a broad sense, sometimes in a narrow sense. In a broad sense, body covers the territory of the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. So you could say the entire experienced physical universe. The sense that we have sitting in a room with pretty subdued lighting, and it's cold, and there's the sound of the wind outside—all of this is body. But sometimes he uses body in a narrow sense of sensitivity to touch. This is the fifth of the five physical senses, and this touch can be internal or external.

For example, as I'm sitting here on my cushion, I can feel the touch of the cushion on my buttocks and the touch of the pad on my legs. This is external touch. Internal touch would be the particular physical sensations going on, the sense of lift and firmness up through the spine. In the traditions, they really focus on touch as a meditation object because it's clear, it's obvious. It's a good foundation to begin.

One important element to notice is that when the Buddha talks about body, he does not mean our concepts about body, but the direct experience of body. Normally we do not experience our body directly. We experience it through a filter of concepts about body. For example, body image: we are obsessed about how our body appears to ourselves and to others, all of which is concept.

We also find ourselves lost in concept when we come to practice meditation. We're given some aspect of body to be aware of—it could be everyday movements, it could be breathing—and what we find is that we very easily become preoccupied and focused on our concepts about body rather than body itself. For example, what we are supposed to feel in this practice. Has anybody found themselves when they're meditating, wondering, "Is this what's supposed to happen? Is this good enough?" Well, that's not body.

That's a layer of concepts about body that we're putting down, and it's getting in the way. What we're supposed to feel, what is meant to happen—these layers of concepts block us from full intimacy with actual physical sensation.

For the purposes of the practice, we want to get down to actual physical sensation. We want to get down to what is really going on in the body as distinct from any concept we have about what is going on in the body. One time in Burma, the way Sayadaw U Pandita tried to express this was that he raised a hand and he said, "What's this?"

Needless to say, the entire hall was paralyzed because everybody was thinking, "This is a trick question. What am I supposed to say?" Until eventually someone had the courage to say, "It's a hand." "Yes, a hand. Very good." And then he went, "Okay, what's this?" "A fist?" "Yes. Very good."

So everybody agreed. He established universal consent. Everybody agreed: this is hand, this is fist. And then he said, "Great. Now, you all know this. You all understand this. Completely unanimous. So you can tell me when this hand turns into a fist." He started to slowly curl his fingers. "Just tell me when the hand turns into a fist."

Now the tension rises, and at some point someone can't help themselves, and they say, "There!" "Oh, okay, there. So this is a fist, but this isn't. Yes?" And of course, immediately—discombobulation. What's the border? At what point does hand become fist?

There is no point. Hand and fist as concepts are very useful. One reason is because they have clear borders. But does physical experience itself have clear borders?

And then he offered a little meditation exercise, which we will do today, in which we are going to investigate what is the experience of my hand. So what I want you to do is sit there, just have your hand out, palm up, close your eyes, settle awareness in your body, and feel your hand. Just feel it. And ask yourself, what am I actually experiencing? And now very slowly start to curl your fingers and feel what is the experience. Don't take it for granted that you know, but really look. What is the experience? What's going on? Keep curling the fingers. And if you come to the point where the fingers touch the palm, keep curling. But what am I actually experiencing?

So what did you experience?

"Movement of—"

Movement. You notice as soon as you said "of," you were about to slide into a concept. But movement. What else?

"Temperature."

Temperature, so cold or hot.

"Tightness."

Tightness. Tension.

"Images."

Images. Mental images. So the mind throwing up concepts. Pictures.

So if we look at what we actually experience—take away the concepts, take away the "of," take away the "about"—and settle in on the actual experience itself, what we get is a whole variety of distinct sensations: movement, hardness, heat, coolness, and so on.

This is what we find beneath concepts. I have my hand, but when I really closely examine it, this hand dissolves into a series of discrete individual sensations: movement, sharpness, heat, stiffness. One way of looking at this is that the concept "this is my hand" does not survive sustained awareness. When I'm aware of something over a period of time, the concept that I have about it simply dissolves. It doesn't match anymore. And what survives are the directly experienced qualities of the experience—in this case, of the body.

For the Buddha, these are the elements, the elemental qualities of the body. Physical experience breaks up into a whole series of discrete sensations, and these sensations are the elements of physical experience. They're called elements because they are what survive sustained awareness. Strip away the concepts, and this is what is left behind.

A very common example: let's say I'm meditating on the breathing, and then suddenly I get lost in my thoughts. At that point, I am living in a world created by those thoughts. This world I'm living in is not here and now—it's somewhere else, and somewhen else, usually. But it's real to me. Then suddenly, I know that I'm thinking. And at that point—bang—that world dissolves. It vanishes. In other words, this world that I took to be real does not survive awareness. In this case, even for a moment, it's not real.

So I come back to this world where I'm sitting in the hall meditating. In this world, my left knee hurts and I really don't want to be sitting here. But let's say I'm a dutiful meditator, so I follow the meditation instructions and start to directly experience the specific sensations that make up my painful left knee. Let's say these sensations hold my attention and I stay with them. After some time, I may realise that my world of "I don't want to be sitting here" has dissolved, because it's just a concept. When I'm absorbed in the actual physical experience, that world vanishes. It has not survived sustained awareness.

Even my left knee dissolves, because all I've got are sensations in space. The sense of it being my left knee has disappeared. So again, my left knee has not survived sustained awareness.

When we really pay attention to what's going on and we sustain that awareness over time, some things dissolve, other things remain. And what remains, even after sustained awareness—these are the elemental qualities of experience. They are the elements.

In the case of the body, they are what is really going on in the body, as distinct from what we think is going on in the body, what we imagine is going on in the body, or even what we perceive to be going on in the body. And it's in this world, the world of direct experience, that for the Buddha, insight can begin to emerge.

Does that make any sense? Here we're starting to get philosophical.

Now, here we're working in particular with touch. The Buddha says that our experience of touch—the fifth of the five physical senses—breaks down into what he calls the four great appearances, the mahābhūta. They are four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

You probably know that in the European tradition, you also have this idea of the four elements. But what makes the Buddha's approach distinctive, I think, is that for him, these elements are not aspects or parts of nature. They are qualities of experience.

So, for example, earth element is the experience of resistance, from soft through to hard. Let's say I have my hands out like this, and I bring them together. I've got no resistance—they're just moving through space. At some point they touch, and immediately there's resistance.

At first, this resistance presents as soft, but if I keep moving in the same direction, it becomes hard. So resistance from soft through to hard—this is earth element.

Air element is the experience of movement in all of its forms. Bringing my hands together, I've got predominantly air element, the sense of movement, but I've also got resistance because there's a stiffness in the hands. And then when the hands join, earth element becomes stronger.

The fire element is temperature, from cold to hot. Again, if I'm bringing my hands together, the quality of temperature I can feel in the hands—the fingers touch, and the temperature goes up. It's a bit warmer there.

And finally, we have water element, which is the most obscure of the four elements. This is the experience of liquidity and cohesion. Liquidity is wetness and dryness, and cohesion is stickiness and slipperiness—the tendency, for example, to slide on a wet floor would be a manifestation of water element.

So all we're going to do now is have an exploration of these elements as meditation objects.

Get into your meditation posture. Settle awareness in your body. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body. From there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders. Let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact on your cushion, bench, or chair. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame, there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Now turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel hardness. Where can you find hardness? Look for hardness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: hard, hard.

Now turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel softness. Look for softness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: soft, soft.

Now open your awareness up to the whole body, feeling your whole body. Turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel heat or warmth. Can you find heat? Warmth? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: hot, warm.

Now focus on those parts of your body where you feel cold or coolness. Look for cold, coolness. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: cold, cool.

Once more, open up your awareness so you're feeling your whole body. Now turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel wetness. Can you find wetness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: wet.

Now focus on those parts of your body where you can find dryness. Look for dryness. If you can find it, focus on it. Name it: dry.

And again, open your awareness out to the whole body, feeling your whole body. From there, turn your attention to those parts of your body where you feel movement. Look for movement. If you can find it, focus on it and name it: moving.

And now focus on those parts of the body where you find stillness. Look for stillness. If you can find it, focus on it. Name it: still.

Now open again your awareness to your whole body and open up to the flow of all the elements. Don't try to hold on to any one sensation but allow all the sensations to flow naturally. Don't try to find anything in particular. Just be aware of whatever is happening within your body without trying to control it.

So that was a quick tour of the elements. Which one did you find, first of all, easiest to locate and most obvious—and presumably therefore easiest to stay with?

"Cold and hot."

"Hot and soft."

"Hard and soft."

Yes, cold, hot, hard, soft. Anyone else? What was the easiest one to find and, having found it, to be able to stay with?

"Wet."

Wet is quite difficult to find. Some people find difficulty with that water element. What about movement?

"Movement."

And what about stillness? Did anybody find stillness?

So beyond the elements is space, and space is still. Space meets all the elements. Space is one of the elements—it's not one of those in that list of four, but space is indeed one of the elements.

So movement was fairly obvious. Hard and soft were fairly obvious. Hard especially—it's like, "Oh my God, it's hard!"

So it was hard to stay with, difficult to remain present with. I found it, but it was sort of disappearing. It dissolved.

Most of the popular meditation objects, when you look at them, are usually based on earth element and air element. Breathing involves air and movement. Body sensation often involves hard and soft. These are, in a sense, the most common ones. Water is the most obscure. Did anybody have problems with water—wet and dry? No? So which one did you find—wet or dry? Which one did you find in the mouth? Wet.

I was going to say, I found hard, and then I found an area of my body that was tense, which was like hard. But staying with it, it changed. I found that interesting—how, in a way, I was making it hard, and it could change.

Yes, that's one of the things that happens when we start to get down beneath the level of concept: the fact of change becomes more apparent. We'll be talking more about this later. Concepts are relatively stable. The world underneath concept is much more fluid, much more dynamic.

Now, the reason why we do this exercise—you notice that it's an exercise in aim. We're aiming at hard. Not wet, not dry, not soft, not moving—hard. And then we're aiming at dry. Not wet, not movement—dry. So we're targeting awareness. We're developing aim and precision.

This is important if we're practicing for insight. If we're practicing for serenity, where all we want to do is develop samādhi, well, that means we just want the mind and body to be still. Precision is not important. It's of no particular consequence at all. But if we're practicing for insight, precision becomes very important.

This comes out in the very word that gets translated as insight: vipassanā. Passanā means seeing, and the prefix vi denotes separation, distinctness. So seeing how this is different from that. This is the kind of perception that we need to develop to enter into the world of insight.

What becomes apparent is exactly impermanence. We stay with something in its elemental quality and it changes. This effect of change—remember we talked about one of the basic frameworks that we're working with in this practice: transitions, change, impermanence. When we drop the concept and go beneath to the actual direct experience, it turns out to be much less stable than we might at first assume it to be. It changes.

So precision and change—these are very important. And then we learn, for example, that if we want to stimulate mindfulness, if you want to maintain awareness over time, look for what is clearest and most obvious to you. Play to your strengths, basically. If something is clear and obvious, that's your meditation object, because it's easier to find and generally easier to stay with until it changes into something else.

Notice also that sometimes we would open awareness out to the whole field of the body. Sometimes we zero in on a very precise target. We open out, we zero in. This is just illustrative that there are different ways of attending. We can attend to a wide field or we can attend to a very narrow point, or anything in between. Both forms of attention are valid. Some people find one easier than the other.

Some people, if they zero in on a single point, say that they get claustrophobic, they get tight, it becomes unpleasant. Whereas when they open out, they have a sense of spaciousness, openness—it's much better. Other people say, "When I open out, I just get lost. But if I have something very specific to hang on to, I can really stay with it." So it's not that one style is better than the other, but they're different, and you find out what works best for you. And when we talk about what works best for you, we mean: what can you find and stay with over a period of time?

One thing that is very interesting and useful about the elements: when the Buddha talks about them, he talks in terms of the body. But you can use the same approach when working with mind. When you're caught up in an emotion, for example—is that emotion hot or cold? Is it hard or soft? Is it still? Is it moving? Thinking is interesting. Thinking has lots of elemental quality. Doesn't thought move a lot? And so on. So once you get used to this idea of the elements, it's very useful for working with the body, but you can then apply it to the mind as well. It seems to naturally flow into that.

You notice that sometimes the more legalistic or philosophically inclined meditators will point this out: we've been going on about dropping beneath the concepts to the elements. What's the fatal flaw in this exposition? "Elements" is another concept. "Hard" is a concept. "Soft" is a concept. So we haven't really escaped concept at all. But what we're doing is finding concepts that are closer to the actual direct experience rather than further removed. Actually dropping concept completely is quite something. In most cases, we don't really do that, but we drop lower and lower, closer and closer to the direct experience.

So your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to play with the elements if that interests you. Whenever in the mornings we toss something out—try this, try that—we're making suggestions. If you find this interesting and useful, go for it. Play with it. If it's not, well, just forget about it.

But you notice that this is all about precision. Now that we've settled into the retreat to a certain extent, beginning to wake up perhaps, it's time to be more precise with the awareness when we can. If you try to be precise too much, you'll find there's a sense of strain and it won't be sustainable. So assess when you can be more precise and see what comes out of that.

CHAPTER 87

Why Practise?

Patrick Kearney · 45 min

> *In this reflective talk, Patrick Kearney steps back from technical meditation instruction to explore the fundamental question: why do we practise? Drawing from the oldest Buddhist records in the Pāli Canon, he retells the story of Gotama's spiritual quest—from his privileged upbringing among the Sakyan clan, through his studies with teachers Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, his extreme ascetic practices, and finally his discovery of the middle path leading to awakening under the Bodhi tree.*
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> *Kearney unpacks the Four Noble Truths as presented in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), examining dukkha not merely as gross suffering but as the pervasive unsatisfactoriness woven through all experience. He illuminates how craving, aversion, and clinging create our suffering, using the famous parable of the two arrows from the Sallatha Sutta (SN 36.6) to show how we compound unavoidable pain with self-inflicted mental anguish. The talk also features the remarkable story of Princess Sumedhā from the Therīgāthā, whose fierce determination to renounce worldly pleasures offers profound teaching on letting go.*
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> *The practical relevance is clear: vipassanā meditation creates conditions where letting go happens naturally as we develop insight into our habitual patterns. As Ajahn Chah taught, letting go completely brings complete peace and freedom. This talk offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a meaningful reflection on what draws us to the cushion and what genuine liberation might mean in our lives.*

Tonight I thought we'd take a little break from so much emphasis on the practice and the nature of awareness and mindfulness and what we should be doing in the practice, and instead make a little bit of room for some storytelling and considering some of the bigger philosophical questions.

So tonight's talk is exploring why we practice, the purpose of meditation, why it's something worth doing. And this is a relevant question, given the pace and busyness of modern lives. We're all pressed for time, we're all stressed and exhausted, juggling all the things that we're involved with. So to voluntarily take up something like a meditation practice, we need to have a sense that it's something worth doing. And also, in the face of so many overwhelming and overlapping social and planetary crises, sometimes we may wonder whether sitting on our meditation cushion is doing anything of benefit at all, or is it just a self-indulgent luxury?

So this question of why we practice is something that you might like to reflect on for yourself right now. What drew you to join this retreat? Why is it something that you considered valuable?

To explore this question, I'm going to go back to a story that many of you will be very familiar with, an oldie but a goodie, a story from ancient Buddhism—the story of the Buddha's own life. Because, of course, he was consumed by this very question of how to attain peace and freedom in one's life. So we can see if his quest resonates for us.

Most of the detail I'm going to give comes from the oldest Buddhist records called the Pāli Canon, which was written down in Sri Lanka around 100 BCE, about 500 years or so after the Buddha lived. But of course, he belonged to an oral non-literate tradition, so for those first 500 years, the teachings were memorized and handed down from generation to generation orally.

The Pāli Canon is vast and it contains many incredible details about the Buddha's life and also the lives and happenings of many of the people, the men and women who were in his community of practitioners at the time. And of course the teachings that were given, but also many details about the society and the world in which they lived in ancient India.

The Buddha was a historical figure. He lived about 600 BCE, two and a half thousand years ago. But we can relate to him as a character in a story that can guide our life. The style of storytelling that we find in the Pāli Canon reflects the society in which the Buddha lived, which is totally different to the secular, rationalist, post-enlightenment world that we inhabit today. So the stories are embellished with things that we would label as mythology and superstition. But this doesn't need to put us off because we're not being asked to believe in them. Instead, we're being offered that we use them to guide and shape the way we live our lives if we find them useful.

So after that preamble, let's journey back to 600 BCE to meet the baby who became the Buddha. He was born in a small republic in the foothills of the Himalayas in what is now southern Nepal into a warrior clan called the Sakhyans. He wasn't called the Buddha when he was born. Buddha is a title and it means "awakened one," so it's a title he took on after his awakening. In the Pāli Canon, he is merely referred to by his family name, Gotama.

Gotama was the son of the chief of the Sakyan clan. So not a prince exactly, as subsequent Buddhist traditions often hold, but he certainly did live a life of great privilege and status and wealth, with summer and winter residences, clothes made of the best Benares silk, pleasure gardens, and a harem of concubines for his amusement.

Gotama grows up in this sheltered and privileged life in his father's household and he adopts the duties of the eldest son. When he's a young man he takes a suitable girl to be his wife and in time she becomes pregnant with their child. And at this point in Gotama's life he begins to really question the meaning of the life that he leads and whether it can bring true happiness. He begins to contemplate the inevitability of sickness, old age and death, and to wonder how we can truly be happy and free when we're living in the shadow of pain and suffering and death.

As he contemplates this, spiritual urgency arises in him to seek a different way of being, free from suffering. It grows stronger and stronger until eventually he feels compelled to leave his life behind and set out on his spiritual quest.

This is a detail that many of us find hard to swallow, the idea of the Buddha leaving behind his wife and child. And it's true that his family did not want him to go. But perhaps Gotama felt deep within him that despite their protests, seeking a way out of suffering was the best way that he could protect his family. We do know that once he found freedom from suffering, he did return to his birthplace, to his family. And many members of his extended family decided to leave their comfortable positions of wealth and privilege and to join him in the spiritual community, including his wife and his young son, Rāhula, who by that time was seven years old.

Gotama left his home and first went to a renowned spiritual teacher who was the leader of a meditative community in the locality, named Āḷāra Kālāma. Gotama joined the community and learned from Āḷāra Kālāma, but after becoming a disciple and practicing diligently for a few months, he found that he had quickly attained the same level of attainment as Āḷāra Kālāma himself. And so his teacher had nothing more to teach him.

Clearly the man who was to become the Buddha had a prodigious talent for meditation. But he also realised that despite reaching this pinnacle of Āḷāra Kālāma's path, he wasn't yet fully liberated from suffering, which was what his quest was in aid of. And so although Āḷāra Kālāma offered to share the leadership of the community with him, Gotama decided he must continue his search elsewhere. He's not going to find what he's looking for here.

He next went to another renowned teacher who had a spiritual community in the area and basically the exact same thing happened there. Realising that neither practice was going to lead him to final liberation, he struck out on his own and decided to become a wandering ascetic. He heads off into the forest to practice on his own and gradually joins up with some other ascetics who are doing similar extreme practices in

the forest. They form a sort of loose community, a little band of them, each inspiring the others to become more and more extreme in their ascetic practice and their mastery of the flesh.

So this is the phase that he was describing in the passage that I read out the other night, where he was crushing mind with mind and sweat ran from his armpits. The kinds of practices that they were doing involved sustained efforts to deny themselves of food and even to deny themselves of breath, in order to face and conquer the excruciating physical pain that these practices caused.

And like when he was in the other two communities earlier on, Gotama is the most conscientious and the most accomplished practitioner, taking the austerities to such extremes that he nearly dies. And finally, when he's actually on the brink of starvation, he realizes that this path also isn't going to lead to final liberation. It's actually just going to kill him.

And in this moment he asks himself: might there be another way to awakening? He famously remembers a time when he was a child, resting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree, watching his father working. And he spontaneously entered the first jhana, which is a very peaceful and pleasurable concentration state. As he reviews the memory, he realizes that it was his pleasure lying in the shade, with his mind and body relaxed, that conditioned this spontaneous jhana state. And in that moment he understands that pleasure is not something that must be run from and mastered, as he's been trying to do with the ascetic practices, but that it has a place on the spiritual path.

This realization is the turning point in his spiritual quest that finally sets him on the path to awakening. By this time he's spent years perfecting the art of meditation. He's extremely accomplished. He's mastered all the transcendental states that his teachers could show him. But he's found that although these allow him to transcend his bodily sensory experience and reach states of sublime peace and bliss, they're only temporary states, and thus they're only a temporary escape from suffering. On top of this, he spent years mastering the most extreme practices that can be inflicted on the human mind and body in an attempt to crush and control his sensory experience. But he's found that this too doesn't bring an end to suffering.

And so now he realizes what's come to be known in the tradition as the middle path, which doesn't seek to transcend or suppress sensory experience, but refines and transforms our relationship to sensory experience. This is important for the way we practice, because the middle path that the Buddha discovered is fundamentally an embodied path. The two other paths that he tried before seek liberation by escaping the body—by transcending the physical realm in the case of the esoteric concentration practices

taught by his first two spiritual teachers, and by mastering physical pain and weakness in the case of the ascetic practices. But the middle path is an embodied path. It's liberation through the body, through intimacy with our embodied experience.

So to the utter disdain of his ascetic companions, he eats some rice and milk to regain his strength. And since his companions are disgusted with what they see as his weakness and capitulation, he strikes out on his own once again. He wanders off and settles himself down under a huge old Bodhi tree, vowing not to move until he's attained awakening. Over the course of the next night, he enters into ever deeper and deeper meditation states, until by the time the dawn is breaking, he's fully liberated from suffering. He's a Buddha.

Up until now, his spiritual quest has taken seven years. After his awakening, he spent a number of weeks absorbed in meditation at the root of several great trees in the area, reviewing and savoring what he's realized. And then he begins to contemplate who he might be able to share this understanding with. He decides on his five former ascetic companions, who of course are still relatively close by in the forest, continuing their practices.

He walks back to where they're camped out. And when he arrives, he proclaims, "I've done it. I'm awakened now, and I've come to show you the way." But they are not the slightest bit interested, because they think he's gone soft, that he couldn't hack the austerities that they were all doing together, and he'd given up. They saw him eating some rice milk and slinking off into the forest. So when he turns up a few weeks later and claims that he's awakened, at first they completely ignore him.

But eventually he says to them, "In all the time that you've known me, have I ever claimed to be awakened?" And they say, "Well, no." And he says, "Well, I'm making that claim now." So he finally has their attention, and they sit down to listen to a teaching.

In this first ever teaching the Buddha gives, he presents what are famously now known as the Four Noble Truths. And this is where we're going to depart from the Buddha's story tonight, although it's just the beginning of his story as the Buddha, of course. He goes on to found a hugely popular and successful community of thousands of lay and ordained practitioners, men and women, supported by some of the wealthiest patrons in the region, including historical kings and queens. He roamed the forests and outskirts of the towns and villages in northern India for the next forty-five years, living as a forest-dwelling monk and teaching tirelessly until his death at the age of eighty.

But we're going to turn now to look at the Four Noble Truths, where we find the answer to the question of why we practice. We've already got a hint about this from the purpose of the Buddha's own spiritual quest—to find a way out of suffering. But the Four Noble Truths elaborate on why meditation can help to remove suffering from our lives.

In summary, the Four Noble Truths are: first, the fact of dukkha, or suffering; second, the origin of suffering; third, the ending of suffering; and fourth, the path leading to the ending of suffering.

Now this is the noble truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.

Now this is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: It is this craving which leads to re-becoming, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there—that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, craving for extermination.

Now this is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it.

Now this is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: It is this noble eightfold path—that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

So the first noble truth is the fact of suffering, dukkha. Dukkha is most often translated as suffering, though probably a better translation is unsatisfactoriness. Many people prefer to leave it untranslated, which is what I'll do from here on, because there's really no English word that encapsulates the full range of experience that dukkha refers to.

On the one hand, dukkha refers to obvious suffering—ill health and injury, the losses and pain associated with aging, the suffering of death and dying, the pain of losing a loved one. But dukkha also encompasses the whole spectrum of unpleasant experience. At one extreme, there's the suffering of losing a loved one, which we can all agree is suffering at its worst. But at the other, there's the experience of stopping by your favourite cafe, full of anticipation because they make great coffee and you're really craving one, only to be a bit disappointed when you sip your first mouthful and discover that today's coffee isn't excellent. It's a little too hot and a little too bitter. Not terrible—just mediocre. Perfectly drinkable, but it doesn't live up to your expectations of the superb cof-

fee you were hoping for, and it doesn't satisfy your craving in the way you had anticipated. This is also dukkha. But you wouldn't really say it's suffering to have a pretty okay barista-made coffee. In this case, it's more like unsatisfactoriness. The experience is not completely satisfactory.

Dukkha is also evident in enjoyable experiences, in their nature not to stay the same forever. The dukkha in the perfect coffee is that there's just one cup of it. And there's no guarantee that when you go back to the same cafe the next day, the cup of coffee you'll get will be just as good. Even a moment that you can't imagine being any better still contains the quality of dukkha within it, because it will necessarily pass away and be followed by less satisfactory experiences.

In fact, dukkha is present in every moment. I once heard dukkha described as anything you would change right now about your present experience, even the smallest thing. Are you feeling a bit tired or a bit uncomfortable, or wishing you wore a slightly warmer jumper? That's dukkha. Dukkha is ever-present. It's part of how we experience the world. The word comes from the Pali prefix *du*, which means bad, and *kha*, which is the hub of a wheel. So dukkha is like an ill-fitting wheel that doesn't roll smoothly through life.

So there's the first noble truth, the fact of dukkha, which we all experience because it's inescapable. And then there are the next two truths: that there is an origin or cause of dukkha, and therefore there's a way to end it. This gets to the heart of why we practice. We're all here because of our dukkha and because we're looking for a path out of it.

People are drawn to meditation because of their dukkha. For some, this is very explicit because they're going through a painful time in their lives. For others less so, because the dukkha they're suffering may not be so obvious. But we're all drawn to meditation because we're searching for something more out of life, something better. We may be hoping for a bit more peace and calm, or we may be going for full awakening. Either way, we're motivated by a desire to escape our dukkha.

But to end our dukkha, we need to understand its cause. According to the second noble truth, the origin of dukkha is our craving. Craving is the feeling of wanting something I don't have—or, the flip side, not wanting something I have. That's aversion, but these are equal and opposite movements. And if you watch your actions closely, as we do in insight meditation, you soon see that craving and aversion are what motivate us pretty much every time we move our bodies.

They're ever-present. We feel uncomfortable in our sitting posture, aversion arises, and then we change position. We see a delicious-looking dish on the lunch table, craving arises, and we reach for the spoon. We feel tired, we think of our cozy bed, craving arises, and we get up off our cushion and head out the door.

So craving and aversion are usually what move us to act. But they're also what creates dukkha, because it's unpleasant not to get what we want or to have to endure what we don't want. This is what causes the inherent unsatisfactoriness of experience.

And whenever there's craving or aversion, there's also clinging. Clinging is our tendency to grab hold of our experience and use it to begin weaving a story, a self, a world. We cling to things we like and things we don't like. Clinging has this quality of not letting things go. And as we all know, we can refuse to let go of things that we don't like just as much as we can cling to things that we do like.

There's a very famous teaching that demonstrates this: the parable of the two arrows. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it. It's called the Sallatha Sutta, and in it the Buddha says:

When touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed ordinary person sorrows, grieves and laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical and mental, just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and right afterward were to shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pains of two arrows.

And the Buddha contrasts this with those whose minds and hearts are free:

Now the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones, when touched with a feeling of pain, does not sorrow, grieve or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught. So he feels one pain, physical but not mental, just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and right afterward did not shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pain of only one arrow.

The difference here is that this second person, who is a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—basically a meditation practitioner—feels pain but doesn't cling to it and doesn't heap additional suffering on top of the pain.

This is an incredibly insightful observation about human experience. We encounter painful situations every day, no matter what our circumstances. We stub our toe, we lose a treasured possession, we get annoyed with someone, we face financial worries or health problems, we lose people we love. In all of these situations, big or small, we're struck with the arrow of physical or emotional pain. It's just part of life. It's what we face in life.

But it's what we do next that causes the real suffering—the reactions and the judgment and the spinning of a story about how terrible it is. This is the second arrow, the mental suffering that doesn't just happen in the moment but goes on and on.

Take, for example, the experience of chronic pain. It's very hard in our habitual state of mind to relate to the direct experience of chronic pain, because as soon as it starts, our habitual reactions have already begun. "Oh, not this pain again. I'm so sick of it troubling me. It's going to wreck the retreat, or the holiday happening afterward, or the marathon I'm training for." "I can never escape from it."

There's a movement here from the actual experience of pain in the moment—this is the first arrow—to an imagined future or an imagined past, which isn't real. It's just a story in our mind, but we're completely wrapped up in this story, identifying with it, and it's causing us great suffering. By clinging to our pain, we're letting it define us. This is the second arrow.

Basically, the Buddha is saying that life shoots arrows at you. Life is like that. And they hurt. But when we resist them desperately, when we cling to our own made-up stories about them, then we are shooting ourselves with a second arrow. If we can simply allow painful feelings to move through us without clinging to them or getting caught up in the story about them, then we can avoid the suffering of the second arrow.

I hope this is resonating. I hope this is something we can all identify with—the many ways and many times in which we shoot this second arrow at ourselves.

The way to end dukkha, according to the third noble truth, is to let go of our craving, aversion, and clinging. When we let go, we refrain from shooting ourselves with a second arrow.

With the coffee example, it's pretty obvious that there's nothing inherent in that nice barista-made coffee that makes it unsatisfactory. It's the clinging to the perfect coffee we had last time that causes the dukkha. If we were to let go of the idea of a particular experience of coffee, then maybe we could find this second coffee very satisfactory. Because actually, it's still quite a good coffee.

We could thoroughly enjoy it.

So the Buddha is not saying, as is sometimes believed, that we shouldn't enjoy things. Sometimes non-clinging or non-attachment is taken to mean not caring, or not feeling, or feeling neutral towards others or towards things in our lives. But that's not what the Buddha is getting at. What he's saying is that we need to cut the craving, aversion and

clinging that usually flavor our experience of the world and lead to dukkha. It's the relationship of craving and clinging that's the problem, that prevents the heart from being free.

If you think about someone you love, isn't it true that love brings not only joy but also dukkha? Everyone we love, we also worry about them, or they annoy us, or they let us down, or we fear losing them. This is the relationship of craving and clinging. It can take something beautiful like love and make it into something painful. And in its worst extreme, craving and clinging can twist love into something dark and abusive, because we don't usually experience pure love. We experience love that's burning with the fire of craving and clinging.

Letting go is something the Princess Sumedha understood from a young age. When Sumedha was a young woman—she was probably still a teenager—she heard the Buddha's teachings, probably from monks and nuns, or maybe the Buddha himself, traveling to the town where she lived and teaching the lay people there. She came into contact with the Buddha's teachings and developed a deep love for the Dhamma.

But she was a princess, a young woman, and her life path was set by her social position. In fact, she was betrothed to a king from a neighboring kingdom. But she was apparently also virtuous, learned, and a brilliant speaker—this is what's recorded in the Pali Canon about her—and she was obviously very feisty as well. There was no way that Sumedha was going to let her parents marry her off when she had a deep thirst for the Dhamma.

Sumedha did eventually become a nun, and she left behind in the Pali Canon an extraordinary poem that details how she managed to join the Order of Nuns and dedicate her life to the practice. It's really quite an extraordinary poem to read. It's one of those passages from the Pali Canon that brings these people who lived two and a half thousand years ago to life—so relatable, so full of human emotion.

Most of the poem describes an exchange which takes place between herself, her parents, and her fiancé. It reads like an exchange between an angry teenage girl and her parents, who she sees as knowing nothing and standing in the way of what she wants.

She starts by petitioning her parents with reasoned arguments about why she should become a nun. They refuse and try to reason back with her: "But Sumedha, you're a princess! You're about to marry a king. You're going to live a life of luxury." But the more they argue back, the more steadfast and insistent Sumedha becomes. The situation escalates until finally Sumedha declares a hunger strike. No food will pass her lips while she is still a laywoman.

You can imagine the situation. The parents are distraught, trying to reason with her. She's distraught and unyielding. Things are already very fraught. And then her fiancé arrives on the scene for the wedding ceremony. The parents say, "Please, can you try and talk to Sumedha?" He tries cajoling her with promises about the life they'll lead together: "You're going to be a queen. Think about the riches, the power, the luxury, this lovely life that we're going to lead together," and so on.

But instead of having the desired effect, at this point Sumedha goes ballistic. She really loses it. All of these details are in the poem. By this time, all three of them—her parents and her fiancé—are on the floor weeping. Sumedha grabs a knife, hacks off her hair, and throws it on the floor. And then, in an incredible piece of poetry that goes on for twenty-nine stanzas, she absolutely blasts all three of them about the dangers of clinging to sensual pleasures.

In the midst of this wrathful outburst—where she compares sensual desires to a snake's head, terrible poison, a skeleton, scraps of meat, a pit of glowing coals—she gives them this poetic and profound advice:

Every sensual delight is on fire, ablaze, seething. When a firebrand in your hand is alight, let go and you won't get burned.

And they do eventually listen, and they let go of Sumedha. They allow her to go forth and ordain, and she practices and attains final liberation.

So let go and you won't get burned. This is Sumedha's advice. And letting go is, of course, the opposite of clinging. To quote from the great Ajahn Chah: "If you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you'll know complete peace and freedom."

This is why we meditate—to create the conditions where letting go can happen naturally. Because of course, letting go isn't something we can force. It isn't even something we can do. If it was, we wouldn't need to be here. But letting go is something that happens naturally when we start to develop insight into our habits of craving, aversion, and clinging, when we see them clearly in the meditation practice. The irony of letting go is that it only happens when we get out of the way.

Letting go of craving, aversion, and clinging to free the heart from suffering—this is the purpose of vipassanā meditation, and it's what we're exploring on this retreat.

"Gone to the beyond of becoming, you let go of in front, let go of behind, let go of between. With a heart everywhere let go, you don't come again to birth and aging."

CHAPTER 88

Tracking Breathing (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 49 min

> *In this guided practice session, Patrick Kearney leads meditators through a series of investigative exercises with the breath as meditation object. Rather than prescribing a single technique, he invites practitioners to explore multiple dimensions of breathing: location, direction, length, clarity, beginnings and ends, and the space within which breath moves. This experimental approach reveals how different meditators experience breathing in vastly different ways.*
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> *The session illuminates the distinction between samatha (serenity) and vipassanā (insight) approaches to breath meditation. For calming practices, a general awareness of breathing may suffice, but insight practice requires precision—the ability to perceive differences, variations, and change. This precision opens the doorway to perceiving anicca (impermanence), one of the three characteristics central to the Buddha's teaching on the nature of experience.*
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> *Kearney shares candidly about his own journey with breath meditation as an asthmatic, offering valuable perspective for those who struggle with conventional breathing instructions. He emphasizes that there is no "right" experience in meditation—what matters is finding the relationship that works for each practitioner. The breath can be understood as air element (vāyo-dhātu), essentially movement within the body, which may be more accessible than the concept of "breathing" for some. Key principles emerge: settle awareness where it's clearest, develop continuity of mindfulness, and if interference with the breath arises, make that interference itself the meditation object. Throughout, creativity and experimentation are encouraged over rigid adherence to prescribed methods.*

This morning we're going to look at breathing as a meditation object. We'll start with some basic exercises in breathing meditation and then we'll have a discussion after that.

Organise your meditation posture. Bring awareness into your body. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body, and from there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact with the ground, and rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Are you breathing? How do you know you are breathing? Isn't it the experience of movement within your body—the movements of breathing in and breathing out? Bring your awareness to these movements of in-breath and out-breath. Where are these movements clearest and most obvious to you? In your belly? In your midriff? In your chest, in your throat, shoulders or head? Focus wherever these movements are clearest and most obvious to you.

If there are movements, these movements must be going somewhere. In what directions do these movements of in-breath and out-breath travel? Are they vertical, moving up and down? Are they horizontal, moving in and out? Are they curved or curly? Do they expand and contract? Focus on directions. In which directions are these movements going?

Let's assume there are two movements, one for your in-breath and one for your out-breath. Is the movement of your in-breath shorter or longer than the movement of your out-breath? Is the movement of your out-breath shorter or longer than the movement of your in-breath? Which one is longest? Which one is shortest? Or are they of equal length? Focus on length.

Is the movement of your in-breath clearer or less clear than the movement of your out-breath? Is the movement of your out-breath clearer or less clear than the movement of your in-breath? Or are they both equally clear, or both equally obscure? Focus on clarity. Which one is clearest? Which one is least clear?

Let's assume there are two movements, one for your in-breath and one for your out-breath. Can you see the beginning and the end of the movement of your in-breath? Can you see the beginning and the end of the movement of your out-breath? Or are you missing parts? If you are missing parts, which parts are you missing? Focus on beginnings and ends.

Movement happens within space. Can you find the space within which your breathing moves? Do not focus on the movements, but open your awareness to the space surrounding these movements, through which these movements travel. Can you find it? Don't worry if you cannot.

Do not strain to find it. Just notice the movements and feel the space around them.

You need to be precise and detailed in your awareness to do these exercises. As you do them, do you feel any sense of strain in your mind? Do you feel any tension in your body? Do you find yourself interfering in any way with the movements of your breathing? If any of this is happening, step back from the details of the movements and relax. Be aware of the movements. Don't do the movements. Be aware. Don't do.

So where did you find them? Where were these movements? Down below in the belly? Up at the top of the nose? Somewhere in between?

How many people found them in the belly? And is that because of habit, or did you just happen to find it there?

One student shared: "The belly, up here, in lots of places—but as soon as I started to try and focus on length, direction, all these things, it just became kind of scrambled. So figuring out where it is works, you can find a place for it. But when you try to add all these other things, it just gets completely hopelessly confused. And I guess it tightens up. Focusing in, it's not much of a job."

So what do you conclude from this?

"It's much better when I open out."

Ah, okay. So even focusing anywhere is not so good—if you open it up and just let it do what it wants to do.

"Yes, and then I just notice what it's doing."

Good. So this is very interesting, because here we have a whole series of exercises, and here we have a meditator for whom this whole series of exercises is a complete bloody disaster. They just want to keep it simple: stay up and feel the breathing.

This is normal. This is typical in the meditation world. No single approach, no single technique fits everybody. We're playing around. We're seeing what works, what doesn't work. And in terms of this experimental approach, all data is good data. You find what works for you. Where is it reasonably clear, reasonably obvious, where you can stay with it? That's the relationship you want. But here we're playing around with different aspects just to find out what's going on.

Any thoughts on directions? Where are these movements going? If you move, you move from A to B. So what's the direction?

Someone observed that there's no direction at the nostril. So what is there? How do you distinguish between in-breath and out-breath?

"Variations of sensation."

Or the same sensation?

"I was going to say sensation is variation, but..."

Oh, that's a good answer. So just a feeling at the nostril, regardless of direction. And within that feeling, there's variations within that one feeling, or one category of feeling. There's sensation, which is... Well, that's an interesting question, isn't it? Sensation—is it one thing, or is it many?

You notice the line of the questioning. What we're playing with here is precision in the breathing. We tend to assume we know what breathing is. Yes, breathe in, breathe out. And you might have that relationship when you're practicing breathing in meditation practice. So what's your experience of breathing? I don't know. Breathe in, breathe out. Yes, that's it.

Now, if you're doing a serenity-based practice, if your aim is simply to calm the mind down, make the mind stiller, fine. That's probably good enough. But if you're practicing for insight, it's too vague, it's too general. What we want to do, and we'll talk more about this tonight, is open up the way to the perception of impermanence, the perception of change. And change means variations. So we're looking for differences. And we're doing that deliberately. This is an aspect of the precision that is characteristic of insight styles of meditation. Because if we can develop precision, we will find differences. And if we find differences, we'll find change.

"So as I settle into meditation, the breathing experience changes. It's not so much that the breathing changes, but my experience of it. It goes from here to there, from stronger to subtler. So there are those changes, but it's not the breathing itself. You know what I mean?"

Yes, I do. So you can see those changes, and eventually you can't see the breathing. It morphs over time. Perhaps this is what we've been talking about before in terms of awareness and the aware. You see the changes in the aware-ing. In the knowing. That's where you notice the changes.

"When you say insight, what do you mean? Because I have my own variations of the word insight."

We're using insight in the way the Buddha uses insight. We're going to talk more about this as we go through. But basically, it's insight into the nature and the structure of experience itself. Normally, when we talk about insight, particularly in our culture

where we're very psychologized, we mean insight into the drama of my life and the drama of the lives of the people who intersect with me. And that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about insight into the very structure of experience itself. And he maps this in terms of three characteristics: change, pain, not self. We'll talk about that tonight.

Did we do length? Length is a good one. Now, with this one, I began by saying let's assume there were two movements. When I was young, foolish, and naive, I used to say there are two movements. But one of the meditators contradicted me. She said there aren't two movements. There's one movement. It just changes direction.

So how many people would say the breathing is just one movement? It's not two movements, one for inhalation, one for exhalation. It's actually one movement. Anybody vote for that? I've got the one movement wallets forming a particular sect of Buddhism, split off.

How many people would vote for two movements? Very good. How many people would vote for something else entirely?

Now of course it doesn't matter how many movements there are. The question is really about direct awareness. And if I realize "I don't know," that's useful data. That's an experience that I'm clarifying. And that's what we're doing—we're clarifying the experience.

So if there are two, or if there's more than one, which one is longer and which one is shorter? How many people would vote for long out-breath, short in-breath? How many people would vote for long in-breath, short out-breath? Sometimes one, sometimes the other?

Once you start to talk about people's experience when they meditate, you quickly realize there's no one experience. Everybody's experience changes all the time. Everyone has their own particular experience, their own particular approach, their own particular way of receiving what comes back to them.

And it's really important to understand that there is no right experience. We spend so much time worrying: Is this right? Is this wrong? Is this what's supposed to happen? When she meditates, sometimes that happens—maybe that's what's supposed to happen. All of this is complete nonsense. What we've got is something happening. Our job is to know it, to be aware of it. That's it. That's all there is.

Did you find any boundaries? Beginnings and ends? No? Is that because you just couldn't find them, or they weren't there?

"I couldn't find... no, there were none there."

There were none there? No, there were none there. Between in-breath and out-breath? Out-breath and in-breath?

"When you prompt me to look, then I can find the boundary. Before you prompted me, I couldn't find any."

And what about afterwards? Did you then kind of forget about it? You couldn't find the boundary before I prompted you. When I prompted you, you could find boundaries. And afterwards, did the boundaries just completely disappear again?

"Yes, boundaries disappeared again."

That's interesting. You could just manipulate the experience to please the teacher. Very good.

So that actually takes us to our last question: Am I interfering with the breathing in any way? Because people find it's quite easy to interfere with the breathing.

When I started meditating, the standard instruction for breathing meditation was just "breathe naturally." Don't do anything with the breath. Just breathe naturally. Which for me was quite a challenge because I'm an asthmatic. But apart from that, years later when I did some yoga with B.K.S. Iyengar in Pune, he once poured scorn on this instruction to meditators to "just breathe naturally." He said it takes the average adult two years of hard training before they can even begin to breathe naturally. It's a meaningless thing to say.

We find that the breath is really, really easy to interfere with, and also that breath is very sensitive to changing conditions.

My state of mind changes, and my breathing changes. My breathing changes, and my state of mind changes. They're intimately connected. And you can pick up all sorts of influences when you start to be sensitive to the breath. Sometimes you can detect a state of the heart through the breathing. I know that I'm feeling agitated because I just felt it in my breath.

This sensitivity can make it quite a challenge to be aware of the breathing without doing anything to it. I went through a period, for example, where if I focused on the breathing, it would gradually get stronger over time. Then at some point I'd be distracted by thinking, and when I came back to the breathing, it was completely relaxed. So I

eyeball it, I watch it, and it starts to get tense. Then I'm distracted—oh, he's gone—and it can relax again. It's quite strange. Breathing as a meditation object does have that quality, and it's something to be aware of.

Question: Could you say something about your relationship with the breath as an asthmatic? When people present with experience as an asthmatic or other breathing difficulties, the anxiety comes up. Did you have to work with that, and how did you manage?

Yes, it just took a long time. It took a long time to find a relationship—for me and my breathing to negotiate a suitable relationship. In the early stages, I found it very frustrating because people would talk about tuning into the breathing and it getting really peaceful and blissful. "Cosmic breathing! The universe breathes through me!" I'm thinking, "God, what the hell are they talking about?"

So that was a social problem because I felt I couldn't do this. Other people could do this, but I couldn't. It does require a fair bit of work and patience and adaptability. For a long time, I would use breathing only as a secondary object, not as a grounding object. And when I reached the period where I could use it successfully as a grounding object, it was controlled in the sense that I would focus down here in the belly. If the asthma's up here in the chest, I focus down here.

It makes sense that you make friends with it—that you've got a relationship with the breath. It personalizes it in some way, takes it out of the habitual anxiety eventually. It's only relatively recently that it seems we can sit calmly together, but even then I've got to be careful.

I use posture as my grounding object. That's one of the reasons why I'm so focused on posture and why I have all the exercises and stretching to develop a meditation posture—because that is actually my meditation object. I hold the body, and that involves the space, and in that space things happen, including the breathing. It's a whole body awareness rather than a specific focus, though the awareness does go to specific things. The sensations at the base are quite obvious, the sense of lift. Lift I use a lot because the tendency is to crunch over. I've got my thoracic spine that curves like this. So I'm sensitive to any of that movement and then lift up.

The posture is quite dynamic. In a sense, the posture breathes. It moves. And breath and posture start to integrate. Particularly on the out-breath, I lift up. In the exercises in the morning, when we do the posture, I say "create space between each vertebra." That's what I'm doing.

Question: I'm confused about primary and secondary object. The breath as an object, as a foundation to bring mindfulness back to the body—I'm also aware that it could be the entry point into meditation as well.

When we say primary or grounding object, we're saying this is the default position. This is the one I start with. This is the one I stay with. When I have any doubt about what I should be doing, that's what I go to. After I come out of distraction, that's what I go to. It's the basic reference point. A secondary object is occasional—it comes and it goes depending on circumstances.

Am I using that as an entry point? With that fine tuning as we've just done, and then opening out into spaciousness—I suppose it's a bit of a spectrum around just connecting you back. But when are you also using it as the entry point, or is that normally what you should be doing?

The grounding object would be your entry point, I would say. That's what you spend most time with. That's what you're most familiar with. That's what you get to know the best. And that's what takes you deeper into the concentration. So that tends to be what opens up.

Someone mentioned deliberate breathing—breathing in a way where the rhythm is driven somehow consciously, and observing that. There were two questions about this. One was how does that relate to mindfulness in walking, where you might be attending to the footsteps, somehow cooperating with the natural flow of action, perhaps very conscious of directing the speed? Does that in some way relate to deliberate breathing?

I forgot to talk about breathing when we're doing walking meditation. Some people, the way Mahasi teaches walking meditation, don't mention breathing at all—it's just movement of the body. But quite spontaneously, some people tune the movement with the breathing. Again, it's rhythm. That's what holds the two of them together.

If I had one exercise in breathing meditation, it would be: can you find the rhythm of the breathing? I've had at least one meditator who said, "I've always had problems with breathing meditation until I focused on the rhythm. And then I could find it." So you find rhythm in breathing, you find rhythm in movement. And in walking meditation, the two can come together—the rhythm of movement and the rhythm of breathing match. For some people, that's quite significant and really helps them. For other people, they don't know what you're talking about. It just depends on the person.

One person shared they'd never done this because anything that even remotely looks like trying to control the breath is a road to disaster. So they tend to leave the breath alone when doing movement, just letting it do what it does. If they don't notice it, it probably does whatever it does much better than if they do notice it.

The second part of the question related to having a very strong rhythmic sense and often finding oneself engaged with that rhythm. There's a question about whether that's "me" or whether it's just happening—to what degree is there a "me" involved?

Do you use that as a meditation object? Yes? And does it work for you? Yes. Then no problem. Clearly some part of you is in there, some part of your mind is doing this. But then, of course, some part of our mind is doing everything. So what difference does it make?

The main thing is whether it's helping you settle in. There is a whole skill of pranayama where you deliberately work on the rhythm of the breath, and apparently it can be very successful in taking you into good meditation. So if it works, it works. Meditation is supremely pragmatic. It's experimental. If you stumble across something that works, you go for it. And you can know if it works: if mindfulness is there, if concentration is there, then you're right. It's going well.

So there's nothing particularly special about getting out of the way of breathing in and of itself? No. No.

I love that.

The reason this is included here is that I once had a student who said, "Look, for years I've struggled with breathing meditation. And then one day I just realized it's happening in space." He simply tuned into the space and bang—breathing meditation was no problem at all.

Sometimes it's just a matter of experimenting until you find the relationship that works for you. What can get in the way is if you have a prescriptive instruction—"this is the way you do breathing meditation"—but it doesn't work for you. Then what do you do? You're stuck. So always take meditation instructions as invitations to experiment. Whatever you come up with that works, that's what you go for. Again, there's an element of creativity in this practice. If you squash the creativity, you're really handicapping yourself.

If we talk about breathing, we're talking about what the Buddha calls air element, which is essentially movement. What I find useful with breathing meditation is to avoid the concept of breathing entirely. Because I'm an asthmatic—I have problems with

breathing. But I don't have problems with air element. So I don't tune into breathing; I tune into air element, into movement. That concept helps. So again, the power of concept: we use the concept that helps us. Be creative with the concepts.

The basic principle, though, is to settle awareness wherever it is—movements, breath, whatever—where it's clearest and most obvious. We're trying to develop the continuity of awareness, of mindfulness. In the later tradition, they analyze all these things very carefully, and they come up with the question: what stimulates or encourages mindfulness? They arrived at two answers. One is a previous moment of mindfulness—in other words, continuity. This emphasizes the importance of continuity. But the second was a clear perception. If something is clear, it's easier to land the awareness on it and keep it there. So with breathing: where is it clearest and most obvious? That's where you go.

Then we encounter the difficulty of being aware of breathing without doing breathing. Some people don't have any particular problem with that. Others have huge problems—they say they can't help but interfere with the breathing. If you find that you're interfering with the breathing, start to get interested in the interference, not the breathing. What is the mind state that's interfering? How is this interference expressing itself? That becomes the meditation object. The breathing steps back into the background, gets out of the spotlight, and what you're looking at is this process—this determination to interfere and how it works. This is part mind as much as body.

Breathing is perhaps the most common grounding object in the Buddhist world, but it's not suitable for everybody. For some people it doesn't work because of problematic relations with breathing, or because of anxiety, or for some other reason. So don't feel obliged to use it. There are alternatives; it doesn't have to be the grounding object. Again, everybody is different.

Someone asked about helping others in their practice—how to help them get out of difficulty, to be free from their struggles. Well, it's very difficult to help other people, particularly through meditation, because meditation is something you do for yourself. But if you find someone who's willing to give it a go, and that person is motivated and interested, then there is a way.

One aspect is this: meditation can reveal the choices that we're making, the habitual choices that we don't see, choices that we feel are making us—"I'm being forced to do this." Most commonly, we see this in any form of addiction. People will say, "I'm not choosing this, it's choosing me." But what meditation provides is that it opens up the space, and we can actually see in real time: that's the point of choice. And if I can see right now that there's a choice, then there's the possibility of making another choice.

There was one retreat I was teaching here, a young woman who was struggling with addiction.

And at the end of the retreat, she came to me so happy, and she said, "I suddenly realised I have a choice." It struck her like a revelation from heaven. *I have a choice.* And as soon as that felt sense arose—I have a choice—then the possibility of something else was there. And you can start to work your way out of the situation.

CHAPTER 89

Practice for Insight

Patrick Kearney · 51 min

In this comprehensive teaching, Patrick Kearney illuminates the mechanics of insight practice, explaining how we move from conventional reality—the world of second-hand concepts—to ultimate reality (paramatta), the realm of direct first-hand experience where awakening becomes possible. He draws on the Theravāda distinction between these two modes of experiencing, showing how our habitual conceptual world, shaped by greed, hatred, and ignorance since birth, entangles us in suffering.

Kearney explores the cultivation of khaṇika samādhi (momentary immersion), contrasting it with absorption samādhi (appanā samādhi). In momentary concentration, distractions become meditation objects rather than obstacles—as Sayadaw U Janaka taught, noise and chaos simply provide 'more objects to note.' This approach widens awareness to include the entire flow of experience through all six senses, making mindfulness of everyday activities central to the practice rather than peripheral.

The teaching addresses why concepts appear permanent while direct experience reveals constant change (anicca). Using the example of beliefs about rebirth, Kearney demonstrates how opposing conceptual positions share the characteristic of stability over time, while the felt encounter with any experience is always shifting. This recognition of impermanence opens the door to seeing dukkha and anattā—the Buddha's 'punchline' that cannot be intellectually grasped but must be directly realised. The talk concludes with practical guidance on tracking transitions, understanding dependent arising in one's own experience, and trusting the natural unfolding of practice over time.

Tonight we're going to talk about practice for insight—how this practice is meant to actually work.

We start with the meditation method. We talked about how we need a framework for the practice. If you start doing a meditation practice, we need some kind of framework, a system that tells us what's important to cultivate in the practice and what's important to abandon in the practice. As we discussed, the first and central quality that we need to cultivate is the continuity of awareness—in other words, mindfulness. From this, everything else flows.

We talked about awareness and how awareness is part of nature, how the fact is we are already aware. Is there anybody in this room who's not aware? No? But nevertheless, it's very easy to forget our awareness, which we've talked about. So the first thing that we have to train is the capacity to remember our awareness. Of course, as we saw, mindfulness translates the Pali word *sati*, from the verb *sarati*, to remember. In mindfulness training, we train ourselves to remember the present rather than the past. This remembering is active. It does require engagement. It reminds us that awareness is not just a noun, it's a verb. Awareness is an action. We aware what's going on.

We could describe the essence of this practice as facing the question: What is happening now? It's clear that investigation is central. Not taking anything for granted is central. What is this experience now? When we take nothing for granted, that's when we can cut through our habitual, conditioned, conceptual view of what's going on, of reality. We're training to cut through our conceptual habits and instead see things for what they are. This seeing is new, because we're not used to it, because it's difficult.

The practice is very simple. Be aware. That's it. But it's difficult. The major reason why it's difficult is because we tend to get lost in our concepts about our experience rather than be intimate with the experience itself.

For example, have you ever been in a situation in which you've tried to meditate but given up because it's just too difficult? One or two, I'm sure. Well done. What happened? There's some kind of discontent and restlessness which takes over. Did this appear in the form of "I don't like this," "I can't do this," "Others can do this, but I can't"? Notice that in this perception, what dominates is "I"—the one who doesn't like this, or can't do this.

One reason why "I" is central in this perception is because if we ask, "What is this practice actually about? What's it for?"—isn't it for me? Isn't that why I came? But this "I" and this "me," does it correspond to a distinct, discrete experience? Or is it just a convenient way of interpreting experience? In other words, is it real or is it a concept?

What we're training to do is drop our habitual concepts about our discontent and discover where and what is the felt experience that I call discontent. Where is it exactly? How is it present? Is it in the body? Is it in the mind?

Is it both? What's the relationship between bodily unease and psychological discontent? And if you want to take this further, do I actually encounter an "I" who is discontented?

You notice that in this example we begin with a normal, ordinary, everyday situation: I don't like this. But we refuse to take it for granted. We refuse to accept it as an accurate account of what's going on. Instead, we are interested, we are curious. There's a degree of skepticism. We're directly aware of what is happening, with curiosity—because this situation may not be what we think it is.

So we could say that in this practice of awaring, we're moving away from what we think is real, what we assume is real, which the Buddha would summarize as "me and my world." And we're moving away from that toward how this experienced event, here and now, presents what it does. For example, does this experienced event right now change in ways that are beyond my control?

But of course, we might then have the question: why is this important? Why should we move away from what we think is happening or what we assume is happening? The reason is that if we don't, we tend to get lost in judgment about what is happening. What is happening now is good. No, it's not—it's bad. It's satisfying. No, it's not—it's disappointing. And so on and so forth.

But if we stay with what this experienced event does, with how we are experiencing, one thing we notice is its dynamism. We allow ourselves to become interested in it as a new event, something inherently dynamic, something which has arisen from somewhere unknown and then disappears, to be replaced by something else. And over time, we may realize that this second way of experiencing feels more authentic than the first.

This takes us to the idea of dharmas, or in Pali, dhammas. This concept of dharmas characterizes the Buddha's way of looking at the world. In the Theravada tradition, Mahasi Sayadaw follows this tradition when he says that reality—and by reality we simply mean what's really happening, what's really going on—comes to us in two forms.

The first is what we directly experience firsthand through the senses, including mind as a sense. The second form is what comes to us indirectly, secondhand, through concepts about what we directly experience. These are the two ways in which reality comes to us: what we directly experience firsthand, and what we experience secondhand, mediated through concepts—concepts that are about the first-person experience.

For the Buddha, firsthand direct experience is associated with understanding and insight, while experience made up of secondhand concepts is associated with delusion or illusion, and the suffering that comes along with delusion and illusion. In the Theravada, firsthand experience is called ultimate reality, *paramattha*. You might have a question: is the Sydney suburb of Parramatta named after this? The answer is yes—one of the early pioneers was a devout Buddhist. He just snuck it in there.

Secondhand experience, concepts about what we directly experience, is called conventional reality, *sammuti-paññatti*. We'll drop the Pali and just use "ultimate" and "conventional." In the practice of awaring, what we're training ourselves to do is to ground our perception in ultimate reality. This is the world of directly experienced events, of dharmas. This is the world in which insight arises.

Normally, where we live is the world of conventional reality, a world of concepts about what we are directly encountering. For the Buddha, one of the things that characterizes this conventional world is that it is a product of habitual conditioning from the past. This conditioning has been shaping us since at least birth—for the Buddha, since way before birth. But let's look at it in modern materialist terms: since at least birth, if not before.

When we ask what forces accomplish this conditioning, the Buddha's answer would be the three *akusala mūla*, the three roots of the unwholesome: greed, hatred, and ignorance. This means the conventional world—the world of habit conditioned by the past, presented to us in our concepts—is not just wrong, but it entangles us in pain and misery.

So the job of the practice is to get us out of this second-hand conceptual world into a world of ultimate reality, of direct first-hand experience. And this is, again, the world of dharmas, and this is the world where insight and awakening can appear.

So this is the job: to go from the world of conventional reality, second-hand experience, to the world of ultimate reality, first-hand experience. But how do we do this?

Well, we do it by directly aware-ing this now, what's happening right now. But we need to cultivate a great deal of power and penetration if we're going to cut through decades of conditioned habit. How do we generate that power, that penetration? It's through what the Buddha calls samādhi.

Now samādhi, classically translated as concentration—these days I'm using Sujato's translation of immersion. But it's derived from the root *dā*, to put or to place. The prefix *ā*, toward; the prefix *sam*, together. To put toward together, to bring together, to collect, to integrate, to unify, to make into one. So concentration is really, I think, a pretty poor translation. Immersion is definitely better. But you could translate it as absorption, immersion, integration, unification.

Now, the thing about this is that when we are in samādhi, all of our mind, all of our being is engaged in directly experiencing this now. All of us is engaged in this task. The opposite of samādhi is division—part of me is practising, part of me is resisting, part of me is hoping for something better in the future. In samādhi, all of me is engaged in just this now.

And if we ask the question, when do we experience samādhi in our ordinary lives, not as meditators? I think the closest we get is when we do something that we enjoy, like play. Because that's where we relax and we allow ourselves to become fully absorbed. And this is one reason why we talk about the importance of relaxation in the practice, because relaxation encourages the arising of samādhi.

Now there are different ways to cultivate samādhi; there's not one right way. And there are different types of samādhi that emerge from different types of practice. It doesn't always present in exactly the same way. In this tradition, the form of samādhi that we're cultivating is called *khaṇika samādhi*, or momentary immersion.

So, roughly speaking, we could say we can cultivate samādhi by becoming absorbed in a single experience, a single aspect of experience, like breathing, for example—where we reject any experience other than the movements of our breathing, just push it aside, just absorb into one thing.

Or, we can cultivate samādhi by becoming absorbed into a whole series of different and discrete experiences. This would be rather like playing a complex game, where you've got to keep your mind on one thing after another after another, but you've got to be right there all the way through. Or like practicing mindfulness in ordinary activities. When you get up from the cushion, you're not really focusing on one thing. You walk out, have a look at the sky, check the weather, think about tea or coffee time. Head up, discover there's only instant coffee, feel bitterly disappointed, realise that as a yogi I should transcend such things. And just stay with that experience all the way through. So it's a whole series of discrete, separate experiences, but each one is being aware-ed.

So what's the difference between these two ways of cultivating samādhi? Well, the first one, absorption samādhi, comes from an exclusive interest in our grounding object. We ground awareness on a single, clear, obvious aspect of experience. We settle into this. We ignore everything else. So the mind becomes unified around this project and this single aspect of experience. And this results in a state of absorption. This is *appanā samādhi*. We're so fully absorbed in our meditation object, we forget everything else. Everything else simply disappears. Have you ever had an experience where you're

absorbed in something in your meditation and the bell goes and you think, "What? We only just started"? And you realise that you just forgot everything except the meditation object. This is absorption samādhi.

Momentary samādhi has a different dynamic because we're not trying to exclude the world apart from our grounding object. We include, for example, distraction—which is what we've been talking about as a way of getting into this.

When we realise we are distracted, we don't drop the distraction and race back to the grounding object. We aware our distraction. And our distraction becomes a meditation object—it becomes what Mahasi calls the secondary object.

So what this means is that awareness widens and includes the journeys the mind makes when it is distracted. What then happens to our grounding object? Well, the grounding object becomes the entirety of the six senses. It becomes the whole flow of experience through body and mind.

Now of course, at any given time, in any given set of circumstances, we might favour one particular aspect of our practice. In the beginning, for most people, this is body. Over time, we may become much more grounded in the experience of the mind, because it's the mind that fabricates experience, including our experience of the body. But in any event, in momentary samadhi, distraction disappears because distraction is our meditation object. We don't live in a world of meditation object here and distraction there. We live in a world of meditation object everywhere.

And of course, you get this strong implication that the samadhi practice doesn't end when we get up and leave the meditation hall. Mindfulness of everyday activities becomes central to this style of practice. We couldn't possibly succeed in it without mindfulness of everyday activities. And this means that our normal everyday activities become our meditation objects. We are aware of first this movement, then that sight, then this thought, then that feeling, without any gap, without any break. Each event is an object of awareness. Each event is our meditation object.

So the objects of awareness change, but the awareness itself remains steady and continuous. We could say that there's one object after another, after another, after another. But as they flow, the awareness of them is the same. It just tracks along. The awareness is completely steady while the objects of awareness are dancing. And this is why Mahasi Sayadaw emphasises that our distractions are our meditation objects. So never be bothered by distraction.

Actually, Sayadaw U Janaka summed this up really nicely. He had a meditation centre on the main north-south highway coming into and out of Rangoon. There was massive amounts of traffic, truck traffic, coming up and down. And on the other side of the road was a shopping centre with lights and loud music. You were meditating in this small meditation centre being flooded by pollution mixed with noise all the time. And sometimes these delicate Western meditators would get upset and complain. They would say, "Sayadaw, how can I possibly meditate in such a noisy environment?" To which the Sayadaw would respond with a smile, "You are so lucky—you have so many objects to note."

And he meant it. Because you can do this kind of practice in that kind of situation. You wouldn't do serenity practice in that kind of situation. There's a saying: noise is a thorn in the side of absorption. But you can get absorbed in momentary concentration in an environment like that.

As I train in this, what I'm becoming used to gradually is the idea of awaring whatever is happening, regardless of whether or not it fits into my agenda. Because what is a distraction? A distraction is just an experience that doesn't fit my agenda. It's not supposed to be there. So my awareness becomes continuous. In other words, mindfulness develops. And as mindfulness develops, samadhi gets more powerful.

The tradition explains that mindfulness leads samadhi. So in this style of practice, we lead with mindfulness. Samadhi comes along later as a byproduct. In other forms of practice, for example in serenity practice, we lead with samadhi and the mindfulness comes along as a byproduct. They're always linked, but it's a question of emphasis. Which one do we emphasise? In this style of practice, we emphasise mindfulness, which means we emphasise the continuity of awareness, and everything else follows along afterwards.

When momentary samadhi matures, the meditation object becomes whatever is predominant now in any of the six senses, including mind. So you get a sense of how wide this practice becomes and is meant to become.

As we cultivate momentary samadhi, what do we begin to see? What becomes clear? Of course, one thing that becomes clear is change. We develop what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence, *anicca-saññā*, which for him is important because it's the entry into insight. We're going to talk more about this in a couple of nights. We cultivate momentary samadhi because this makes the fact of change clear—clear in depth.

So why is this important? Let's return to this idea of direct first-hand experience versus indirect second-hand experience—in other words, the world of concept. What characterizes concept? Let's take one example. Let's take a concept of something we have not directly encountered. Let's say the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth, or what I prefer to call life after life. Does this actually exist? Is it real? Is this doctrine true?

Now, some people believe it, and they believe it because authoritative texts say it is true. Some people disbelieve it because it contradicts their belief in scientific materialism. And we find both of these positions among practitioners of Buddhist meditation. So these two positions—yes, there is rebirth because Buddha said so; no, there isn't because it's scientifically impossible—they are diametrically opposed to each other. But they do have one thing in common: they are both concepts.

Has anybody directly experienced rebirth? Now there certainly are people who have a memory of a previous life. This has been well documented. But these memories are themselves concepts. Like any memory, like the memory of last week, they are creations of the mind that may or may not correspond to an actually encountered first-person experience that occurred in the past. And I think every trial lawyer is intimately aware of this fact.

So they're concepts. That's what they have in common. And what do all concepts have in common, even those that are totally opposed to each other? Even when you have to choose one and cannot choose the other? They appear as permanent—what the Buddha would call *nitya*. They are not permanent in the sense of lasting forever and ever, but permanent in the sense of lasting unchanged over time. This is what permanent means for the Buddha: something that lasts unchanged over time, regardless of the unit of time.

Let's say, for example, that ten or twenty years ago I decided that the Buddha must be right. There is rebirth, if he says so. I am prepared to take his word for it. Or let's say, in an alternate parallel universe, that ten or twenty years ago I decided that regardless of what the Buddha says, there is no rebirth. It's just scientifically impossible. Now, has this concept and my relationship to this concept changed over the past ten or twenty years? Well, apparently not. So this concept is permanent—using permanent in the sense that the Buddha means it, lasting unchanged over time. And it can appear as permanent precisely because it is a concept. Concepts are permanent in the sense that they remain stable over time.

We don't spend all our time thinking about rebirth, but let's say you are one of those who does not believe in rebirth. And let's say you're listening to a dharma talk where the speaker says that rebirth is true, and if you don't believe it, you cannot be a

Buddhist anymore, and your practice cannot end in enlightenment. Apparently there are such dharma talks. So what is going on? You're having a direct, first-hand experience of listening to the talk and a direct, first-hand experience of agitation.

A felt sense of dissatisfaction that the speaker is demanding you make an act of faith that you don't actually have, with the implied threat that if you don't, you will be excluded from the club of enlightenment.

So let's say you are one of those who does believe in rebirth, and you arrive at this same talk with this belief firmly in place. You are having a direct, first-hand experience of listening to this talk and a direct, first-hand experience of satisfaction—a felt sense of confirmation in your belief and pleasure that this truth is being put forward.

These specific experiences of listening to the talk and responding to the talk are direct, they are first-hand, and they are changing. They are not permanent. They do not last over time. So let's say the next night, as a glutton for punishment, you go to another dharma talk, and it turns out that it's about the same thing. The concepts in the dharma talk might be exactly the same, but the felt encounter with the talk and the felt responses to the talk arising in the mind and the body—these will be different from the night before. Perhaps there will be some boredom in going over the same territory again.

So the direct first-hand experiences are not permanent. The concepts are permanent. Concepts are stable; they last unchanged over a period of time. The belief you hold or reject today could well be the same belief you held or rejected ten or twenty years ago. But direct encounters with this now, the world revealed by awareness, are unstable. They do not last unchanged over time.

If you are listening to this legendary dharma talk, and if, as a practitioner, you notice an affective relationship to the words—whether approval or disapproval—you may choose to be aware of the arising of this affective response as your meditation object. And what would you find? Changing, shifting physical sensations and psychological responses. You would find impermanence.

So the practice of momentary samādhi reveals a world perceived as impermanent, a world subject to change. Now for the Buddha, that which is anicca, impermanent, is also dukkha, inherently unsatisfactory, and that which is dukkha is anattā, is not self. Why all this is, we're going to explore in a couple of nights from now. And the recognition of these three universal characteristics of experience—this is what constitutes insight. So this is the trajectory of the practice. This is why we emphasize the continuity of awareness.

And as well, for these three universal characteristics of experience to become clear, to become a part of our world, we have to develop a calm, still, powerful mind. This is the function of samādhi. So it can help to use a central reference point, some aspect of experience that we come back to again and again—what we've been calling the grounding object.

Different traditions recommend different grounding objects, but as we said, the grounding object is more a function than a thing. Whatever works to hold our attention over time is our grounding object. For most people in the early stages of practice, this tends to be some aspect of body, but it may well mature into mind itself. It may mature into a sense of the dynamic interplay between body and mind.

But for how to get there: begin with what is clear and obvious now, and then track the wanderings of your awareness. Over time, your grounding objects will remain clear, or become clear. This is why we emphasize the importance of seeing transitions. We are not simply trying to make mind and body still. We're training to stay with the movements of awareness itself and the objects of awareness, both.

Coming back to Sayadaw U Janaka, when he was teaching in Australia, at the end of a retreat he was asked by one practitioner, "How do I know if I'm making progress in my daily meditation practice?" An interesting question. But his answer came as a surprise to me. He did not, for example, say, "If your samādhi is getting stronger, you are making progress," which is what I expected him to say. What he said was, "If your experience is changing, you're making progress."

"But my meditation has got a lot worse since the retreat!"

"Congratulations! You notice that. That's change. Stay with it. It's important."

Seeing change opens us up to seeing how the mind fabricates our experience. We begin by assuming something is already given—me, my world. And then we learn to recognize that something is fabricated by the mind, dependent upon conditions. For example, I come to a meditation retreat: reasonable accommodation, very nice food, nice meditation hall.

Follow meditators who do not irritate me in the slightest, but instead model the depths of samādhi and mindfulness. And lo and behold, mysteriously, my samādhi deepens.

Then I go back home, and within forty-eight hours it's completely evaporated. Me and my world. But I have good samādhi—I know I had it then. This is me. I'm a good meditator. I can sit here for two hours and just be mindful. That's me. That's the self. That's permanent.

No. It's just conditions.

Does this mean I'm a bad meditator? No, it just means conditions have changed. And guess what? They always change. So the job is simply to be aware of that. Don't take it personally. It's just changing conditions, that's all. Just come back to right now. What's happening? That's it.

So as you see, it's very simple. But as this process unfolds, what we notice is that our habitual world—the world defined by our concepts and our narratives, the world that revolves around the self and its fortunes—is not as real as the world defined by the three universal characteristics of anicca, dukkha, and anattā. And it's in this new world that we discover a much more authentic and a much more satisfying way of life.

Any questions?

Question: When you say transitions, you mean tracking the change? The transition is the point of change?

**Response: Yes. As we get interested in change, we notice first of all that things change. But then we become interested in* how* things change. We become interested in the intersections where one thing becomes another. These become particularly fascinating.

So if we're working with distraction, the moment I'm distracted, something happened. The mind went off into distraction. When I realise, "Oh, wait a minute, I'm distracted," what I might do is look back and ask myself, "What happened just then?" The kind of questions I would ask: What was I aware of when the mind slid into thinking? What was the quality of my awareness when the mind slid into thinking? Just have a look.

Maybe something is there. "Oh, that's interesting"—file that away for further reference. Or maybe you don't know. Forget about it, move on. But you become interested in the dynamics of change, how change occurs, and what conditions change. Again, you're monitoring experience over time, seeing how things unfold over a period, so you come to understand.

If you're living with someone, for example, you study that person over time, and you get to know: if I want to get up his nose, this is what I can do. You just get to know the whole situation because you've been tracking it over a period of time.

When we track our experience over time, we get to see the dynamics of it. And this is impermanence.

Because at the moment I'm tracking the primary and then the secondary—just about managing that.

Very good. The understanding comes in time. That's fine.

There's a sutta that I finally stumbled into. I knew I'd seen it somewhere, but I finally found it. It's called "Urgent," if you're looking it up on Sutta Central. It's very brief. The Buddha says a farmer has three urgent duties: to sow the crop, then look after it, and then harvest it at the appropriate time. He says the farmer has no special power by which he can declare, "May the crop be ready for harvesting next Saturday at 10 a.m." It's just with the rolling of the seasons and doing the work at the appropriate time that something happens.

The special power—the word used for that is *iddhi* in Pali, *siddhi* in Sanskrit. Have you come across *siddhi* before? The *siddhis* are the supernormal powers: that the Buddha could fly, could talk to devas. These are *siddhis*. And *siddhi* literally means success—the indications of success. So, miraculous powers. When the Buddha was giving his talk, he would have known that his audience would associate that word with these miraculous powers. A farmer isn't a miracle worker who can produce a crop on demand. He just works with the conditions. Over a period of time—boom—there's a crop.

A practitioner has three urgent duties. I forget what they are exactly. But at the end of it, with the passage of time and the rolling of the seasons, realization arises. It's not that the practitioner has any special powers. It's just that they do the work according to the conditions. As the seasons develop, they get the results.

But it's the self which is impatient. "I can't figure this out. There must be something wrong with me. There must be something wrong with the practice. Actually, I think it's the teacher." And this is the world of concept.

Any other questions?

I have a question. You said in momentary samādhi—the khaṇika samādhi—that mindfulness leads to samādhi. I can understand that. The mind, that continuity, and then the mind focuses, all comes together. That makes sense to me. But then you said it's the other way around for absorption samādhi. First there's samādhi, and that produces mindfulness. I don't understand how that would work.

It's a question of emphasis that comes out partly in the style of practice people do and the rhetoric around it. For example, in this practice, you notice the centrality of walking meditation, moving meditation. At Mahasi centers, it would be sit for an hour, walk for an hour, sit for an hour, walk for an hour. And if they saw a student neglecting the walking meditation and just doing the sitting, they'd be worried. They'd seriously question this.

What's going on? If you do much more sitting than walking, there's much more samādhi compared to the mindfulness. Because in walking, it's more mindfulness than samādhi. And of course in daily activity, the emphasis is on the mindfulness.

But you can go to places where they teach straight serenity. They won't bother with walking meditation. They have long sits. Then between the sits, they might just hang out and relax and recover and get ready for the next one.

So it's a very different approach.

I think I understand what you're saying. So there, the emphasis is on the samadhi, but the mindfulness will come along if you're open to it. For some people, it doesn't develop very much. But that's the idea. Always they work together—it's a question of which one you emphasize. And in the insight lineages, the emphasis is on the mindfulness.

Practitioner: Talking about the direct experience of ultimate reality—impermanence, change, and then pain, and then not-self. Conceptually, I think I can understand change and pain. But not-self? I don't know how to relate to not-self. Can you tell me?

Teacher: No. I used to, when I give Dharma talks on anatta, provide a guarantee. Anatta is the most counterintuitive, subtle aspect of insight—the most difficult to intellectually understand. And I provide the audience with a guarantee: if right now you do not understand anatta, I can guarantee that at the end of this talk, you will not understand anatta. Because it's not a matter of understanding.

Practitioner: Oh, it's not a matter of understanding?

Teacher: Imagine you're telling a joke to someone, and you're building up to the punchline, and you deliver the punchline, and they look at you and say, "Could you explain that?" Would you even bother? No—you either get it or you don't get it. Anatta is the Buddha's joke. It's the punchline of his joke. You either laugh or you don't.

But there is one way of looking at it that gives you an entry into it. Remember, for the Buddha, self is the one in charge. So who's in charge of your life? You are. So the self is the one in charge. But are you actually in charge of your experience? No. You can't control your meditation experience, for example. You can influence it. You can make choices that influence it. But you can't control it. You're not in charge of it. That recognition is a taste of not-self.

Practitioner: Now, when you see it that way, I can understand.

_Teacher: But you notice that flavor of not-self is tinged with dukkha. Because you_* want to be able to control it.

Any other questions?

Practitioner: I have a question about the breathing from this morning. I didn't get a chance to speak to you about it at our interview. But I wanted you to help me deal with something. As we were doing practice today with the breathing, I was watching the breath and noticing that. And then I noticed anxious thoughts. And then I noticed I stopped breathing. And I was like, oh, okay—because sometimes that will happen outside of retreat. And it was like, oh, what do I do with that? Because that's a reality.

Teacher: And what you've just seen is an aspect of dependent arising. This conditions that. The arising of anxious thoughts conditions the stopping of the breathing.

So then you could play with it. Well, what if I simply deliberately started breathing? What would happen to the anxious thoughts? Or what if I let go of the anxious thoughts? If I can let go of them, how would that affect the breathing? How does body affect mind, mind affect body?

This is part of the understanding we're discussing. You're seeing a connection between the state of your mind and the state of your body—anxiety, anxious thoughts, breathing. And so you start to see pathways. You start to see connections. That's what you're looking for. And then you've got a choice what to do next. You can work with the body—just breathe deliberately. You can work with the mind—just feel the anxiety and let it wash through. Over time, you experiment. You try this and you try that, and that's how you develop the craft. You become a more skilled practitioner.

One participant shared that they had sticky notes everywhere on their laptop saying "breathe, stop, box breath," because in those moments of anxiety they would get wrapped up in it and then notice the reminder. They wondered if that counted as a practice. It is a practice. And as Emma likes to say, you get good at what you practice.

Another person found it helpful to grasp that anything permanent is a concept, and that conditioned states lead us away from recognizing impermanence. They asked if there were any quick bits of advice for working with this.

Well, there is, but keep in mind that time is only a concept. So, you know, two or three years in a meditation center should fix the problem. But seriously, there's no quick fix—it's part of nature. I think it's very important for understanding the Buddha that the Dharma is part of nature. It's not that I'm in here practicing diligently because one day I hope Buddha will notice. It's just nature. It's just the way nature works. And nature works in its own time, in its own rhythm.

Someone asked whether recognizing something as conditioning is different from actually dealing with the conditioning. Yes, that's the first step. What mindfulness does is it clears the deck. You can see, oh, this is what's happening. And then the decision is, what do I do about it? That's where you enter the realm of sīla, of ethics. We make decisions, but what is the basis of our decisions? Is it a clear view of what's really going on, or is it complete confusion? The meditation gives us a clear view—this is what's going on.

CHAPTER 90

Tracking Wise Attitude (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 54 min

This practice workshop introduces cittānupassanā, the third satipaṭṭhāna or foundation of mindfulness, which focuses on tracking the heart-mind (citta). Building on earlier body-based practices, this session explores how to become aware of the meditating mind itself—the attitudes, feelings, and mental states that color our practice.

The teaching addresses a common meditation challenge: we often focus so intently on meditation objects that we remain oblivious to the craving, aversion, or delusion driving our practice. Through guided exercises, practitioners learn to check in with questions like "How am I feeling about the meditation right now?" and discover what arises—whether physical sensations like chest tightness, evaluative thoughts, or subtle feelings of striving or contentment. The Buddha's response to Māra offers a model: rather than fighting or fleeing from unwholesome states, we recognize and name them, thereby taking away their power.

Practically, this approach reveals how body, heart, and mind co-create experience. Using the example of working with pain, the talk shows how physical sensation (the first arrow) combines with aversion in the heart-mind (the second arrow) to create suffering. By shifting from object-focused to subject-focused meditation, we can observe the very processes that construct the sense of self. The session emphasizes that wholesome states—equanimity, contentment, ease—deserve equal attention, as savoring these helps the mind find its way back to wise attitude in future moments.

So this morning we're moving into a realm that I particularly like working with: the heart-mind.

So far in the morning workshops we've mainly been exploring the first satipaṭṭhāna, the body, the first foundation of mindfulness. This is of course the realm of physical experience and sensory experience—the elements, the breathing, the flow of sensory objects as we move around the hall or open up our awareness to an open, radar-like awareness.

This morning we're going to start our exploration of the third satipaṭṭhāna, the realm of the heart-mind. This is cittānupassanā, tracking the citta, which is most often translated as "mind." But I prefer the translation "heart-mind" because the two—heart and mind—are very much connected experientially. We often find that when we're working with one, we're working with the other.

The citta, the heart-mind, is another domain of experience that the Buddha directs us to for cultivating mindfulness. As I mentioned, it's one of the four foundations of mindfulness, one of the four satipaṭṭhānas suggested in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which is the seminal instruction given by the Buddha for cultivating mindfulness for insight.

The realm of the heart is about feeling or affective experience. We've already been talking a little on the retreat about craving, aversion, and clinging. These are three movements that the heart makes, three feelings of the heart. As well, there are wholesome feelings like the brahmavihāras: love, compassion, joy, equanimity. The realm of the mind is our cognition and our knowing of experience—creating meaning out of our experience through perception, thinking, and so on.

But in our experience, these two—the heart and the mind—are interwoven and interdependent. When we feel an emotion, it has a strong affective feeling to it, a strong feeling of the heart, but it also involves thought and perception and identification. Tuning into the dynamic movements of the heart-mind is helpful for a few reasons.

Firstly, the heart-mind tends to be the cause of what we perceive as problems in the meditation. The nature of the heart is to feel, and perhaps you can identify with the way that feelings sometimes seem to stubbornly get in the way of a blissful or tranquil meditation experience. "If only this emotion would stop ambushing me, then I could settle down and practice properly." And the nature of the mind is to think, which we all tend to find just a touch inconvenient when we sit down to meditate.

Neither feeling nor thinking are actually problems at all, of course. They're natural functions of the heart and the mind, and they're precious opportunities to develop awareness and wisdom. But if we're not willing or able to work with the heart-mind in the practice, then we experience them as problems, as distractions, as obstacles.

If we don't work with the heart-mind, then we can't fully understand our experience, because body, heart, and mind all feed and co-create each other. Unless we can be aware of them all, we're oblivious to this interaction. We're not seeing how one thing causes and conditions another.

To use the example of working with pain: if we're only focused on the physical sensations in the body and we can't see the aversion that's arising in the heart-mind, then we won't fully understand how the phenomenon of pain operates. The experience of pain is an interplay between the physical sensations, a feeling of dislike and resistance which arises in the heart, and then the perceptions and concepts and thoughts that go on in the mind. The aversion comes from the heart-mind, and this is what makes the

experience painful. The physical sensations are the first arrow of painful feeling, and our reaction to the pain, which happens in the heart-mind, is the second arrow—and that's the one that creates the suffering.

Focusing on the heart-mind allows us to see dependent arising, how one thing conditions and is dependent upon another. Tuning into the heart-mind also refocuses the lens from what we could call object-focused meditation—focusing the attention on an object out there, either something chosen or something that just arises in our experience, a sound, a sensation—to subject-focused meditation. From meditation objects out there to the one who is meditating, the meditating heart-mind.

This is an important shift because in meditation this is where we usually identify the self. "I'm the one who is meditating. I'm the one who's aware." If we begin to investigate the one who is meditating, we may begin to unravel this persistent misconception that there is in fact a "me" doing this meditation.

The self is a product of mental activity and feeling. The heart-mind constructs the self through perceiving, thinking, cognizing, clinging, and so on. If we can make those activities, those processes, the objects of our meditation, then we can watch the self in process, in action. And when we bring our awareness to it, that's when it begins to dissolve.

We'll explore various ways of working with the heart-mind over the coming mornings in the practice workshops. This morning, we're picking up on a theme that is really central in natural awareness because it helps us to refine wise effort, which I talked about on the first day, I think it was. It's really central to this approach: refining the effort and energy that we're putting into the practice.

What we're going to look at today is cultivating wise attitude in the meditating heart-mind. It's about checking the heart-mind's feeling about the meditation practice—checking whether we're meditating with a heart that's balanced and open and accepting, or one that's tense, judgmental, dissatisfied with the quality of my meditation. Am I wanting something to happen or wanting something not to happen? Is the heart-mind content to simply be aware of what's happening now, or is it straining or striving to get to a better quality meditation experience?

Very often when we check in with the heart-mind, the answer to these questions is yes. It turns out that when we look, we find that our meditation tends to be driven by craving and aversion, much like everything else in our lives. Meditation can easily become just another way to ingrain the deep habits of striving to achieve and constructing a sense of self.

When we look for attitude in the meditating heart-mind—and soon we'll look at how we do that—we may well find one of three unskillful attitudes: craving, aversion, or delusion.

We might find an attitude of craving—wanting something to happen, trying to manufacture an experience, trying to recreate a good sit, or a feeling of striving. Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Or we may find aversion—disliking an experience, wanting it to go away, a sense of dissatisfaction, self-judgment. Is it possible you've had a moment or two of this in the past few days?

Or we may find an attitude of delusion—confusion about what we're doing or what is going on, spacing out or getting caught up in concepts, thinking about the practice. Perhaps something that resonates.

But a fourth possibility—and no doubt you have also had this experience in the past few days—is that when we feel into the heart-mind, we find wise attitude. We find an openness to whatever is arising now, a sense of okayness about the present experience, a sense of no problem, no preference. We find a sense of well-being, peace, pleasure, contentment, ease, joy. These are equally important to get to know, to notice, indeed to savour.

Before we do a little experimental exercise to play around with this idea of attitude in the heart-mind, let me clarify something about this term "heart-mind." When I say heart-mind, I'm not referring to physical locations in the body. We're talking about qualities of our experience. The heart is often associated with the physical heart area, but what it refers to is the feeling aspect of experience—how we feel things like liking something, wanting something, disliking something, pushing it away. We also feel equanimity, pleasure, contentment. These feeling qualities are what we mean when we talk about the heart.

Similarly with the mind—in our culture we often associate this with the head, but we're talking about qualities of experience which we can get in touch with as activities or things that are happening, things like thinking or perceiving or being aware. Although these have associations with places in the body, it's actually important to set that aside because what we're going for, as we've been discussing throughout this retreat, is direct experience. Having a fixed idea that thinking happens in the head and feeling happens in the heart may actually limit your connection to experience, because you might find something completely unexpected about where these experiences seem to be playing out.

So let us do a little exercise to feel into our citta, our heart-mind. First, get into a comfortable and relaxed posture.

Looking for heart-mind is about tuning into the mind state of the one who is meditating. This might be a background feeling of contentment or agitation or tension that becomes apparent if we ask ourselves something like, "How am I feeling about the meditation?" or "What is my mind state right now?"

Because body and mind are intimately interconnected, it might be that what arises when you ask yourself such a question is a physical sensation somewhere in the body. You might notice a tightness in the chest or a pressure behind the eyes, or maybe a warmth in the heart area or a sense of spaciousness. These are signs of your mind state. It doesn't mean you've failed to find mind state because you asked this question and what came up was physical sensation. This is where you can bring in the qualities of investigation and curiosity. "That's interesting—I'm trying to find the attitude I have towards the meditation right now, and what comes up is this sense of tightness in the chest. What can that tell me? Can I hang out with this sense of tightness for a while and see what it reveals?"

Another sign of mind state that might be easy to notice is the type of thought we are having. If you catch yourself judging yourself harshly about your meditation practice, or perhaps congratulating yourself, these are sure signs that aversion or craving are present. Again, this is an opportunity to bring in investigation and curiosity. We're not interested in the storyline, of course, but can we find a feeling or a physical sensation in the body that is connected to that thought? It provides a sign—"Ah, craving or aversion must be present. Can I actually get in touch with the direct experience of them?"

So to bring the meditating heart-mind, or citta, into focus, we're shifting our attention from the meditation object to the heart-mind that is aware, that is meditating. And we might get there by way of a feeling, a mind state, a physical sensation, a mood, a thought—anything might be the way in.

With that preamble, let's do this short meditation exercise. Although we're investigating the realm of the citta, we're actually going to start with a particular focus on the breathing.

Get yourself comfortable and relaxed in your posture, and bring your attention to the breathing. Focus on the aspect of breathing that is most obvious to you. It might be movements in the abdomen or elsewhere in the body. Or it may not be movement—it

may be touch. Maybe it's the rhythm of the breathing, the energy of the breathing, the space in which breathing happens. Whatever's most obvious, focus on that sensation, that experience.

We're placing our awareness on the breathing and trying to be as clear about the experience as we can be. For the next three minutes, I want you to see if you can remain with the sensations of breathing, staying continuously aware for just three minutes without a break. If you do find yourself distracted, just immediately bring your awareness back to the breathing and stay with it.

You're halfway through now. It's been one and a half minutes. If you got distracted, take your attention back to your breathing now and refocus your awareness for the next minute and a half.

And now shift the focus of your awareness towards the heart-mind that is meditating. What's your attitude towards your meditation right now? What is the state of your heart-mind? Are you satisfied with your meditation or dissatisfied? Are you welcoming of your experience, or is there a voice of judgment about how well you did in the exercise? Is there tension in the body or mind?

So how did you go? Any success with tuning into the feeling in the heart-mind at the end there?

One practitioner shared: "There was some amount of noticing that I drifted off a bit, but it was okay. There was both noticing that the breathing's not my favourite, but also noticing that I was doing okay with that. But there was still judging, and judging my not being able to just let that go. It was a mixture of things."

So there was judging and evaluation going on, but it sounds like not very strong. There was also a bit of an underlying sense of acceptance. And I think that's a pretty common experience, whether we recognise it or not—to be continually judging and evaluating our experience and our achievement.

Another practitioner reported: "I managed to maintain mindfulness. There were some things in the background that tried to get my attention, but they stayed in the background. And when I went to the citta and fired into it, there was this little being in the corner, whimpering. Tightness in the citta, like, 'I could be a good girl.' A little being whimpering underneath the pressure to perform."

That's a really powerful, visceral experience of this striving to succeed. And that's exactly what this technique is aiming to bring into the light, because often we're so focused on the meditation object that we're not aware that this experience is also happen-

ing—and is indeed driving the way that we relate to the meditation object and the practice. Were you able to stay with that experience at the end there for a while? Yes, she was able to stay with the citta.

Another practitioner offered a different experience: "I was able to stay with the breath, but meanwhile I sort of enjoyed and was amused at almost how the practice had been gamified a bit."

and get to know it.

So it becomes the meditation object. We don't try to get rid of it, and we don't try to ignore it. We greet it like the old friend that it is. And the way we cultivate wise attitude in the meditating heart-mind is by getting to know unwise attitude really, really well—by welcoming it and getting to know it and rejoicing in our clear seeing of it.

So when the demon Mara, the personification of temptation, appears before the Buddha before he's attained awakening to distract him away from his meditation practice, he uses various guises. He takes on different forms and uses tricks to try to scare the Buddha and to seduce him.

Feeling a little bit set up and challenged, and then being able to watch that and wonder about it—is that a form of gripping, or is it just enjoying what's being offered?

And of course it is a set up. It's not about whether or not you can stick with the breath for three minutes. It's a situation that applies a little more pressure to bring to the fore this tendency we have to be tense in the practice.

Did anyone have the opposite experience of finding at the end that actually there was an okayness with what was going on?

"I felt better. I sort of started off quite tired and my mind felt quite heavy, and when I focused—just not focused—my mind felt lighter for the exercise."

Oh, okay. So it was a feeling that this exercise is helping to focus?

"To focus and to be lighter. Along with that came a lightness. And I stayed with it, but the distraction was my mental commentary about—you know, I knew you were going to say 'what happened,' so that was me pre-empting my sort of commentary of observation."

So the commentator was preparing.

But this lightness that you describe—it's equally important to recognize these states of heart-mind that we're meditating with. Because again, sometimes we can be so focused on the meditation object that we fail to notice the wholesome qualities. Sometimes the wholesome qualities can be quite subtle. So it's important to notice when there's wise attitude in the meditating mind as well, and to really feel the full flavour of that experience. That also helps the mind to become familiar with that experience and to find its way back—to choose that experience in future moments.

So we've had varying levels of success with feeling into the attitude of the heart-mind. We practice this by simply dropping it into the meditation from time to time, by regularly checking in and asking ourselves a question. You can phrase it in a way that works for you, but essentially it's: How am I feeling about the meditation now? What is my mind state now?

The important thing in this practice of checking the attitude in the heart-mind is what we do next. If we notice an unskillful attitude, there are three main movements we could make.

Possibly the initial reflex is to try to get rid of it. Say it's mid-afternoon, that long stretch where there's nothing interesting happening to stir up excitement in the practice. The hall feels a bit silent and stifling, and there's just this restless energy in the mind. It's not even that there's anything interesting to think about—there's just this restless quality, and it won't settle. And then I notice... perhaps I remember to ask myself, what's the attitude in the heart-mind? And I notice that frustration is also present.

So the obvious move I could make is to try to get rid of the frustration. I could berate myself for not accepting this restless state of mind and remind myself sternly that meditation is about letting go and accepting whatever arises.

Would this work? Unlikely, because it's just more resistance to what is arising. This time it's resistance to the frustration. So it would just be more unskillful attitude, driven by aversion.

A second option would be to notice it briefly, maybe note it, and then turn our attention away to another, better meditation object. This choice may also be driven by aversion to the frustration, which makes us unwilling to stay with it—it's not really the meditation object that we prefer. This strategy probably has more chance of success than the previous one. It depends on the level of power in our concentration and mindfulness, and whether they can command more energy if we move to a different meditation

object than the original restless state of mind and the frustration that are pulling our energy in a different direction. But one likely outcome of simply noticing frustration and then turning away from it is that it will continue to fester.

So the third option is that we welcome the frustration as an opportunity to develop wisdom. The frustration has already hijacked our meditation. It's an unwanted guest that has not so much turned up on the doorstep as is already inside, on the hearth rug. So what to do but welcome it in, pull up a chair,

into abandoning the path, abandoning the practice. What is the Buddha's response when Mara appears? Does he chase Mara away? Does he outsmart him? Does he go into battle? Does he ignore him? No, he doesn't. I'm sure many of you know how the Buddha responds when he is faced with Mara. He recognizes Mara. He calls Mara out for who he truly is.

And this is what we need to do when we recognize unskillful mind states. We want to see them and we want to understand them, not push them away. This is how we take the power out of them—like the Buddha when he calls Mara's bluff.

And as I mentioned, it's equally important to recognize wholesome mind states and wise attitudes as they arise in the practice. We get to know them, we savor them, we appreciate them, we learn from them. What does it feel like to have a heart that is unmoved by disturbances? What does it feel like to have a heart that is radiating love? So opening to attitude is not only about seeing and working with unskillful attitudes, but it's also knowing a mind that has equanimity, knowing a mind that's imbued with wholesome qualities, knowing a mind that has a wise attitude to the meditation practice.

I want to finish with a final guided meditation—not so much an exercise this time, but just a meditation to once more point us in the direction of this territory. But before I do that, are there any final questions?

A practitioner shares: For me, that welcoming often is very informative and allows me, as you said, to get to know anger or fear or whatever. And sometimes there's the welcoming, but I know underneath there's the thought, "Oh, if I welcome it, it'll go away." And sometimes I'm not sure what to do at that point. There's aversion there in a sense—there's aversion plus the fear or whatever, so there's a lot going on.

Yes, and there can be a lot going on. But essentially it's the same principle. It can regress backwards infinitely, where we can have an initial experience and we're averse to that, and then we're averse to the aversion, and we can be averse to that aversion, and

so on. But it's all fundamentally the same principle, which is that we're welcoming or opening up to the aspects of experience that are normally unwelcome, that we normally want to push away.

So we might be in this dynamic where we're trying to apply meditation tools and work with an experience and welcome it, but we can tell something's off. Something's not quite right—there's something a bit disingenuous here. Maybe we caught a little thought that doesn't actually fit the story of what we're trying to do. In that case, we just get curious: Where is this disingenuous feeling coming from? Can I get in touch with that experience? It's the same basic principle. It's getting in touch with the direct experience, being as intimate with the actual experience as we can be, but always turning towards that aspect of experience that we might habitually turn away from because that's not what we want in the meditation. We want a different object.

And of course it can be very slippery and tricky and subtle, because that is the nature of the mind, and it's also how we habitually move through our lives. That's why this practice can be so eye-opening—because we often don't notice that we bring this attitude even into the meditation practice. It does require constant sensitivity and regular checking. And that might include even when we think we're working with the very craving or aversion that's driving the practice. We still need to check.

Another practitioner asks: A similar experience—every instruction generates another expectation. It's like, turn towards acceptance, and then I'm averse to the aversion, and it's almost like there's nothing you can do about it. And that itself can also be liberating—the realization that there's nothing I can do.

Well, exactly. I think that is the key: we're genuinely not trying to get rid of anything here. We could reframe it—we're going looking for gems that we can polish to cultivate wisdom. So when we find frustration in the heart-mind towards the meditation experience, it's like, "Ah! An unpolished gem." It's not something I'm trying to get rid of. This is like meditation gold. "Oh, here's my afternoon sorted. It's not going to be boring and restless anymore."

I got an opportunity to get to know the nature of frustration. It's actually fascinating, you know. You won't be frustrated at the end of that if you really pull up a chair and grab a cup of tea with it and sit with it. But if you spend your whole afternoon trying to dodge it and not talk to it, then it affects you.

So I think that's a great realisation—it's liberating to understand that the task is simply to see it. I don't have to do anything else. I don't have to try and get rid of it. Not to get rid of it, but to turn all experience into wisdom, because we keep generating experience and then reacting to experience. Now we have to learn a skill to turn all experience into wisdom, to find the liberating potential within suffering itself.

One of the ways to investigate is simply to ask: What's there? What's happening? And I suppose what was happening earlier on was that because there hasn't been a dialogue previously, it's like sitting in silence with a stranger. There's a resistance: "No, I'm not doing this." So the question becomes: How do you build that dialogue when it hasn't existed before?

If the internal dialogue I suggested feels unnatural, then just drop it. Find a way to check in with what's going on in the heart-mind, but it doesn't have to take the form of asking yourself questions. If the internal dialogue gets in the way, then scrap that entirely. You might find something else that works for you—perhaps some sort of remembering the heart, some felt sense of turning towards it. It's a tool to help you remember to check in, but it doesn't have to be a question and it doesn't have to take a dialogue form if that feels obstructive.

What I'm hearing is that it's not specifically the question that feels difficult—it's that relationship itself, that turning towards what's really going on. It's almost like there's a level of trust that needs to be built. Absolutely. The heart is asking us: "Where have you been for so long? I've been waiting for you to come and talk." So there's a trust to build, and initially there may be no communication at all.

Like any aspect of experience, when we offer these suggestions in the practice, some people grab onto them immediately and say, "Oh my goodness, yes, this is exactly the realm that works for me and I want to dive into this." And other people think, "What are you talking about? I've never turned inward and asked myself what's the feeling tone of this experience before." So absolutely, just feel into it gradually. Try throwing it in there occasionally. If it doesn't feel fruitful, don't worry about it. Drop it. Continue what you're doing. And maybe some other time when you remember, just try it again.

With all of these different tools that we're offering in the practice workshops, it's definitely a case of finding what works for you and then going with that, playing to your strengths. Becoming proficient in meditation or making progress is not dependent on completing all the different modules—until you've mastered the breathing and the elements and you can see the attitude in the heart.

It's not like that at all. These are just all different ways in to becoming intimate with our experience. And you find the ways in that work for you. You just don't worry about the others. Or maybe you listen to the others and occasionally you try them, and your practice changes over time. But you don't spend effort butting your head up against something that's not working.

"I suppose I know where that is—it's a craving to get to know. I have a craving to get to know because it's part of my wider journey. So I think it comes from that as well. I'll drop it and then I'll be keen to pick it up again."

And if you know you have that craving, which of course is very common—this craving to get to know—then you can drop all of these different suggestions in as a question in the practice without any attachment to an answer. So the practice becomes just dropping it in as a question and then being open, seeing what happens.

"Just following on from that, Patrick talked last night about the conceptual world and what he called ultimate reality, which to me is sort of the felt world. So following on from that question, would you say generally—because that question for me was about how do I engage with this heart-mind—is it in the realm of a felt relationship?"

Yes, absolutely. It's about bringing it into the body. When you find the feeling or attitude in the heart-mind, in its purest form it is an affective experience, an experience of the heart. But like I said, the way in there, because for many of us that is not very familiar—we might have lived our lives quite cut off from these deep feelings of the heart—for many of us the way in is through other experiences. But they're all experiences that are happening here and now.

So it may be, like in the examples I gave with the restlessness, that I'm not yet aware there's frustration there, but there's restlessness and this sort of sense of discontent—"Oh God, two and a half hours till dinner." And then I remember to ask myself, "What's my attitude to the meditation right now?" What I might find is not an immediate connection with this raw feeling of frustration, because maybe that's not very familiar to me and I haven't really spent much time hanging out there before. What I might notice is that the chest feels very tight. I wonder what that's about. I've just dropped in this question and then the part of my experience that has presented itself is a tight chest. I don't necessarily even yet associate a tight chest with frustration, but I just notice: tight chest, interesting. And so I hang out with the experience of tight chest. It may be that it reveals the underlying frustration, or not. I just hang out with it, drop the question, continue, and drop it in again at another time.

"It means the ability to transform instantly all the experiences—like a psychic power to transform all the experiences. To transform any unhappy experiences immediately into happy experiences. Psychic ability."

Well, the thing is that the quality of presence and seeing something has a pleasurable quality to it. This is why if I'm restless and then frustration arises and then I can really zero in on the frustration, all of a sudden the meditation becomes energized and pleasurable again—even while the frustration is still here in its raw form, in its raw energetic form. Because it's actually a very energetic and pleasurable experience to be with it and see it.

"You might become energetic when you touch it. Immediately touch it."

Very good.

"Can I ask about that? It seems to me there are different levels of intensity or power in the things that arise in citta. For some of them I can just witness them and they're there, they're perfect as they are, and welcoming them, they evaporate, and a sense of well-being arises. And other things can be beyond my capacity—it's the same phenomenon, it's just something arising in my current experience, but some are easy and some are beyond what I can do and deal with in that moment. Have I got it right? There's an intensity? Why?"

Absolutely. There's a huge range of intensity of experience, and it is really important. We've talked a little bit about not expecting that this intense feeling will necessarily go away. Many times we have to see something over and over and over and over again.

again before it dissolves. So it is important to understand that we are genuinely wanting to see, to hang out with an experience, to get to know it.

But equally important is knowing when it's time to pull back, because sometimes some experiences are too overwhelming. And the golden rule with practice is that whatever choice we're making in meditation—and there's always lots and lots of choices available to us—whatever choice I'm making, it should be steadying the heart.

Sitting, pulling up a chair, having a cup of tea with my frustration can be incredibly steadying for the heart, because I'm not identifying with the frustration anymore. I'm actually getting to know it. It's quite illuminating. In fact, it's quite mind-blowing to sit with aversion and understand how it shapes your life. That is an experience that's steadying the heart.

But if the feeling is so overwhelming that I'm trying to turn to it and I'm trying to turn to it, but it's not steadying the heart—it's just leading to more agitation, to a greater lack of balance—then it's time to do something else that soothes. I just get up and go for a walk. Or if I like doing a very focused practice to soothe, if that works for me, I might choose to do that, or whatever it is. But the golden rule is that it needs to be steadying the heart.

So it's a very good point. Thank you for raising that.

"I don't understand why there are different intensities, but I accept that there are. Thank you for helping me understand what to do with it."

Yes. Or as Patrick said last night, it's just a natural process. And that is the liberating thing about it. We don't have to do anything. The self doesn't have to get involved and sort things out.

Well, we have chatted through the time that we had available to do the guided meditation, so your mission for this morning, should you choose to accept it, is to check in with the state of the citta, the state of the heart-mind, from time to time when you remember—and to explore ways to welcome whatever is there, be with whatever is there, get to know whatever is there.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 91

Ripening for Insight

Patrick Kearney · 36 min

This talk addresses the essential distinction between awareness and insight in meditation practice, examining how mindfulness alone—while valuable—is insufficient for liberation. Drawing on the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, the speaker explores how vipassanā (seeing that frees) requires both clear seeing and understanding (ñāṇadassana) of the three universal characteristics: anicca, dukkha, and anattā.

Using the practical example of working with chronic pain, the talk demonstrates how we habitually project permanence and solidity onto experiences that are actually flowing and changing. When examined closely through mindfulness, what seemed like an enduring entity reveals itself as a series of discrete events—sensations arising and passing, interspersed with moments of their complete absence. This seeing separately (the 'vi' in vipassanā) allows us to understand that suffering arises not from experience itself, but from our identification with and clinging to it.

The talk emphasizes dhammavicaya (wise investigation) as the quality that ripens the mind for insight. This involves genuine curiosity directed at direct experience rather than conceptual speculation about past or future selves—what the Buddha calls unwise attention. Through a candid personal account of working with obsessive thinking over decades of practice, the speaker illustrates how even sophisticated investigation can be subtly driven by aversion, and how true freedom comes only when we stop treating experiences as enemies to be conquered. As Robert Aitken Rōshi taught: meditation doesn't produce insight, but it makes us accident-prone.

In those moments where death might be just a breath away, we do the thing that's most important to do. In that moment, there is nothing more important than securing the oxygen mask in place. And we're urged to take this same attitude towards the practice. In each and every moment, there's nothing more important for us to do than practice—as if smitten by a sword, as if our heads are on fire—because we have a big goal: to end suffering, to abandon identity view.

And at the same time, what would our practice be like if we were practicing the way we want to die? What would we want our last breath to be like? No one wants their last breath to be desperate and panicky. Don't we want it to be calm, accepting, intimate

with what's happening? Don't we want our last breath to be effortless, relaxed, not striving? Don't we want our last breath to be a letting go of trying to get anywhere—an experience of effortless peace?

So this is the quality that we need to be cultivating in our practice. And the maturity of wise effort is finding a way to balance this tension: practicing as if we have not a worry in the world and all the time in the world, and simultaneously as if we might die before we even have time to draw the next breath. To navigate this paradox, we need to practice skillfully.

At the start of the retreat, we focus on the basic natural awareness instructions, which is very much the "wandering mindfully" part of the verse. We cultivate an effortless, open, relaxed awareness—just the light touch awareness with which I know I'm seeing, or I know I can feel my hands. This way of practicing is very much about stripping away the complexity of both everyday busy mind and also of meditation technique, coming into a simple awareness, a simple intimacy with whatever is presenting to our radar-like awareness from moment to moment. This is good for developing wise effort and continuity of mindfulness.

But to develop skill in the practice, awareness alone is not enough. Awareness alone is good for wandering mindfully, but not for walking the path. Awareness alone will not help us to abandon identity view. We need to cultivate insight too.

Awareness is as simple as "just this." But awareness is not the whole path. We don't want to solidify the idea that the practice is nothing but being in the present moment, because we can actually practice for years or even decades being in the present moment without necessarily developing deep wisdom about the nature of reality. This might make us a bit less reactive in the present moment, but it won't free the heart from suffering. The practice is so much deeper, so much more profound than that. It's also about creating the conditions for insight in order to free the heart.

Incidentally, "Awareness Alone is Not Enough" is actually the title of one of Sayadaw U Tejaniya's books, which I find slightly ironic because it's his approach to awareness that gets all the attention—because it's so relaxed and radical. People often take this approach to be an "awareness only" or "bare awareness" approach. But if you listen to what Sayadaw U Tejaniya teaches, his main message is about the importance of wisdom in the practice. And by wisdom, he means skill in knowing how to practice to ripen the mind for insight.

So let's turn now to insight, this goal of mindfulness practice. This is the vipassanā in satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā. Satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā is the cultivation of mindfulness for insight. Insight is why we do mindfulness meditation; it's the purpose of the practice. Mindfulness is what we do, but it alone is not the goal.

The simplest, most direct translation of vipassanā is "seeing clearly," based on the interpretation of *vi* as excellent or powerful, and *passanā* as seeing. I personally like Rob Burbea's translation: "seeing that frees," because this captures the purpose of insight. Patrick prefers "seeing separately," because the *vi* in vipassanā can be translated as "separate." And "seeing separately" clarifies what insight actually is: seeing that things we took to be enduring, solid entities—things—are actually nothing but a flow of different experiences. We take them to be a single thing because we're so used to relating to the world through a layer of concept. Patrick defines insight as seeing our experienced world as a flow of events.

Let's use the example of chronic pain, which is something familiar to me and may be familiar to many of you. In the early days of my practice—and still today if I'm not being mindful—I relate to my pain as something solid, a real thing that endures over time and that I have a relationship with. It's my pain, and it's part of my identity. It's plagued me all my adult life. It makes certain kinds of activities impossible or painful, and it has cost me thousands of dollars in visits to osteos and physios over the years. I have a belief that it's a part of me; it's mine. I relate to the pain inside a story that stretches from my past to my future—a story about the impact that this pain has had on my life.

is likely to have in the future. And when there's a flare-up of the pain, or when it's bothering me on a retreat, this is how I relate to it—as a solid entity and a part of my identity. And the story starts running.

Perhaps on the first day that the pain appears, it might be something like, "Uh-oh, here's this pain again. This could be problematic. I hope this isn't going to stick around and cause me too much trouble." Then by the second morning, I'm even more invested in identifying with it. "Oh, it's been here for 24 hours now. It's going to make it impossible to sit. I might have to leave the retreat early," and so on. By now, I've well and truly shot myself with the second arrow of suffering.

But if I sit with the pain for a while, I begin to notice that it's not as solid as I assumed. For one thing, it hasn't actually been here for 24 hours. It comes and goes. One moment it's here, and another moment it's not. It doesn't hurt when I'm lying down. It doesn't hurt when my attention is distracted by something else. Perhaps when I'm in the dining hall enjoying all of the delicious tastes and sensations that are provided as part of the lunch experience, the pain sensations drop away. But I have this belief that

because the pain appeared yesterday morning and it's still here this morning, it's been here for 24 hours. This is the sense of permanence that we habitually project onto things.

If I go to see a physio and they ask me how long I've had the pain, I will confidently reply, "Well, it first showed up yesterday morning, so it's been here for 24 hours." But in what sense is that true? When I was eating lunch and delighting in that experience and I didn't notice the pain, what do I think—that the pain was somewhere floating nearby, waiting to possess me again when lunch was finished? Of course not. Pain is nothing but a phenomenological experience. It has no independent existence. So the idea that my pain has been here for 24 hours turns out to be a concept that doesn't survive mindfulness.

By bringing mindfulness to it, I start to see it more clearly and I see the different experiences separately. I'm seeing it as a flow of events. There was a sensation of pain, and then the attention shifted and there was no sensation of pain. After a while, there was a sensation of pain again, and then the body position shifted and the sensation of pain disappeared. Then a while later, the sensation of pain returned, and so on.

This is the seeing aspect of vipassanā. But insight is more than just seeing clearly. To go back to Rob Burbea's interpretation, it's seeing that frees. And this kind of seeing also requires understanding, ñāṇa—understanding the way things really are. Insight contains both of these aspects. The Buddha uses the term "seeing and understanding," ñāṇa-dassana, to indicate that they're a package, that we need them both.

Seeing is what we do in the here and now. It's always and necessarily here and now, in the present. The pain comes, the pain goes, and I notice it coming and going. Eventually, when the mind is ripe, understanding arises from the seeing.

What we see and understand are, of course, the three universal characteristics, samanya lakkhana: impermanence, anicca; unsatisfactoriness, dukkha; and not-self, anattā. They're universal because everything we experience shares these characteristics.

Firstly, impermanence. Every experience is impermanent in that experience is always changing and nothing, no experience, sticks around. We might start to marvel at how the experience of the pain doesn't actually stay stable for more than a moment, even though I had thought it to be solid and enduring. The sensations that I thought were constant are actually constantly shifting and changing. It shifts and changes. It comes and goes. And I start to understand its nature is impermanent.

Secondly, dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, suffering. Every experience is a cause of unsatisfactoriness or suffering because of our tendency to cling onto it, to identify with it. We might start to notice that with the pain, the real suffering comes when I identify with it, when I start spinning the stories of the past me that was in pain and the future me that will be in pain, when I shoot myself with the second arrow. Or we might see the mental aversion to the pain and recognize that it's actually the aversion that creates the suffering. The pain is just a constellation of physical sensations.

But when aversion arises in the heart-mind, then it suddenly turns into an unbearable experience.

I've had a lot of experience working with aversion. It seems to be plenty of it in my field of experience to use as a meditation object. I remember one time on an early retreat—probably one of the first I did with Patrick—I used to have so much trouble with the sitting, so much physical pain, so much desperation to change positions and shift my body. I used to sit there miserably, waiting for the meditation bell to ring so that I could escape from the hall and make my body more comfortable.

And at some point, the teacher, who was Patrick, directed me to work with the aversion to the pain. That was like a whole universe opening up inside me, because I found it was actually quite clear and obvious to see this aversion. It was like sparks shooting up from the solar plexus—these little sparks smoldering there. And so I started to enjoy sitting without moving, because I was waiting and watching to see what the aversion would do.

What would happen was that the uncomfortable sensations would stay fairly constant, with the aversion sort of smoldering here in the heart. Then at some point the aversion would flare up the central channel, and in that moment, the experience became unbearable—and before I'd even made a conscious decision, I'd shifted position.

So: impermanence, dukkha, and finally anattā, not-self. Everything that exists has the nature of not-self. There's nothing at all in our experience that, when we examine it closely, we can hold onto and say, "This is me." We understand that what I took to be this very solid and menacing entity—my pain—is nothing but a flow of experiences. It isn't my pain after all. The "me" that exists in that story about my chronic pain is just a character in a story. And when I drop the storyline, this is all there is to it. There's no past pain. There's no future pain. And there's no me who is in pain.

So insight means something quite specific. It's a technical term in the practice—insight into these three characteristics. This is different from psychological insight into our behavior or relationships or mental states. Meditation can sometimes provide psy-

chological insight, but this is not the aim of insight meditation. We might go on retreat and come away with a better understanding of something going on in our lives. This kind of revelation can come to us on retreat; it's a wonderful side effect of the practice, but it's not the insight we mean when we're talking about insight meditation.

This is how we begin to cut through our delusion: through clear seeing and understanding. The relationship between these two—between seeing and understanding—is a bit mysterious. Often we have to see the same pattern playing out many, many times before we understand. Understanding is not something we can force, and we won't understand until our minds are ripe for wisdom. Insight is not something we can do. All we can do is set up the conditions that make it possible, or even likely.

Patrick's Zen teacher from his early days, Robert Aitken Roshi, used to say that meditation does not produce insight. Insight always comes about as an accident, but meditation makes us accident-prone.

So we can't do insight, but we can nurture a curiosity about the way things really are, and a desire to see and understand clearly. This is the quality of wise investigation —dhamma vicaya. Wise investigation is turning our curiosity and interest toward our experience. It involves developing aim and precision, which we've been talking about in the morning workshops. But most importantly, it's an intention to understand our experience clearly.

When I was practicing at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's meditation center in Burma, he had no time for us asking him to explain why we were having this or that meditation experience. He would always say, "Don't ask me why that's happening. Go and find out for yourself." It turned out that he learned this from his own teacher, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, whose style of teaching was apparently never to explain things, but instead always to turn the question back: "Well, why did that happen? Go and practice and find out, and come back and report." Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that he learned to just ask himself "Why?" whenever something unexpected or interesting turned up in the practice.

This is a good way to sum up why investigation matters. We track our experience in order to see the patterns and understand the causal relationships. And we track experiences by being intimate with them in the present moment.

Say I'm trying to have a blissful and concentrated sit, but instead I'm plagued by a dullness that I just can't shake. I could resist this mind state with varying strategies and varying levels of success. Or I can ask myself, why? I can get curious about the dullness. What's the experience of dullness? Is it a mental dullness or a physical, energetic dull-

ness? What does dullness actually feel like? Does it have a physical location? Is it associated with a certain type of thinking or feeling? What's my attitude toward the dullness? What happens to the dullness if I track it over time?

What's important here is that we're not looking for the answer by thinking about it or theorizing about it. We're looking for the answer in our direct experience. This is a really important distinction. Investigation doesn't mean jumping on a thought train about maybe I'm feeling dull because I didn't get enough sleep last night, or I didn't have enough protein with breakfast, and perhaps I'll eat two eggs for breakfast tomorrow morning and then I'll see if I'm dull at the same time tomorrow afternoon.

In fact, this kind of conceptual speculation is what the Buddha calls unwise attention, which he describes as any thinking along this theme: Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?

Conceptual speculation about past me and future me—these have no place in wise attention and wise investigation. Am I feeling dull because I didn't have an egg at breakfast? This may be relevant from a health point of view, but from a practice point of view, this is just conceptual blah, blah, blah about how I was in the past at breakfast. The Buddha calls this a thicket of views that will just reinforce the belief in a separate self.

Instead, he advises that we should direct wise attention, yoniso manasikāra, to the nature of suffering, which we understand when we pay very close attention to our experience. We're always interested in our direct experience, but with an attitude of investigation—of wanting to clarify, to understand.

This is how we resolve the initial paradox, how we wander mindfully to abandon identity view. We develop increasing intimacy with present experience by surrendering fully to it—just this. But at the same time, we cultivate the qualities of wise attention and wise investigation by being as clear and precise as we can, so that we begin to understand that experience is ever-changing, that this conditions that, that we suffer when we cling, and that ultimately there's nothing to cling on to.

In accordance with the principle of no preference for one meditation object over another, being willing to work with whatever arises, wise investigation requires a genuine welcoming of the experience—which we talked a bit about this morning—a willingness to sit down with it and have a cup of tea together and get to know each other.

I thought I'd share, to finish up, my most transformative experience of this from the time I was practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma. But the origins of this start when I first took up meditation practice, because the bane of my early meditation was relentless, obsessive thinking. I don't know if anyone else here can resonate with that. I can actually still remember the content of some of the thought loops that played during some of my early meditation retreats—right here in this hall, as a matter of fact.

I was someone who struggled to focus on the breathing, struggled to keep the attention in the body. It felt like this was because of the enormous power of my thinking, which was relentless. And so I went into battle with the thinking. First I threw everything I could at it. I tried to smother it and suppress it with concentration, which failed miserably and left me with these energy explosions that would derail me for half a day.

That went on for a few years, and then I got smarter about it. I honed the quality of wise investigation and learned how to make thinking the meditation object. I learned a lot about my thinking. I started to see how it was driven by aversion or boredom or craving or fear. I started to perceive the relationship it had with my body and its energetic movement. This was another few years of practice.

And by this point, I was congratulating myself on how well I could work with thinking as a meditation object. The only problem was that it still hadn't gone away. Well, actually, most of it had, because what I'd been able to develop was the sharpness of mindfulness and investigation honed into a kind of laser beam which, if I was really vigilant and dedicated in the practice, I could direct at most thoughts and cut them down before they'd even had time to take shape.

So that was satisfying, but it was quite high-energy work. And if I was being honest with myself, it still exhausted me in my practice by constantly demanding my attention and vigilance. The most infuriating part was that there was one type of thought—a little voice in the back of my head. I'm sure none of you have this. I call it the commentator. And the commentator could not be slain by the mindfulness laser because it was behind the laser. No matter what direction you aimed it in, there was the commentator helpfully and encouragingly narrating the experience: "You're doing a great job. You're not letting any of the thoughts pass. You're definitely progressing in the practice. Just stay vigilant..." and on and on. This endless narration of the meditation experience.

By then I had convinced myself that this commentator was all that stood between me and a liberating and blissful experience of not-self. The situation built to a crescendo while I was on this long retreat. One night I just hit the wall. I had been investigating thinking for days, getting more and more refined with my precision, developing the sharpness and clarity of my mindfulness, but I could not turn off thinking.

In desperation, I actually went to Sayadaw's residence at night and knocked on the door and asked for an individual interview, which thankfully he granted me. All of this came pouring out—how I had developed all this skill to work with thinking as a meditation object and it was still plaguing me. I don't know if I actually said the words, but I think he could read it in my face and body language that I was really at the point of thinking, should I just head out the gates?

He listened and looked at me and then he just said, "Thoughts are not the enemy, but you are still trying to get rid of them."

And that was the thing that turned everything around. I was still identifying with the thinking and thus I was still resisting it. The resistance to it was preventing me from seeing the identification. I saw that I'd been investigating thinking to get rid of thinking. I'd actually been pumping energy into the thinking with my ardent investigation, which was driven by aversion. Thoughts aren't the enemy. They aren't the self. They're just thoughts. And I was creating my own suffering by treating them as the enemy.

Once I finally stopped trying to push them away, I could see them clearly and I could understand their not-self nature. And since then, thinking has never again been a problem for me in my practice—which is not the same thing as saying that my practice is thought-free. In fact, I was thinking about this for the purposes of this talk, and I'm not sure if I should publicly admit this in a talk that's being streamed out into the ether, but I would estimate that in the twenty-five years I've been practicing, the amount of thinking has probably only reduced by about thirty percent. The difference is it's not a problem anymore.

So the qualities that are needed in wise investigation are a willingness to welcome anything that shows up and an attitude of playful curiosity. Over time, these will ripen the mind for insight and hopefully make us accident-prone.

Is that the second awakening factor?

Yes, Dhammavichaya—the factor of investigation.

The question arose because I had suggested not investigating the thought itself, so what should we investigate instead?

The principle in meditation is that we're never interested in the storyline. We're never interested in the content of the thinking. Instead, we're interested in whatever is unfolding in direct experience—whatever we can notice that is clear. And then we stay with that to see what it reveals.

It is possible to work with thinking as a meditation object—and I think we'll be exploring this in one of the upcoming morning workshops—but we're never working with the content of the thought, the storyline. What we're working with is thinking as an activity that is happening here and now in the body, heart, and mind, because it involves all three.

We can hook onto any aspect of that which is clear. We might notice a particular type of thought, a recurring thought, a very familiar thought, or a very sticky thought. The way we might start to work with it is to ask ourselves, "Oh, I recognise this one—this is planning mind," or whatever it is. "What else is going on in my experience that might be related to this? Is there tension in the body, for example?"

When there's thinking, there will undoubtedly be tension somewhere in the body. There might be other physical sensations. There might be a feeling quality in the heart—not the literal heart, but a felt quality to the experience.

So we look for what is clear and obvious about the present experience.

Starting in the body is a very good idea, because it is clear and obvious and in the present. And it's best to stay there—without the analysis paralysis, because that analysis is always about the past.

That's right.

Good night, and have a good rest.

CHAPTER 92

Tracking Thinking (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 1h07

> *In this practice-focused session, Patrick Kearney leads a series of meditation experiments designed to transform our relationship with thinking. Rather than treating thoughts as problems to eliminate, he invites practitioners to investigate the activity of thinking itself—distinguishing between thoughts (content) and thinking (process). Drawing on the Buddha's understanding of citta and nāma-rūpa, Kearney explains that our difficulty isn't thinking per se, but our addictive relationship to it.*
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> *Through playful guided exercises, participants explore fundamental questions: How do thoughts appear—as words, images, or feelings? Where in the body do we experience thinking? Do we think with our bodies? The session reveals the remarkable variety of individual experiences, with some practitioners locating thoughts in the head or heart, others finding no location at all, and many discovering the intimate body-mind connection in cognitive activity.*
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> *Kearney emphasizes that thoughts provide us with a sense of identity, which explains their compelling nature even when mundane. Using Nisargadatta Maharaj's analogy of a mother watching her child play with a toy, he suggests we become interested not in the content of thoughts but in the play itself. This shift in perspective—watching how the mind creates meaning and constructs a world—opens doorways to understanding emptiness and not-self. The teaching concludes with the beautiful image of citta as a clear mountain pool, where awareness itself is the transparent water through which all mental phenomena become visible.*

This morning we're going to play around with tracking the thought stream. Emma was talking about this last night—the difficulty that thinking can present. The Bard says, "He thinks too much; such men are dangerous." Julius Caesar, Act One, scene something or other.

One important aspect of insight meditation is learning to track the thought stream, the endless flow of thought generated by the mind. The basic principle is universal: a thought is just an event. It's a dhamma—a conditioned event which arises in the mind and ceases. So it's just another meditation object, that's all.

Thought, of course, is completely natural. It's the mind's job to generate them, and if the mind doesn't, we're in trouble—we probably need twenty-four-hour care. So thinking is completely natural and not at all a problem. The problem for most of us—not all of us, but a lot of us—is our relationship to thinking. We have an addictive relationship to thought. This addictive relationship is not natural and it's not necessary. It's this relationship that we explore when we're doing meditation.

What we're dealing with is mind throwing up thoughts. It could be compared to a fire constantly throwing up sparks. Mind throws up little thought moments, whole clouds of them, and the awareness knows all this. Then one of these sparks seems to be particularly interesting. The awareness goes straight to it, grabs it, and starts to turn it into something—most often a story, a narrative. What we then do is believe them. We actually think the story is true, despite the fact that the stories frequently and cheerfully contradict each other.

Have you ever emerged out of a bad meditation thinking, "I am hopeless at this. I cannot do this. I must be the worst meditator in this room." You leave the hall with your head hung in shame. Then the same day you have a really nice sit and you think, "Actually, I'm pretty good at this. It's really no problem, it's quite simple. These other people are probably struggling." You walk out of the hall with your head held high. Now, they can't both be right. At the very least, one of them is wrong. Yet when they're playing, we completely buy into both of them. And we take this as normal.

Why are they so attractive? The answer, of course, is that if you start to investigate when you think, who do you think about? We think about ourselves. We think about others, but we think about others in relation to me—my friends, my enemies, and so on. What the thinking provides us with, which is why we find it so interesting even when it's absolutely batshit boring, is a sense of identity. Thoughts confirm to us: this is who I am, and this is the world that I'm living in. That makes them entrancing and fascinating.

Have you noticed how you can be meditating on the body, and the body is really clean? There's stuff happening—different sensations and so on. But as soon as the most mundane thought pops up—"Will the breakfast tomorrow be like the breakfast this morning?"—as soon as that pops up, we just abandon the body one hundred percent and go straight into the thought. Why is that? What the mind does, which the physical senses do not do, is create stories. Mind is a storyteller. The body does not create stories. Mind creates stories through language.

The body also has language. But the difference between the language of the body and the language of the mind is that the language of the body does not tell stories. The language of the body is sensation. This is why you can always believe what your body tells you. You cannot believe what your mind tells you, but your body never lies.

At the same time, because the body doesn't actually tell stories, it's boring. It doesn't hold our attention. And we would trade in a good relationship with the body for a boring story any time. This is simply human nature.

So tracking the thought stream subverts our deeply ingrained determination to identify with the world created by thought, and it opens us up to a world beyond thought and beyond concept. It helps us enter into the world of emptiness and not-self. This is where the practice fits and why it matters.

Now, notice that when we think, we normally assume that what is important is what we are thinking about—the content of the thought. We assume this is what's important, and we simply take for granted the activity of thinking, how we think. We just take it completely for granted.

But when we're tracking the thought stream, we are not interested in what we are thinking about. What we're interested in is the activity of thinking. You could say that what we're interested in is thinking, not thoughts. This is extremely important.

As a meditator's rule of thumb, I like to operate on the principle that every thought I think is a lie—including the thought that every thought I think is a lie. That too is a lie. Just don't believe them.

There's one interesting analogy that Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj provides which I think fits this aspect of the practice very well. He says it's like a mother watching her child play with a favourite toy. You have the mother, the child, and the toy. The child is engrossed with the toy, completely caught up with it. The mother sees all this, and she's not really interested in the toy. What she's interested in is the child playing with the toy. She's interested in the game.

In the same way, when we track the thought stream, we are not interested in the contents of our thoughts. This is just the toy we're playing with. What we're interested in is their play and our relationship with that play. It's a different perspective that we take.

The basic method is this: find some aspect of the activity of thinking that is not the content of our thoughts, and make that the meditation object.

What we're going to do now is play with a number of brief meditation experiments or meditation games. The attitude we bring to this is important. Treat these as games. Do not take them seriously. It's important that we play with these experiments. It does not matter what happens in these games, but it would be nice if we enjoyed ourselves while we played. So have a very light attitude towards it.

This is important, I think, for Dharma practice in general. The Dharma is the most important thing in our lives. The Dharma is far too important to be taken seriously. Do not take it seriously. Do not make it heavy.

In each exercise, we're going to begin by settling awareness in the body, and at some point we're going to direct awareness to some aspect of the thought stream. If we get lost in our thoughts, we drop the thinking, come back to the body, settle, and then return to the mind. This is what we're basically going to do.

So let's just do it first, and then we'll have questions later.

Construct your meditation posture from the ground up. Settle awareness in your body.

And now, stop thinking. Don't think. Just don't think.

Okay, any luck? Show of hands—how many people stopped thinking? Good. What constitutes a thought here? Does it have to be with words? We're going to get to that later. Anything you think may possibly be a thought counts as a thought. How many people failed utterly and indignantly? So we've got a lot of fences here. Partial success. How many people had partial success?

So those of you who had partial success, what was your secret? Because you have just cracked one of the mysteries of meditation practice. How did you manage to go through a period of time without thinking?

"I have a new mantra: don't think."

Does a mantra count as a thought? Yes, it does. And I had to say it at least three times—so three thoughts. Not bad. So mantra, that might help.

"I found that if I very firmly directed awareness to my heart area, there's very immediately a buzzing and very pleasant feeling which is so pleasant that I can just immerse in that."

So if you can immerse in your meditation object enough, the thinking just shuts down. Anybody else have that method? Same. How long can you maintain it?

"Until I notice I'm doing it."

Will that be seconds, minutes, or hours?

"Seconds, probably."

Anyway, the reason I throw this exercise in is basically to show what we're faced with. We're addicted to thoughts, to thinking. It's quite difficult not to think. And we can sometimes, with a supreme effort of will, put it aside for a while. But then afterwards, we go, "Oh, that was good. I didn't think for a while." And we're back in the thinking.

So this is what we're working with. It's the relationship to thinking that we're interested in. And the way into that relationship is to begin to be interested in the process of the activity of thinking.

So let's address your question with our next exercise. Again, construct your meditation posture—lifting up from the ground, opening up the spine, balancing the head, and settling into the body. From there, settle into your normal meditation object.

Are you thinking? If you are thinking, and if you know you are thinking, then thoughts must be appearing to you in some way. How do thoughts appear? Do they appear as words? Do they appear as visual images? Do they appear as feelings? Do they appear as combinations of these? Do they appear as something else entirely?

Study the flow of these thoughts. Don't focus on their content—what they are about—but on their appearance, how they present themselves to you. How do thoughts appear?

So how do they appear? How do you know you are thinking?

A word arising frequently as instruction, like "rest" or "relax," and a word arising frequently noting or naming something. So words, basically.

I noticed it was sort of like a reaction to experience.

But what appeared in that reaction?

Well, one of the things was the hearing. Then you start thinking, "Well, what was that?" And sometimes you can go off on a story about it.

And so when you were thinking, how were you thinking? In words? In images?

Words.

So they appear as words, and you can see that they're triggered by certain events. Then up will come the words and some kind of commentary.

I think that if what I'm thinking is in the foreground—but there can be no foreground, yet there is a background. It's like potential thoughts floating around in the background that could come to the foreground and take over my consciousness.

And when there's activity in the foreground, how does it present? How does it appear?

It tends to be a continuity, like a monologue.

So words?

I get words and images, both. But when they come up, I cut them off by pausing my breath, and that cuts the thread, the slogan, and then the whole monologue just collapses.

So in the foreground, there's a monologue—predominantly words—but which is very fragile. It can be cut off without too much difficulty. But in the background, there's some kind of activity which is not words, but which will produce those words if given the chance.

Yes.

When we start to look at the thinking activity, one thing we see is that there are depths. What we normally call "thinking" is the surface activity of the mind. But that thinking comes from somewhere, and the activity of the mind goes much deeper. One of the interesting things about drawing attention to thinking itself is that we're going into the mind and seeing how it creates meaning, how it creates a world. What we normally call thinking is just the end product, just the surface activity. But as that drops away, we can go deeper, and we're witnessing, as it were, world construction.

In English, we don't really have the language to talk about this. Notice the paucity of language when we're discussing the mind. What does the mind do? Well, it thinks. But what exactly does that mean? This question has popped up this morning—what exactly is that? We don't bother to define it. We just have this general sense of "the mind thinks." We have this very vague vocabulary. Whereas the Buddha has a very precise vocabulary about a whole series of cognitive activities through which the mind creates a world.

So when we start to look at "thinking," we often begin because it presents as a problem—a distraction that requires attention. But what we're actually doing is directing awareness to how the mind creates meaning, how the mind creates a world. And this is really, really interesting to get a handle on.

"I found when I actually focused on your instructions, that created more thinking. And then I got totally lost as to what it was. I just didn't know. I was completely lost."

You were totally bamboozled.

"Bamboozled. But also, what you mentioned there about the mind creating meanings—I think that's true, but I also think it can be a value, you know, to have a life that has meaning."

Oh, absolutely. As we've said on more than one occasion, there is nothing wrong with thinking. Thinking is natural. It's part of the world. It's part of nature. If we didn't think, we would need twenty-four-hour care. The problem is not thinking. The problem is our addictive relationship to thinking. What we're getting a sense of is that relationship. And if we get a handle on it and see this process of meaning-making, it's very useful.

"I had an experience of like a bubbling away, an undifferentiated sort of bubbling away. And at some point I noticed an attitude. I'm guessing that there was maybe a feeling or a sensation that came before the attitude. And I'm guessing also that the attitude would have fueled thinking."

Well, we'll put aside all the guessing. But what we've got is this undifferentiated seething and bubbling away. There's something there. And then emerging from that is an attitude. And that attitude has already given you a stance in the world. Other things will flow from that, of course.

"It's a combination of all those things—feeling, visual..."

And images, words, and feelings. The reason I chose those three is because most people will report their thinking in either one or more of those ways.

"There's also noise, I think—not necessarily like a word, but a rhythm or a sense of noise."

So there's all sorts of different things that pop up, and it's interesting to get a hold of, just to recognize what it is that's coming up.

"When I close my eyes, I still see the room, my body. So that's still thought, right? It's not narrative, verbal thinking, but I'm still thinking."

Would you say you predominantly think in images? It's interesting how different people think in different ways. I'm strictly a word man. And when I come across other fans of the word, I sometimes ask the question: is it a dialogue? Is there more than one voice in there? For some people, it's more than one voice. I haven't come across anybody that's got more than two—I don't see why not. But me, I'm strictly monologue. I do not let anybody else in. It's just me. And I've more than once thought this is why I became a teacher—to indulge in this kind of external thinking.

"For me, with my thinking, I notice when I'm in a good mood, my thinking stream is planning and the future."

And there's an optimistic sense in the planning?

"Yeah. And when I'm in pain, it's often about the past."

And my point of view and justifying myself. So I sort of see thought kind of emerging often from that feeling world. Maybe feelings themselves are thoughts in some way.

Well, feeling is a mental activity, for sure. It's a mental activity that's very embodied. Mental in the sense of mind, but body and mind for the Buddha are intimately interconnected.

When the Buddha talks about feeling, he tends to put feeling at the foundation, at the very basis. And he says what we feel, we perceive. So feeling affects our perception, how we perceive the world. What we perceive, we think about. So he seems to have a layered thought structure with feeling at the foundation.

Would you add belief to that as well then?

So I'm thinking about thought and why it's come about, and you're saying we're going to do a deep dive into it. It starts off with a belief of some form and then it turns into a feeling and it turns into a thought. It moves from one to another to another.

It's like there's this whole drama going on down there in the mind, most of which we are completely oblivious to. But then we catch certain things when they pop above the surface—that's what we catch. So what first pops above the surface into awareness may or may not be the first thing to have occurred. That may be at the end of a long stream of underwater activity. But then, oh, that's there, and then that conditions that, and then that conditions that. So we're usually operating with just part of the picture.

I suppose I know that I believe there are thoughts, and they are meaningless, generally. And then in my mind I've got a thought that some of them come from a belief of suffering. That's a better word—suffering. And that's where one of the linkages is worth exploring.

We're deeply conditioned by the past. We're deeply conditioned by whatever pain we've gone through. We're also deeply conditioned by whatever pleasure we've gone through. And from that, the mind has learned to respond in certain ways. This is what will shape what's going on.

The mind is deep and immensely complex. And when we're looking at thinking, again, we're looking at what has popped above the surface into awareness. But once we start to pay attention to it, we can then start to go down. Basically, the deeper levels start to open up and we get a better sense of what's driving me. Why is it that I have this belief? What does it do for me? And so on and so forth. So we start with what we conventionally call thinking and we start to go deeper.

I suppose the challenge for me is that most of them are useless thoughts. Then there's a portion which are useful.

You find if you get a handle on the thinking mind as a meditation object, the quantity of thought tends to go down and the quality of thought tends to go up. The thoughts that are really genuine expressions of wisdom become clearer. There's more space for them. They're not being smothered by the rubbish.

But then if I want to go deeper into the thought or the tracking of the thinking, it seems to me as if I have to do it by thinking."

"No, no, no, no, no. That's our habit—always to just slide into the content. We're just watching what the mind does. That's all. And it won't reveal everything at once. This is a gradual process. It just begins to naturally happen. Gradually we start to notice more, but that comes with time."

"I think I have this experience of what arises spontaneously, in which I don't feel that I have agency. And also the experience of choosing to think something, in which I do have an experience of agency. Both can be words or sometimes images. I'm just curious about the relation between what makes this—between agency and non-agency."

"I don't think it's an absolute border. I think it's more like a spectrum. Sometimes for me at least, it's like thoughts are arising but then I decide to cooperate with them and I'll take them in a certain direction. I would call this reflecting on something. But other times it's more random, just kind of seething around, and I'm not particularly cooperat-

ing with it at all. It's moving from one possibility to another to another. So you do get different experiences, and agency is one of them—or what the Buddha calls choice. That is one of the factors that conditions the experience. In the meditation practice, if we're just witnessing it, then the agency is simply to watch. So you get a different relationship."

"What can also condition our experience is hormones. The chemical—if we're naturally producing dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, endorphins, those happy chemicals, that informs our natural state. The thinking mind is not doing that."

"That's right. This is body conditioning mind. Mind conditions body, body conditions mind. The interrelationships are innumerable, and this is what we're always dealing with. This is dependent arising. So all we can do is focus on what's available to us in the present and then see how it unfolds.

"Awareness itself, mindfulness itself—it's like it experiences this vast, complex, interconnected web. And what we want to do is get hold of it and change its direction so it heads towards happiness, satisfaction, welfare, along the path in other words. But how can we possibly get hold of this and change the direction? Well, we insert one thing: awareness. And just inserting awareness in there starts to shake it up, starts to move it in ways which otherwise it wouldn't move. So that's the beginning.

"Then, of course, again, agency comes in. We start to see things and we realise, 'I can do something about this. I can't do anything about that.' And away we go. But it's the awareness itself going in there—that alone starts to shake things up."

"How does the process of naming or labelling in the Mahasi tradition fit in with thinking? Because that's a concept, it's a thought—adding another concept to clarify a concept."

There's an expression somewhere in the tradition: using a thorn to extract a thorn. So it's using a concept to clarify what's going on. Let's say you're meditating and something happens, and there's no thought involved. Then the meditation ends and you might reflect, "Well, what happened then?" When you reflect upon it, you're putting words to it, wrapping a concept around it, and that helps clarify it. As it were, it makes the experience part of the everyday furniture of the mind. Whereas if you didn't do that, it would be some interesting... you'd have a sense of "that was weird, that was interesting," and it would be forgotten. But if you can put words to it, that's what it means. And again, it's all about meaning. This is where it fits. And that can be very helpful.

So again, there's nothing wrong with concepts. It's the addictive relationship that is the problem. Sometimes when you're doing intensive meditation practice and there's a lot happening, you just want to think about what's going on. Well, that's a valid thing to do. But what I recommend is always, again, agency. You realize there's a lot going on, you need to think about this, and then you make the resolution, the determination: "Right now I will drop the meditation and I will reflect about X"—whatever it is, like you've picked something. And then you think about it very deliberately. You might keep the same posture as you do when you meditate, so it's often very focused, clear thinking. And then when you're done, you make the determination: "Right now I will drop the reflection, drop the thinking, and return to the meditation." So you have a clear border.

And if you want to know when you should drop it, one thing to look for is the slightest hint of repetition. Drop it. Because now the mind is going around in circles. After that, you might want to make a journal note. Then you can go back to it later. Sometimes you go back to it later and you think, "What was I on?" And sometimes you go back and you go, "Wow, that was really good. I really learned something."

So again, thinking is natural. It's part of being human. It's the relationship to it that we're interested in.

But we're talking far too much. There's another question—which has been burning you up for years, now you can finally get an answer. And the question you know you want to ask, but you're too embarrassed, is: where do I think?

So if you sit into your meditation posture, construct your posture, and settle into your normal meditation object. Are you thinking? Turn your awareness to the place where you think. This is similar to finding where physical sensations arise. The difference is that physical sensations have physical location, while the thought stream may not. People may experience their thoughts in the general area of the head, and it can be useful to begin there. But don't take anything for granted. Don't assume that you already know. Where do you think? Is there a specific location? Is there more than one location? Does this location change? Or is there no location? Where do you think?

So where are they?

"Thinking appears for me located in head and heart, and that which knows thinking is space, so beyond."

So that which knows thinking is quite wide, and the thoughts themselves appear either in the head or the heart. Is there a connection between head and heart, or are there just some thoughts in the head, some thoughts in the heart?

"They inform each other."

So they influence each other. They collaborate.

Anyone else? Where are they?

"Mine are mainly in my head, but there's a relationship between my solar plexus and my thinking. It's got to do with will, I think. I'm still exploring it. There's a tension here, and often the tension in my head and that area is connected."

Do you find that if you notice the tension in the solar plexus, that means there's a certain kind of thought? Or is it any kind of thought?

"It's got to do with will, I think. Decision, making a decision or something. Or no, on a more basic level than that—just willing through the world. That sheer... I think thought is given as some sort of solution to operating in the world, and to some extent it is, but to some extent it's not. Yet it seems to be a default: 'I'm going to think my way through this.' And that decision comes from the solar plexus—that sort of force, the energy level."

Yes, this blends into our next exercise, which is: do we think with the body? So this body-mind interconnection with thought.

"You mentioned before better quality and worse quality thoughts. I noticed in that exercise that the worse the quality of the thought, the higher it is in the body. So altitude and poor quality go together. Up here are all the thoughts where the self gets quite entangled, with all the emotion attached to them. And then the commentator I mentioned last night is in the back of the head. And then there's some thoughts that come from the heart, and some that come from the solar plexus."

And generally the quality is better as you go downstairs?

"Yeah, it's definitely better. There's definitely less self in the ones down here."

"At this time in the retreat, I find that my thoughts and my feelings from the heart and abdomen are giving birth to thoughts."

That's interesting. So that becomes clearer during a retreat?

"Yes, because the rubbish that I'm carrying around most of the time from the outside world—that drops away with the practice of awareness, awareing the abdominal area. Realizations and things coming to consciousness."

Anybody fail to find location? And is that because—like if I'm looking for something and I'm looking for it and I can't find it, but I know that somewhere it exists, it's just that I can't find it. So there's that kind of "can't find it." But there's another kind in which basically it doesn't have location. It's just absurd to talk about location. Which one did you have?

"It just doesn't have a location. It's a category error."

Again, you notice the variety of experiences that people have. And one of the advantages of listening to different people's experiences is that it begins to dawn on you that there is no one right experience. It does not exist. There are different experiences. There are experiences that totally contradict each other. But it's just experience. And our job as meditators is to clarify the experience as it presents—not to judge it as good or bad, right or wrong. All of that is complete nonsense. We just clarify the experience.

I've done this exercise many times. Sometimes I would find where the thought was. Sometimes it would be very, very clear. And sometimes it wasn't that I couldn't find it—it just definitely, location did not apply. The way I expressed it to myself was: thinking is both everywhere and nowhere simultaneously.

So you can get completely different experiences at different times. That's normal. But what we're interested in is clarifying whatever experience presents now. That's the only thing that matters. We're opening up the whole system gradually over time.

We're pretty much out of time. Do we have time for one more? Okay, let's go.

Constructing your meditation posture, settle awareness in your body and settle into your normal meditation object. Are you thinking? Do you think with your body? Or does your body respond to your thinking?

For example, do you feel any tension in your body as you think? You might check for sensation in the area of your face. Is there tightness in your jaw? Is there tension in your forehead? Alternatively, do you relax when you think? Does your posture change when you slide into thinking? For example, you may find you slump slightly. Look for how your body responds to your thinking. Do you think with your body?

"I think with my body."

You think with your body?

"When I have thoughts, I notice my body doing things."

So your body responds, would you say? It's a body-mind activity, not just thinking. Do you first notice the thought and then notice the body's response, or do you notice the body's response first and then notice the thought?

"No, I have the thought and then, because I'm being conscious now, I notice I'm like that."

When you start to see these interrelationships, it's very interesting. If you begin to recognise that when you think, something is happening in the body, then you might train yourself differently. Let's say your meditation object is normally physical. You might actually train yourself to catch it first in the body and then see the thinking.

Sometimes this is what I do. I have a characteristic slouch in my thoracic area, which is associated with tension. It's like the thought energy goes up the spine and locates there. So the first thing I feel sometimes is this movement up the body, and then I notice it, relax it, and the thought is just about to get started. These patterns are interesting because once you see that A conditions B, you can approach it from either A or B and see what happens.

"I had the enjoyable experience of giving my mind free rein to go on a thought journey, imagining enjoyable activities I've carried out in the past. And that takes me right into the sensory, physical experience of the activity, feeling it in the body. It's kind of holistic in the sense that all the senses are involved. I hear sounds, or a sense of the sound, in the space. I find it very interesting because it carries on as a thing in itself. I might decide to think about that, but then it starts happening and I'm just in that experience. It's a very body experience."

Similarly, it might be that if you're completely at one with the body and allow it to completely relax, then that body will not produce thought. Or it may produce thought, but a particular kind of thought. Once we start to see these interrelationships, all sorts of interesting things open up. And interesting things are good because what we want is continuity of awareness, and it's easier to stay aware of what we find interesting.

This is one of the reasons why it's good to have a playful attitude towards the practice. If we're playing with it, it's likely to be interesting. And if it's interesting, we'll stay with it. It won't be, "Oh, I've got to keep going with this in-breath, this out-breath. How many more are there?"

"I wanted to make a comment about the idea of thinking in the body and looking for transitions between one mental state and another, and where that is occurring in the physical sense. The possibility that what feels like a body manifestation is actually a form of thinking—that's really something to ponder. The idea that something's arising that I experience as a physical sensation, but it's some kind of idea."

We have a strong body-mind duality—we kind of have the assumption of a strong body-mind split. But the Buddha's basic approach doesn't use that. He's more interested in the activity of being aware and that which is aware. And that which is aware could be what we would call physical or could be what we would call mental. But what for him seems primary is the activity of being aware and that which is aware. Change the awareness, you change that which is aware. Change that which is aware, you change the awareness.

So it's coming at it from a different angle. When we translate it into our culture, it opens up possibilities that normally we wouldn't think of because of our habitual thought patterns.

The thoughts felt more energetic in the body, moving through the body, as opposed to that more undifferentiated place, which is more visceral or cellular.

When you talk about this relationship between awareness and that which is aware, is it too much to ask what those qualities are as they come into the body?

The way the Buddha talks about it, he uses the term *nāma-rūpa*. *Nāma* is cognate with our word "name," and it refers to the mind's reaching out to be aware, to name, to experience. So perception, feeling, and a few others have evolved from this understanding. And then there's *rūpa*, which is form. Originally it meant the visible world, the visible form. Then it also became a word for body. But essentially it means an appearance.

So when we direct awareness in certain ways, what appears as a result? And then, given that appearance, how does it affect the way we are aware of it? There's this to-ing and fro-ing. It's like when you have pain, and then you are aware of the pain. The appearance is pain. And then you direct awareness in a certain way, and suddenly it's not pain anymore—it's something else. You change the awareness again, and it's pain once more.

So his view of the universe is quite dynamic. He's interested in the dynamics—how one thing blends into another, how one thing influences another.

Is there a medium in which awareness happens?

A medium? No. I think awareness, in a sense, *is* the medium. When he talks about awareness in its elemental form, the process of awareness includes awareness itself, but it also includes perception, feeling, and several other factors.

One image the Buddha uses—and we've been referring to this term *citta* every now and again, which we translate as "mind" but which covers more than what we normally call mind—is this: Imagine a clear mountain pool of water. You come to the edge and look into it, and you can see all the way through. At the bottom you can see the rocks and the pebbles and the little eddies in the current. You can see the fish swimming around.

Now, the *citta* is the whole pool. The rocks, the pebbles, the fish, the plants—these are the different contents of the *citta*: feeling, perception, wanting, aversion, and so on. The water itself is awareness. It's transparent. In its essence, it's transparent. But sometimes it gets muddy or disturbed, and you can't see through it. This would be awareness when the *citta* is agitated—awareness loses that quality of transparency.

But when the *citta* settles, we can recognize that quality of transparency, or you might see it described as the luminosity of awareness. And it's within that luminosity of awareness that everything happens.

We're going to play with this in tomorrow morning's workshop, so we'll see if we can get a bit of an experiential taste. I provide the esoteric theory, and I provide some practical experience.

You mentioned that analogy earlier in the retreat.

I did, yes. I must be fond of it.

And you would think water is not visible—and yet when you look at it, you know you're looking through water.

I find that interesting. Awareness, whilst it's intangible and hard to grasp, at the same time, you know it.

You can be aware of it. Yes, because knowing is the essence of awareness.

One image—actually not from water, but from a movie—comes from one of the more recent Sherlock Holmes series. In this one, Sherlock Holmes' evil sister is involved. She's locked up because she's brilliant like Sherlock, but she does evil things. And Sherlock goes to visit her.

And you enter into the cell, and there's a visitor's chair near the door, and there's a sheet of glass that keeps the prisoner on the other side. So he sits there and he's talking to her, and she gets up and starts to wander around. And then she steps through the glass. Because it turns out there is no glass. They just tell him that there's glass, and so he assumes there's glass, and it's completely clear, so he doesn't see it. But actually there isn't any. And you can just move through.

To me, that speaks to the nature of awareness. It's one of the things that makes awareness so mysterious—because it's fundamentally not a thing. It's like where things happen.

We won't go there. I'm completely confused.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 93

Three Aspects of Realisation

Patrick Kearney · 53 min

> *In this profound teaching, Patrick Kearney examines the three interlinked characteristics of existence—anicca (impermanence), dukkha (suffering), and anattā (not-self)—as they function in meditative realisation. Drawing from a brief but powerful teaching stating that "the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence, and the perception of not-self in pain" are what contribute to realisation, he unpacks how these characteristics are not philosophical doctrines to believe but empirical discoveries to be verified through direct experience.*
>
> *Kearney emphasises that perceiving impermanence goes far beyond intellectual acknowledgment—it involves becoming a "connoisseur of change" who investigates the arising, persisting, and ceasing of every experience, including the experience of self. He explores how momentary concentration (khaṇika samādhi) allows practitioners to track experience as it moves, revealing that even our sense of a stable self is constructed through craving, conceit, and view. The teaching illuminates how genuine insight into impermanence naturally gives rise to an understanding of dukkha—the anxiety and disappointment built into clinging to what is unreliable.*
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> *The talk culminates in a discussion of how these perceptions mature into stream-entry (sotāpatti), characterised by the realisation that "whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." Kearney addresses the fear of groundlessness that arises when facing not-self, suggesting that what initially feels like terrifying free-fall ultimately reveals itself as freedom. He concludes with Robert Aitken Roshi's teaching on the subtle yet profound difference between awakened and unawakened life—pointing to a transformation that is both utterly ordinary and completely liberating.*

Tonight we will talk about the three aspects of realization. Here we're continuing the theme of insight—what exactly insight means from the Buddha's perspective. We take as our text this brief teaching: "These things play a part in realization: the perception of impermanence, the perception of pain in impermanence, the perception of not-self in pain."

This is a very brief presentation of the three characteristics, and what we'll do tonight is go through them. We begin, of course, with impermanence.

When the Buddha lists these three characteristics, it's always in this order: anicca, dukkha, anattā—change, pain, not-self. The concept of change or impermanence, anicca, is absolutely central to the Buddha's teaching. He could say that what characterises delusion is a denial of impermanence, while awakening is characterised by a clear perception of impermanence. It's absolutely central, which means we have to work out what the Buddha means by anicca, classically translated as impermanence.

To begin with, it's not a philosophical theory of change. If there is such a theory, it may be interesting intellectually, but it's not going to lead to awakening. Equally, it's not our normal, everyday sense of change, which everybody knows, because that too is not going to lead to awakening. So what is the Buddha talking about?

We start with the word itself, anicca. *A* is the negative, so "not," and *nicca* is the stem—so "not nicca," where nicca means stable, constant, permanent. This is Pali language, and in ordinary everyday Pali, when people are not speaking about the Dhamma, nicca is often used to refer to what can be relied upon. For example, dāna—you know the meaning of dāna: gift, giving. So you have the expression nicca dāna. A nicca dāna is a perpetual gift, what we might call an endowment—something that can be relied upon to last for a very long time. Bhatta is food, so nicca bhatta is a continuous and therefore reliable food supply.

So anicca, impermanent, means unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable—not to be depended upon, not to be trusted. This is where you can see the link between anicca and dukkha, where dukkha is pain, suffering, dis-ease. If we rely on something unreliable, sooner or later we are disappointed. It's built in. And of course we find in our life that we are disappointed again and again.

This is essentially what the Buddha is talking about. Now, in the context of the culture in which he was teaching, the idea of the nicca, or in Sanskrit the nitya, the permanent—this is very important in the doctrines of the day. In the Upanishads, to give it the Sanskrit name, nitya is the ground of things, which gives them their stability. In the Upanishads, the nitya is ātman, self. In the Upanishads, ātman is the essential self that underlies everything—permanent, stable, unchanging. In other traditions, the nitya might be God, so God would play the role of the nitya.

But what the Buddha is saying—and it was radical in his day—is that we cannot find any such ground. When we examine our experience and how experience flows, we cannot find anything that underlies what we experience as the world. We cannot find anything that stabilises what we experience as the world. It's change all the way down.

Again, it's important to recognise the Buddha is not making a doctrinal statement here. This is an empirical statement. It's not ideological. It's not philosophical. In other words, he's not saying, "Believe that there is no ground that stabilises your experience or you will not be saved." He's not saying that. What he's saying is: see if you can find anything in your experience that does not change.

And he might add, and by the way, good luck with that.

So this is an empirical approach. This is all about empiricism. It's about the nature of human experience. The Buddha is not teaching an ideology which, if we believe it, will save us. What he's teaching is an open inquiry into the nature of human experience. But he maps human experience, and he maps it in part according to these three universal characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anattā—change, pain, not-self. And these characteristics are characteristics of experience. They are not doctrines to be believed. Whether or not one believes them is utterly irrelevant. They are experiential, not theoretical.

So his project is to encourage his students to look and see for themselves. Is he right about these characteristics? Can you, for example, find some aspect of your experience that does not change? This is the challenge.

The Buddha feels that if we embark on this search, we might recognise that whatever we seek to rely upon turns out to be unreliable because it changes. And when we recognise this, the natural human response is to become anxious. We could say that if we have not felt anxiety because of impermanence, we haven't yet perceived impermanence to any depth.

The perception of impermanence goes a lot deeper than anything intellectual. When we really understand the fact of change, this moves us in some way. And for the Buddha, the perception of impermanence is linked to apprehension, to anxiety, because it involves a felt sense of the unreliability of things, a felt sense of the essential fragility of life itself. If we are not moved by our experience of change, we haven't perceived impermanence in the sense that the Buddha is talking about.

One aspect of this which I personally am becoming more familiar with is in the process of ageing, where it turns out that our body is much more fragile than we assumed it to be. I don't know—have you reached the age where you get together with your friends and you start talking about how your respective bodies are falling apart? Anicca.

Another way of looking at it is that the perception of impermanence creates anxiety because it uncovers our attachment. What alarms me is not change as such, but the fact that things change from the way I want them to be, or they change in ways that are un-

predictable to me, or they change in ways that are uncontrollable by me. Change is inherent in life, and everybody knows this. But the perception of impermanence, and the perception of dukkha in impermanence, involves realising that I cannot control these changes.

Life is inherently uncertain. Whatever I seek to rely upon turns out to be unreliable in the sense that sooner or later it will fail me. Life disappoints. This is what creates the pain in change.

In the practice, we move from the perception of impermanence to the perception of dukkha—the pain at the core of our being and the disappointment which is built into clinging. The Buddha links the perception of impermanence to the perception of pain and also to the perception of not-self, anattā. As we go deeper in the practice, we start to explore these characteristics, and it does become increasingly clear that they're interlinked. We could even say that they're three sides of the same existential situation. We could go so far as to say they constitute a three-sided coin.

Impermanence connects to pain in terms of the anxiety that it generates. How does it connect to not-self? We're doing the practice and going deeper, and we may begin to realise that what we regard as ourselves is also subject to change, inconstancy, unreliability. But this is very difficult to accept, and we spend a great deal of energy denying or resisting our own impermanence. For example, we learn to structure our experience to create the illusion of a permanent self.

Now remember that for the Buddha, "permanent" does not necessarily mean lasting forever and ever. Again, we're talking about an experience, not a theory. For the Buddha, something is permanent if it can be seen as not changing over time. So to be a self—let's say, for example, to be Patrick—then this self has to remain unchanged over time. The Patrick who begins giving this dharma talk has to be the Patrick who finishes it. The Patrick who is giving this talk must be the same one, the same person, the same Patrick who has been teaching dharma for a long time and plans to continue to do so in the future.

In other words, there's an assumption of stability over time. There's an assumption of permanence that's built into the experience of self. But as we talked about the other night, what is there about this present experience of Patrick that remains unchanged over time? And as we talked about before, what gives the self an apparent stability is concept.

We take the self for granted as real. We take it for granted as ourselves. But for the Buddha, it's real only as a concept.

Now, this is not knocking it. Self is a useful concept. In fact, it's a necessary concept. We need a healthy sense of self to function in the world. But it is only a concept.

So I relate to the world through a screen of concepts. The world is what I conceive it to be. I am who I conceive myself to be. And my concept of myself is very stable. I think of myself as the same person who was born all those decades ago, who was raised in that house, who went to this school, who wandered off to that country, who did this thing, and so on and so forth. There's an assumption of stability over time.

But when I look now for the present experience of that person I was in the past, I can't find it. The experiences have all vanished, but the concepts constructed from those experiences persuade me that somehow they still exist, that they're stored somewhere. And the concepts persuade me that I—the person who underwent those experiences—is the same person as the person sitting here tonight. All of this is real only as concept.

And speaking of getting elderly, the universal complaint of the elderly whose bodies are decaying is: "But I feel the same inside." Now what feels the same inside is self. It's a concept. Meanwhile, the actual mind-body process is revealing itself as increasingly unreliable in the world of direct experience.

So we project onto our experience that which it does not contain. We assume a stable someone who is experiencing all of this. Our perception is not simply that this now is happening. Our perception is that this is happening to someone—it's happening to me. And that this now is about someone—it's about me. It may be that you're sitting in this room thinking that this retreat is all about you. Actually, it's about me.

This is a projection, and the projection of self is a construct. It's constructed through three interrelated activities that together create a sense of a permanent self. These three activities are craving, conceit, and view—taṇhā, māna, and diṭṭhi. If we were really going deeply into not-self, we would look at all three: craving, conceit, and view. But let's return to impermanence. We can see it's important—it's the gateway, the entry.

So how do we uncover the fact of impermanence? Essentially, it's by learning to pay attention to change. We talked about momentary immersion, khaṇika samādhi, or momentary samādhi. This is what we're cultivating in this practice. We track experience as it moves. We're not trying to attain stillness by holding onto a single object. We want to go deeply into the particularities of experience. We want to see how experience moves and shifts.

When we do this, what we're learning to attend to are the most mundane aspects of experience. And of course, what we attend to is what we value. What we pay attention to is what we think is important. In this practice, we attend to the most mundane aspects of experience, and so we learn to value them. This is why we point out that we're not interested in seeing particular things or having a certain kind of experience. What we're interested in is discovering how experience itself moves.

I think a good image—one I read many years ago, I forget who wrote it, it was a seminarian—is this: doing this practice is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Does that feel familiar? The needle is very small and very mysterious, while the haystack is very large. Where's the haystack? It's right here. So the job is enormous. And the needle, of course, represents enlightenment or realisation or whatever—some kind of special insight.

The hay represents our normal, everyday experience, which we have come to see as unsatisfactory—which is why we're here, which is why we're on a retreat, looking for something special that will justify all the trouble we've taken to come and do the practice.

And so we carefully go through the haystack. The more diligent and obsessive meditators lift up and examine every tiny blade of hay, systematically going through that haystack, looking for that needle.

And eventually we realise that what we're looking for *is* the hay. In other words, it's already here. Impermanence, change, is already happening. It's just that we have trained ourselves not to notice it. So what we need to do is return to the obvious—to return to what we assume we already know and learn to see it anew.

This is one reason why we emphasize paying attention to the experience of distraction. We sit, and we decide to keep our awareness on the meditation object—let's say breathing. Suddenly we realise that we're thinking of something that happened yesterday or may happen tomorrow. Now, how did that event arise? What caused that event to arise? Did we make a conscious decision—time to have a good think? Or did the thought arise despite our best intention to stay with the meditation object?

Sometimes, of course, we do decide to have a nice think. But more often, it just happens. We don't have any control over it. If we go through this experience enough, paying attention, not dismissing it because it's the hay but valuing it because it's experience, we begin to notice that not only does experience change—in this case swinging between meditation object and distraction—we begin to realise that we do not control these changes. They just happen.

We begin the practice assuming that we are in charge of the project. I will come to the meditation center, I will do a meditation retreat, I will work on my practice, and I will make it better. But if we're really engaging with it, it doesn't take long before we realize we are not in charge of the project. If anything, the project is in charge of us.

And so the practice of becoming intimate with distraction can show us the three characteristics. Everything is changing. We are not in control of these changes, which is painful. And since there appears to be no one in charge, this is not self. The practice of sitting here and getting hopelessly swamped by distraction reveals the world of the three characteristics. It reveals the world of insight—if we're prepared to actually look at it.

Let's get back to impermanence, because it's the first one. If we look at this perception of impermanence, it is obvious that things change. I think if you had a non-Buddhist friend and you're talking about the retreat later on, and your friend says, "What did you learn at the retreat?"—thinking some mysterious, mystical something—you say, "Well, it turns out that things change." Would they say, "No, I think you're wrong there, mate"? Most unlikely. It's obvious that things change.

But *how* do they change? Our job as practitioners cultivating momentary samādhi is to become connoisseurs of change. We're interested in the fact that one thing turns into another. We're particularly interested in the intersections of experience, the borders where one thing becomes another—in other words, what we've been calling the transitions of experience.

Here I'll just toss out a few possibilities that you may recognise, or that you may encounter in your practice. Things change. In other words, they arise and they cease. They begin and they end. Do I see the arising? Do I see the beginnings of things? Do I see cessation, the ending of things? Or am I missing something?

Now, if I'm missing something, it could be because I'm in the middle of things, between beginnings and ends, which is where I assume a certain stability. But that which I take to be stable—is it as stable as I assume? When I look closely, does it move in any way?

The Visuddhimagga has a very interesting image for this. It says: imagine you live in an apartment, and you've got a nice window, and the window looks out at an expressway.

And this particular part of the expressway is one-way traffic, and it goes from, as you look out the window, from your left to your right. So if you look out of the window, you see the cars passing. If you turn to the left, you see the cars coming, coming, coming,

coming. If you look to the right, you see them disappearing, disappearing, disappearing, disappearing. If you look straight in front, you see them arise—there they are, they're gone, there they are, they're gone.

Three different views of the same phenomenon. Different perspectives, different views one can have on impermanence, on change.

Now this work is very mundane, so we're staying with the elemental qualities of experience: the movements of breathing, the sensations of the body, the feel of thinking, as we were playing around with this morning. Every breath, every thought has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If they had no beginning, they would not arise, so we would never notice them. If they had no end, they would never leave. And if they had no middle—in other words, the space between beginning and end—they would be coming and going so quickly we would barely notice them. And by the way, that is one of the perceptions of impermanence: when things are moving so quickly we barely have time to register them.

Sometimes I find that I'm staying with my meditation object and everything seems quite smooth. Does this smoothness itself change? And the meditation object—is it really the same as it was before? Or is it changing? If it is changing, how is it changing? Is it like waves? If it's like waves, are these waves smooth or choppy? Or is the object more strobe-like—appearing, disappearing, appearing, disappearing? And if that's the case, are the edges clear or not?

Another view: when things change, awareness moves from one object to another. Does it move because that initial object just ended and a new one began? Or is it that the new object attracts me before the old one has ended, while it still has my attention? This is another flavor.

When the experience is gone, is it completely gone with no trace remaining, or is something lingering, like some kind of aftertaste?

Another flavor of the perception of impermanence, which can be quite interesting, is noticing that this experience now is new. It's never happened before—at least not quite like this. So I think about this experience. It's about ten after eight and we're sitting in the hall, most of us in the same spots we normally sit because we've become very territorial and are prepared to defend our territory from recalcitrant meditators who think they can just move in. We're used to this particular spot and the particular view of the hall it gives us. There's a familiar speaker giving the standard dharma talk. Seems to be the same, doesn't it? Is it? Really? Or is this experience right now unique? This is noticing the freshness of things.

Another aspect we've touched upon is the relationship between the meditation object and the mind which knows the meditation object. The object is changing, and the mind which knows the object is changing. Sometimes we like the meditation object and sometimes we dislike it. Sometimes we feel the experience is good and sometimes we feel the experience is bad. Sometimes we find meditation satisfying, sometimes unsatisfying.

Can we drop our obsession with how we think things should be—a concept—long enough to see how they are and how they change? Can we drop our preoccupation with the object of experience long enough to check the mind which is aware of the object? Is that changing? How is it changing?

These are flavors of impermanence, things that may arise, even things that can be played with deliberately. The point is not to take change for granted but to become interested, to become, as I said, a connoisseur of change—someone who can really appreciate the finer flavors of change.

So we look into impermanence.

But how can we see into impermanence deeply enough to be transformed by it? For the Buddha, this is to ask: how can we see deeply enough to recognize that everything changes, including the one who is experiencing change? That also changes.

This comes out in a brief verse in Pali which appears again and again in the discourses to indicate the first stage of awakening—sometimes called the vision of Dharma, sometimes called stream entry. Roughly translated: "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease."

So it's about change. But notice the sting in the tail. First of all, "whatever is of the nature to arise"—what is of the nature to arise? Everything. Everything we experience. Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease. The sting is in the "all"—no exceptions. This indicates a recognition, a seeing through. And that is the moment which marks the first stage of awakening. In other words, understanding and accepting change all the way to the bottom.

This reminds me of the turtles. Some of you have heard the story, maybe some of you haven't. In ancient India, they had a particular system of cosmology: four continents—one to the north, south, east, and west. India is the southern continent. Between the four continents is Mount Meru, and at its higher reaches is the heaven of the thirty-three gods. Higher still, you get into the more subtle heaven realms. What holds the four continents together is the great ocean, and what holds the great ocean is the great wind. This is traditional Indian cosmology.

One time there was a learned Brahmin teaching his young son cosmology. The young boy is very bright, with a very inquisitive mind. He thinks about this and says, "But what's holding up the great wind?" His father is very pleased. "That's a very sensible question. Under all of this, beneath each of the four continents, there are four great horses holding up this whole thing."

The young boy is impressed by this news. He thinks about it and says, "But what's holding up the horses?" The Brahmin teacher is delighted. "That's a fantastic question. Underneath the four horses are four great elephants, just holding up the whole thing." The young boy is even more impressed. "What's holding up the elephants?"

"I'm glad you asked, my boy. Not many people get this deep in the investigation. Underneath the four elephants are four great turtles." You can imagine how impressed the young boy is. But he's still thinking about it. "What's holding up the four great turtles?"

At this point, his father says, "My boy, it's turtles all the way down."

And realizing this is the entry into Dharma. Turtles all the way down.

The perception of impermanence matures when the mind realizes the necessity of change—the fact that change is built into the very fabric of experience itself. Every experienced event arises and ceases dependent upon some other experienced event. This is their nature. This is what defines them. Every experienced event is impermanent.

This is the realization of the universality of change, which you could say is cognitive.

But along with this cognitive realization comes an affective one: the futility of resisting change. And this is the entry into *anicca saññā*, the perception of impermanence.

As this perception becomes increasingly obvious, we begin to shed our attachments, because the futility of holding to anything becomes increasingly clear. This understanding is based on a perception of change as inherent to the very structure of experience, the very patterning of it. Which means, of course, that our experience of self must also be impermanent, and like every other experience, not worth clinging to. If self itself changes, if nothing can be held as being self, then holding on to a self just makes no sense. And so we enter into the perception of not-self.

All three characteristics are interlinked in this way.

But if I have no ground as self, if holding on makes no sense, what are we talking about? Isn't this annihilation?

When the perception of change is flavored with the perception of *dukkha*, of pain, we have a sense of the groundlessness of experience, and with it comes a response, a reaction—fear of falling. It's like there's a black hole and I'm being sucked into it. This fear of falling is an existential rejection of not-self, because when coming face to face with it, when the mind begins to intuit it, there's a recoil. *I must have a ground. Without a firm foundation, I am lost.* And if I get a sense of groundlessness, I have to scramble back to the ground I once had. Otherwise, how can I function in the world? I must be someone. Even being someone in pain is better than being no one.

This is how the perception of *dukkha* develops as the perception of not-self begins to mature. We find ourselves in a kind of free fall, terrified because of this fear of falling.

But once we let go, once we stop resisting the inevitable, we realize there's actually nothing to fall onto.

So what are we left with when we separate the fall from free fall? We're left with free. If there is no ground, there's nothing to fall against. And so there's nothing to fear. Free fall becomes simply free.

This is the freedom of not-self when these perceptions mature.

Self is attractive because it appears to give us a foundation—for us and for our world. We construct a self in the first place because we fear we need a ground, a solid foundation. This is a very deep psychological need. But when we go through the anxiety of groundlessness and emerge on the other side, we finally recognize that not only can we not find a ground—it turns out we don't need a ground.

We are being held by Dharma.

The ground of Dharma, if you could call it a ground, is wider and freer than any self we could construct through our concepts and our clinging.

So the perception of not-self matures, and at some point the penny drops and we realize *Nibbāna* itself. The view of self, the view of "I am," "I am this"—it drops away. And we never have the same relationship to experience again. This is the first stage of awakening, the *dhammacakkhu*, the vision of Dharma.

Now, this does not mean that we float around in a cloudy but spiritual nothing. We continue to be who we are. But we recognize our self—both the self we play to ourselves and the self we play for others—we recognize the self as just a role. And we find that we can drop those aspects of the role that cause us and others pain, and we

can develop new aspects of the roles we're playing that bring happiness to ourselves and to others. We become like skilled actors who finally have some control over the script.

And of course, at times we forget our vision, and our habitual view of self, of clinging to self—boom, it pops up again. But it would be much weaker than before, and once we're aware of it, it will fade away again. In other words, our baseline has changed.

At this point, according to the tradition, we enter into the noble eightfold path, as compared to the eightfold path. Another way the Buddha talks about this is entering the stream, becoming a stream enterer. We enter the stream

in which the practice, in which life itself, is not a struggle against the current, but a flow downstream. The Buddha says it's like a river that flows inevitably to the great ocean. It may take a while to get there. There may be many twists and turns. There may be delays when it comes against a huge great dam. But it will arrive.

So if we get to this point—stream entry or the vision of Dharma—how is life on this Noble Eightfold Path? Rather than go on and on about it, let's look at one teaching by the modern Zen teacher Robert Aitken Roshi, who once addressed the question: what is the difference between an unawakened, deluded person and an awakened, enlightened person? Everyone in the room sat up a bit straighter. This is a very interesting question.

And he explained: the unawakened person wakes up in the morning, goes to the bathroom, has breakfast, and goes to work. The awakened person wakes up in the morning, goes to the bathroom, has breakfast, and goes to work. And that's the difference. I'll leave you to ponder that.

A question arose about how to interpret the word Dharma. Dharma is a technical term popularised by the Buddha. It entered into the whole Indian tradition after him. It's one of these terms which is layered, has different layers of meaning. In the Pali English dictionary, if you get the book version, it's kind of large pages with small print, and I think Dharma goes on for several pages. Same in the Sanskrit dictionary—huge entry.

But basically, it's got layers of meaning. Fundamentally, Dharma is the way things actually are, the way the universe actually moves—because for the Buddha, the way things are and the way things move is pretty much the same thing. Then another layer is: given that this is the way things are, what should I do about it? This is Dharma as duty. Given that this is the way things are, how should I live in response?

And Dharma, when it's used in the plural—dharmas—means the events that come and go according to natural conditions. So here, the vision of Dharma is that top meaning: the vision of "this is the way things are." But then after that—okay, now what? What do I do about it? How do I live in accordance with this? How do I cooperate with it rather than fight against it? This becomes Dharma practice.

Someone suggested this might be essentially equivalent to the Tao. I think so. It would perhaps be equivalent to Buddha nature also. When Buddhism went to China, or particularly when Chan went to China, this sense of it really was picked up—or picked up Taoism as well. That strong sense of "it's the way nature itself moves" probably would have resonated with the Taoist tradition. The way things are.

Another question arose: is there any transcending of dependent arising? Or is it only through seeing conditioning and the deep conditioning of life? Yes, there is a realisation of dependent arising, and that comes from the experience which transcends even dependent arising—the experience of nibbāna itself. Nibbāna is a directly encountered event. And that is the unconditioned, the unconstructed. Whereas dependent arising is the realm of the conditioned, the constructed. But having entered into that and come out of it, you get a new appreciation of the constructed and the unconstructed and the relationships between them. They live alongside each other. They interpenetrate. That's what one sees. It's seeing right through to the bottom. Like if it's turtles all the way down and you go right through past the bottom turtle—this is what you see. That is the liberation.

From that comes the liberation. To emerge from that experience, you're different, and you're living in a different world.

The Buddha talks about liberation and the understanding of liberation. When he discusses the progress of the two stages of insight and awakening, he distinguishes liberation from the understanding of liberation. Liberation is always an experience which is *bang*—something just changed. But what is it exactly? What's going on? This is the understanding of liberation.

Now, the understanding of liberation may arise almost immediately, or it may arise a day later, or it may arise a month later, or a year later, or a decade later, or a lifetime later, because things have to be processed. And so we're in the realm of time. But of course, fundamentally, time isn't real. So whether it takes a microsecond or a lifetime or two—what's a lifetime or two between friends?

In the texts, you get these classic experiences that people have where *bang*, it's the Big Bang Theory, *bang*, everything changes. But they're famous precisely because they're so unusual. More usually, you just have this gradual understanding. Every now and again you get a click, like something happens. But what really changes is this gradual unfolding of an understanding. You find yourself in a different world.

And of course, that first stage of awakening—stream entry—the only thing, according to the Buddha, that it changes is view. That's what is cut through. If you look at the three roots of the unwholesome—greed, hatred, delusion—that first stage cuts through delusion. But greed and hatred, they're still rolling along. They're more deeply embedded in the citta, and it takes more to actually dissolve them.

So as John Hale once commented when we were gossiping about meditators—about who had attained first stage and who hadn't—he said, "Stream enterers, they're almost as bad as ordinary people." Hence the noble eightfold path. You're just on the path now. You're definitely on the path.

CHAPTER 94

Awareness of Awareness (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · 56 min

> *This practice workshop delves into one of the subtler aspects of cittānupassanā (contemplation of mind): turning attention toward awareness itself, or what Patrick Kearney calls the process of 'awaring.' Building on previous sessions exploring wise attitude and working with thinking, this session invites practitioners to investigate the knowing quality that underlies all experience—the water in which objects of meditation swim, usually unnoticed in the background.*
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> *Through guided exercises, practitioners explore catching awareness as it moves between objects, noticing how attention functions like a torchlight illuminating different aspects of experience. The workshop then opens into investigating the felt quality of awareness itself—its spaciousness, stillness, clarity, and the way it holds all experience. Participants share rich descriptions: awareness as formless and ongoing, as both active and still, as prismatic and precise, as vast space within which attention moves.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes approaching this investigation with playfulness and curiosity rather than striving. This shift to 'subject-focused meditation' exposes the impersonal nature of awareness, beginning to dissolve the persistent sense that 'I am the one experiencing.' When we see that awareness is simply a conditioned process—not a fixed self—the duality between subject and object begins to break down. The session offers practical pointers including the Tibetan instruction to notice the gap between thoughts, while acknowledging that different entry points resonate for different practitioners. Like all objects of meditation, awareness of awareness can be a vehicle for insight into anicca, dukkha, and anattā.*

So we've been playing in the realm of cittānupassanā, tracking the heart-mind and looking at different ways in, different things to play with.

We started with the practice workshop on wise attitude a couple of mornings ago, checking in with how we're feeling about the meditation practice, to see if there's a sense of tension or strain or striving or self-judgment driving the practice. And also to get to know and appreciate wholesome qualities, wise attitude, when that is present in the heart-mind as well.

Then yesterday we were looking at working with thinking, one of the primary ways that the heart-mind distracts us from the meditation practice.

This morning, as promised, I want to turn the exploration to another aspect of citta, and this is the awareness itself, or we could say, the process of awaring.

A word of warning before we dive into this esoteric and subtle subject. When we hear of something like awareness of awareness, something that sounds subtle and refined, it's natural that we want to experience it. But this is a trap, of course. That would be preferencing one object over other objects. So it's really important that we treat this playfully and curiously in the same way that we've treated every other suggestion that has been made in the morning practice workshops. Certain types of objects resonate for some people. They work well, and whatever object works well for you, that's what you use. Those universal characteristics that Patrick talked about last night—of anicca, impermanence; dukkha, unsatisfactoriness; and anattā, not-self—are there in every experience, and hence no preference for one object over another. Any object can be the vehicle for insight and awakening.

I haven't yet settled on the language that I use to describe this aspect of experience. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, uses the phrase "awareness of awareness," and this works really well for me. But Patrick prefers to talk about "awaring," which emphasizes the fact that awareness is not a thing but a process, an activity, a flow of experience. So it's more accurate to call it a verb. Indeed, it's more accurate to call every aspect of experience a verb, because that's what we find when we get close up to it.

As Patrick was talking about yesterday, there's what we're aware of—the "aware-d," often in meditation practice the object of the meditation—and there's the awaring. And that's actually it. For some people, to think of it as a verb, as awaring, can help to avoid some of the conceptual tangles that we can get into with a phrase like "awareness of awareness." I will use both terms, and you can relate to whichever one makes more sense for you.

Awareness of awareness is taking awareness itself, or the process of awaring, as the meditation object. It's about shifting our focus from what we are aware of, from our meditation object, to the knowing of the object. We could look at it like making a foreground-background shift.

Usually in meditation, we're aware of an object. In vipassanā meditation, we're trying to get clearer and clearer about our experience of that object. To do that, we need to hold the object in the center of our awareness, much like seeing clearly an object that's on the bottom of a pond. But much like the clear water in the pond, we're not usually aware of the awareness itself, which is in the background. The meditation object is in the foreground, and then in the background, unnoticed, is the water—the awareness.

What we're doing here is shifting the focus, shifting the foreground and background, to see if we can notice the awareness or the awaring itself. We're shifting the focus to the water in the pond and bringing it into the foreground of the practice.

It's a bit like becoming aware of the process of seeing. We've played around a little with this concept at various points in the retreat: are you aware you're seeing? If we think about seeing, it's integral to most of our activities—indeed, all of our conscious activities really. When we are seeing, we are normally completely immersed in what we are seeing, which is often necessary for whatever activity we're undertaking. So we're not usually aware that we are seeing, but we can become aware that we are seeing.

Right now, if we open our eyes, we have a visual field in front of us. We're very used to immersing ourselves in our visual field because this is how we go about our day and conduct our activities. But we can be aware of the process of seeing. We can take our awareness, just right now as we're sitting here, to the place where seeing happens from—which is of course our eyes—and we can be aware that in fact there are sensations in our eyes. We can be aware of the eyeballs moving as we look from place to place. Then if we stay with the seeing for a while, we become aware of the automatic blinking that's happening all the time. We know it happens all the time, but usually we're completely oblivious to it.

We can become aware of the boundary around our vision, that our vision is actually bounded by our eyelids, maybe the rim of our glasses. As we stay with it more, we can also become aware of a sense of depth in the visual field. There is a depth to it, a sense of perspective, which creates a sense of space. It also creates a duality between what is seen and the seer. The seeing is happening from a specific place over here, and out there is what is seen.

So we've shifted the focus from the usual...

immersion with what is being seen to the process of seeing itself.

In a workshop a couple of mornings ago, I was describing the shift from object-focused meditation to subject-focused meditation that we make with cittānupassanā—the turning of attention to the one who is meditating, to the selfing process by which this meditator constructs her world through sensory experience. This is another aspect of that shift to subject-focused meditation. But this time, we're not so much watching how we construct a self out of our reactions to sensory experience as we are directly investigating who is meditating.

When we look to the awareness, we are opening up to the not-self experience of awareness. Because usually, of course, we associate "me" with "my awareness." Particularly in meditation, this can be quite persistent—this very strong sense that I am the one experiencing my world. In meditation this can manifest as, "Okay, well, I can see that the thoughts are impermanent, and I can see that the pain is not me. But aren't I still the one meditating? Aren't I the one still having this experience?" This sense of identity residing in the awareness can be quite strong.

But if we can turn our meditation towards this process of awareing, then we're exposing ourselves to the reality that awareness is just an impersonal process. When we see this, the duality between self and world begins to break down. The subject-object dichotomy begins to dissolve, and all that's left is the process of awareing.

Like the other experiences of seeing that we have been exploring on this retreat, this is not something we can force or manufacture. But in the spirit of having an intention to investigate phenomena, it's quite interesting—an interesting area to play with. I have a couple of exercises to experiment with, to see if we can catch a glimpse or feel a taste of this quality of awareness or awareing. It's very important that you treat these lightly, with a playful approach. There's no right or wrong.

Let's move into the first exercise now, and I'll take some questions afterward. If you'd like to get into a comfortable posture for a short meditation activity.

This exercise plays with the possibility of catching a glimpse of awareness as it moves. Often when we're looking for subtle aspects of experience, it can help to work first with transitions—when experience changes from one thing to another, when we move positions, or when we change our focus of awareness from one thing to another. Subtle aspects of experience can be easier to see at the beginning of a new activity or experience. So let's do a brief exercise to see if we can catch awareness move.

Begin with your awareness resting lightly on your breathing. Just a gentle awareness. Shortly I'll prompt you to move the awareness to something else, and when you do, see if you can catch the experience of awareness moving from one object to another. But for now, rest your awareness on your breathing, in a relaxed way, with whatever aspect of the breathing is most clear.

And now switch the awareness to sound, and see if you can notice the movement of awareness. See how this focused awareness is a bit like a torchlight that was pointed towards the breathing and is now illuminating sound. Stay with the sound, directing your awareness towards it.

And now move your awareness to your feet, and notice the movement of awareness—how it lights up your feet now. Stay focused on your feet. Wherever you intentionally focus, awareness is immediately there, illuminating the object with its light. Tuning into this is developing your sensitivity to the process of awareing.

Your awareness is on your feet. And now switch to your hands, and watch awareness jump from your feet to your hands. Stay with the hands and see if you can tune in to the light of awareness.

And now widen your awareness to the whole field of the body, being aware of whichever sensations are most clear within the field of the body. Did you catch the movement as the awareness widened out from the hands to encompass the whole body? Does the light of awareness feel different when it's spread over this wider field?

So, did you notice awareness move? Yes? And what was the experience like?

"It was a bit like a torch beam. And then right at the end, there was a whole lot of noticings in between. But when..."

When I invited you to open out to the whole body, I felt like I was suddenly running around—no, no, no. Reset. Receive. Just receive, rather than going out.

So at first it felt like you took that torch of awareness and tried to point it in lots of different directions all at once?

Yes, kind of feet, you know, and coming back into different places, and sound, and it was like, whoa. But then suddenly thinking, oh, realising—oh, just to receive. Because it's there everywhere.

So in the end, you found a different experience of a wider awareness.

Yes.

Other people find the movement of awareness differently. My experience is that there's the knowing of attention being directed on objects, but that which knows the attention isn't moving. It's like the sky that receives all things equally, and things just come and go. So there's a sense of awareness being still and vast, and then a movement of awareness within that—a movement within that stillness. And I frame it differently as attention.

So you call the moving awareness the attention?

Yes. And that which knows this directly moving is this pure presence, this vast space that knows and is unmoving.

I experienced the difference between the sound awareness. And so a question arose, because it was quite spacious. I thought, are they different? For me, awareness has a feeling. But then I thought, are there different sorts of awareness? Does the object condition them? Do they have a dependent relationship?

Well, that's a great question for further investigation, because certainly we do notice that our experience of awareness changes. It has a depth to it. It has this ability to be like a very focused torch beam of light sometimes—like in samādhi states, to the exclusion of anything else. And it also has an ability to be a diffuse light that can open up and take in many objects all at once. So it certainly has a depth to it, and it is, like anything, a conditioned experience, subject to change. But it's really interesting to drop in that kind of question, because it helps us to get clearer about the different experiences of awareness.

What do you think? Do they condition each other?

Yes, absolutely. And other things too. Each experience of awareness is conditioned by many different factors. It's also conditioned by, for example, the state of the heart in that moment. If the heart is more unified, then awareness is going to have the quality of immersing more deeply into the object of attention. So yes, there are many factors conditioning what we call a moment of awareness—something we see clearly in our practice.

The example of the hand was a good one, because it felt like the feet and the hands were too restrictive. Maybe the concept of the feet and hands—so it felt too restrictive to have awareness focused on them. I played with having feet and hands in awareness instead. Then that became much more spacious. I think it's a balance between that wide open space and focus.

So the concept of turning your awareness towards your hands felt like it was too much of a—

It wasn't a concept. It was that there was too much awareness to be locally located.

Yes.

So then flipping it around felt like a nice balance. If I'm going to focus on hands, then hands in awareness rather than awareness on hands.

Yes, so this is another great example of the depth that this experience of awareness can have, and how there are so many things that condition that experience in any moment. It can be like flipping around how we're thinking about what we're doing, and that can actually change the experience that we have.

Soraya, yeah, you've had your hand up before.

I also had—I'm sure others had a similar experience—moving from breath to hearing. They felt quite different. And so I stuck around there and was flipping backwards and forwards for a little bit. One of the things I noticed is if I focused on my breath as in *here*, it was a kind of concentrated feel, whereas hearing was quite an expansive feel. Then I went, okay, so I changed my focus of breathing to breathing in air. And then they had more similarity. So I guess, in short, the thing of conditioning how I experience breath.

Yeah, and getting an experience of the expansiveness of awareness versus the more focused attention style type of experience.

Let's have Marion and Greg and then maybe we'll get on to another exercise.

So my awareness changed through the meditation. Initially it was the focus—like seeing—like I would almost internally see the sound, or I'd be moving my eyes effectively. When we got to the hands, that had fallen away, and my hands were just in awareness. There wasn't any focus, just hands in awareness. And it continued like that with the following—it was like less effort.

It's just being with.

Yeah. Was it also more a sort of lessening of the sense of duality between awareness and aware?

Yeah. So it started out with more of a consciousness of being together.

Thanks, Marion. Greg?

There's something kind of similar, actually, to what other people have been expressing. For me, the knowledge of the aware brings a whole field of consciousness within which the thing that I'm attending to resides. And so to bring an example of when that's not happening might be if I'm typing or writing something and entirely engaged with the content of what I'm writing. And then having the consciousness that in that experience I'm not aware of anything else. But to ask myself to do that brings the remember-

ing of aware in itself, which brings the consciousness of the whole field. So in some ways I don't have that capacity to really forget that I'm aware of everything else, weirdly.

Well, shall we do another exercise? This next one is playing more with this quality of the consciousness of everything, or the vast awareness in which the movements happen. So let's have a play with this one.

Meditation begins

Settling into a comfortable posture. And do whatever it is that you do to bring body, heart, and mind into balance. Gently opening up to the flow of experience, with whatever's arising, or with your grounding object.

Relaxed. No effort. Just this.

Cultivating a sense of intimacy with unfolding present experience. Relaxed and aware. Just noticing what's happening now. Feeling the richness of being alive in this moment.

In your meditation, you're aware of things in your experience. But what is this awareness? Can you shift the focus now to the awareness itself? Can you feel the quality of awareness? The felt experience of the process of awaring.

One way it's described is as the space in which experience arises. Or in the Tibetan tradition, you're sometimes instructed to direct attention to the gap between thoughts. Can you tune in to the felt quality of awaring? What does awareness feel like?

If you were to describe it, how would you describe it? Does it have a location? Is it expansive or focused? Clear or obscure? Dynamic or still? Peaceful or agitated?

Meditation ends

How did you go with that one? Did you find a felt quality to awareness or awaring?

Seems formless and ongoing.

Formless and ongoing. Ongoing in the sense of space, spaciousness? Without beginning and end.

"It seems to me to be active and still."

Active and still—do you want to say a little more about that experience? What was the experience of active?

"Active because there's a receptive quality. It's not asking for something, just noticing. And then my sense of consciousness expands. If I ask in an unspecified way, there's this expansion. If I ask in a specified way, it's different. So it's actively receiving, expansive, and there is a stillness. But I struggle with the concept of object—if I can be aware of it, then is that an object? I was wrestling with that toward the end. I kept asking, what is being aware?"

Yes, and this is one flavor of the experience. I think Patrick mentioned earlier in the retreat that one time when he did this activity, he reported there is no awareness—you can't find it. There's experience, there's what's going on, but awareness itself can't be located. That's one of the ways it's experienced.

But also, with the conceptual tangle of this thing called awareness, that can be tricky to think about too much. That can get us into a knot. If there's a thing called awareness and I can be aware of that thing, then is that another awareness? And so on, infinitely back—turtles all the way down.

So again, don't worry too much about the concept. Just see what is there in the experience.

"I've never tried to do that before. What I kind of experienced was something that happens more and more—this energetic but very quiet quality, or still, not so much quiet, but something. And I'm noticing, but it just holds. It's dynamic. All these things that were not one, not the other."

Yes—neither this nor that, both and neither.

So this exercise tuned you into this quality of experience, which you kind of knew was there.

"Yes, I hadn't thought of it as awareness. You and Patrick have talked about that, but it's something that's grown in my experience. Something that's just... this is amazing. Not having a name for it or a description or a place to put it in the story of whatever."

And that's great. You just play with it and use names for it as long as they are helpful in clarifying the experience. If they help you see more clearly aspects of experience that were in the background before, then wonderful. But if they become something that tangles you up, don't worry about it.

"But it's great to know—oh, it fits somewhere."

Yes, exactly.

"In that exercise, unexpectedly, the awareness was precise."

Which is not what I expected. In the first one, it swooped a little bit like a bird that knew where it was going for nectar or something. I didn't realize at the time that Emily Dickinson—hope and the feathery thing—so there was that flavor to it.

And then going wider, there's a bit of a clamor. The literary critic thinks, "Oh, that is such a cliché," you know. But quietening that, it's like this prismatic, crystalline diamond around my hara—or the hara—and very not-me, because the account of me goes wide. And here's this prismatic, crystalline thing breaking everything into the colors.

So that was the awaring in that moment.

Now try not to get attached to it. Or just at least notice when you do.

Okay, so it was expansive and there was less of a sense of self, but interestingly it was quite a clear experience—this was not what you were expecting.

It's like needles of light all around it.

Laughter

I think that's why I like to offer this workshop—because although it is a subtle aspect of experience, it can be very fruitful to turn the attention there. But, you know, like any aspect of experience, it resonates for some of us and doesn't resonate for others. So we just play with it. If it's useful, we keep playing with it. If not, don't worry.

Then you said just this—"just like I shattered." And my heart went bang. And it's sort of like, "I'm free." Because that's all there is, is this. And this is the awareness. It was just like—bang.

And what happened after?

Well, you asked about what the qualities are, and to me it's openness. Open and receptive. And there's a lot of qualities that are... there's no words for it.

So did you find the experience clear or obscure when you said there's no...?

Very clear. It was clear, it's just that it's not something that can be put into language, is it? There's no words for it, you know. And we don't... Something like being held. But those aren't the right words. Like there were lots of—it's sort of like this, but that's not right.

Thank you. That's a very good question you just asked: "And what happens after?" Because we're not about clinging to them or anything, but we're in the aftermath, as it were. And so "what happened after" is a very... For me, at the very end, there was this very much an "I" going, "You can't stay here. What about what's going on in the world? What about this?" So what happens after is going to be one of my focuses for today.

Okay, yes. And also noticing that attitude to the meditation practice that just always pops up.

I found that quite challenging personally, because it was—I was aware, but my field was so large. I don't know, I dropped objects. And I was aware of all this. And then thoughts came in. But then what was useful was that Tibetan sentence you said.

Ah, yes, the gap between thoughts. Yeah, and that helped. I went, "Ah, okay." So in the midst of this open field, I'm aware of that, I'm aware of that, I'm aware of that. And then thoughts popped in. And then I went, "Oh, okay, you said that," and I went, "Okay, there's this little gap between."

So that gave you somewhere to aim. To get clear about the experience.

Yeah, and to kind of bring myself back out. And then it reminded me of the importance for me to have an object. This is an open field, and that's what happens—my mind has a field day.

And that's also why we do an activity like this, because it does try to bring in those qualities of aim and precision that we use in wise investigation to an object that is so expansive and diffuse and hard to pin down, hard to find the language to express. So it can help to have some places to look, and hence the prompts—sort of tossing them out to see which one lands for you.

So, you know, it might be, "Okay, the gap between thoughts, that's a place I can look" to get a flavour of what's there when the thoughts aren't there. Or it might be something else. For me, what kind of resonates is the felt quality of awareness. I find that that's quite—it's almost like a place I can go to, the felt quality of awareness. But it's different for everyone, what resonates. And so that's why I threw out different options.

I know that's not for me, and I'm totally okay about leaving it there. But I think those moments where I had the—like someone else was saying—the moments where I had the awareness of me looking onto these thoughts kind of gives me a bit of, "Oh, okay, you've done it." So it's okay, you've been doing bits, and that's okay at that level. It's permission, but it's also agency. There's a bit of agency there, which is like, "Yeah, cool, Dee, you're fine here." That was nice to experience. You know what I mean? There was this

agency or control—not control, but choice. Seeing the choice. Yeah, seeing the choice and going, there's a flavour and it's nice to see that flavour or being aware of what it's like. It was nice to play with that. And as I said yesterday, I'm not telling myself off.

Very good.

Sorry for not doing that. Thanks very much. Moving on.

When you say the felt quality of awareness, do you mean you just say that to yourself, without needing to...?

I think I probably used to. I think what probably happened was—so, as you've probably gathered from the sorts of stories that I've shared over the course of the retreat, I'm not so great at using meditation objects that are in the body or the physical field. And so when I finally was given permission and guidance to use aspects of mind as meditation, that's where I feel at home.

So I think what happened was that I became aware of awareness itself—this sort of expansive quality, the process of awareing—and got to know it. And now it's probably my main grounding object. It's a place I can come back to.

Maybe in the early stages I would remind myself, "Ah, the felt quality." If I was lost—you know, some people will go to the breathing—I might think, "felt quality of awareness." I probably don't think that so much anymore. But it comes from a familiarity with it. So the prompt can just help to head you back in that direction, similar to working with any other meditation object.

Does that answer the question?

But like I said, that's using a concept that works for me. Is there such a thing as a felt quality of awareness? Everyone in the room would have a different experience of that. But it helps me to head in a direction of an experience that's familiar.

Okay, well that's time. So your mission today, should you choose to accept it, is to dabble in this realm a bit. Be aware—and be aware of being aware.

CHAPTER 95

Awakening Here and Now

Patrick Kearney · 44 min

> *This talk addresses a fundamental paradox in Buddhist practice: awakening (bodhi) is presented both as a gradual training and as something available in every present moment. Patrick Kearney begins by examining what awakening actually means—liberation from the delusion of a separate self and the resulting freedom from craving and aversion (nibbāna). Drawing on the Khemasutta, he explains how even stream-enterers who have abandoned belief in self retain a subtle sense of 'I am' until full awakening, likened to the lingering scent of washing powder on clean cloth.*
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> *The talk explores both dimensions of awakening through compelling examples from the early texts. The gradual path is illustrated through the threefold training of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, and the Buddha's similes of the Ganges flowing toward the sea and the goldsmith purifying gold. Yet the Therīgāthā account of the nun Pāṭācārā reveals how awakening can happen spontaneously—not on the meditation cushion, but while washing her feet and extinguishing her lamp. Her embodied mindfulness of mundane activities opened the door to complete liberation.*
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> *The Bāhiya Sutta (Udāna 1.10) provides the teaching's culmination: 'In the seen will be merely what is seen.' This radical instruction points to pure intimacy with sense experience, stripped of the perceptions, judgments, and stories that construct both self and world. When we truly experience 'just this'—sound without 'bird,' sensation without 'me'—the fabrication of identity ceases. The teaching reveals that awakening isn't distant or esoteric but accessible through complete presence with whatever arises right now, in this body, in this moment.*

The title of tonight's talk is Awakening Here and Now.

It's a slightly provocative title because you've all been practicing diligently for a week or so, and yet awakening may feel like just as distant and unattainable a goal as when you arrived here at the start of retreat. But of course, the belief that I can never reach awakening, that I can never actually free myself from suffering, is just another concept. It's another view based on the mistaken idea that I am fixed, unchanging, a real permanent entity.

So tonight we're going to look at awakening, and particularly at this paradoxical quality that it has. Awakening is a gradual process, but it's also available here and now.

Let's start with what is meant by the term awakening. Awakening is the translation of the Pali word bodhi, and it's preferred by many over the earlier translation, which was enlightenment. Enlightenment is a familiar term, but awakening is a more literal translation of bodhi. It suggests waking up to reality, waking up to the way things really are. What we awaken from is our delusion of a separate self—liberation from the view that I exist.

There are two levels to this realization. The first, attained at the initial stage of awakening called stream entry, is the understanding that everything in my experienced universe is empty of a self. That is, there is no self to be found anywhere. This is the realization of anattā, not-self, after which a stream-enterer cannot take things as personally as they did before, because they understand that nothing they experience is really me or mine.

But nonetheless, a subtle sense of "I am" persists. The letting go of this deeper sense of self doesn't occur until final awakening, full awakening. In one discourse, the elder monk Khemaka likens the subtle sense of "I am" to the scent of washing powder that remains on a cloth when it comes back from the washerman. The cloth has been cleaned of stains in the same way that the stream-enterer's citta has been cleaned of the belief in self. The cloth is spotlessly clean, but because the stream-enterer is not yet fully awakened, the sense "I am" lingers in the background like the scent of the washing powder.

This analogy works better in ancient India because, apparently, what they used back then to wash their clothes didn't smell very nice. The things Khemaka mentions are lye, which is a caustic chemical that can irritate the nostrils when inhaled, and cow dung, which I think speaks for itself. So the cloth is spotlessly clean, but it still has a bad smell about it. This is the lingering sense of "I am." Khemaka compares full awakening to the owner of the cloth putting it away in a scent-infused wicker hamper so that gradually the scent of cow dung is obliterated.

That's the realization of awakening, what we awaken from—the dispelling of the delusion of a separate self. The reality we awaken to is nibbāna, most clearly explained as liberation of the heart from the fires of craving and aversion. When there is the dispelling of passion and desire for things that are cherished—pleasant sights and sounds, thoughts and feelings—the deathless state, nibbāna, appears. Mindful in the here and now, those who know this are forever calmed, crossed over beyond the world.

Nibbāna is described as a state of sublime peace or supreme happiness, characterized by the complete ending of suffering and rebirth. But because it's a state that is beyond concept, and also beyond the experience of anyone who's not yet awakened, it's

most often described in negative terms, by what it isn't. Literally, nibbāna means extinguishment—the cooling of the heart, the extinguishment of the fires of craving and aversion.

The nun Sumedhā, whom we met the other night with her fiery diatribe about letting go, describes nibbāna like this: "There is this beyond aging, this beyond death, this the unaging, undying state, this free from grieving, from all animosity, unobstructed, unhindered, free from all fear, not burning." You can see she's talking about nibbāna in terms of what it isn't, what it's free from—free from aging, from death, grieving, animosity, obstruction, hindrance, fear, and burning. And this is all she says about it.

This is what I'm referring to when I'm talking about the awakening process: the complete liberation of the mind from the delusion of a separate self, and the resulting liberation of the heart from craving and aversion.

Let's turn now to the idea of awakening as a gradual path, a gradual process. This is one familiar way that awakening is presented, particularly in this Theravādan tradition. It accords with our experience and with what we're taught to expect. We come on retreat once or twice a year, and in between we do what we can to maintain our practice. We listen to dharma talks, and we hang on to this idea that gradually, as we get a little better at this dance of meditation, we're inching closer to the goal.

This idea of awakening as gradual, and indeed as a natural process, is one that's emphasized in the early teachings. The most well-known formulation of this is the threefold training of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, where we lay a foundation of ethical conduct, sīla, and on that foundation we establish steadiness of mind, samādhi, and on that basis we cultivate wisdom, paññā.

The Theravādan tradition elaborates on this idea of a gradual path in various ways, providing other sequential frameworks, such as the stages of insight expounded by Buddhaghosa, an early Theravādan scholar from the fifth century AD. These stages of insight have been taken up by more contemporary traditions, followed by Mahasi Sayadaw, for example, and other Burmese lineages. These stages of insight map out the successive deepening of insight into impermanence, dukkha, and not-self in the practice.

So on a gradual path, we train in ethical behavior and meditation, and over time it naturally and inevitably leads to the result of awakening.

And the Buddha himself uses a variety of similes to suggest that awakening is a gradual process. In one sutta he says that meditators flow towards nibbana like the river Ganges flows towards the sea. A drop of water in the river doesn't instantly be-

come part of the ocean. It flows towards it steadily, and eventually, at the end of its journey, it merges into the great ocean. But there's no shortcut to this journey, which winds and meanders as the river itself winds and meanders. And perhaps at times it even comes to a standstill, or gets caught up in a little eddy and whirls around and around.

Similarly, the Buddha uses the analogy of a goldsmith removing impurities from gold to describe how a practitioner works with and purifies the mind in the practice. First, the goldsmith thoroughly washes the gold to get rid of the gross impurities. Then they wash it again to get rid of the moderate impurities. Then they wash it another time to get rid of the minute impurities. Then they smelt it to get rid of the dross—which, according to Google, is a scum of impurities that forms on molten metal during the refining process. And then they repeat this process again to make the gold pliant, workable, and bright. The point the Buddha is making here is that this is a natural and sequential process. By removing the impurities from gold, starting with the large impurities and down to the fine ones, you naturally create the conditions for the pure gold to emerge, and each step is dependent on the one before.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that awakening is gradual is the fact that it is always presented in the suttas as a process with four stages. We've mentioned this a few times during the retreat: stream entry, once returning, non-returning, and arahantship, which is full awakening. At each of these stages, different fetters are abandoned. A stream enterer, for example, is someone for whom the belief in a separate self has been abandoned, but the roots of craving and aversion have not yet been significantly cut at this stage. A stream enterer still feels their likes and dislikes very strongly.

This framework of a gradual and natural process of awakening is a comforting one to us as meditators because it allows for the possibility of progress along a path. It gives the experience of awakening depth, which makes it more accessible. It's not all or nothing, but a project over time of liberating the heart and mind that can encompass many momentary freedoms and liberations along the way.

But there are also examples in the early teachings that suggest awakening is a sudden breakthrough—a world-altering flash of realisation. In fact, the suttas are littered with examples of people who, in the Buddha's time, heard the Dharma being taught by the Buddha himself or one of his senior disciples and experienced a spontaneous breakthrough, either full or partial awakening.

My favourite description of a sudden breakthrough comes from another of the women disciples. We heard a little bit about the nun Sumedha the other night. But there's another nun who was one of the Buddha's senior disciples, a woman named Patachara. Like Sumedha and the other women disciples of the Buddha, not much is recorded

about her. But she was obviously a gifted and charismatic teacher in her own right, because it's recorded that she had one of the largest followings of nuns of any of the senior disciples. Patachara was a significant figure in the Buddha's Sangha, yet not much is recorded about her beyond the story of how she came to the Buddha's community and one poem that she left behind about her awakening.

Patachara was led to the Dharma after intense tragedy and suffering. She was actually the victim of a catastrophic natural disaster, a violent storm that killed everyone in her family except her. But she was clearly a survivor with a strong personality. She was the daughter in a high-status family, but she fell in love with one of the servants and ran off with him, eloped with him. They had one child together, and then she became pregnant with another. By then, she wanted to reconcile with her family. She wanted to give birth in her family home, which was the custom in ancient India at the time.

Against her husband's wishes, she took her little toddler and set off heavily pregnant and otherwise alone, apart from the small child, to head back to her parents' house to give birth. This was in a different town and involved traversing a section of wild forest. It would have been an arduous journey while heavily pregnant with a toddler. When her husband realised she was gone and where she'd gone, he hurried to follow after and catch up with her. He did indeed catch up with her along the path. By then they were deep in the forest, a catastrophic storm was brewing, and Patachara's labour was just starting as well.

Patachara ended up giving birth there in the forest, exposed to the elements in the middle of this huge storm. In a heartbreaking series of tragedies, the storm and then the subsequent flooding of the river she had to cross the following day claimed the lives of not only her husband but her two young children as well. Patachara struggled on alone, not knowing what else to do, and when she finally arrived at the town where her parents lived, she found that their house too had collapsed and been swept away in the flood.

At this point, having lost her entire family, Patachara understandably went mad with grief and pain. She wandered around in rags and people threw sticks and rubbish at her. And eventually, mad and naked, she stumbled across a gathering listening to the Buddha teaching.

And the people who were in the crowd tried to drive her away. But the Buddha saw her and he came and spoke to her. And by pointing out to her the universal nature of suffering and grief, and the inevitability of death, he managed to calm her heart-mind, and she asked to be ordained. So that's how she entered the community.

And as I said, she went on to be a respected senior leader of the nuns. The poem she left behind is recorded in the Therigatha, the Book of Elder Nuns, in which the women describe their understanding of the teachings and declare their awakening.

What's interesting about Patachara's poem is that she gives quite a precise account of how awakening happened. The poem starts with her lamenting that even though she's been practicing diligently, she hasn't yet attained the fruit of nibbana. And then she continues:

Having washed my feet, then I watched that water, noticing the water flowing from high ground to low. With that the mind was calmed, just as a noble thoroughbred horse. Having taken my lamp, I went into my hut, inspected the sleeping place, then sat upon the bed. Having taken a pin, I pushed the wick right down, and just as the lamp went out, so all delusion of the heart went too.

So this is Patachara's account of how awakening happened. And there are a few things that are interesting here.

Firstly, it's spontaneous. It happened suddenly and without warning. One moment she reached out her hand to snuff out the wick of the lamp, and the next moment—bang—her mind was free.

Secondly, it didn't happen on the meditation cushion. Do you sense some sort of agenda here? Or in Patachara's case, it would likely have been the root of a tree. But instead it happened when she was going to bed after a period of intense meditation. And in fact it was precisely when she allowed her mind to relax after diligent practice that the awakening experience occurred.

This poem is her lion's roar—her declaration of complete liberation. What we don't know is how many stages she went through in that one experience. But this is her declaration of the breakthrough to final awakening.

Now, some may have heard that certain traditions say a woman cannot attain arahantship. If you look in the early teachings, there are many examples to the contrary. In fact, I believe all of the poems in the Therigatha, the collection of poems by the elder nuns, declare their attainment of arahantship. This idea that women cannot attain full liberation came in the later Theravadan tradition, but it certainly wasn't there in the early teachings of the Buddha or during the time of the Buddha's community. You won't find this in the early texts. It's a reflection of the gender bias in the cultures that came later in the 2,500 years since then.

So it didn't happen on the meditation cushion—that's another interesting feature of this account. And thirdly is how embodied, even mundane, the moments leading up to this experience are in her description. She's just getting ready for bed. She washes her feet. She watches the water running off. She goes inside and sits down on her bed and turns out her lamp. The door to awakening was being fully mindful of her body as she went about her everyday tasks.

Patachara's account challenges the common conception of awakening as being esoteric and unattainable. Often when we hear stories about people getting enlightened, it can seem like such an alien and unlikely experience. How could something like that possibly happen to me? But when we look at descriptions like Patachara's more closely, a different understanding emerges. Her poem points to something profound and exciting about awakening: that when our minds are sufficiently ripe, awakening happens spontaneously.

It has this quality of sudden penetration, right here and right now. Through intimacy with mundane experience, the mind suddenly lets go and opens into the experience of nibbana. And what this means, of course, is that the possibility for awakening actually exists in every moment.

It's still very hard to believe this. We're sitting here, dealing with our own internal struggles, thinking, well, how is that relevant to me? Awakening's not happening to me in this moment, and it's unlikely to happen in any of the moments that are going to come soon. So to see how this might be available as an experience here and now, let's look at another example from the Buddha's disciples. This is Bahiya of the bark cloth.

Bahiya is a famous character in the ancient Pali suttas. He is famous for being the quickest of the Buddha's disciples to attain awakening.

Here's his story. Bahiya lived at the time of the Buddha and was a sailor by trade, until one day when he was shipwrecked and washed up on the west coast of India with all of his possessions lost. He'd been stripped even of his clothes, and so he fashioned some clothing out of bark and headed to the nearest town to seek help. He ended up going from door to door, begging.

But even then, there must have been something a bit out of the ordinary about him, because instead of seeing him as a penniless beggar, the people mistook him for an awakened sage, a spiritual wanderer. He ended up establishing himself in the area, and over time he became the respected leader of a spiritual community. And since everyone else thought he was awakened, he began to believe that he must be.

But in his heart of hearts, Bahiya did have doubts about his own enlightenment. One day, when he was pondering whether he really was an arahant, a passing deva—a divine spirit—tuned into his thoughts and took it upon himself to set Bahiya straight. He appeared before Bahiya and told him, "Bahiya, you are not an arahant, nor are you on the way to becoming one."

Bahiya is quite shocked by this revelation. He wants to know: are there any arahants living anywhere in the world? The deva tells him about the Buddha, living thousands of miles away on the other side of India—which in those times was a very long way away. But being a seeker of the truth, Bahiya doesn't waste a second. He leaves his home immediately and makes the journey from west to east India on foot, stopping only a night in each place along the way.

When he finally arrives at the Jeta Grove in Savatthi, where the Buddha is camped out with a group of monks and nuns, he marches straight up to the nearest monk and says, "Where is the fully enlightened one? I must see him straight away." To which he's told, "Well, you'll have to wait. The Buddha has gone into town on his alms round. He'll return a bit later and there'll be a time for teaching and asking Dhamma questions."

But Bahiya can't wait. He rushes into Savatthi, finds the Buddha, and falls onto the ground in front of him saying, "Teach me the Dhamma, Lord, please teach me the Dhamma."

The Buddha is halted in his tracks in the middle of the street. He says to Bahiya, "This is not a suitable time. I'm on my alms round." To which Bahiya replies, "I can't be certain how much longer you or I have to live. Please teach me the Dhamma now." Again, the Buddha refuses him. But when Bahiya pleads for a third time, the Buddha relents and gives him a concise and profound teaching.

He says, "Here, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: In the seen will be merely what is seen. In the heard will be merely what is heard. In the sensed will be merely what is sensed. In the cognized will be merely what is cognized. In this way you should train yourself, Bahiya. When, Bahiya, for you, in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the sensed is merely what is sensed, in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be 'with that.' When you are not 'with that,' then you will not be 'in that.' When you are not 'in that,' then you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

With that short instruction, the Buddha moves off to complete his alms round. And in that very moment, Bahiya gets it. He is instantly awakened by the Buddha's words.

It turns out that he was right to have a sense of urgency about receiving the teachings, because the next thing that happens is this: as he's wandering away, he is gored to death by a cow protecting its calf. The Buddha and his companions come across Bahiya's body on their way back from their alms round.

And the Buddha sees him lying there, and he instructs the monks to take Bahiya's body and make a stupa for it. When they inquire why, he informs them that Bahiya died an arahant. He heard the Buddha's teaching, and his mind was released on the spot. And that's why Bahiya goes down in Buddhist history as the quickest to attain awakening.

So what does this teaching mean? The first part is the Buddha's instruction to Bahiya about how he should practice: *In the seen is merely what is seen. In the heard is merely what is heard. In the sensed is merely what is sensed. In the cognised is merely what is cognised.*

It's talking about pure intimacy with our sense perceptions. Simply seeing, simply hearing, and so forth, without adding on top all the layers of perceptions, judgments, intentions, clinging, and aversion that are part of our everyday experience.

This might sound simple and straightforward, but of course it isn't. Because we automatically perceive, organize, categorize, and judge our experience in every moment. These are not functions that we can easily turn off.

For example, if you're meditating and you hear the sound of a bird, you instantly know it's a bird. Even if there's no mental chatter about which bird it is or how lovely it is to be hearing the bird, you still know it's a bird. So you're not experiencing pure intimacy with the senses. A layer of perception has already come between awareness and the aware, interpreting the sound hitting your ear as "bird." It's very hard to imagine our experience of the world without this.

A useful analogy is language. Language, of course, is nothing more than a particular collection and rhythm of sounds. This becomes very apparent whenever we hear someone speaking a different language to our own. But when our own language is spoken, it's impossible not to hear the words and understand the meaning, because perception and cognition are already at work.

So the Buddha is instructing Bahiya to develop intimacy with the senses, to strip away all the things we do with sense experience in our minds. Instead of a beautiful bird or an annoying bird or a delicious dinner or a pain in my knee, it's just this. Just this. Just this.

In his teaching to Bahiya, the Buddha goes on to say: *When, Bahiya, for you, in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the sensed is merely what is sensed, in the cognised is merely what is cognised, then, Bahiya, you will not be with that. When you are not with that, then you will not be in that. When you are not in that, then you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.*

So what's he talking about here? He's suggesting that the layers we add to bare sense experience are what create our world and our sense of self. When we don't layer our perceptions, our judgments, our intentions on top of our sensory experience, then we don't construct an identity out of them. This is what he means when he says, "You will not be with that, you will not be in that."

To go back to the example of hearing the bird call, we can identify the layers involved in constructing a sense of self and world out of this simple sensory experience.

At the gross level, there's what we do with our perceptions about the world. If we're sitting here and we hear a bird call, we might act with either pleasure or perhaps aversion. That might generate a thought, and then we begin to weave a story about me and my relationship to the bird. "Oh, that's such a beautiful sound. This is such a precious place to be on retreat because of all the wonderful birds." Or it might be, "Oh, that bird is so noisy and raucous. How can I possibly meditate with that squawking going on outside?"

We're heaping our mental reactions on top of the sensory experience, and we're creating a sense of "me." I'm the one who loves being at BMIMC because it's such a sublime garden setting. Or I'm the one who can't meditate with all this noise going on.

If we apply our mindfulness, we may manage to stop this chain of mental reaction and story. By doing so, we cut through one of the layers of self that we're adding to the experience. But even then, as I mentioned earlier, we still immediately recognise the sound as a bird, without even thinking about it. We've already applied the label of "bird." And this already brings into being a world of concepts which we inhabit. There's me, and the meditation hall, and the tree outside, and the bird.

So instead of hearing only the heard, we've already constructed a world and we've constructed a self. If we were to truly hear only the heard, there would simply be sound. It would not be perceived as birdsong, which would mean no bird, which would mean no tree outside, which would mean no here, which would mean no me.

So without my stories about my sense experience, then where am I? I'm nowhere to be found. There's just this. There's simply sense experience, nothing more. I am neither here nor there, nor in between.

On the one hand, the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya has a beautiful simplicity to it. It's a very practical meditation instruction because the senses are always available to us, and the instruction to simply be with them intimately is clear and uncomplicated—as in Patachara's example, where she was simply being mindful of the flow of experience as she washed her feet and turned out her lamp. On the other hand, it's a deeply profound practice that, as both Patachara's and Bahiya's stories show, can lead us to complete freedom from suffering here and now.

The Bahiya Sutta ends with a poem uttered by the Buddha, in which, inspired by Bahiya's sudden breakthrough, the Buddha describes awakening:

Where water, earth, fire and wind have no footing, there the stars don't shine, the sun isn't visible, there the moon doesn't appear, there darkness is not found. And when a sage, a Brahmin, through sagacity has realised this for himself, then from form and formless, from bliss and pain, he is freed.

This poem's placement at the end of the Bahiya Sutta beautifully illustrates the two sides of the Buddha's teaching: the radical simplicity and the profound depth. On the one hand is the instruction to Bahiya, which involves cutting through the complexity of conceptual thought and being completely grounded and intimate with the body and with the present moment. On the other hand is what this practice opens us up to—an experience that's beyond the senses, where water, earth, fire and wind have no footing and where the sun isn't visible. This seems at odds with the very embodied instruction that in the seen is just the seen. And yet what the Buddha is implying is that there's no contradiction between these at all.

Awakening is fathomless and indescribable, but there's a simplicity and an immediacy to it as well. Freedom from suffering is not in some sort of distant transcendental realm—it's accessible by simply being fully intimate with our sense experience, by simply being aware of whatever we're experiencing right now. Awakening is right here, right now, in this body. Just this.

CHAPTER 96

Transitions

Patrick Kearney · 31 min

> *As the retreat nears its end, Patrick Kearney addresses the common tension between wanting to protect the concentrated mind and prematurely leaving the practice behind. He invites practitioners to walk a middle path by gradually deconstructing the protective walls of retreat conditions while maintaining awareness.*
>
> *Kearney introduces several practical techniques for bridging retreat and daily life. The first is Sayadaw U Tejaniya's '50-50 awareness' — dedicating half our mental energy to engaging with activities while reserving the other half for maintaining continuous mindfulness. He points out that retreatants are already doing this naturally when listening to dharma talks while remaining aware. Additional practices include cultivating awareness of seeing (our predominant sense for constructing experience), and deliberately practicing faster movement to overcome the false association between mindfulness and slow motion.*
>
> *The most challenging exercise offered is structured speaking and listening meditation, reflecting U Tejaniya's approach where interpersonal communication becomes an integral part of practice. Kearney emphasizes that wherever awareness is available, insight and wisdom are also available — whether sitting in meditation, walking briskly, or having a conversation. The key is recognizing that conducive conditions support mindfulness but are not necessary conditions for it. By practicing in progressively more challenging situations, we develop the capacity to identify impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self in the very activities where our delusions are most entrenched.*

So here we are at the start of our last full day, and we've been practicing for over a week together now with an emphasis on natural awareness. I hope that you've had a taste now of the solid foundation of samādhi and mindfulness that an open and relaxed approach to practice can cultivate.

Of course, we've been supported in this by the retreat conditions. We're removed from our usual distractions, our needs are taken care of, and generally it's a very conducive environment for practicing meditation.

But as I mentioned in my opening talk, natural awareness promises more than just a relaxed approach on retreat. The power in this approach is that we can use it to cultivate momentum in our mindfulness in everyday life as well. And this makes insight possible too in everyday life, because wherever awareness is available, then so too insight and wisdom are available.

It does take some experience of this approach to really gain confidence in its depth and in this possibility. But the potential is to take our everyday experience—the messiness and the chaos of our everyday lives—as the grounds for insight, so that we can identify impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self in the very activities and interactions and daily habits where our delusions and our construction of the self is most entrenched.

So we're coming towards the end of the retreat, and often this is met by two movements amongst the yogis.

One is the attitude of, "Oh well, I've nearly made it. We're nearly there." Thoughts about the future start to arise a little more frequently and persistently than they were a few days ago. We've been working pretty hard, and so we kind of lean into those thoughts. Before we know it, we've jumped on a thought train about a future me that will start tomorrow when I leave the retreat. I'm planning and I'm invested in this future projection of my life that's going to start tomorrow.

Another response to the end of the retreat is, "Oh, the retreat's ending and I'm not sure I've got exactly everything I came to get out of it just yet." This is the kind of defending the walls of the retreat, as if our life depends on it—work really hard and don't give in to distractions.

What I want to invite you to do is to walk a middle path between these two. Lean a little more into meditation as a way of being in this next twenty-four hours by pushing the boundaries of the retreat conditions a little bit and bringing in a little bit more everyday life.

I'm inviting you to experiment with gradually deconstructing the walls of the retreat, or at least pushing them back a little bit, and see how your awareness and insight withstands it.

I'm going to suggest a few minor modifications that you might like to make to your practice over the next twenty-four hours. Like everything that we offer in the morning workshops, it's entirely up to you which ones you take up, which ones you play with, and which ones you run with. But the idea is to give yourself the opportunity to work

with conditions that are a little more like everyday life as we move into this transition phase. Because, as I've said a number of times, if we don't practice being aware in everyday activities, then how are we supposed to get good at it?

The first one I want to mention is a basic technique that Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses for meditation in everyday life, which he calls fifty-fifty awareness. This is simply the idea that while I'm doing any activity—any everyday activity—I use fifty percent of my mental energy for engaging in the activity, doing what needs to be done, thinking about what needs to be thought about. The other fifty percent of my mental energy I reserve for meditation, for being aware of what I'm doing.

So if I'm having a shower or cooking or having a conversation or whatever it is that I'm doing, I'm using half of my mental energy to engage in the task and half of my mental energy is reserved for watching myself engage in the task.

I can demonstrate this pretty easily. Are you meditating right now? Well, apart from Patrick, who clearly hasn't been cultivating the momentum. Are the rest of you meditating right now? I bet most of you are. I actually think you probably can't help it. Am I right? Because there's some momentum in the practice and the mindfulness flows.

So you're meditating and you're also listening to me and considering what I'm saying and how you're going to put the instructions into practice. That's fifty-fifty awareness. You're already doing it. It's actually nothing new at this point in a retreat. It's what we're cultivating, and it's the natural effect of the momentum that has built up in the mindfulness.

We're already naturally doing fifty-fifty awareness. It's not introducing anything particularly new at this point in the retreat, but it is helpful to notice it, because then we can notice what it feels like, we can notice the experience of it, we can notice that it's possible to have some of our energy doing what we need to do—listening to a dharma talk, doing our yogi job, whatever it is—and at the same time some of our energy is reserved for maintaining the continuity of awareness. If we can notice that and get familiar with it, then it helps us when we go back into daily life to know what to look for, where to aim, and even have the confidence that, "Oh yeah, this is possible. I know what this feels like."

The second suggestion, if you haven't tried this already—because it has come up a few times in the retreat, and this is absolutely just if it feels like something that interests you, not at all obligatory—is to play with awareness of seeing.

This can be a powerful practice for meditation in everyday life because seeing is such a huge part of virtually every activity that we do. It's actually our predominant physical sense for interacting with the world and thus constructing our world. I think this is probably why so many meditation techniques emphasize closing your eyes, because it's a very effective way of immediately cutting off our experienced world.

But of course, the only problem is if we only ever practice meditation with eyes closed, then we never get good at meditation with eyes open.

So when I say awareness of seeing, I'm actually not so much concerned with whether your eyes are open or closed on the meditation cushion. This is more about noticing the experience of seeing when you're moving, and also on the cushion if that appeals to you. But I think there's a lot more depth to the experience of awareness of seeing when we're moving around, when the visual field is moving, or when we have to use the visual field because we're engaging in activities.

And one more suggestion I have for you is to play with faster movement. This might sound quite radical as a suggestion. I think it feels wrong, am I right? It feels wrong to make fast movements on a retreat. And there are good reasons for this. Slow movement is conducive for settling the mind, allowing the mindfulness to catch up with the body, as it were, and to get the mindfulness going, to establish some momentum. Slow movement is also important for silence of body, which is important when we're practicing in community.

So it's a conducive condition for mindfulness, but it's not a necessary condition for mindfulness. And I think it's important that we see that clearly in the practice.

We come on retreat, and I don't know about you, but it can feel like even if I really need to break out a little bit and go for a walk on a trail away from the center, even then walking fast feels like I'm doing something wrong. You might think, "What if another yogi comes around the corner in the opposite direction and I'm walking too fast?" We have this idea that mindfulness and slow movement are so interdependent that mindfulness is somehow dependent on slow movement. We worry that if we speed up, our mindfulness will crumble—like we might jeopardize the whole retreat if we go around moving too fast.

But of course that's a ridiculous idea. If the mindfulness that we're cultivating here over nine days is so precious and brittle that it can't even withstand us walking fast, then at some point we need to overcome the association between mindfulness and slow movement. Or we have no hope of being mindful when we go home. And particularly

not when we start rushing at home. I mean, I have two kids waiting for me at home. So if I can't be mindful during fast movement, then I can tell you I have no hope of being mindful during everyday life.

So my challenge to you is to find a way to start to weave a bit more fast movement into your practice in this context over the next twenty-four hours. Out of consideration for the other yogis and the retreat container, it's important that this is alone and in private. So that means either in your room, or take a walk—write down in the book up there that you're going out for a walk and take a walk off the center, down the road or on a trail.

If it works for you, taking a walk can be excellent because then you can really let yourself play with faster movement and watch the mindfulness and see how it survives a faster tempo. You can push this as far as you want. You can go for a jog for all I care. But be tuned in to the quality of the mindfulness. And you might discover something quite surprising. You might discover that the body can be quite dysregulated through exertion—heart racing, breathing elevated, sweating—you might not get to work up a sweat today—but the body can be quite dysregulated and yet the mind can be cool, calm, unmoving at the same time.

So you could try walking fast off the center, away from the center. Or if that's not easy for you or not appealing, you could think of another way to do some fast moving in the privacy of your room. You could set yourself the task of doing some of your daily chores in your room quickly. You could even set yourself a little challenge like, "Okay, I'm going to get up, get dressed, fold my clothes, put them away as fast as I can and watch the awareness while I'm doing it." And in that case, because you're setting up a little challenge for yourself, what you might find is the quality of rushing comes. This is great practice, because isn't that something we deal with on a daily basis back home?

Afterwards, you can slow down again, settle the heart, settle the mind, and reflect a little bit on what that experience was like. How did the mindfulness survive faster movement?

So I guess the point I want to emphasize is that this approach is far more radical than simply choosing, "Am I going to sit now or am I going to walk now when I'm on retreat?" It's about dissolving the dichotomy between on the cushion and the rest of our lives, because awareness is always available. It's available when we're sitting in the hall, and when we're wandering in the bush, and when we're going for a jog, and when we're writing an email, and when we're arguing with our partner. Not to say that it's

equally easy in those situations, but the mind will get much better at choosing awareness in a particular situation if it has had practice. So we have to practice in all situations—easy and difficult, mundane and chaotic.

I'll stop there and check if there are any questions about these suggestions, anything that's not clear about how to put them into practice.

"In terms of the awareness of seeing, if you decide to make seeing the meditation object and you notice that you're attracted to objects, is that not quite what you're getting at?"

Well, what do you think? If you decide to make seeing the meditation object and you notice that you're attracted to objects, what would be your response in the practice?

"I guess I'm thinking that if you're attracted to objects... yeah, I guess it just becomes another object."

Exactly. Then it becomes part of the package.

In fact, then it becomes the very thing that draws you into the practice through curiosity. "Oh, isn't that fascinating? I look at what attracts me and I never really noticed that before." And in that drawing in, the samadhi can arrive because we've come together and collected around it.

Yes, absolutely. So there are two movements you can make when you notice that an object draws you in. You can either get interested in the quality of the attraction itself, which is investigating the movement of the heart, or you can be drawn into that object and allow it to become an object of serenity or samadhi—that's using the natural pleasure in the heart that some objects can provide.

Now, I have one final suggestion for you. This one might blow your socks off a bit, so get ready. This is the main morning practice exercise that I'm going to offer you for today.

Today, those who want to will have the opportunity to practice speaking and listening meditation. Speaking and listening. This is going to take place in a very structured way as an intentional meditation practice, and it's completely optional. The reason we're doing this is because interpersonal communication is such a big part of our lives, and it's one that we tend to find very difficult to bring awareness to.

If we just conduct a little straw poll in this room: who is satisfied with the amount of awareness they bring to their communication with loved ones, friends, and colleagues in their everyday lives? Any hands? Excellent—we have a couple of people. Who would like to be better at it? Okay, the overwhelming majority.

Well, as I keep saying, the way we get better is that we practice. This was very much a central part of the practice at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's meditation center in Yangon. There was a loose noble silence, but it was understood that at any time you could talk. It was also absolutely expected that when you went to report in your interview, you reported on the talking you had done and on the continuity of your awareness while you were talking.

There was this sort of unofficial time—like a Dharma discussion hour—when the heat had settled and the dusk was falling and it was just tolerable to be outside and to move. At that time of day, people would congregate in groups of two or three and do these gentle laps. There was a driveway that went right up the center of the meditation center, and people would just do these gentle laps up and down in the dusky twilight, talking together—preferably quietly—about the Dharma. It was an integral part of the practice: getting familiar with continuous mindfulness while you're speaking and listening.

So the way it's going to work is this: there's a designated meeting spot, which is the covered veranda area at the front of the center. If you go up the middle of the garden to the veranda area and the building, there's a covered veranda that's like a thoroughfare out to the road—just a little area with a couple of chairs. That's the meeting place.

If you decide to participate, you go up to that area and wait until someone else turns up, then pair up with that person. This isn't a chance to catch up with a friend—you just see who's there and pair up together. Once you've met someone and formed a pair, you need to move away from that immediate meeting area. We don't want the meeting area to get clogged with little conversations that then draw in additional people who turn up.

This is a bit challenging because of the weather today, so we've done our best to arrange for it. When you've formed a pair, you have two choices. You can make use of two sets of chairs that have been placed nearby. As you're looking toward the road from the covered veranda, if you look to the left, the veranda comes around in an L shape into the staff area. Right up at that end, just outside the staff area, we've put two chairs that are covered and private on the edge of the veranda—that's one place a pair can go.

The other place is that if you continue through the covered veranda as if you're going out of the center, just on the right is the retreat manager's purple cabin, and Margie has very generously set up two chairs under her little front porch—another little covered area where two people can sit. So there's opportunity for two pairs to sit down together.

The other option, which you may prefer anyway, is to grab a raincoat from the row of hooks as you're looking out toward the road—those raincoats are always available to yogis. Or take an umbrella; there are umbrellas all around the center for yogi use.

Another option is for the two of you to go for a little wander down the road together and then come back up. You should be in a pair, not in a group. Have a short conversation together—ideally only five minutes, perhaps ten minutes maximum. Then end the conversation together and leave the speaking and listening area, returning to the main part of the retreat centre in silence.

What you talk about doesn't really matter. You're not practising being a great conversationalist, and I think we can all have some understanding and compassion for each other that we may well be a bit rusty in this regard. We're practising maintaining mindfulness during speaking and listening. So it doesn't matter if the conversation is a bit stilted or if you can't find the words you want. Take it slowly. I would suggest sticking to the here and now—how the retreat's been going, what you've enjoyed about being here, for example. I'd suggest steering clear of world politics.

It's okay if it feels clunky. It's okay if it feels forced. It's okay to take it slowly, and to ask the other person if you can pause while you ground your awareness. In fact, this can be a good thing to establish beforehand if you're both interested—to say, "Look, I might take a couple of breaths before I reply to you."

What should you be aware of throughout the experience? The first thing to note is that this meditation exercise has already started. It doesn't actually matter whether or not you choose to participate—you're still going to be engaging with this idea and this possibility for the rest of the morning. So you can notice your reaction to this possibility starting from now, and especially once you leave the hall. Even if you decide not to do it, watching your reaction to the idea is already an important part of the practice. Has excitement arisen in the mind? Has anxiety arisen? It's a great opportunity to watch and feel your reactions. I'm adding a bit of fuel to the fire of your meditation practice for this last day.

Then there's your awareness when you go to the meeting place. What's the feeling in the heart? Is it excitement? Eagerness? Fear? It may feel uncomfortable and exposing to go there. You don't know who you're going to meet. You don't even know if there will be someone there to meet with. So be aware of any feeling of self-consciousness, embarrassment, or eagerness.

Once you've paired up and you are speaking to the other person, use whatever you can to ground your awareness and stay connected to your embodied experience while you're talking. It could be physical sensations in the body, the sound of your own voice, awareness of where the energy is in the body. Is the energy rushing up into the head? You might also notice the quality of rushing or the quality of eagerness. It can really help to ground the awareness in the physical sensations in the lower half of the body.

When you're listening, you can use similar anchors to ground the awareness. But pay special attention to whether you're staying in your own experience as you listen to someone else, or whether you're really going outside yourself and identifying with the other person, or getting caught up in eagerness about what you want to say next—not really being here and now with the listening.

After you've finished your conversation, you leave the speaking and listening area, and the practice continues. Be with the heart-mind as it gradually settles. Notice what has been stirred up and watch the process of the heart-mind coming back into balance. This is a really important part of the process. So don't stay in the meeting area and jump straight into another conversation. This is blind dating, not speed dating.

You can go back for another conversation if you want, but wait until the heart and mind have settled before you try again. The meeting place will be open until the end of the lunch break—until 2:30. So from the time we finish here until 2:30, that gives you quite a bit of time. You don't need to rush, and you can go back for another conversation if you feel it's been really beneficial or you're intrigued to work with it more.

But if you do feel the urge to go back for more, check in with the heart-mind about the motivation. Are you wanting to go back because it's a really interesting meditation practice and you want the opportunity to learn more from it? Or is it just a distraction or entertainment—a way to avoid the remaining hours of the retreat?

Okay, any questions?

I think I feel very challenged to practice right speech in daily interactions with people. Very challenged.

Yes, that's right. It's very common to feel very challenged to practice right speech. Interpersonal communication is, of course, one of the most difficult areas to maintain our mindfulness. Because most of the stuff that triggers us comes from other people, especially those who are close to us.

Are the instructions clear and complete? Good.

We'll wrap up so you can go and get chatting, shall we?

I will say, don't forget in the excitement of this final suggestion—don't forget the earlier suggestions that I made. Don't forget about playing with fifty-fifty awareness, awareness of seeing, faster movement. These are also valuable ways to practice breaking down that dichotomy between retreat and everyday life.

And we will have, after 2:30, time to really settle back into the practice and play around with those other options, if you like, in that last big chunk of practice opportunity that we have this afternoon.

Enjoy.

CHAPTER 97

Invitation to Dhamma

Patrick Kearney · 48 min

In this profound closing talk from a meditation retreat, Patrick Kearney weaves together the Buddha's core teachings to illuminate what he calls 'the invitation to Dhamma.' Beginning with the middle way (majjhimā paṭipadā) as presented in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), he explains that this path cannot be found at any extreme or even at a midpoint, but only emerges as a dynamic balance in the present moment—free from clinging and striving.

Kearney connects this understanding to paṭicca samuppāda (dependent arising), describing reality as a vast web of relationships rather than isolated things. Drawing on the Uggaha Sutta's farming metaphor, he emphasizes that we cannot control the process of awakening any more than a farmer can command crops to ripen—we can only create conditions and trust natural processes. This leads to a penetrating exploration of anattā (not-self), explaining how the self is 'the one who separates from experience in order to shape it,' and how recognizing its absence is uniquely challenging because we're looking for something that isn't there.

The talk culminates in an examination of saddhā (faith or confidence), distinguishing it from mere belief as 'placing the heart' in relationship with reality. Through the Āpaṇa Sutta's teaching on the five faculties, Kearney shows how mature saddhā and paññā (wisdom) become virtually indistinguishable—the heart's intimacy and the mind's clarity working together. His personal observations from teaching in Malaysia offer insight into how cultural conditioning affects our capacity for samādhi and our fundamental sense of connection. The invitation to Dhamma, he concludes, is simply this: recognize that what we seek is already available, surrender into awareness itself, and discover we are already held.

So tonight we're going to talk about the invitation to Dharma, and we're going to start with the middle way.

When the Buddha was awakened as a young man and decides he's going to teach, he goes looking for his five former companions who were with him in his days as an ascetic, because he thinks they might conceivably understand what he's talking about. Two months after his awakening, he teaches the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Rolling the Dharma Wheel. And in it, the first thing he taught was the middle way.

You've probably heard of Buddhism as the middle way—it's quite commonly associated. The middle way in this particular discourse is the middle way of practice that lies between two extremes or two ends. In Pali, this is *anta*. And they are the two extremes of the pursuit of happiness through sensual indulgence versus the pursuit of happiness through asceticism.

Now, where can we find the middle way? To begin with, the middle way cannot be defined as the opposite of another way, because that would be an *anta*, an extreme, an end, not a middle. The opposite of indulgence is asceticism, which means asceticism is just another extreme. The opposite of asceticism is indulgence, which means indulgence is just another extreme. Often people say the middle way is the medium way—the midpoint between these two extremes. But that's just another *anta*, because the midpoint is the opposite of the ends, so it's still an extreme.

The middle way can be found only where there is no *anta*, where there is no extreme, there is no end, there is no place where we are stuck on anything. So the middle way emerges as a dynamic balance between opposites. It's a place characterised by no fixed positions. And if you get a sense that this has got something to do with not-self and emptiness, you're absolutely right. This balance can only be found in the present. It cannot be found if we're holding on to the past or striving for the future. It's only found in the absence of clinging, in the absence of escaping from.

In this discourse, the Buddha defines the middle way as the eightfold path. Everybody who knows something about Buddhism knows about the eightfold path. If you look at this path, it is characterized by dynamic complexity. There are eight factors, and all of them are necessary. If any one of them is too weak or too strong in comparison to the others, the path doesn't work. The whole system collapses.

In other words, balance is everything in this practice, and balance requires pleasure because it requires delicacy. When we are driven by either what we want or what we're trying to escape from, we blunder because we're desperate to get away or desperate to get something. When we blunder about, we lose our sensitivity to what is actually going on now.

The middle way is one expression of the Buddha's fundamental teaching of dependent arising. In Pali, this is *paṭicca samuppāda*. If you have any interest in Buddhist philosophy, you would have heard about dependent arising. It's considered very difficult to understand and very esoteric, so I'll explain it now.

What dependent arising is about is an expression of the underlying patterns of experience. It's the systems view of reality. What it's saying is that each individual experience we undergo is one aspect of an almost infinitely complex system made up of a vast number of other aspects of experience, all of them intimately related to each other. These relationships are normative—in practical terms, they are reliable and they can be mapped and understood. To sum it up, the world of dependent arising is a world of relationships, not of things.

Given that dependent arising is how nature works, this is the basic framework. What should we do about this? How are we supposed to respond? We do the practice, which consists of cooperating with these natural conditions so that we move toward the cessation of suffering. When we understand the natural laws that govern the arising and cessation of experienced events—of *dhammas*—we can learn to live in such a way that we abandon those events that lead to suffering and cultivate those events that lead to the cessation of suffering. We can cultivate a path. This is the foundation for the path.

It's really important to recognise that all of this is about nature and how nature works. The Buddha addresses this issue in a discourse called "Urgent." It's a brief discourse, and the Buddha says a farmer has three urgent duties.

What three? A farmer swiftly makes sure the field is well ploughed and tilled. Next, they swiftly plant seeds in season. When the time is right, they swiftly irrigate or drain the field. The farmer has no special power or ability to say, "Let the crops germinate today, let them flower tomorrow, let them ripen the day after." But as the seasons change, there comes a time when that farmer's crops germinate, flower, and ripen.

You see how he's talking about natural process—the seasons that roll on, certain things done at a certain time, and this gives a certain result.

In the same way, a practitioner has three urgent duties. What three? Undertaking training in the higher ethics, the higher heart, and the higher wisdom—sīla, samādhi, paññā. These are the three trainings. That practitioner has no special power or ability to say, "Today, let my heart be freed from the influences by not holding," or tomorrow, or the day after. But as that practitioner trains, there comes a time when their heart is freed from the influences by not holding.

Now what is the Buddha saying here? Why is he comparing the practice to farming, to gardening? What he's saying is that we do not control the process of practice and awakening. Yet, as we practice, the heart opens and the result naturally emerges. And this understanding is built into the Buddha's image of path. Of course, when you talk

about Buddhism, the Buddha's practice, there's a lot of talking about path. If we're cultivating a path, what are we doing? We're setting a direction and moving along it. And if we're going to do that, we need to be able to influence the flow of events.

But one practical consequence of the infinite complexity of dependent arising is that I discover it is impossible to control my experience. The classic example: let's say I'm struggling in my practice, and then suddenly everything slips into place and the meditation runs smoothly. Has that happened this week? Once or twice? When this happens, I think, "That's it. I've finally cracked this practice." And I confidently sit down for my next session, and everything is in total chaos. I can spend the rest of the week struggling to reproduce that experience and completely failing.

So why can't I reproduce a past experience? Because that experience—any experience—is the result of an enormously large number of conditions coming together in a certain way, and most of these conditions are completely unknown to me. It doesn't sound like science. It isn't. It's nature. These conditions suddenly come together in a specific pattern, and my body-mind shifts into a smooth, clear meditation session. And then, just as suddenly, conditions shift again and this smoothness disappears—and it ain't coming back, not for a while. I cannot make it happen.

So what can I do? Remember, dependent arising says that these patterns that govern the flow of experience are normative. In other words, these patterns can be mapped and they can be understood.

Just to give a kind of local example of what this means: first of all, this kind of understanding is not unique to the Buddha. It's part of traditional systems of knowledge. For example, many years ago when I was studying in Brisbane, I had a friend who used to hang out on Stradbroke Island off the coast. He used to spend time with the Indigenous owners—the men, of course. One day he was out with a dugong man—a man of knowledge, a man of wisdom, a young bloke in this case. They were chopping wood in the forest when the dugong man mentioned conversationally that the mullet were running, so it was a good time to go fishing. My friend had the presence of mind to ask, "How do you know the mullet are running?" The dugong man pointed to the ground where there was a line of hairy caterpillars who were active. He said, "When you see this, the mullet are running." Isn't it obvious?

Now, the Dugon man was not saying that the behaviour of the hairy caterpillars causes the mullet to run. If that were the case, then if you wanted fish, what you would do is go hunting for hairy caterpillars and stir them up, and then you could race over and get the fish.

But his people had been observing the patterns in nature on Stradbroke Island for at least ten thousand years. And they have learned that when the hairy caterpillars are active, the mullet are running. In other words, you have hairy caterpillars and you have mullet, and they're both part of a much larger network of conditional relationships. Within this network, there are specific patterns that can be discerned and relied upon. And such a pattern can be acted upon, and you get a result from this action.

So in terms of the meditation, let's give a very mundane example. I'm doing breathing meditation and I realize that when I focus on my breathing with great determination, my shoulders get tight. That's interesting. So I experiment by relaxing my effort and I discover that my shoulders relax. I'm seeing a pattern. And when I practice in accordance with this pattern, my experience changes. And it may change in ways that lead to my welfare.

So when we practice mindfulness, what we're doing is being continuously aware over a period of time, and we uncover these patterns within our experience. And over time, we get to understand how these patterns unfold.

So this is the middle way, dependent arising, and these are closely linked to the Buddha's teaching of anatta, not-self. And not-self is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the Buddha's teaching to understand, partly because it goes against all of our assumptions and habits.

To us, self is perfectly obvious. I mean, after all, who decided to come to this retreat? Who is doing this practice? Who is listening to this talk? It's obvious that the answer to all these questions is me, myself. So how can I deny any self?

And not-self is also difficult to understand and to experience because it's not a something. It's the absence of something. So the understanding of not-self is part of the arising of insight. And as we've talked about before, for the Buddha, insight is always insight into the three universal characteristics of experience: anicca, dukkha, anatta. All experience is changing. All experience fails to satisfy. All experience is not-self.

Now these three characteristics, as we mentioned before, are always listed in this order, and this gives an impression that they constitute some kind of hierarchy listed in order of seniority. But while they are listed separately, they arise together. They're like different sides of a three-sided coin. If one is present, all are present. And the fact is, all are present at every time and in every situation. They describe what is happening and what is unavoidable.

So our nature expresses the fact of change. And change is beyond our control because we cannot control nature. And in the same way, we cannot control our own experience. So, for example, meditation experience. We might try to organise things so that every sitting period is marked by calm and concentration, but we cannot make that happen.

Experience changes because of nature, which means it changes because of a much wider system of dynamic dependence. And because we want to control our lives, this inability to impose control is painful. This is dukkha.

And who is the one in charge? Who is the controller? It's self. If I cannot find anyone in charge of me and my life, I am experiencing not-self. I'm experiencing the absence of the controller. Because for the Buddha, self is the one who is in charge of experience. But the Buddha is saying we cannot find anyone in charge.

We keep looking for the hidden commander, and we keep issuing commands in his or her name. But no commander is ever actually found.

Recognizing not-self is very delicate. Self seems real. We have always assumed it is there. It appears to be a good working hypothesis that explains our experience. But the weird thing is that when we look for it, we can never pin it down.

So recognizing not-self is different from recognizing the first two characteristics—change, pain, anicca, dukkha. Because change is a something; we can point to it. Pain is a something; we can point to it. But not-self is not a something. It is an absence. It's an empty space where we assumed something lurked. And it's more difficult to recognize an absence than it is to recognize a presence.

Imagine going to a party where you expect to see your friends. And let's assume you have many friends. It's easy to recognize those who have come, those who are present. It's more difficult to recognize those who are absent. And it's more difficult still to sense their absence as part of the general background of experience.

Now, this dynamic might be seen in the problem of finding right effort in our practice, which we've been talking about this week. Have you ever found yourself striving to do this practice correctly, and either praising yourself for getting it right or blaming yourself for getting it wrong?

When we have this attitude to our practice, it indicates we are practicing what the Buddha calls wrong effort, micchā vāyāma. And why is it wrong? It's wrong in the context of path because this kind of effort sends us in the wrong direction. And where does wrong effort come from? It comes from our determined assumption that there is

someone here who is making all this effort—the one who should be getting things right and who is a failure if things go wrong. And who is the one responsible for this project? Self.

When we're caught in the ups and downs of the practice, or when we're caught in the ups and downs of life, what we're caught in is the ups and downs of self. The practice becomes problematic when I, the practitioner, get in the way.

This is one reason why we've been emphasizing the importance of relaxation. Relaxation is important in the practice because when we strive to get things right or regret that we got things wrong, we are imposing a self between us and our intuitive recognition that we are already aware. We do not have to try to be aware. We are already aware. We have forgotten our awareness, although the awareness is already here.

And so we make too much effort. We get lost in our concepts about our experience and lose touch with the experience itself. We're lost in concepts of right and wrong, concepts of winning and losing. All of this distracts us from what is actually happening. And all of these concepts naturally arise from a sense of self.

With the self in charge of the project, we find ourselves trying to make something happen—which means we have a view or an image of what should be happening. I should be concentrated. I should be staying with my breath. I should not be thinking. And then we struggle to realize this view, to make this image into a felt reality. This creates tension and conflict. But the very struggle hides the fundamental fact of awareness itself.

All of this comes from the dominance of our sense of self, the one who's in charge of the project. This is one reason why Tejaniya is such an interesting teacher, because he really zeros in on this. In his book *When Awareness Becomes Natural*, he quotes his own teacher, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, who said: "Don't try to do anything. Don't try to prevent anything. But don't forget what is happening."

Very interesting: Don't try to do anything. Don't try to prevent anything. But don't forget what is happening. This is the description of right effort—effort as part of the middle way, effort when there is no one interfering with the practice, no one getting in the way.

So what we have to do, if we can say that we have to do it, is get out of the way. How do we get out of the way? One possibility is that we can get out of the way through the role of saddhā, usually translated as faith or confidence.

Let's zero in on this key term. Saddhā is the Pali word. Sometimes you see it translated as faith, sometimes as confidence, sometimes as trust. The word comes from the root *da*, to put or to place, combined with *shrad*, which is an old Vedic word for heart. In Vedic Sanskrit, *shrad* becomes in Pali *sad*. So saddhā means to place the heart—as in the sense of putting our heart into something. "I put my heart into this." Or it can mean to place in the heart, as we say, taking something to heart. Saddhā is about the heart connection with what we take to be real.

And notice: it is not belief. This is really important. It's about a felt connection with reality. Belief is cognitive. Saddhā is not cognitive—it's affective. It's in the heart, not the head. This is really important. In our modern world, if someone uses the term faith, we assume this means accepting impossible beliefs because someone tells us to. But this is not saddhā. If saddhā really is faith, it's probably closer to faith in the sense of being faithful to someone or to something.

Let's say we commit ourselves to a relationship with another person. We agree implicitly or explicitly to be faithful to that person. Now this does not mean we believe impossible things about him or her. It means that we are committed to this relationship in such a way that it shapes our way of life. It provides us with a sense of direction, a sense of what is important and what is not so important. And therefore it provides us with a felt basis for the decisions that we make. This is closer to what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about saddhā.

In the teaching, the Buddha pairs saddhā with paññā. Paññā is wisdom or understanding. The word is based on the root *ñā*, to know, to understand, and you get the prefix *pa*, which acts as an intensifier. Paññā has a wide range of application. It's closely related to sati, mindfulness. Often when the Buddha talks about mindfulness practice, he uses a compound word, *sati sampajañña*. Sampajañña is again from the same root, *ñā*. It's a kind of entry-level understanding. If I'm tracking experience over time, I get to understand it—a very basic, ordinary, ground-level understanding. This is sampajañña. But in all of its forms, paññā, understanding, is not affective. It's cognitive. It's in the head, not the heart.

Together, saddhā and paññā, faith and understanding, when they come together represent an alliance between the affective and the cognitive, between the head and the heart, within the person, to the point where, when they mature, they become virtually indistinguishable.

This comes out in one discourse, the Āpaṇa Sutta, "At Āpaṇa." When the Buddha was staying at a place called Āpaṇa, he asked Sāriputta to teach on the five indriyas, or faculties. Now Sāriputta was one of his chief disciples, foremost in wisdom. The indriyas,

the faculties—this is a list. As you know, Buddhism is full of lists. And it's actually a list within a list: saddhā, viriya, sati, samādhi, paññā. Faith, energy, mindfulness, immersion, and wisdom or understanding. This list takes the familiar three aspects of the Eightfold Path that deal with meditation—energy, mindfulness, concentration or immersion—

And at one end you have saddha, faith, and on the other end you have wisdom, understanding, paññā. These flanking positions are very important. The Buddha really was a connoisseur of a good list.

So Sariputta goes through the list, starts with faith, energy, and so on. And he says faith is directed towards the Buddha and the Buddha's awakening. Now what does he mean? Does he mean that one believes in it? Hallelujah, I believe? No, he's talking about the felt sense of the reality of awakening. The felt sense. Which means the felt sense of the real possibility for me of awakening.

And you notice the sense of reality, at least in potential. If I have saddha, whatever I have saddha in must be sufficiently real for me to act upon it. So let's say that I think Buddhism is great, Dharma is great, Buddha is great, and I've got nice Buddha images at home and a whole library of Dharma books, and I can discourse learnedly about the Buddha's teaching—but I don't know about going to a retreat. I mean, it's pretty tough. And besides, I'm quite busy. So, no. There are no actions. Such a person might have belief in what all these books are saying, but he does not have saddha.

But if a person feels, "I've got no idea whether this Buddhism business is real or not, but I've got to find out, and the only way I can find out is by diving into the practice"—that person has saddha.

So Sariputta starts with saddha, then he goes through the three factors of the Eightfold Path, and then he finishes up with paññā, understanding, which he says is directed towards understanding dependent origination. And then he sums up. He's gone through the list—one, two, three, four, five. He's taken a linear journey, starting with faith and ending with understanding.

And then he does something quite unexpected. He goes back to the beginning of the list. He says, "Striving again and again, being mindful again and again, unifying her mind again and again, and understanding again and again." Do you notice the "again and again"? He doesn't think this is going to be done in five minutes. "A cultivated student's heart is firmly placed in this way. Those things that once I had only heard about, now I live, touching them with the body, seeing them clear through. This is her faculty of faith."

That's a very interesting definition. "Those things that once I had only heard about, now I live, touching them with the body, seeing them clear through." Things are touched with the body and seen clear through. "Things" translates dhammas—events, phenomena, the experiences that arise.

So what we appear to be seeing are two different modalities of experience. Touching suggests feeling, seeing suggests understanding. Touching suggests intimacy, seeing suggests detachment. Touching suggests heart, seeing suggests head. In other words, when we have mature saddha, mature faith, it is almost indistinguishable from wisdom, from understanding.

So the Buddha says, "A cultivated student's heart is firmly placed in this way." The verb translated as "firmly placed" here is abhisadahati, which adds the intensifying prefix abhi to the verb "to entrust one's heart." So it's not a case of faith now and develop wisdom later. Faith here, understanding there. Faith and understanding at war with each other. And that's very much the Western heritage.

But rather both are present, they are equal, but they are different. Saddha, faith, is intimate and physical. It's an affective relationship with reality. Understanding sees right through. It's a cognitive relationship with reality. And both are central to the path.

You notice that what we've been talking about over this week, we've been emphasising the understanding. And one of the meditators in an interview said, "It's very dry, this practice." That's exactly right. In the tradition it is called the way of dry insight. You're right, it is dry. So head and heart, affective and cognitive, understanding and faith—how do they relate to the practice?

The Buddha looks at the practice through two broad categories of samatha and vipassana, serenity and insight. You notice again here the joining of head and heart. Serenity represents the heart's connection with the practice. And when we connect serenity with not-self in the mental way, we may begin to recognise an interesting pattern.

Before I go on about this, I want to tell you of an observation that I made many years ago when I first started teaching in Malaysia. For a number of years, I would go every year and teach, or most years, at a place called SBS outside of Taiping in Malaysia—SBS standing for Sasanaraka Buddhist Sanctuary. The meditators were Chinese Malaysians. The first time I went there, there's this big hall. I've never been there before, so I'm a bit nervous. I go in, I do my performance, and they all listen. They're too shy to ask any

questions. Then they meditate, and it seems to be pretty good. Then they leave the meditation hall and they go, "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah" to each other. They come back to the meditation hall and they meditate. They leave the hall, "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

I'm looking at this and I'm horrified. My God, this is terrible. This is a disaster. Because in Australia, if people were talking like this, it would be completely hopeless. The whole practice would collapse. But I couldn't help but notice that it didn't bother them. They walk along the path, "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," head into the hall, right in there. It was pretty weird.

Over the years, I just kept looking at this and kept wondering, why is it that as a cohort, as a population, Malaysian Chinese find samadhi much easier than Australians? Much easier. What is it? I pondered this and came up with a hypothesis, and I present it purely as a hypothesis, not even a theory. But my hypothesis is this: your typical Malaysian Chinese meditator, when he or she goes deeply within themselves, they know, "I am not alone." And I think the typical Australian meditator, when they go deeply within themselves, knows fundamentally, "I am alone." I think this is the difference.

The sense of presence, of intimacy, versus aloneness, clearly can be influenced by social conditions. But it suggests something deeper, because intimacy is characteristic of the experience of the middle way and of not-self.

So let's go back to the self. Who is the self? It's the one who separates from experience in order to shape it according to his or her demands. The self is the one who judges experience as good or bad, as successful or failed.

For example, we come to the practice hearing about these distant, far-off ideals of enlightenment and awakening. We may be moved by these ideals, sufficiently moved to embark upon the practice. This movement is faith, it's saddha. Yet we doubt. And in our doubt, what we do is try to wrestle our experience to the floor. We try to make our experience conform to our desires and our wishes, and usually we fail. So we experience dukkha and we get trapped in wrong effort. We are determined to bring things under our control, the control of the self, and therefore we resist our intuitive recognition of not-self—which again is part of the three characteristics, always present.

But what if we surrendered into not-self? What if we stopped struggling? What if we really began to open to the fact of awareness itself? To the fact of intimacy itself? And how experience flows when we are intimate.

I'm reminded of an event that took place—well, I used to say years ago, but now it's last century, last millennium. I was practicing in Burma, and at that particular time, John Hale, who was a good friend and one of my main teachers, was practicing at the

same center. Actually, he was practicing at the branch center. He finished his retreat and came back to the main one where I was, hanging out for a few days before going home.

And there was something about him. I think we could call it enlightenment, which people found incredibly attractive. It was like bees to honey. People just gathered around him and hung out with him.

One day I saw an interaction between John and a Thai yogi. This particular practitioner was very dedicated, really dedicated. But very rational in his approach. He was an ex-sportsman and a coach, very successful. And in his coaching, he knew it was all about getting the right technique for the player. If the players could master the right technique, they'd win the game. So he was really concerned about having the best technique. Whenever he would meet a meditator who impressed him, he'd go up and question them. He accumulated vast realms of data. He even recorded his own interviews with the teachers.

And he zeroed in on John. He wanted to talk to him. And he had one basic question: What is your technique? How do you do it?

John would look at him with vast compassion. And all he would say was, "It's already available."

"Yes, yes, yes, but what is your technique?"

"It's already available."

"Yes, yes, sure, sure, but what do you do?"

"It's already available."

And that's all he would say. It was really interesting because the poor yogi was getting more and more frustrated. He couldn't get this at all.

When we relax while remaining aware, we recognize something. And what do we recognize? We recognize that what we are looking for is already here. Perhaps it's been looking for us.

But this can't be true, we protest. Because what is already here is painful and unsatisfactory. But so what? What does it matter what judgment or what assessment we place on top of our experience? The fact is, it's already available.

And perhaps we can get a felt sense of this more readily when we become more intimate with the awareness. We're talking about awareness of awareness. One way of looking at it is when we direct awareness to our experiencing, our aware-ing, rather than what we experience, what we are aware of. Because in awareness itself, there is no judgment. There's just awareness. There's just this world, now. There's just intimacy.

And in intimacy, nothing more is needed.

We experience this in our everyday lives when, for whatever reason, we let go of our habitual concepts and judgments and just surrender. Sometimes we do this, for example, when we love. And sometimes we do this when we relax.

In this retreat, we've talked about the importance of relaxation, but of course love is also central. So each night we recite the Karaniya Metta Sutta. And what is metta? Essentially, it is love. Because when we love, we surrender. And when we surrender, we discover we are already held.

And this is the invitation to Dharma. Dharma itself invites us. We don't have to fight to enter Dharma. We don't have to prove ourselves worthy. We just need to surrender and accept the invitation that is already moving us. We just need to recognise that we are not alone. We are already with Dharma. And Dharma includes everything and everyone.

So how do we practice when we know we are held? We get out of our own way. There's no need to struggle. There's no need to fear failure. We just feel the intimacy of this, which is happening now, and which needs no justification and no apology. No special technique. It's simply this, simply now. And nothing more is needed. And in fact, nothing more is possible. We have arrived.

So just relax. Notice what is here. And surrender into it.

And when we get a felt sense of this, when the heart opens to Dharma, we get an understanding of what the Buddha was talking about when he spoke about entering the stream. Instead of struggling to stay afloat, we relax into the current. Instead of diligently swimming upstream, we cruise downstream. So we stay awake and watchful, but we relax into our wakefulness.

We've got nowhere else to go. And this right here is enough.

CHAPTER 98

Closing

Patrick Kearney · 41 min

> *In this closing talk from a nine-day retreat on mindfulness, Patrick Kearney and Tina Ng reframe the transition from retreat to daily life not as an ending but as a change of conditions—an invitation to continue practicing in the midst of ordinary activities. Drawing inspiration from Sayadaw U Tejaniya's journey of deepening practice while battling depression and managing a family business in the chaotic markets of Yangon, they emphasize that awareness is always available regardless of circumstances.*
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> *The teachers offer practical techniques for sustaining practice at home, including the concept of "50-50 awareness" (maintaining partial attention on present-moment knowing while engaged in activities) and "tapping the light switch of awareness" (making light, repeated efforts to remember rather than striving for continuous mindfulness). They encourage practitioners to identify three daily activities as informal meditation sessions, be creative with formal practice in any of the four postures, and find approaches that are genuinely enjoyable and sustainable.*
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> *Key themes include releasing expectations about what practice should look like, celebrating natural moments of awareness rather than judging lapses, using dukkha and difficult emotions as mindfulness bells, and bringing gentle awareness even to challenging activities like screen use. The talk concludes with honest reflection on navigating relationships with non-meditators—recognizing that practitioners are a cultural minority and learning to adapt skillfully to different social contexts while maintaining inner practice. Throughout, the emphasis remains on self-compassion: the only daily life practice without value is feeling guilty about not practicing.*

So here we are at a particularly exciting time of transition, what we often conceptualize as the end of the retreat and the return to everyday life. I would like to offer an alternate framework this morning, which is not so much the end of the retreat, but just a change of conditions. An invitation to continue the retreat in everyday life.

Essentially, the practice that we've been exploring here over the last nine days is meditation as a way of being. I hope that over this time, you've been able to get a bit of a sense of the truth that awareness is always available—that it's available no matter what is presenting to awareness or no matter what activity we're engaged in. And wherever awareness is available, then so too insight and wisdom are available. So these are available in the midst of everyday life.

This was something that I really learned from Sayadaw U Tejaniya. For those of you who are familiar with his teaching and perhaps have read his book, which is partly autobiographical, I think this really comes through so strongly in the way he recounts his experience of deepening into the practice over the course of his life. His book is called *When Awareness Becomes Natural*, for anyone who wants to follow it up.

He had lots of periods of intensive meditation in the meditation center of his teacher, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw. But he was constantly pulled back out into everyday life, often by his family because he had family commitments to uphold in the family business. As Patrick mentioned at an earlier point in the retreat, he had a pretty wild and colourful life. He was very much a layperson battling with the chaos and messiness of life.

His practice really deepened when he was battling with a very severe depression. He would take refuge in the meditation centre for months at a time, but he found that when he returned to lay life, when his father came to call him back to help manage the family business, the depression would return. Eventually he understood that the only way through this depression was to understand it, to bring awareness and insight to it—in the midst of it, in the midst of the turmoil. And so he describes the different strategies and ways that he had for really making the challenges of life central to the practice.

One that I really appreciate is this: his family business involved his father being a cloth merchant with a market stall in the central markets of Yangon. A really busy, noisy, chaotic, colourful environment. Sayadaw U Tejaniya used to find it very overwhelming when what his heart was yearning for was practice and he was dealing with depression and he needed to be in this environment working and dealing with customers and all of the overwhelming sensory stimuli. He tells how he used to walk around with a Vicks inhaler stuck up one nostril. It was a mindfulness reminder, a strong sensory input to remind him to be aware—just remember to be aware. Apparently when people asked him about it, he would say he had hay fever or something like that. But this was his creative way of doing whatever he needed to do to build remembering awareness into everyday life. And of course, as I've said a number of times through this retreat, we get better at what we practice. So with practice, over time, this skill of cultivating awareness in daily life can grow.

This is my encouragement to you: to think about what practice means in everyday life differently, to be creative with it, and to think about it as a daily life retreat. Where we simply, patiently, and with a sustained but light touch effort, practice over and over again to bring awareness into what we're doing.

It will feel very different, of course, so it's important not to have expectations. It will be much more difficult because the situation is different—it's a less conducive situation to drop into deep awareness and deep samādhi. And it's really important that we don't judge success in practice in everyday life on whether or not awareness is continuous. Achieving continuity of awareness isn't important. If we think that's the goal, then we're just swapping out one expectation about ideal meditation with another. We're just swapping out the idea of continuity of awareness through every activity for the previous ideal we might have held—that somehow when I sit down every morning to do my meditation practice, I'm going to enter a thought-free, blissful, jhānic realm for a while, and then I'll go about my day.

It's not that achieving a special meditation state in everyday life is what's going to catapult us out of suffering. It's that we have the intention and the commitment to cultivate increasing intimacy with the present, which we carry through our everyday life. And over time, that transforms the way that we are in the world.

Some tips about the practicalities of practice once we go home. Yesterday I introduced the technique of fifty-fifty awareness, and maybe you had the opportunity to practice a little with that, play a little bit with that. If that resonates for you, then that's a really helpful concept to take home. It makes it more achievable. We go about our day, we've still got to invest our mental energy in what we're doing, but we can retain some portion of our mental energy just to remember to be aware.

Another one that's really helpful is this idea of tapping the light switch of awareness. That really emphasizes the light touch effort. Wise effort in practice in everyday life is simply remembering to be aware now—just tapping the light switch of awareness whenever we notice it's dark again.

And again, that's what's important. That is what's conditioning the mind to choose awareness in future moments. And over time, the light switch will start to remain on for longer and longer.

So it's tapping the light switch that's the sign of progress. It's not whether I can stay continuously aware over the course of an activity. It's looking back and saying, "Well, do I remember to tap the light switch more often these days?" That's the sign of progress in the practice.

Be interested in the times where the mind chooses not to be aware. Notice what they are for you. For me, it's rushing. Sometimes I can see the mind—an unexpected deadline comes up, suddenly you've got far less time to get out of the house than you real-

ized you had. And it's like the mind sort of teeters on the brink and then thinks, "Oh well, I'll pick up the awareness practice later because this is really important. I've just got to get us out the door."

Or maybe it's when anger arises. Identification with view, position, righteousness. Like, "Oh yeah, I can see the anger arising, and it's quite interesting to watch that. But I might just make sure that the other person understands that my view is actually the correct view. And then I'll come back and watch the aversion."

So noticing this in a playful way—this is an opportunity to laugh at ourselves and to ask: Is it ever helpful to make the choice not to be aware? Notice the consequences of when the mind chooses awareness and when the mind chooses not to be aware. Is it ever actually helpful to choose not to be aware?

Similarly, celebrating the moments of knowing throughout the day. This one is so important. Often people come to me in interviews and say something like, "Oh look, I must admit I'm not a very good meditator when I get off retreat. I find it really hard to keep up the daily practice. I probably haven't even been sitting for the past few months." And then they pause and say, "It is interesting though—when I go out for a walk or do this or that activity, I do notice that I'm quite aware. I really can get a sense of the flow of sensations." And then they describe awareness of direct experience.

So again, it's about these limiting conceptions that we have about what the practice is. Celebrate the times when awareness is present, either because we have remembered and tapped the light switch, or—even more interesting—when we haven't even remembered and awareness has already returned. We can really tune into this, particularly in the days following this retreat, because awareness will be returning without being invited or remembered. The practice is happening naturally. This is the naturalness of the practice. It's actually not the self who does the practice. So really notice that and celebrate it and savor it, because that is the practice unfolding naturally.

Treat life like a retreat—the retreat of daily life. In a retreat, we don't give up entirely when we drop the ball for a few minutes, do we? Otherwise you wouldn't still be here. So bring the same slow and steady commitment to it in everyday life.

A couple more things about dedicated practice time, or formal practice time, because this is always the question that's foremost in people's minds at the end of a retreat: How long should I sit for?

You've probably guessed it's not much good asking me that question, because I like to emphasize the equal importance of all four postures. So when someone asks me how long to sit for—if sitting works for you and you really like it, great. It's a wonderful practice to help cultivate the momentum of awareness and samādhi in daily life. If you enjoy sitting, then sit, and it doesn't matter how long you sit for.

But if you struggle with sitting and you're asking how long you should sit for because you think you can at least know you've ticked off being a good yogi if you manage to stay there till the end of that session—then I would say, try something different. Be creative. Do your formal practice in a different posture. Find a way to connect with the practice that is enjoyable and nourishing and makes you want to do it on successive days.

Formal practice is very useful, very, very useful. But formal practice doesn't have to be sitting on the cushion with eyes closed until a timer goes off.

Formal practice can be in any of the four postures: sitting, standing, lying, or movement. It's very freeing and very good for developing our sense of independence and trust in the practice if we actually do go home and play with it a bit.

In the middle years of my practice—over the couple of two and a half decades that I've been practicing—the first phase I was just trying to get on the cushion and judging myself very harshly for not doing it very well. Then in the middle years it was a time of real creativity and experimentation. I knew that I needed formal practice to sustain the momentum in everyday life, and I would just try different things for periods of time.

There was one time when I was living in Sydney in an apartment and didn't have much time because I had a long commute to and from work every day. So I thought, well, how can I do formal practice and also get outdoors and move my body each day? I combined the two. The formal practice was this forty-minute loop—I'd make the intention to leave, be aware, and then I would leave the house and do this brisk walk alongside the joggers and the prams and everything down near the river and back to the house. That was my formal practice time.

Another time in that same situation in Sydney, I dropped the daily practice for a while, and instead every second Sunday I had a retreat day. I took the eight precepts, and I didn't have much structure to the day, but the eight precepts were there to provide a retreat container. I could really go deeper into the practice, and then the rest of the time in that fortnight it was just taking little opportunities here and there.

When my kids were little, my formal practice time became lying in bed next to them while they fall asleep—which, for anyone who's done that, is not particularly conducive. It sounds warm and still, but it's definitely not still. And often inside it's not very warm.

So play with it. Play with what works. That's what we're looking for here, just like we've been talking about through the retreat as well.

Sometimes when I run natural awareness courses where people zoom in or come to the meditation center once a week and then the rest of the time they're in their everyday life, what we do in the first session is have people work in pairs to set up a kind of daily life retreat structure for themselves that they're going to integrate into everyday life. The idea is that it's not adding in anything. It's not adding extra pressure to your day.

What I get people to do is identify three activities in daily life that are going to become their meditation sessions for the duration of the course. The three activities you pick are really up to you, and it depends what you want to focus on and what you think will work for you. They can range from a formal session, like a half-hour sit, through to something much simpler. I do suggest at least one of them is a formal period, which I define as a period of time where the only purpose is to be aware, to meditate. It doesn't matter really what you're doing with your body.

So a formal practice, and then two others. At the more conducive-for-meditation end of the scale would be an activity that doesn't require interpersonal communication, isn't on a screen, involves some mundane and repetitive movement with the body, and not much cognitive work. It could be taking the dog for a walk or unpacking the dishwasher, that kind of thing.

But then you can move right up to the other end of the spectrum and select an activity that's much more challenging, if you feel like that's where you want to stretch yourself. We did that speaking and listening activity yesterday. Maybe it's picking a particular communication that you have each day and bringing awareness to that. Maybe it's the first ten minutes that you open your computer in the morning, when you're checking your emails. You can be infinitely creative with it, and you tailor it to how it can both support your connection with awareness of the present and also how it can stretch you and work on your gaps.

Be creative with the supports. Stick a Vicks inhaler up your nose if that works. Use mindfulness bells. Sometimes—I think I've experimented with this, and sometimes people say this—instead of a particular activity, it could be a particular time of day.

Maybe a bell goes off and forty-five minutes later there's another bell, and it's this time in the morning where you're just kind of pottering around your house. That could be a time instead of a specific activity.

The importance of reviewing your practice—I can't emphasize enough. We don't want to be too entangled in conceptual analysis while we're practicing, but reviewing how it's going is another part of remembering the practice. It helps to inspire us and it helps us to clarify what's going on in our practice and where the gaps are. So again, you can put something in place to remind you. It could be that a little bell goes off around the time you go to bed that just reminds you to reflect on the practice. This is not about judging what you didn't do. It's just about remembering the importance of this project and having that intention carry you into the next day. Journaling, if journaling is helpful.

The important thing is that however you practice in everyday life, it is enjoyable. It needs to be enjoyable. That's what will make it sustainable. So I really encourage you to be creative with daily practice. The only daily life practice that's not valuable is feeling guilty about not practicing.

A couple of other things I want to mention. I think I've used this phrase a couple of times through the retreat: that really this practice opens us up so that we can invite in everything—all of who we are, all of how we are—so that we can use the chaos and messiness of life as the grounds for practice.

Dukkha—unsatisfactoriness, pain, suffering—as it manifests in our everyday lives can be a great support for the practice. It can be like a mindfulness bell. We can develop a sensitivity to the movements of the heart and a sensitivity for when suffering is arising that increases our curiosity and the quality of our awareness.

I started to notice the pattern that I had with anxiety. It might be that some incident triggered it—sometimes it doesn't even seem like an incident triggered it at all. But something might happen that triggers anxiety, which is essentially the energy of fear. The flavour of anxiety and its associated storyline is one of being unsafe. Some aspect of my life feels unsafe or has made me feel unsafe.

So this gets triggered and there's this feeling of lack of safety—the lack of reliability of life, right? And then what happens is that the mind constructs a story to fit the emotion. I've now learned that when there's that feeling in the heart, it's important just to notice it and recognise it. And to know that if there is a movement where the heart

reaches out and grabs onto one aspect of my life, then of course the narrative is going to be that that aspect of my life is unreliable and unsafe—whatever it is, whether it's something to do with my job or my kids or anything else.

Dukkha can be like a mindfulness bell that alerts us: "Oh yeah, got to pay real close attention to what's going on."

It's also important to notice that just because we make unskillful choices doesn't mean that we're not practicing. We can be aware of unskillful choices while we're making them. Okay, it might be slightly disappointing to see ourselves making those same unskillful choices for the millionth time, but it's not wasted. The awareness of it unfolding is never wasted. It's gathering data—gathering data for the mind, for it to finally put together and understand.

One final thing I'll mention is about devices, because these are such a difficult feature of our lives today. Sometimes people say, "That sounds good, but what about working on a screen? When I'm using a screen, how can I possibly be aware?" And of course, like interpersonal communication, this is one of the really difficult areas. But again, it doesn't mean we can't play with it.

If tuning into awareness of seeing is something that works for you, this can be incredibly helpful when we're on screens, because of course seeing is the primary sensory activity that's going on. We can be aware that we are looking at the screen. We bring that in when we remember, we bring it in at the beginning, and okay, we forget. But we're strengthening the capacity to be aware.

Being aware of body can also be very useful—being aware that there actually is a body here that's interacting with the screen, because so often we're completely oblivious to that. And also being aware of the heart. If I'm scrolling the news, when is enough? It's pretty full on, checking out the news. So when is enough? Tuning into: "Actually, that's enough now." Or the same with scrolling Facebook. When is the awareness really just getting sucked into mindless activity? So tuning into the heart—and again, just not having expectations, but also not assuming that because it's a difficult activity I just won't go there. You play around the edges. When doing computer work, just checking in occasionally: is the body relaxed or is there tension?

Gradually, over time, no moment of awareness is ever wasted. Because every moment of awareness is seeing—you know, we were talking about insight the other night—seeing and understanding. Every moment of awareness is seeing, because we're coming back to direct experience and we're seeing it. So it's gathering the data, gathering the data, so that eventually the understanding emerges.

And it's also exposing the citta, the heart-mind, to a more wholesome state of being, so that the citta will start to naturally choose that more wholesome state of being in future moments. A moment of awareness that I've remembered by tapping the light switch or checking in with the body while I'm on the computer will condition a natural arising moment of awareness in the future.

I think that's all I've got to say. Patrick, do you want to add to that?

Sadhu. Sadhu. Sadhu.

In that case, any questions? It can get a bit much when you get a whole load of ideas for the practice.

"Do you recommend incorporating some metta somewhere along the line?" someone asked. "I used to keep a gratitude diary, and I found that really good, but of course, like everything else, it fell by the wayside."

Metta is fantastic. If you have a connection with metta practice, it's wonderful for nourishing the heart. And the underlying theme of what I've been saying is that you want to find a way to nourish the heart, because that is what will inspire you to sustain a connection to the practice.

We don't explicitly teach metta in these retreats. In the way that Patrick and I practice, well, perhaps I'll speak for myself. Everyone knows I'm full of metta. I actually use metta as a meditation object quite a lot, but I use it when it arises spontaneously. That's why I tend not to teach it—I haven't come to it through an explicit framework or technique. But it's a great practice for nourishing the heart, absolutely.

The things I've mentioned are examples, but the underlying message is this: be creative and trust what you know about your own practice. Do whatever inspires you to stay connected to the practice, to stay connected to the present moment. And if the invitation to consider so many things is overwhelming, then trust that knowing in yourself that says, "I need to keep it simple." Choose one thing you know works and stick with it.

But remain open. If down the track it's not working—and you know it's not working because you're experiencing more guilt about not doing the practice than actually doing it—then choose one new thing and go with that.

"Because sometimes you can get just so many options," someone reflected. "Recently I thought I should be doing the five remembrances, but it's very hard to fit everything in."

Absolutely. If the choices are overwhelming you, choose one thing at a time and practice it. Commit yourself to it, but only as long as it's inspiring you to stay committed to your practice. When it stops inspiring you, choose one other thing and commit yourself to that.

Another question arose. "I apologise because I asked you this in my interview and I've forgotten the answer. I should take my notebook with me. Something external will come in, completely out of my control, and it will niggle me. And I'll be lost. I will. I'll watch myself get lost. I've watched myself think, 'I'm out of control, I can't even grab it.' In that moment, what do I do? Patrick suggested yesterday that I try to feel into it, but I can't find that in that moment because I'm stuck in anxiety."

When life throws its biggest challenges at us and we are completely overwhelmed with feeling, that is of course the most difficult moment to have any expectation that we're going to maintain continuity of awareness. It doesn't mean we can't try, but the key thing about our everyday practice is that the more we practice in a relaxed and gentle way when circumstances are not so extreme, the easier it's going to be when we meet extreme moments.

There are times when what life throws at us, and our reactions to those things, are so extreme that we intuitively know what we need right now is whatever it takes to soothe the heart. That doesn't mean we can't sometimes try to bring the practice into extreme situations, but be gentle on yourselves. Don't expect it to be easy.

When we do practice in the midst of extreme circumstances, the same principles apply that we've been working with on retreat. We're not interested in the storyline. We're interested in what's going on in the body and in the heart. So we don't worry about the storyline—we come back to the body and find what's happening here. What are the physical sensations? What are the feelings? Can we stay with the raw energy of the feeling?

But if we can't, because it's just too overwhelming, then that's fine. We do what we need to do to soothe ourselves, and we continue to practice in less extreme situations.

And that will gradually, over time, increase our capacity to be with more and more challenging feelings.

"That's really helpful, especially that part about having more compassion for myself in those moments. Not, for lack of a better word, beating myself up and feeling guilty —'How many more treats do you need to get over that one?' But yes, for me it's that beautiful piece around self-compassion. Soothing was a perfect word."

Yes, and there's nothing less soothing than being in a really extreme state, being very, very upset by something, and then a little voice in the back of your mind is going, "You can't even meditate now, you know." That's not soothing. That is unskillful attitude.

"When I go home, when I go back to work, one of the things I'll need to remember is that the people at home and the people at work haven't been on retreat. They've stored up a lot of things that they want to ask me and talk with me about. And it may be that I'll be less reactive. Any hints for not being insufferable?"

One thing you could try is if someone's being caught up in something, you glare at them and you say, "Are you aware in that now? I find this great peace and tranquility."

I think basically you've just got to put up with it. There's so much more to work with. It's true, though, that if you're a meditator, you're part of a cultural minority. So you've just got to get used to dealing with people who are on a whole different framework.

I was reminded of this years and years ago. I went to a party being held by my brother, and one of his old mates was there. It was kind of rumoured among my brother's mates that I was some kind of guru. This sort of comes up at the party, and he says, "So you meditate, do you?" I said, "Yeah." "Why do you do that?"

And I said, "Because of dukkha."

"What, what?"

"Because of pain. I'm in pain, and everybody's in pain."

And he said, "I'm not. I don't have any pain. I've got no problem." And he hurried off.

To me, it illustrated the gap. There's this part of me that can never be shown. And that part of me is actually the most important part. But I want to maintain these connections. And so it's almost like I slide in. I'm an actor.

Actually, I'll remind my brother—I'm going to visit him after this. The second time he was married, we went out for bucks night. He and his old mates and me. And we met up at this club or something in the city, in Sydney. I came downstairs, and there they all were. Everyone had a glass of beer, and they were all shouting at each other and sloshing beer. And I'm standing there thinking, "Oh my God, what do I do? How am I going to survive this?" So I grabbed a glass of beer and started shouting. And I fit right in. Then after a few hours I was so exhausted I went back home.

But you adapt. You don't have to—the self is an actor, and we're playing different roles. And this is, I think, one thing that you start to recognise with the understanding of not-self: everybody's playing roles. Some people don't know that they're playing roles. But we do, because we can see it. So you play the role which is appropriate to that particular context. At least that's what I do. I try to do.

"That's perfect, because what I've noticed is other people can make me forget, and I get pulled into it."

Yes. That is very common.

And I've also noticed that people who are practicing awareness in the moment seem a bit not present to me.

Because they're playing a role. They're playing the role of the meditator.

Yeah. And I don't like that. There are few things more irritating than the good Buddhist.

Okay. And we're done.

CHAPTER 99

Vipassanā Meditation: An Introduction to Insight Meditation Practice

Patrick Kearney · 42 min

In this illuminating conversation, Patrick Kearney—a meditation teacher trained in the Mahāsī Sayādaw lineage of Burma—offers a comprehensive introduction to vipassanā (insight) meditation. He explains the fundamental distinction between samatha (serenity) and vipassanā practice: while samatha aims at absorption into a single meditation object, vipassanā cultivates precise awareness of change and impermanence within experience. Kearney describes how the Mahāsī method uses a 'grounding object' (mūla ārammaṇa) while also making distractions themselves into meditation objects, revealing the three characteristics of existence: anicca (impermanence), dukkha (suffering), and anattā (not-self).

The discussion explores core Buddhist concepts including the six sense bases (the five physical senses plus mind as a sixth sensitivity), the five aggregates (khandhas) of clinging—body, feeling, perception, saṅkhāras, and consciousness—and how insight practice reveals the construction of self as an ongoing project rather than a fixed entity. Kearney draws on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta to explain how this practice is not object-specific but can use any aspect of body or mind as its focus.

For practitioners, Kearney offers practical guidance on working with posture, physical tension, and emotional disturbance. He emphasizes the counterintuitive nature of progress in insight meditation—recognizing distraction is itself a sign of developing mindfulness. The conversation also addresses the contemporary secular mindfulness movement, acknowledging that while it may lack technical precision, it serves as a valuable gateway that brings many practitioners to deeper Buddhist practice.

Welcome to Treasure Mountain, the podcast that inspires and guides us to find the treasure within human experience. I'm your host, Sol Hanna.

In some recent episodes of Treasure Mountain Podcast, we've heard about the importance of samatha practice—that is, meditation with the purpose of developing stillness and tranquility of mind. But what about vipassanā, insight meditation? Some of my listeners have contacted me and asked me this very question. The vipassanā meditation movement has had a huge impact upon meditation practice both East and West, and has shaped modern understandings of what meditation is about and for. So what is vipassanā meditation? What is its heritage? What is its basis within Buddhism, and how does it work?

To answer these questions and more, we have as our guest today Patrick Kearney. Patrick has practiced mindfulness meditation since 1977. At that time, there was little or no Buddhist meditation training available in Australia, so he spent years traveling in Asia and the USA, working with teachers from different Buddhist traditions to learn the craft of meditation practice. Most of his training has been in the insight meditation lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, which included several years as a Buddhist monk. His main teachers were Sayadaw U Pandita and John Hale. He's also trained in the Diamond Sangha lineage of Zen, where his teachers have been Robert Aitken Roshi and Paul Maloney Roshi.

Patrick has been a full-time teacher of mindfulness meditation for over twenty years. He conducts residential and online retreats, workshops, and seminars. He has studied early Buddhism at postgraduate levels and has a particular interest in the original teachings of the Buddha before the invention of Buddhism. This allows him to bring the radical insights of the Buddha to our contemporary situation. He sees meditation as a physical practice that reconnects us with the felt world of our senses, allowing us to live our lives directly rather than through the cling wrap of our habitual thinking.

I'm really pleased that Patrick has taken the time to join us on the podcast today, and I want to thank all our listeners for joining us for this episode of Treasure Mountain Podcast as we seek for the treasure within human experience.

Welcome to Treasure Mountain, Patrick. How are you today?

I'm well, thank you.

I'm really pleased that you've taken the time to join us and share your experience and help our listeners understand more about vipassanā meditation. A great place for us to start is at the beginning. Could you define for us what is meant by vipassanā meditation, or what we sometimes call insight meditation?

When the Buddha spoke about meditation, one of the basic dyads he used was serenity and insight—samatha and vipassanā. This is partly about purpose. Why does one undertake a meditation practice? Is the purpose to develop serenity, or is the purpose to develop insight? These are not mutually exclusive, obviously, and in fact you can't develop insight without a foundation of serenity. But it does indicate a basic purpose and therefore a basic direction.

In one very interesting discourse, the Buddha talks about four kinds of people. He says some people develop internal serenity of mind but not a higher understanding of insight into dhamma—in other words, insight. Some people develop insight but not internal serenity of mind. Some people develop neither, and some people develop both.

Clearly, what he wants is for people to develop both. So insight and serenity are qualities that exist in any practice, but you can have some practices that are more oriented towards serenity and some practices that are more oriented towards insight.

Just a few weeks back, we had Peter Harvey from the Samatha Trust as a guest, and he was talking about samatha meditation. How would you say that vipassanā meditation is distinct from samatha meditation?

The insight tradition that I'm familiar with is that of Mahasi Sayadaw, and the way he structures the practice is to lead the student to perceive change. This is anicca saññā, the perception of impermanence or of change, because for the Buddha this is the gateway into insight.

My understanding of serenity is that one absorbs into a single meditation object. Let's say, for example, breathing—a classic meditation object. If I'm using breathing for serenity purposes, all I want to do is absorb into the experience of breathing. If I'm practicing for insight, I want to do that, and I also want to see the changing characteristics of the breathing. This will change my relationship to the meditation object.

For example, I'll be interested in how the experience of breathing changes, and this can be right down to the very elemental level. Is the in-breath longer than the out-breath, or was the out-breath longer than the in-breath? Can I see the beginning and the end of the in-breath? Can I see the beginning and the end of the out-breath?

Is there a gap? What does the mind do during the gap? If I'm distracted, am I more likely to be distracted on the inhalation or the exhalation? And so on.

So you notice in that relationship with the meditation object, it tends to be more precise. There's a bias towards precision, but it's very interested in seeing the differences. My understanding of serenity is that if I'm following the breathing simply to absorb in it, I'm not looking for the differences between in-breath and out-breath. I'm not looking for the differences between the breathing as it presents now and as it presents five minutes later. But if I'm practicing for insight, I am interested in all of these differences.

Now, is it just when you do insight meditation, is it just using the breath? Or for instance, I've heard you can do like sweeping through the body. Are there any other bases upon which insight meditation might be developed?

Yes, I talk about breathing because it's so common. I call it the generic meditation object. But anything at all—this is a fundamental principle of Satipaṭṭhāna, which is what we translate as insight meditation or mindfulness meditation. The thing about Satipaṭṭhāna as an approach to practice is that one of its characteristics is that it is not object specific.

Let's go back to breathing. If you're doing ānāpānasati, mindfulness of in and out breathing, it is object specific. If you're not following the breathing, you're not doing it. But if you're doing Satipaṭṭhāna, the meditation object can be any aspect of body or mind. It's not limited. So anything at all.

In the case of sweeping the body, that's a way of using body sensation in such a way that you see change. That's what you're doing. The whole thing is deliberately designed that way. Mahasi Sayadaw, when he talks about what insight meditation is, sometimes says insight meditation is to be directly aware of whatever arises in the six senses as it arises. So, everything. And sometimes he says it's to be directly aware of the five aggregates associated with clinging, which in the classical Theravāda sense is another way of saying everything—but here, specifically, anything that we identify with. So again, anything.

Can I stop you just for a very brief moment to clarify a point there? Some of our listeners might not have heard of this idea of the six senses. Of course, in the Western education system, we learn about five. So what are those, and what in brief are the five aggregates of clinging as well?

I'll start with the six senses. The Buddha, what he's interested in is experience—the nature of human experience. In European philosophical terms, you could call him a radical empiricist, or you could call him a phenomenologist. He's interested only in experience, which means he's interested in what comes through the senses. And for him, the senses are sensitivities—sensitivity to particular forms of data.

If you consider the body, there are two very small parts of the body that are sensitive to light. We call them the eyes. They register light, but they don't register sound, for example. The two parts of the body that register sound are sensitive to sound, and so on and so forth. So the senses are sensitivities that pick up particular forms of data.

Mind is a sensitivity. It's sensitive to particular forms of data—for example, thoughts, perceptions, fantasies, desires, aversions, and so on. So mind is a sense, a sensitivity, along with the physical five. Hence six senses. And the sixth sense is not something spooky. It's just the fact that mind is a sensitivity. That's how it operates.

Yeah, subjectively, that's what we experience—five external senses and the mind.

Yes. And all that the Buddha is interested in is what we subjectively experience. He's not interested in anything else. That's one of the reasons why he rejects theories of self, because he says, well, you don't actually directly experience a self.

So he just won't go there. He talks about any given experience as not self, and therefore says to forget about self. He's not really saying there isn't a self—he's just not joining the debate. He's saying, look, if there is one, you can't experience it, so let's forget about it.

That's the same reason why there's no creator God in Buddhism. It's not because he says there isn't one. He says that if there's a creator God, and if we are part of creation, then by our very nature we cannot step out of creation, and so we cannot directly experience a creator God. So let's not bother even talking about it. It's beside the point—absolutely beside the point. He's only interested in the nature of experience. He's a radical empiricist. He refuses to make any exceptions.

So if you use the six senses as your meditation object, it's code for anything at all in human experience.

And then we have the five aggregates—this is the pañca upādāna khandha. The pañca khandha are the five aggregates; the pañca upādāna khandha are the five aggregates appropriated. Upādāna is normally translated as clinging, so these are the five aggregates associated with clinging. But what it really means is that the five aggregates are five categories of experience—categories that we appropriate to say, "This is me."

What does the term "aggregates" really mean?

The word is khandha, which has a variety of meanings. It can mean a great mass of things, a collection, a pile. Stephen Batchelor translates it as "bundle" because he links it with the Buddha's imagery of fire.

Let's say you're on the beach and you build a sandcastle. The sandcastle is a single thing, but it's an aggregate—a pile of sand. The use of the term aggregate suggests that what's holding it all together isn't all that strong. The sandcastle is sitting on a beach, so anything that can be categorized as sand is also part of the aggregate. The term can be applied in different ways, but in all cases it's a collection of particular types of experience.

So there are five aggregates, five categories of experience that we use as raw materials to construct a self. These are body, feeling, perception, saṅkhāras (constructions or formations), and awareness. These are the raw materials we use to construct a self, like we use sand to construct a sandcastle.

Is there emphasis in Vipassana on observing these khandhas?

Yes. As I said, Mahasi himself, in his popular writings, sometimes says that what you do is track the six senses, and sometimes he says what you do is track the five aggregates associated with clinging. In both cases, he's opening things out. And in both cases, he's interested in how we construct experience—including how we construct the self.

For the Buddha, self is a construction project, but one that's never completed—rather like an Australian builder. I'm being cynical here because we've had a lot of builders at our place. It's an ongoing construction project.

What happens in insight meditation is that you see yourself constructing yourself. When you see that, you cannot believe in the independent existence of the self, because here you are, busily constructing it. And if you're busy constructing it and it's causing you pain, you think, hmm, maybe I could stop doing this.

So you're drawing a connection between the construction of self and dukkha—suffering, one of the other universal characteristics?

That's right.

Often we don't see that connection. So part of what insight meditation is trying to do is to help us see it. And that's actually in the first truth. When the Buddha is defining dukkha, he says, "In summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha."

The purpose of the practice is to take you into change—this emphasis on the way things change—and take you into dukkha, and therefore take you into not-self. The three characteristics are all bound up with each other. In fact, strictly speaking, according to the tradition, insight meditation begins when the meditation object becomes one or more of the three characteristics. Until then, you're really doing a preliminary serenity practice, but one that's aimed at uncovering the three characteristics.

What are the expected long-term effects of regular Vipassanā practice? If one is practicing every single day for a number of months or years, how might one change as a result?

Well, one thing is you would develop more serenity, because as you practice the discipline of the practice, there is a calming down effect that takes place. But what you would expect is to have a greater understanding of how your own mind works, and therefore a greater understanding about how other people's minds work, because

everybody's minds work in the same way. From that, you would expect to see greater empathy, and you would expect to see greater equanimity in one's ordinary life. If it's working, that's what you should see.

But it takes time for these things to emerge. And they can emerge, and it can take more time for them to be noticed. It's one of the paradoxes of the meditation practice. Because meditation is a natural activity, it can be difficult to see a cause and effect relationship between what's happening in your life and the meditation practice.

Let's say I take up meditation to handle stress, which is a very common motivation. Let's say that before I take up meditation, I've had another practice to handle stress. And this practice involves a certain form of alcohol kept in the fridge. I come home from work, I bring out the bottle, I pour a glass, I drink the glass, and I feel better. I drink another glass and I feel even better. There's a clear cause and effect relationship—I know why I'm feeling better. It's because I'm consuming this substance, and it's clear because it's artificial.

But let's say I instead take up meditation practice. It's a natural process. And what can happen—it's not at all unusual—is that someone takes up meditation because they feel really bad. Then after some time, maybe a few months, they feel, "You know, I used to feel bad, but I feel okay now. So why am I keeping up the meditation practice?" So they drop it. They continue to feel good. And then three months later, they're thinking, "You know, I'm not feeling so good anymore. I wonder why." And then maybe the penny drops. But there's no obvious cause and effect relationship because it's natural. And also perhaps it's happening over a longer period of time.

It takes time. That's the other thing. If you're looking for a quick fix, don't bother with meditation.

I've noticed this even in myself—your motivation to practice is often stronger when there's a bit of suffering. Then you practice and you feel better. And then all of a sudden, you just kind of let go of the practice a little bit. It's something that's pretty common.

What are some of the challenges that beginners might face if they're starting a Vipassanā meditation on a regular basis? What kind of problems might they encounter, and what are some ways they might overcome them?

A common set of problems have to do with the body. Posture is important. In fact, the four postures—moving, standing, sitting, lying down—are one of the sections of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta in which the Buddha hands out the meditation objects. So posture is

really important in the broad sense. This goes back to the Indian yoga tradition. In Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras, Patañjali says regarding āsana, posture: "Posture is steady and comfortable." If you're going to settle the mind, you need to settle the body.

And if you're going to settle the body, you need to be either still, or if you are moving, moving pretty rhythmically—and to be able to do that over a period of time. So the posture must be steady in that sense, but it also needs to be comfortable. Because if you're constantly bothered by physical pain and restlessness and distress, it's going to be much harder.

Now, that is a big barrier in today's world. Most people are carrying a huge amount of physical tension, so you need to work through that. Usually, for a lot of people, some kind of body work is recommended—yoga or some such modality—and that helps a great deal.

The next barrier is the restlessness of the mind and the disturbance of the emotions. This varies from person to person hugely, but it takes a great deal of patience. You need to be able to settle awareness and then simply watch your dramas unfold. And again, this brings us back to the body, because the stability and the frame that you have is body. So if you can settle into body in any given posture at all—any posture—over a period of time, and then just watch and feel what happens, then you gradually work your way through these more gross levels of disturbance.

Question: You mentioned that it's pretty common, especially for beginners, to have emotional disturbance. I imagine you might be referring to strong craving arising, or perhaps traumatic or emotional experiences from the past coming up in meditation. Because we identify with them, they feel very close to us, and when they arise in the mind, we feel very involved with them—they have strong emotions attached. Are you saying that one way to work through this is to come back to awareness of the body?

Well, here we come to the details of the method, the craft. Different methods come out of different lineages, and they have different answers, different approaches to this.

In Mahasi's approach, first of all he talks about what in Pali he calls the *mūla ārammaṇa*, the root object. His English-speaking Burmese disciples translated that as "primary object." I prefer to translate it as "grounding object." You need something you can settle awareness into—a home base. You spend, particularly in the early stages, a lot of time settling into this grounding object, being distracted, coming back, being distracted, coming back, being distracted, coming back, endlessly. The same as in serenity practice.

Then Mahasi talks about what could be called the secondary object. At some point we're distracted—in other words, the awareness is taken from where we want it to be, the grounding object, and it's as it were kidnapped, and we find ourselves somewhere else. Usually this is in thinking, or physical pain, or emotional disturbance. As soon as we realize that this has happened, that becomes the meditation object. The physical sensation, the physical pain, the emotional disturbance, the thought becomes the meditation object. Be directly aware, and then come back to the grounding object.

So instead of a simple "come back endlessly to the grounding object"—which is my understanding of how serenity would work—once you start to get into it, you start to make your distractions your meditation object. This is where the craft of the practice comes in, because that can be very challenging and very difficult. How do you do that? How do you make your thought a meditation object? How do you make your emotion a meditation object? This is not immediately obvious. And this is where training with a teacher is important, where learning the craft becomes very important, and where it can become quite counterintuitive.

Question: Obviously there's more to the method than we can cover in a short interview like this. If someone listening was interested in trying out insight meditation, what advice would you offer them for getting started?

Find someone who teaches insight meditation—that's the obvious one. There are a fair few people around, and there are different methods, different lineages. That's a good place to start. But I would say basically: be interested in the fact of change. This is what I tell all my students. Get interested in change.

And if you want change handed to you on a plate, get interested in distraction. Become interested in the fact that you get distracted. As opposed to, say, feeling upset or averse to the fact that you are distracted, you actually start to say, "Okay, what's going on here with this distraction?"

If when you realize you're distracted, you get upset about it and criticize yourself, or criticize the method, and then hurtle back to the grounding object as soon as you can—basically, you've just wasted a perfectly good distraction. What you've just been shown is change. And you've also, in all probability, been shown not-self, because did you choose that distraction, or did it just arise because of conditions?

So you get to know, you're directly aware—or in Mahasi's language, you note the distraction. It becomes the meditation object, only briefly, particularly in the beginning, only briefly, and then back to the grounding object. But you don't just dismiss the distractions. You recognize it, you accept it, you're aware of it, and then you go back to the grounding object.

And I also wanted to ask, as a meditation teacher yourself, apart from what you just mentioned, how would you start out teaching beginners? What are the main points you would hit upon in, say, a beginner's meditation course, just as an overview?

Whenever I teach a retreat—mostly I teach retreats—I start off with playing around with awareness itself, getting a sense of what awareness is. And then I move on to mindfulness. Now, mindfulness I define as the felt continuity of awareness.

Usually I start off with this exercise. I say, "Okay, we're going to start with a very technical meditation practice. We're going to hold our hands together and feel our hands." Question: Can you feel your hands? Answer: Yes. That's awareness. Question: Are you making any particular effort to feel your hands? Answer, for most people: No. It's just happening. That's awareness. It's just happening. Something is present to you, and it's just happening.

And then we do exactly the same exercise, but for three or four or five minutes. Then I ask them, "Were there any gaps in your awareness of your hands over that period of time?" And almost invariably, the answer is yes. "Was there any effort involved in maintaining continuity of awareness?" Most people say yes.

So why is it that I'm aware of the touch of my hands naturally and without any effort, but if I have to maintain that awareness over a period of time, suddenly it becomes difficult? Well, that's the difference between awareness and mindfulness. Mindfulness is maintaining continuity of awareness over a period of time. And to do that, the first thing we have to notice is the discontinuity—to recognize that my awareness actually isn't continuous at all. There are always gaps.

That must be very hard to pick up on.

Well, it is. When I do that exercise, I used to do a version where I'd say, "Okay, feel the touch of your hands for three minutes. And as soon as you recognize that you've lost the touch of your hands, raise your hand." Now, we're doing this in a room, so this is, you know, the demand to be publicly humiliated. And what is really interesting is that usually the first people to raise their hands are the most experienced meditators.

Why? Because they're sensitive to the discontinuity of awareness.

Because their mindfulness is actually better. They've been working on it. They've been practicing. So it's quite counterintuitive in some ways. One of the things that makes insight meditation tricky is that it is, on occasion, completely counterintuitive. To be distracted but aware of your distraction is a sign of progress.

I'd like to go off on a bit of a different tangent and ask you about mindfulness, since that's what we're discussing. Mindfulness is the common feature regardless of what type of meditation you're teaching—if it has any integrity at all, mindfulness is going to be a key element. It's the seventh factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. I've asked recent guests about their impressions and perceptions of what's going on in the West now, because there's a lot of talk about mindfulness. While it originated within Buddhist meditation practice, it's now been stripped of its original context. There are many different mindfulness-based courses available, and of course apps on your phone meant to train mindfulness. What's your impression of this whole explosion of mindfulness in society? What are the positives and negatives, and is it missing anything?

Certainly it's missing the Buddha's understanding of mindfulness—what he called sati, in Sanskrit smriti. When mindfulness became fashionable with Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction, or MBSR, he used mindfulness as a kind of catch-all word to describe the meditation practice he was presenting. He said this in his writings. So he used the term mindfulness rather vaguely, and that vagueness has stuck. The Buddha is very precise in the way he uses his terms, so from a traditional Buddhist perspective, the secular mindfulness movement is hopelessly confused and vague about the actual meanings of the terms they use.

But on the other hand, so what? Mindfulness-based stress reduction and other modalities—they work. They relieve suffering. And they speak to contemporary secular audiences in ways those audiences can appreciate. So who cares?

The main thing is meditation. This is what's radical, what is possibly revolutionary for our culture. In Western culture, we've never developed, as part of normal everyday life, a sense of what we call meditation and the craft and skill involved in that. In the Christian tradition, it's quite spotty. You do find it, but often the yogis—the people who are practicing—are low status and frequently oppressed, because they come up with ideas and practices disapproved of by the guardians of orthodoxy. In the Indian traditions, however, the yogis are the authority. So the Indians developed a very sophisticated understanding of what happens when one meditates or contemplates.

What's happening today is that perhaps for the first time, Western culture is starting to recognize that there is such a thing as what the Buddhists call meditation, that it is a skill, a craft. You can learn it. You can get good at it. And if you do that, there are signi-

ficant benefits. This is revolutionary. So the fact that the secular approaches are a bit spotty around the edges when it comes to technicalities is neither here nor there. It's wonderful that people are interested at all.

And of course, so many people who get started with these secular varieties of mindfulness—I meet them when they turn up at a retreat because they want to go deeper.

That's a good point, actually. That's a very good point. I think that was the original intent of people like Jon Kabat-Zinn—to make it more accessible outside of a religious context, in a secular setting, so that more people would practice. From a Buddhist point of view, it's not really a big deal. We don't need to insist upon a specifically religious context in order to do mindfulness. For us, there isn't that duality. It's simply a matter of developing the mind in this way. It's very useful and beneficial.

I really appreciate that you've taken the time to come on the show and talk to us about Vipassana meditation. I feel like we've just scratched the surface. There seems like there's a lot more to explore. Would you recommend that if someone wants to start out with meditation, should they go straight on to a retreat? Or would you say it's better to do a weekly course for a few weeks and then perhaps later down the track do a retreat? What are your thoughts on that?

Probably better to join a meditation group and just dip into it. You want a group where there are some experienced people who can help you out, give you the basics, and then start to play with it and check it out rather than dive immediately into a retreat. And then when you're ready, you can consider a retreat.

But one thing I would say is that sometimes what people will do if they want to attend their first retreat, they'll pick a brief retreat—two or three or four days—thinking this will be easier. But actually it's harder because those are the hardest days. You're just beginning to get a sense of what's going on, and then it's time to go home.

Yes, I know what you mean. I've always found that on retreat, day two and day three are the hardest. After that, it gets easier. So perhaps that's useful advice for those considering their first retreat.

Thank you very much, Patrick, for coming on the show. I really appreciate it, and all the very best for the future.

Thank you. Thank you for the invitation.

CHAPTER 100

Practising for Insight - with Patrick Kearney

Patrick Kearney · 1h15

> *In this illuminating talk, Patrick Kearney introduces the practice of insight meditation (vipassanā) as taught in the Mahāsī Sayādaw lineage of Burma. Drawing on over four decades of practice and his training under Sayādaw U Paṇḍita and John Hale, Kearney explains the fundamental distinction between direct first-hand experience (paramattha or 'ultimate reality') and second-hand conceptual experience ('conventional reality'). He emphasises that the practice of 'noting' — directly aware-ing whatever is happening — trains practitioners to ground perception in the world of directly experienced events (dhammas), moving beyond habitual judgments conditioned by the past.*
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> *Kearney explores how this direct awareness reveals the three characteristics: anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), and anattā (not-self). He references the Uppāda Sutta (AN 3.136), examining the Buddha's teaching that 'all constructions are impermanent, all constructions are dukkha, all dhammas are not-self.' The talk addresses practical challenges practitioners face, including the tendency to judge meditation experiences rather than simply observe them, and the confusion between labeling and genuine noting practice.*
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> *The session concludes with a provocative paradox: if insight meditation trains us to drop concepts and stay with direct experience, yet the three characteristics themselves appear as concepts, how do we resolve this tension? Kearney promises to explore this paradox in a follow-up talk, inviting practitioners to investigate this question in their own meditation. Along the way, he addresses questions about the relationship between thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, the nature of māna (conceit/measurement) as fundamental to selfhood, and the connection between rebirth and anattā.*

Settling awareness in your body, feeling your body. You're listening or hearing the sounds—in this case the sound of the bell, the sound of my voice. You can see, unless you've got your eyes closed. And you can feel touch.

So let's say you're sitting in a chair. You can feel the contact of your feet on the floor perhaps. You can feel where your body is supported at the base of the body. If your chair has a back, you can feel the support at the back. So settle your awareness in these different sensations and just feel your body.

You notice the simplicity of what we're doing? Just feel what is happening. As you're feeling your body you might feel sensations, you might also feel the movements of your breathing. You don't need to give anything any particular importance, but just feel whatever is happening.

And of course, there's also thought buzzing about.

You might be telling yourself stories. Just let them go and come back to your body. Feel your body. Breathe and relax. Particularly on your exhalation, you might just relax. There's nothing to do. Just relax. And as you relax, feel your body. When thinking pops up, just notice that you are thinking, and come back to your body.

So try again and just listen. Notice how the sound comes and goes. It appears out of nowhere. It's present. And it disappears.

Have you noticed that your body's sensations do the same thing? They appear, they do their thing, and then they disappear. You might notice that your thoughts are doing the same thing. They appear, they do their thing, and they disappear. Just notice how things are coming and going, appearing and disappearing.

Did your attention wander off? What's happening now? You don't need to get anywhere. You just have to remember what's happening now. It could be sensation, could be thought, could be sound. It doesn't matter. But what's happening now? What is clear now? What is obvious now?

Have you been distracted? What's happening now? And is what's happening now appearing? Is it doing its thing? And then is it disappearing? Notice those movements—how things come and go, including your attention that comes and goes. Don't fight it. Just be interested and watch it.

What is clear now? What is obvious now? Come back to your body. Feel sensation. Come back to your mind. Feel thinking. Notice how things appear, and then they dance, and then they cease. Watch them as they come and go.

So that was a kind of brief foray into what we could call an insight meditation style of practice. What I'd like to do now is launch into the talk, in which we explore practicing toward insight.

As you know, when the Buddha talks about meditation, he talks about meditation for serenity, *samatha*, and he talks about meditation for insight, *vipassanā*.

And you get a whole range of different techniques. Some specialise in one, some specialise in the other, some blend them. So here we're going to talk about practising for insight in the context of the Mahasi lineage.

We're talking about the teaching of Mahasi Sayadaw, a Burmese monk who lived from 1904 to 1982. He was one of the great revivers of insight meditation in Burma, and his lineage has spread throughout the world. He's quite influential. So we're going to talk about how he understands the practice.

If you read English translations of his writings—of course he never spoke in English, he taught in Burmese—but his students translated into English, and what they emphasized as the center of the practice is the idea of noting, to note the meditation object. Now here, "to note," despite what it might suggest in English, in Burmese what it means is to directly aware whatever is happening.

For example, if I ring the bell and I ask, "Can you hear the bell?" what I'm asking you is: did you directly aware the sound? Can you feel the sensations of your body? Are you directly awareing the sensations of your body? Are you being distracted by thought? Can you watch the thinking? Can you aware the thinking? This is noting—directly awareing whatever is happening.

Now, this is incredibly simple. The simplicity of it is actually what makes it so difficult. Did anybody suffer from what we could call distraction? Did that happen for anyone? Perhaps not for this group, but in other groups, people would say yes, it happened quite frequently. It's difficult to actually simply directly aware whatever is happening, and especially to do it over a period of time.

But why is it difficult? It's difficult because we tend to get lost in our concepts about our experience rather than being intimate with the experience itself. We tend to live in the world of concept. We tend to live in a world in which what we take to be real is what we think is real, or what we assume is real. But what we want to do is move into a world in which we're simply interested in how this experienced event right now presents to me, what it does.

For example, I made certain suggestions. Have you noticed that sensations appear, and they dance, they sit? Have you noticed that thoughts appear, they dance, they sit? Now obviously I'm prodding you in a certain direction. In other words, do we notice that things change? And they change in ways that are beyond our control. How many people would say, "I was in absolute control of my experience during this meditation

period"? Probably no one. We don't control experience. It changes, and it changes in ways that are out of our control. The Buddha is constantly talking about this in terms of anicca, dukkha, anattā.

When we are lost in the world of concept, what we tend to do is become lost in judgement about our experience. My experience is good, my experience is not good. My experience is satisfying, my experience is disappointing, and so on. But when we stay with what this experience does, with how we are experiencing it, noticing its dynamism, then we become interested in the flow of experience, the structure of experience. We don't care whether it's good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, meditative or not meditative, because we recognise these are just ideas, these are just concepts. What I'm interested in is what's actually happening.

Now this takes us to the world of what the Buddha calls the dhammas—in Pali, the dhammas, plural. Of course you've all heard the Pali word dhamma; the Sanskrit and English equivalent is dharma. This Pali word dhamma has a variety of meanings. The Buddha's dhamma means the Buddha's teaching. Sometimes you see the word in the plural: dhammas, depending on whether we're talking Pali or Sanskrit.

When he uses it in the plural, what he means is how we experience things. Mahasi Sayadaw, for example, tells us that what we think is real, what "reality" comes to us in two forms. First, what we directly experience firsthand through the senses—and for the Buddha, of course, this includes mind.

So what we directly experience firsthand, and what comes to us indirectly, secondhand, through concepts about what we directly experience.

If I have any thoughts about my meditation practice, do you notice they're *about*? They're not the actual practice. They're thoughts about—they're secondhand, one step removed.

Now, for the Buddha, firsthand direct experience is associated with understanding and insight. Experience made up of secondhand concepts is associated with delusion and the suffering that accompanies delusion. This is really central, particularly for meditation.

In Theravāda Buddhism, direct firsthand experience is called ultimate reality, *paramattha*—which I think is spelled exactly the same as the centre of Sydney, but I think this is just coincidence. So direct firsthand experience is called ultimate reality, while secondhand experience—in other words, concepts about what we directly experience—is called conventional reality.

When we are practising meditation, when we are noting, when we are directly aware of whatever is happening—and this is the basic discipline of the practice—we're training ourselves to ground our perception in ultimate reality, in the world of directly experienced events, in the world of *dhammas*. And this is the world where insight arises.

Is this making sense so far? We're getting very technical, talking about ultimate reality and conventional reality. But it does boil down to what we directly experience and concepts about what we directly experience. And our habit is to live in this second world of concepts about.

Let me give you an example. Have you ever had the experience of having done a meditation session—might be one session, might be a whole retreat—you finish it and you think, "Well, that was a complete waste of time, wasn't it?" Have you ever had that experience? Have you ever thought, "Well, that was hopeless"?

But you notice that that is a judgement *about* the experience. It's not the experience. The experience itself is something different. It could be the experience of restlessness. "My mind was too restless, I couldn't settle down, therefore it's no good." But the direct experience of restlessness is ultimate reality. That's exactly what we're looking for. And yet we don't take that seriously.

We assume the experience should be something—like it should be blissful and meditative and lots of *samādhi* and so on and so forth. We don't notice that all of that are just concepts. They're concepts about. They're not the actual experience. But we put all our importance into the concepts about, and we judge the direct experience insofar as whether or not it lives up to the standards set by the concepts.

But the concepts aren't important. What's important is the direct experience.

So the meditation practice involves the discipline of simply staying with the direct experience. That's all. Nothing more. That's the discipline. Very, very simple. Very, very difficult, because it goes against all our habits.

Now, what the Buddha is saying is that when we're practising for insight and we're just sticking with what is actually happening, we start to see change. We start to see *anicca*, impermanence. And we develop what the Buddha calls *anicca saññā*, the perception of impermanence, the perception of change. This is built into direct firsthand experience.

Normally, what we've been doing all our lives is training ourselves to live in the perception of permanence, of not-change. And what are we saying now? What you want to do now is actually develop the opposite perception—the perception of change.

Let's take a debate in contemporary Buddhism. Take, for example, a concept of something we have not directly encountered. Let's say rebirth. The Buddha teaches rebirth. Does this actually exist?

Is this doctrine true?

Now some people believe it, and they believe it because authoritative texts and teachers say it is true. Some people disbelieve it because it contradicts their belief in scientific materialism. And you find both of these positions being held by people who practice Buddhist meditation.

These two positions are diametrically opposed to each other. But what do they have in common? They're just concepts. Has anyone directly experienced rebirth? Now, some people claim to have memories of a previous life, but these memories are themselves concepts. They're creations of the mind. They may correspond to an actually encountered first-person experience that occurred in the past, or they may not. But basically, they're just concepts.

And what do concepts have in common? All concepts, including concepts that completely disagree with each other—they appear as permanent, as *nicca*. Now, when the Buddha talks about permanent, he doesn't necessarily mean lasting forever and ever. He means lasting unchanged over time. This is what *anicca*, not permanent, means for the Buddha: something that lasts unchanged over time, regardless of the unit of time.

Let's say, for example, that ten or twenty years ago I decided that the Buddha must be right—there is rebirth if he says so. Or let's say that ten or twenty years ago I decided that regardless of what the Buddha says, there is no rebirth; it's scientifically impossible. I've taken that position. Has this concept, and my relationship to this concept, changed over the past ten or twenty years? Apparently not. It's permanent—using permanent in the sense that the Buddha uses it: unchanging over time. And it's permanent because it's just a concept. Concepts are permanent in the sense that they remain stable over time.

Let's go back to our rebirth example. We don't spend all of our time thinking about rebirth, but let's say that you are one of those people who do not believe in rebirth. Now let's say you're listening to a dharma talk where the speaker says, "Look, rebirth is true, and if you don't believe it, you cannot be a Buddhist and you cannot gain enlightenment." As you listen to this talk, you may get agitated. Are you trying to propagandize

me? Are you saying that I have to accept an orthodoxy I do not believe in order to succeed in this practice? What is happening? You are having a direct, first-hand experience of listening to this talk, and a direct, first-hand experience of the agitation that is arising from the listening.

Let's say that you're listening to this talk and you are a believer in rebirth. You think, "This is great—at last, someone's putting it down there." Then you may be having a direct, first-hand experience of satisfaction, a felt sense of confirmation of your belief and the satisfaction that the truth is finally being revealed.

Now, these experiences—listening to, responding to this talk—these experiences are direct, first-hand, and they are changing. They are not permanent. They do not last over time. If you listen to someone else saying the same thing the next night, the concept will be exactly the same. But the felt encounter with the talk, the responses that arise in mind and body, would be different from the previous night. These direct, first-hand experiences are not permanent. But concepts are stable. Concepts stay unchanged over time.

So when we normally live in the world of concepts, we live in a world of permanence. But the practice of noting, the practice of directly being aware of whatever is happening right now, reveals a world which is clearly impermanent, subject to change. And it's in this world that understanding can begin to emerge. Because for the Buddha, the perception of change is the entry into insight.

And of course, for the Buddha, that which is *anicca*, that which is changing and therefore unreliable, is *dukkha*—inherently unsatisfactory. And that which is *dukkha* is not self. The recognition of these three universal characteristics constitutes insight.

Any questions? I know we're kind of jumping in the deep end here. Am I making sense?

One person thinks so. I'm glad we got one vote.

So let's move on.

In one very famous teaching, the Buddha says: *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā, sabbe dhammā anattā.* If you're looking for this, it's the Uppāda Sutta on Arising, in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of the Threes, number 136.

This could be translated as: all constructions are impermanent, all constructions are painful, all phenomena are not-self.

When the Buddha is talking about constructions, *saṅkhārā*, basically a construction is something that is put together, created. For example, this building that I'm in is a construction—someone built it. The building that you're in is a construction—someone built it. This meeting is a construction; we're all building it. This talk is a construction. So a construction is anything that's put together out of parts. And for the Buddha, anything that's put together out of parts, sooner or later, will fall apart. It will cease. This is simply built into the understanding.

So he says all constructions are impermanent and painful. If we ask what are constructions, what are *saṅkhārā*, the answer is basically everything—everything in the universe except for the unconstructed, the *asaṅkhata*, otherwise known as the not-born, the not-become, the not-made.

Hence the third statement: all phenomena are not-self. You notice that the constructions have disappeared and been replaced by phenomena. This translates *dhammā*—directly encountered events. And all of them are not-self. But notice they're not described as subject to change and dissatisfaction.

Now look at the claim being made: all constructions are impermanent. This is a very bold claim.

Let's say I am a dedicated practitioner of insight meditation. Let's say that whenever I'm directly aware of whatever is happening, I recognize that the experience I'm having—a *saṅkhāra*, a *dhamma*—I recognize it's impermanent, subject to change. In terms of my direct, first-hand experience, I can say: whenever I note, whenever I'm directly aware of something, whatever I note turns out to be impermanent, subject to change.

Would you agree with that? Have you ever been directly aware of something that never changed? Or have you found that every time you're directly aware of something, it changes?

Great.

But what about all of those constructed experiences that I have not noted? What about all of those experiences that occurred before I started meditating? What about all those experiences that will occur in the future? I haven't noted them. I haven't been directly aware of them. I have no direct first-hand experience of them. So any idea I have about them is what? It's a concept.

And doesn't that mean that any belief I have in their impermanence is just a return to the world of concepts? Isn't the Buddha, with all this instruction about staying directly with experience and not going into concept—doesn't he just take us to a paradox where at the end of it he expects us to take on a concept which we cannot possibly verify?

We've arrived at a paradox. We practice, we practice diligently to drop our secondhand experience of concepts and to stay with the direct, first-hand world of changing creation. And if we do it successfully, where does it take us? To more concepts—the concepts of universal impermanence, pain, and not-self.

Another way of looking at this is: have we done all this work just to end up with another belief structure?

Not only that, but according to the tradition, insight meditation strictly speaking begins when our meditation object is one or more of the three characteristics, the three universal characteristics.

But if the three characteristics are concepts, how do we note concepts? Isn't noting the practice that deconstructs concepts, that takes us to a world beyond concept? Isn't that the whole idea?

So we come across a paradox, and what we're going to do next talk is try to explore this paradox and see where it takes us. But this is the paradox that we're faced with. The whole training is all about dropping the concept, just staying with the actual experience. When we do that, we notice the actual experience is changing. And the Buddha goes beyond that. He says all experience is subject to change. But as soon as he makes that move, hasn't he just taken us back into a world of concepts? And what are we doing there?

So let's explore this in the next class. And explore it in your own meditation practice, and see what you come up with.

Question from the audience: Just on that last point, in terms of the practice, will it get to a stage where the three characteristics of anicca, anattā, and dukkha will no longer be concepts? They are what will be the direct experience—the direct experience of impermanence?

That's the idea. But how that works is quite mysterious, and this is what we want to explore. It will take us into the nature of awareness itself, which we haven't talked about much. So far, we've just been taking awareness for granted as if we know what it is.

Question: How are thoughts, perceptions, and feelings connected?

Ah, that's a very technical one. They're all part of the same general process of constructing a world. If you think about the Buddha's teaching on the senses—the six senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding—the Buddha calls this *sabba*, everything.

Now if you look at the five physical senses, each of them is a sensitivity. Take the eyes. There are two little parts of the body that are sensitive to light. My hand is not sensitive to light, but these two parts are, so they pick up visual data. The ears are sensitive to sound; they pick up audio data. And so on. Each sense is a sensitivity to a particular form of data.

The five physical senses each have their own unique streams of data. The eyes do not hear, the ears do not see. So you've got these five streams of data coming in towards us. Mind has its own unique data—what we've been calling the world of concept. But it also picks up the five streams of physical data. All of these streams flow into mind. And then the mind's job is to make meaning out of it, to create a meaningful world.

Take perception, for example. Perception is recognition. That gives us our sense of familiarity. I turn up in this quite mysterious phenomenon called the Zoom room, and I pretty soon pick up that this is the Buddhist meditation group. I can tell because you've got that mettā sign behind you. That's a clue. Now imagine someone who's never in their life had anything to do with meditation—they would not have the faintest idea what mettā means. They turn up and think, "What is going on here? I don't know what this is, who are these people?" Because the perception hasn't been worked out yet.

Perception is based on experience. A good example is language. If you're listening to your native language, you just understand what's being said. But if you've ever undertaken the job of learning a second language, you know how much work is involved to train the mind to recognize that this pattern of sound represents this meaning. That's the job of perception. Perception gives us a familiar world.

Feeling is the heart's response.

I like. I don't want. I want. I don't want. I don't know. I'm confused. I'm either ignoring or confused.

So perception is essentially cognitive—it gives me a world of meaning. Feeling is affective, of the heart. It tells me how I'm responding to this world. And thinking is a kind of higher-level processing that continues to make sense of it all, but in a more detailed way.

All of these factors, and others, are working together to create a sense of me in my world—in other words, a sense of what the Buddha calls self.

Does that make sense?

Yes, it does. And Patrick, earlier someone made this comment and question, perhaps connected to what you were just saying. This person says, "I've heard a bit about heart and brain coherence and connecting with your body. Can you speak a bit more about that?"

Heart and brain coherence in connecting with your body. Well, in the Western world, we're obsessed with brains. We think that mind—when people talk about mind, you notice they often use the words mind, brain, and head interchangeably, as if they're the same thing. Just absolutely ridiculous. And of course, we have all this brain research, and things are popping away in the brain, and so on and so forth.

But there is a recognition that this misses out something. It misses out what the Buddha calls the affective—what we, in our culture, tend to call the heart. There's the cognitive aspect of experience and the affective aspect of experience, and the Buddha distinguishes these two aspects as well.

If you think about it, when the Buddha says, "What is the fundamental problem that we have?"—sometimes he'll say it's delusion or ignorance, *avijjā*, which is cognitive. Sometimes he'll say it's *taṇhā*, craving or drivenness, which is here in the heart, affective.

When the Buddha says, "What is the fundamental solution?"—sometimes he says it's *bodhi*, awakening, enlightenment, which is here, it's waking up, it's understanding: "Oh, this is what's going on." Sometimes he'll say it's *nibbāna*, which is the going out of the fire, which is here in the heart, affective.

So the human being has both of these aspects, and balancing them is very important in order to lead a balanced life.

Thank you, Patrick. We've got another question about what you were saying earlier about the paradox. "I don't understand why the paradox is such a major thing. Wouldn't it be the case that if I get to a stage in practice where I think I've let go of everything, but I am still aware of the paradox, then I simply haven't let go of enough and need to keep on meditating? A position that I've been in ever since I started meditating anyway."

That's an interesting statement. If one is still aware of a paradox, I think this is actually a very interesting state to be in, because it gives you something to pay attention to and makes things interesting.

So fantastic. Just keep meditating. And yeah, perhaps I'm just overstating my case to get my audience interested and to come back on the 27th of March. Otherwise I wouldn't get an invite to come back.

Next question: If we shouldn't obsess over labeling an experience as anything, and we should just experience it without judgment, then how do you fully appreciate the joy of it? Does joy naturally arise without judgment of the experience?

Basically, there's more room for joy when the judgment goes away. The problem with judgment—there's not a problem with judgment as such. My problem with our judgments is that most of them are based on the past. We are creatures of habit, and we come to this present experience now highly conditioned by the past, and this gets in the way of our actually experiencing.

What people will find when they practice—it's quite common on meditation retreats—is that there will come a time when the practitioner will say, "Oh, it's like..." They get a sense of the newness, the freshness of experience. It's like they step out of the meditation hall and think, "It's like I've never been here before." It's new, it's fresh. There's spaciousness and joy in that, because the past is not floating onto them. They're just genuinely present. And then, of course, that involves a judgment: "Yeah, this is nice. I should keep doing this." So the judgment itself is not the problem. The problem is that most of our judgments are heavily conditioned by the past. And of course, that means by our delusions and attachments.

Patrick, would you say that because of that judgment, it's almost like that commentary that we have in our life, and that becomes in some ways a barrier between us and direct experience? So instead of directly experiencing, we have that judgment slash commentary.

Yeah, and that, of course, is the work of the self. Because notice—the self is permanent. The self is a product of the past. And it doesn't change. That's the nature of the self. So that's where we're trapped.

It's very true what you said about how the judgment is very much part of that habit and also part of the past. But would you say also that judgment—there is a sense of comparison as well, and that's also the opportunity of the self comparing something as better or worse and what we want?

Yes, that's the world of concept. Of course, that sense of comparison at its heart is what the Buddha calls *māna*, which is a central movement of the self. *Māna* is usually translated as conceit, but literally it means "measure." It's an action noun from the root *mā*, to measure. If you think about it, when you measure something, you get out your ruler and you measure it. In doing so, what you've done is create a border where this thing that I'm measuring ends and the rest of the world begins. So there's a fundamental division: me here, you there. This is the fundamental act of self. And for the Buddha, fully awakening is the complete letting go of that moment.

Also, coming back to that question—the person was asking about not obsessing over labeling an experience, connecting that with judgment. The labeling or noting practice in the Mahasi tradition—is that a labeling or noting practice that is without judgment?

This causes great confusion. People think noting means labeling. I think it's because of this use of the English word "to note." But in Burmese, there's a verb that means "to aware." If you notice, in English we don't use awareness as a verb. We use it as a noun. We don't say "I aware." We say "I am aware." But noting essentially means "aware of." When the Mahasi Sayadaw's disciples were translating into English, they scratched their heads—these people don't have a verb for awareness.

We'll just use noting. And the labeling, the naming, can be very, very useful because it helps to aim the awareness precisely where you want it to go. When you're practicing for insight, precision in awareness is very important—much more important than if you're doing serenity meditation.

So remember, insight meditation is all about change. Well, if you're going to see change very clearly, you need to distinguish between this and that. This becomes that. This ends. That begins. So you need to be precise with the awareness, and the naming helps precision.

But it's basically an optional added extra. You don't need it. Some people find it extremely useful and use it a lot. Some people find it just gets in the way—it gets too conceptual and it's not useful for them. Some people find that sometimes it's useful, sometimes it isn't. So it's the optional added extra. But the essential thing, by noting, we mean directly aware of it, with or without the name. It doesn't matter. Directly aware of it.

Someone has asked a related question: how about "knowing" instead of "noting" as a verb? That would work, but "knowing" in English can have too conceptual an implication to it. I like "awaring" because there's no conceptual overlay. So I talk about awaring

because it cuts through the concepts. You can know your way home, for example—well, that's pure conception. But knowing the feel of sitting on this chair, swaying backwards and forwards, that's not conceptual. It's direct.

How we use language in meditation practice is very important because language easily leads us astray, but equally it can be very helpful if we find the right term. And this is one of the challenges when we undertake meditation practices—to use language skillfully. The Buddha spent a lot of time refining his language to get it right. So if knowing is helpful, go for it. Otherwise, awaring.

Another question: "I've noticed people being sucked into pattern recognition to the point of near delusion and paranoia. I imagine anything taken to extreme is going to get you into trouble."

Pattern recognition is very much part of insight, but anything that takes you towards delusion and paranoia—obviously it's become obsessive and it's no longer wholesome. And meditation, you know, people can have bad effects from meditation, for sure. This is quite regular. And some people really should not be doing insight meditation. But usually they're the ones that do, which is one of the problems.

Anything that gets out of whack, anything that gets out of balance can be really bad. And this is why your own discernment is so important. When you undertake a meditation practice, particularly in the context of the Buddhist teaching, the Buddha really emphasizes independence and making your own judgments about what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. You have to develop that capacity to develop your own discernment. But it's really important when you undertake a meditation practice to recognize that I, as the practitioner, I'm the one in charge, not the teacher. The teacher is a guide, but I'm the one who's responsible because I'm the one who's doing it.

Another question: "What is your opinion on new age spiritualism that focuses on looking for and recognizing patterns to improve their lives?"

Depends what you mean by "improve," doesn't it? The problem with new age spiritualism, or spirituality, whatever you want to call it, is that it's very much the dharma of a consumer society—where I can take a bit of this, take a bit of that, mix it all together, and improve my productivity at work. That doesn't take us very far, in my view. That's just my own prejudice, of course. The dharma is something vast, something that we surrender to. You can't pick and choose. It doesn't work. You just take on the whole package or not.

Someone has asked about rebirth—a topic that comes up in many of our talks and something people often grapple with. So let me share more about this, especially for those who really can't believe in it or understand it.

First of all, you don't have to believe in it. It's completely unnecessary. As for wrapping one's head around it, it is quite difficult to get a hold of—not simply because of cultural distinctions, like it not being part of our Western culture, but also because the Buddha's understanding of rebirth, of life after life, is based on his understanding of not-self, anattā.

This is the first thing people usually miss. They assume that when the Buddha talks about rebirth, he's talking about personal survival after death—post-mortem survival. He is not talking about personal survival. He's talking about not-self. The key is to understand that when the Buddha talks about rebirth, he's talking about it from the perspective of anattā. And if you don't get anattā, you're not going to understand what he's talking about in terms of rebirth. You're going to assume it's all about me. Do I get to live on after death or not? That's people's basic attitude. If someone feels that after they die they're still going to be here in some form or another, then they're interested. If someone thinks that when they die that's it, it's all over, they're not interested. And you'll notice that both these movements are all about me, all about the self. What is fundamental to understanding rebirth is that for the Buddha, it's part of not-self.

Karma has a great deal to do with this as well. You get the term kamma-vipāka. Kamma is action. Vipāka is ripening—how the action ripens. Now, the ripening process can be instantaneous, or it can take an immense period of time. So karma is clearly interrelated to rebirth.

For example, in contemporary secular Buddhism, where people begin by saying there's no rebirth—when you're dead, you're dead—those same people will also be highly skeptical about the reality of enlightenment. Some will simply say that enlightenment is psychologically impossible. Either they'll dismiss it completely, or they'll lower the standard dramatically, like certain internet gurus who say, "Look, if you're relatively balanced and economist, then you're enlightened."

Why do these two go together? Why does the rejection of rebirth on the one hand come paired with an inability to come to terms with the idea of enlightenment on the other? Because when you look at what the Buddha means by enlightenment, it's perfectly obvious you need a very long time for this project.

If you've got to do it in a human lifetime, you probably won't make it. You need much more time. And so it's a much more cosmic kind of approach to understanding how the world works, which is completely alien to the Western worldview. The Western world has always had a very narrow view of the universe. The Indian view of the universe is immense, wide open. And we have problems accommodating that.

Question: Is there any emphasis on letting go in vipassanā, or is it just about being aware of anicca, anattā, and dukkha?

You cannot be aware of anicca, dukkha, and anattā without letting go. If you're holding on, you'll never see the tilakkhaṇa.

Question: Are all paradoxes resolved when one stays in touch with ultimate reality?

Yes, eventually. And when I say eventually, I'm using conceptual words—I'm being conceptual. Because time is just a concept. But yes, that's right.

Closing Dedication

Merit is a poor translation of puñña, which essentially means auspicious power. May the power of what we've done tonight radiate throughout the universe—not restricted to any one person or any one group of people, but spreading around the town, spreading everywhere and everywhere.

CHAPTER 101

Where Zen and Vipassanā Meet - Patrick Kearney

Patrick Kearney · 1h23

> *In this engaging conversation, Patrick Kearney traces his remarkable path through Buddhist practice, beginning with early meditation attempts in Sri Lanka and India in the 1970s, through his foundational training in Diamond Sangha Zen under Robert Aitken Rōshi, to his transformative encounter with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita at Mahāsī Sasana Yeiktha in Burma. Kearney offers a rare perspective as a practitioner deeply trained in both Zen and Theravāda vipassanā traditions, reflecting on how these paths ultimately converge at deeper levels of practice.*
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> *The discussion explores essential aspects of the meditation craft, particularly the Mahāsī approach of making distraction itself the meditation object—a revelation Kearney describes as pivotal to his practice. He addresses the spiritual faculty of saddhā (faith), reframing it not as blind belief but as placing one's heart into practice, akin to the trust required in any meaningful commitment. The conversation delves into working skillfully with emotions like anger through direct bodily awareness rather than engaging with conceptual stories.*
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> *Kearney illuminates the progression through insight knowledge, explaining how continuous mindfulness naturally develops equanimity and leads to understanding the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa): anicca, dukkha, and anattā. He offers a nuanced distinction between personal suffering and dukkha as universal characteristic, showing how insight into not-self transforms our relationship to pain itself. Throughout, Kearney emphasizes that while techniques differ, authentic practice across traditions ultimately addresses the same Dhamma—the reality of what is happening now.*

Hello, everyone. Welcome to SITHEADS Meditation Club. My name is John. I help organize this group. SITHEADS is a sitting and social group for people interested in deep meditation practice or even just curious about deep meditation practice. Everything we do is free and donation-based. If you want to hang out with us, you can find us at sitheads.com.

Now, it is my pleasure to introduce Patrick Kearney. Patrick, is it okay if I talk about you a little bit in the third person while you sort of sit there and take it?

Patrick: You may. I'll just absorb into not-self and not be bothered.

John: Perfect. So Patrick Kearney is a meditation teacher. He has practiced the Satipatthana Vipassana style of mindfulness meditation, most frequently found in Burma, since 1977. His training is mostly in the tradition of the very famous Burmese master Mahasi Sayadaw. He also spent several years as a Buddhist monk. His main teachers—I don't think he actually got to intersect with Mahasi himself—were Mahasi's very famous lineage holder Sayadaw U Pandita, as well as John Hale. He also trained in the Diamond Sangha lineage of Zen, where his teachers were Robert Aitken Roshi and Paul Maloney Roshi.

Patrick has been teaching full-time for over twenty years. He teaches both practical techniques as well as the underlying theory. To me, I have never met a dual Mahasi-style Vipassana Zen practitioner. That is a very fascinating juxtaposition. So I am very excited to get to talk to Patrick about it.

Patrick, I'm really happy that you're here with us. Before you and I have a conversation and then open it up to Q&A, is there anything that you want to say before we get started?

Patrick: No, I think you covered the essential points. I think we can get started.

John: Cool. So we'll just have a little chat, you and I, maybe thirty minutes, something like that—maybe a little longer if I can't restrain myself—and then we will open it up to Q&A from the group.

The place where I want to start is exactly where I said. Mahasi Vipassana, for anyone who doesn't know—people may be familiar with it as noting, which I think is a slightly reductive way of referring to it. But I think that's what people are familiar with: "Oh, noting practice." We could talk about the ways in which it's more than noting; that would be interesting. But first, I just want to ask: Mahasi-style Vipassana from Burma, Zen practice from Japan originally—what? How'd that happen?

Patrick: Well, it happened organically, as it were by accident. I got involved in Zen in the late seventies in Sydney, when I was looking for people to meditate with. There was very, very little happening.

John: Did you already know how to meditate? Had you learned somewhere?

Patrick: I'd begun earlier in the year. I left Australia to go to Sri Lanka and India because there was nothing—this is in the early seventies, early-mid seventies. I was reading about Buddhism, reading about meditation, and decided I've got to do this. But

there was nothing happening in Australia. So I went to Sri Lanka and India. I did a retreat in Sri Lanka, two weeks at Kanduboda Meditation Center. That was my first jump in. It was quite horrific.

John: What was the lineage and what was the style of practice?

Patrick: Well, theoretically, it was Mahasi.

But in fact, as I realized later on, the monk who was in charge of the center at that time was not only not Mahasi, but actually anti-Mahasi. So what I was actually practicing was essentially serenity with ānāpānasati, awareness at the nose tip. But I didn't know enough about what was going on to realize that was what was happening.

I did talk with them about the problems I was having with focusing at the nose tip because I was getting a lot of head tension and so on. I suggested that I bring the awareness down below to the rising and falling of the abdomen because I had read about this technique. And the teacher was horrified. "Oh no," he said, "you can't do that. You cannot focus on your bowels. Your bowels are dirty. You focus here." At this very clean part, apparently.

That was when I realized there was something odd going on. But anyway, I stayed there two weeks, and my body was in terrible shape. My knees hurt for two weeks afterwards. I had to sit leaning against a wall. That's when I realized I needed to do yoga, chiropractic, massage—just to physically be able to do this practice. I went off to India, got sick, got hepatitis, came back and decided I had to be better prepared next time.

So I was looking in Sydney for someone to meditate with. I just came across an announcement about a visiting Tibetan Lama who was giving a talk. I went to the talk, put my name down for the mailing list. He ran a weekend retreat. At that weekend retreat, I was sitting hunched over on this terrible cushion, and I looked to my right and there on the floor was this magnificent black cushion. I looked at that cushion and thought, "I've got to get a cushion like that." Then my eyes went upwards to the fellow sitting on it—full lotus, perfectly straight back, perfect mudrā. I thought, "I've got to get a posture like that." That was Lee Davison, who was one of the founders of Zen in Australia.

So I joined what was then Sydney Zen Group, but what is now the Sydney Zen Center. I was one of the very early members, just by coincidence. But I liked it because they had good cushions, they taught you how to sit with proper posture, and they only sat for 25 minutes at a stretch. I could handle that. What else could you want? And they told me to keep my eyes open, which I found excellent advice because that way I didn't fall asleep.

I've never made it to full lotus, except for a few moments at a time, but I do sit comfortably now. It's interesting the number of long-term meditators who have injured their kneecaps. Because the problem is not the knees—the problem is the hips. If you don't have the hip flexibility, all the stress goes to the kneecap. And if you're raised sitting on furniture, you don't have the hip flexibility. It's very, very unusual to have it naturally.

So I found my way to Zen. We ran the first Zen retreat in Australia. At the time, we were writing to every Zen teacher we had heard of saying, "Why don't you come to Australia?" Basically, they never even bothered to answer. Then finally, we wrote to Robert Aitken Roshi in Hawaii and said, "Why don't you come to Australia?" And he answered. It was fantastic. I remember the meeting, all of us sitting around saying, "We've got a letter from a Zen teacher!"

Unbelievable. Anyway, in the letter, he said no. But he suggested we ask his teacher, Yamada Roshi. So we wrote to him in Japan, and he wrote back saying no, why don't you ask Aiken Roshi? So they were just bouncing us back and forth.

At that point, we got fed up and simply organized our own retreat. When Aiken Roshi found out about this, he was horrified and said, "I'm coming." You call this love—that's what brought him there. So we established this connection with the Diamond Sangha in Hawaii.

When I had the money to once more head off on pilgrimage, I started in Hawaii. I went there originally to stay three months, but I ended up staying two years. If any of you have spent time in Hawaii, you would understand exactly why. It's a very difficult place to leave. In fact, when I left, my motive was: if I don't leave now, I'll never leave.

So then I went back to Southeast Asia and South Asia. This was 1982, and the Burmese government had shut down the foreign meditation program. You could only get a one-week tourist visa to Burma—that was it. So I headed off to Sri Lanka and India again and only made it to Burma in 1984 on the one-week visa.

In Calcutta, I met someone who was coming from the other direction, having just been in Burma. I asked him what was happening at Mahasi Center, and he said there was a new teacher working with foreigners. His name was Sayadaw U Pandita. When I asked what he was like, he shook his head and said, "I never realized just how sloppy my meditation was until I worked with U Pandita."

I thought, I've got to go there. The perfect, straight-as-a-pin, lotus posture—I had to go find this guy. I sense a pattern emerging: drawn to love, but also to rigor.

So I went there and spent a week with him. He was very busy running the center and had only one hour a day to teach foreigners. And there was one foreigner—that was me. So I had an hour a day with him, interviewing directly with U Pandita himself.

He had just taken over the job of teaching foreigners. Later, when he became popular and lots of people came, he stepped back and had other teachers do the interviews. But in those early years, he was doing them himself. I think partly for his own education—to find out what was going on with these Westerners, who we were. We're much more difficult to teach than the Burmese.

This was still at Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha. It was only afterward that he left and set up his own center.

At the end of my week, I went to say goodbye, and he said, "You should go to the office and apply for a long-term meditation visa."

I said, "But Sayadaw, there are no long-term meditation visas. You can only get a tourist visa."

And he replied, "You should go to the office and apply for a long-term meditation visa."

And I said, "Yes, Sayadaw."

So I went off there, and the government had just opened up. I applied, got the sponsorship, went to Bangkok, applied for the visa, and eventually got it and came back for three months with him. I was the first one back after that closure period.

About twenty-four hours after I arrived, another foreigner turned up—an English guy called John Hale, whom I had met briefly in India previously. I realized there was something special about him because we went off to our first meeting with Sayadaw U Pandita, sitting in the room that I had been in before. I was looking around thinking, "This is nice to come back again," and I glanced at John. He was already in deep samādhi. I thought, "Oh, this guy's pretty good." And he was—he was phenomenal. So really that three-month retreat, I had two teachers: Sayadaw U Pandita and John. We became friends, and he eventually became my main teacher. That was the Mahasi connection.

Meanwhile, when I came back to Australia, one of my old Zen friends said, "Well, now you can come back to Zen." I said, "No, no, no, I'm really not interested." But foolishly, I added, "I would like to actually figure out the Mu koan, because I'd been working on Zhaozhou's Mu and I'd never got it."

For anyone who doesn't know, a koan is essentially a story—it can be very brief or much longer—that encapsulates a dharma understanding which cannot be conveyed conceptually. You either get it or you don't. One of the classical opening koans is Zhaozhou's Mu. The story goes: A monk asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" Zhaozhou said, "Mu." Mu, apparently, in medieval Chinese and in modern Japanese, is the negative—"no" or "not." I never fully understand why they don't just call it the No Koan if that's what it actually means. My personal hypothesis is it's not as mysterious and mystical if you say "no." It's much more impressive if you say "mu."

But there's something I'm struck by here. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, what was it like to be a curious and sincere meditator pursuing Buddhist practice? It's so different now. People watching this can just go onto their computer, type "meditation," and have access to all these teachers, all these teachings, all the different styles of practice. It's an embarrassment of riches now. But back then, if you wanted to learn about meditation, you went to India, you went to Sri Lanka. When you came back to Australia, you got into Zen because that's what was around—there wasn't a full menu, a smorgasbord of everything the way there is now.

It was such an adventure then. It was hard. You had to really work, you had to travel, you had to spend money, you had to spend time, you had to endure hardships to obtain the Dharma. In some ways that was difficult, but in other ways, what an adventure. There was a feeling of having earned it, having had to climb the proverbial mountain to meet the master on top instead of just putting it into your Google search bar. There's also a camaraderie among the people who were fellow travelers from that generation. It sounds like John Hale and I had an experience of being bound together by that shared odyssey. I know that Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield and Mirabai Bush and all these people had that feeling among them.

Is that true? Am I looking at things through rose-tinted lenses, a nostalgia for a past I didn't get to experience? Or was it really like that? And how does it feel to look out over the landscape as it is today, where things are so different in terms of how one accesses Dharma?

I think if you look at the current situation from my perspective, Dharma is much more widely spread—inconceivably so compared to my youth. When I started meditating, to actually be interested in doing Buddhist meditation, much less to actually pursue it and do it, you had to be certifiably insane. It was a completely crazy thing to do. Now it's all over the place in the guise of mindfulness. It's become part of the culture.

Yes. So the Dharma culture these days is very, very wide, but it's very shallow. Back in the day, it was very narrow, but it went very deep. Spread thin in a way. But I think this is inevitable. I think this is just part of the way the Dharma spreads into a new culture. And it'll deepen over time because there's always some people who want to go, who need, who have to go deep, and they'll find a way regardless of the circumstances. They're the point of the spear. They're the ones who push it forward.

But one thing that is different is economically, it's much harder these days. When I saved money in Australia to go to Asia, well, back when I arrived in Hawaii in 1980, one Australian dollar was worth, I think, a dollar twenty American. It's now about maybe seventy cents American. Plus there was full employment. So you could walk away from a job and disappear for a year, two years, five years, and come back feeling confident you could just walk into another job.

That's incredible. But young people today, it's like they feel if they don't grab that next rung on the ladder right now, they're done, they're finished.

Yeah. You didn't have that sense of insecurity. Capitalism was not as developed and as ruthless then as it is now. So it was economically and socially a lot easier for people to do this. Now you've got to have, I think, double, triple the dedication to do that. Because when you walk away, you've got absolutely no idea whether you'll ever be able to get back in again.

That door might close behind you.

You know, there was always a problem, but back in the day it was nothing like as bad as it is today. I think this is one of the reasons that when Sharon and Joseph and Jack came back, the thing they started was a retreat center because that was the paradigm they understood. And it was an accessible paradigm—the idea that if someone's really serious about practice here in the West, they'll find a way to do a three month retreat every year or something like that. And that was kind of viable.

It sounds like in a way that it isn't so much now. And that's why I feel like there's a need for a different kind of institution, an institution that doesn't require you to fully uproot yourself from your life in a way that isn't as doable as it was maybe in the seventies—and still find your way to deep practice somehow.

But it is interesting how that paradigm, the IMS paradigm, really still is the way it's set up. What it's set up to support is sporadic, long retreats. And that's necessary if you want to go deep—you've got to spend the time to go deep. And depending on how disturbed the mind is, the contemporary Western mind is a lot more disturbed than, say, the Burmese mind of the 1980s. And it takes us a lot longer just to settle.

Yeah.

And also, we're burdened by the fact that we don't have saddha. We don't have faith.

Oh, true. Yeah. You said saddha, the spiritual faculty?

Yeah.

It's amazing how our sort of rationalistic skepticism is so useful in so many things and such an incredible obstruction during meditation practice. And I remember when I first started doing Vipassana practice, Mahasi style practice, and I learned about the five controlling faculties, the five spiritual faculties that you use in Vipassana practice—one of them being saddha or faith. That one, I sort of poo-pooed. I didn't say anything to my teacher, but I was like, okay, well, that one I don't care about. I'll focus on the other ones. That's some vestigial thing left in from a more benighted era.

And I was so crazily wrong. Once I was able to understand that faculty as something akin to trust, rather than as I had grown up understanding faith—meaning sort of blind faith in something that you have no evidence for—once I understood it to mean a sort of trust that is engendered by experience, I was able to connect with that faculty a bit more and see its essentiality, really.

In the West, we're hampered by our cultural conditioning, which sees faith as essentially belief, but in particular belief in things that normal, rational people would not believe in.

And on the other side is science, and science is all about rationality and empiricism, what actually works, and they're at war with each other. But this is a European cultural war. It's got nothing to do with India. It's got nothing to do with Buddha. But we drag him into it.

Saddha—there's no real adequate translation for it. It comes from the Sanskrit word *shrad*, heart, and the root *da*, to place. So *saddha* in Pali means to place the heart, as in to put one's heart into something, or to place in the heart, to take something to heart. *Saddha* is all about the heart relationship to what's going on.

It's rather like love. Let's say you fall in love with someone and then you decide, I want to spend the rest of my life with this person. If a friend says, "Look, you are being utterly irrational. What is your evidence that this is going to work out over the next 30 years? What data do you have that could possibly justify this decision?" The answer is,

of course, there isn't any. But I just know. And I'm going to take the jump because I have to. That's *saddha.* It's not belief. It's the heart's movement, the heart's determination to take the chance.

Michael: That's beautifully put. Maybe we could use that as a segue into talking about meditation itself. I'd be curious to hear—if you were to describe Mahasi style practice... I feel like Mahasi practice is maybe not always so clearly understood. There are so many different people talking about it in different ways. It's been filtered through the lenses of various teachers, both older and more contemporary, Asian and Western. If you were to just describe it to someone who's never heard of it—what is Mahasi practice? What's it for? Why do I do it? And how do I do it?

Stephen: The practice essentially is to directly aware whatever is happening now. That's the practice.

Michael: I would perhaps respond back, "Yeah, I hear a lot of meditation described that way. Be here now, experience what's happening without judgment." But that doesn't give me that much purchase into what is distinct about this style of practice.

Stephen: And that's what I like. That's what I liked about the Mahasi approach, particularly when I came across it through Sayadaw U Pandita. The reason why I left Zen and went back to Asia—when I told Robert Aitken Roshi, he was horrified that I was descending into the Hinayana. And I told him, "I need to go because I want to learn how to meditate."

Now, some people are natural and intuitive meditators. They just get it and they just do it. In Diamond Sangha Zen, which is the lineage I trained in, they didn't really teach how to meditate. It was very basic. Just, you know, here's your meditation object, hang on to it. That was the instruction. But they didn't teach the craft.

Michael: Yeah.

Stephen: But I needed to learn the craft. Exactly how do I do it? When this happens, what do I do then? When that happens, what then? And what U Pandita taught was the craft.

Michael: Yeah.

Stephen: And so you build the craft. How do I directly aware? What is it that I'm directly aware of? How do I know that I'm directly aware of it? And why should I directly aware it? And what happens when it changes?

What happens when it doesn't change? What happens when I'm distracted? And so on.

What Mahasi does, when it's taught properly, is develop the craft so that people literally know what they're doing. These days I have a number of quite senior practitioners who come to my retreats because they want to learn the craft—because they've never actually learned it.

But there are different crafts. If you learned your craft from S.N. Goenka, your style of experiencing what's happening in the present moment would look quite different from if you'd learned it from Sayadaw U Pandita. And if you managed to glean some insight into what Zen sitting or shikantaza—just sitting—actually is, and you managed to learn how to do that, that craft is very different as well. It's not like the people who managed to penetrate the heart of shikantaza are now doing something quite similar to Mahasi practice. It's a different practice.

So as soon as you go into the whole question of method and technique, things start to separate. In the most general sense, if you've got a room full of people who are starting to learn how to meditate, roughly speaking you could say: what you should do is take X as your meditation object—let's call it the breathing. We could be even more specific: the breathing sensed at the nose tip, or the breathing sensed in the abdomen. Stay with that. Hang on to it. Don't let go. And when you're distracted, we'll talk about what happens then. That's one possibility.

Another possibility is: just sit there and let your awareness roam and simply notice your awareness. You're always aware. Right now, you are aware. Start to notice the awareness itself. It doesn't matter what you're aware of.

So you've got two ends of a spectrum here. One is where you give yourself something very specific to be aware of, and that's your central point of interest. At the other end, you don't care what you're aware of—you're just interested in the awareness itself.

Now, you try that with a room full of people. You'll find some people, if you say "just be aware of the awareness itself," they're completely lost. They've got no idea what you're talking about. They're all over the shop. Whereas you give them a specific something to be aware of—oh, at least I know what to do. And they can get started.

But other people, you give them that one thing to be aware of and they feel cramped, claustrophobic, tight. They work themselves up. It doesn't work. You say, "No, no, just relax and open up and be aware," and suddenly: now I'm present. Now it's really working for me.

In other words, people are different. No technique works for everyone. There is no such thing as the one true technique. And this is really, really important, especially for people who are coming into meditation. There is no one true technique which works for everyone. It's up to the meditator to discover which method works for me. It's not up to the teacher. The teacher knows what the teacher has been trained in and what the teacher is skillful at. It's up to the meditator to say, "No, this doesn't work for me. I've got to try something else."

But that's a relatively recent luxury. If you were born in 1928 in Burma, you're probably going to be doing Mahasi practice—or actually, there are more options than that in Burma. You could do Mogok, Sunlun, Pa Auk. There's a lot. So bad example, forget it. There are thousands of insight meditation techniques alone. But it's going to be one of the Burmese styles.

Because you're in Burma and it's 1933 or whatever. And so you better hope one of those Burmese styles lines up well with you. And if you're in the USA, then you're stuck with the American methods. What to do? What are those?

We're all captured by our historical circumstances. We have a particular inheritance—karmic inheritance, genetic inheritance. We're living in a certain time, a certain place. We have certain cultural conditioning. And all of this influences our approach to meditation, what we think meditation is, what we're looking for, how we can do it, how we're prepared to learn it, what teachers are available to teach us. Everything is conditioned.

But all I was saying is that this idea of "if this technique doesn't work for you, try another, find the one that works for you"—it's only relatively recent that you would have access to more than a few options in terms of technique. It's actually quite a blessing that you can explore. And that's the big advantage of the current situation, as I said—very wide. Now, shallow perhaps, but what to do? It's the person who brings the depth into it. You've got lots of options to explore and lots of choices, and so you've got the potential to find something that actually works for you. And then, of course, once you find it, you go for it. You can't afford to muck around.

Question from the audience: Would you say that despite your long-time involvement with Zen, when it comes to your technique or your craft, you are primarily a sort of Mahasi practitioner? That's your main approach? Are you doing Zen-style shikantaza, or would you say your technique is mostly influenced by the Burmese practice?

The deeper you go in any technique, the more you actually—to some degree—master it, the more the practice itself turns into play. And when you meet someone else who's playing, you can recognize the similarities. So a lot of these differences, they're very, very important when you begin, but they're not so important later on. So shikantaza and Mahasi style—I think they come together. Fundamentally, they turn out to be the same thing. But you've got to get there.

How do you get there? You've got to go along a certain path. So the different techniques or the different lineages provide different paths. And the different paths suit particular kinds of people. And if they work, they will get you there. But once you're there, you can look around and realize, "Oh yeah, that's similar. I can see where they're coming from. I can see why they're doing that."

Questioner continues: So that's super interesting to me, because I've talked with people who have different views on this matter. Some people feel that no, these practices are different, and they don't necessarily go to the same place. They have things in common—you'll recognize things in the other practices, you'll see the similarities—but they're taking you to different places, different awakenings, different samadhis. And then there are other folks I've spoken to, and whose work I've read, who have this great conviction that essentially they're all paths to the same mountaintop. Once you get to the top of the mountain, you'll notice that all those other paths actually get to the very same place. It sounds like you definitely feel these are all pathways up the same mountain, and it's just a question of where you're starting, on what side of the mountain, and what method of climbing best suits you. Am I characterizing you fairly?

Because what we're dealing with is Dharma. A dharma is simply what is happening, what is real. That's it. So of course there's similarity, because we're all dealing with the same samsara and it's all the same Dharma.

There are differences in concept. There are conceptual differences, and these can be very great. So for example, I'm climbing up the mountain—well, what is the top of the mountain? It's enlightenment. So what is enlightenment exactly? Well, if you go to classical Theravada and go back to the Buddha himself, it's quite simple. Full enlightenment is the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion.

But you talk to a lot of people in secular Buddhism, you talk to some people in Mahayana Buddhism, and they say, "No, no, no, no. That's ridiculous. That's psychologically impossible. It doesn't exist." So they will define enlightenment in some other way. I was reading a book—I forget who wrote it, a very good American practitioner, an academic. I forget his name. I'm too old; I can't remember names anymore. I was never very good at it anyway. But he wrote a book on enlightenment.

I think it might have even been titled *What Is Enlightenment?* with a question mark. I was very interested, so I read the book, and really it should have been named *What Is Enlightenment in Zen?* because he's coming out of a Zen background. Much of it was about the problem that arises when a respected Zen teacher goes off the rails and becomes enmeshed in scandal. How does one reconcile their enlightenment with their scandal? How do you bring that together?

There was much learned discussion about this. And I'm reading this thinking, "It's pretty obvious. If he got into these scandals, mate, he wasn't enlightened." He might have been very charismatic. He might have been a great leader. He might have been very dedicated. But he's obviously not enlightened because otherwise he wouldn't have gotten involved in these scandals. That's pretty simple.

So you notice the conceptual framework is very different. In one view, if you're involved in these kinds of scandals, you are not enlightened—simple. Versus another view where you can be enlightened but somehow still get immersed in all these different kinds of scandals. Now this is purely conceptual, and in the world of concept, you can have these divisions and they never go away, because that's the nature of concept.

This is one of the difficulties—whenever we talk about Dharma, we're in the world of concept. It's only in direct experience that we have the purity of the Dharma itself. And in that direct experience, concept doesn't matter. It's just what's going on.

You could say something similar with technique—that essentially the technique is just a way of getting you to the truth, just a way of getting you to the Dharma. The differences between techniques will essentially be discarded along with the techniques at a certain point. I like to say that meditation is something we do while we're waiting for something else to happen. It keeps us busy.

Well, I've monopolized your time long enough. Why don't we open it up to questions?

One practitioner shared: "I've done three sixty-day retreats at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's center, and I interact mostly with Common Ground these days. There's a lot of focusing on mindfulness of breathing via Analayo, who is rather critical of Mahasi in a talk I heard. I'm trying to figure out whether I want to keep myself in one place or if it's okay to move around between the two."

I think overall you should feel free to move around. Once you've established your practice—and it sounds like you have, you're an experienced practitioner—you get a sense of what works for you and then pursue that. It can always be very useful to explore, try something alternative, try something different, see if it works, see if it doesn't.

The more experience you have as a practitioner, the more discernment you develop about whether something works for you. In the popular presentation of mindfulness, for example, they really emphasize nonjudgmental awareness. You can see why they say nonjudgmental—because if you start to meditate and get caught up in conceptual ideas about what should be, what shouldn't be, what's supposed to happen, you get lost. But as you gain more experience, your discernment, your wisdom faculty develops, and you begin to sense what really works for you and what doesn't. You learn to trust that understanding.

Remember that for the Buddha, the direction of the practice is toward increasing independence. You treat your teachers with respect, but in the relationship between teacher and student, the one in charge is the student. You take on what is useful and simply drop what is not. You can see for yourself over time what works and what doesn't.

And the basic standard is this: is greed, hatred, and delusion going down, or is it going up? If it's going down, it's working. And so you just trust that. You trust your own judgment, your own decision-making.

Analayo's criticisms of Mahasi are very interesting because they show his character as an intellectual. And when you're an intellectual—and he's very, very intelligent, really, really good at it—then conceptual frameworks are very important to you. Now, one of the things about concepts is they have very clear borders. You can distinguish between this and that with great accuracy and precision, which is what Analayo and all good scholars do, especially scholars of Buddhism. That's great because you get a view, a picture of what's going on, which can be extremely useful for the practitioner.

But the question is: in my experience, is this working? So I might be doing a practice about which this great authority says, "You shouldn't do this practice because it's no good for you." But I'm doing it and it's working for me. So who do I believe—my experience or that theory? Well, if I'm a practitioner, there's no debate. My experience. It's an interesting theory, and maybe I'll keep an eye out. Maybe what he's saying is correct. But if this is working for me, I'm going for it, thank you very much.

Let's see—Bijan, would you like to come up and ask your question?

"Hi Patrick, thanks for doing this. My question is about when did the practice feel like it became real for you? Was it sort of gradual? Did it feel like the switch from Zen to the Mahasi style—did meditation feel real for you in both of those? Or was it more like

once you switched to Mahasi, there was an experience or a time on retreat where you thought, 'Okay, this is what I'm going to be doing'? I guess it comes back to the faith thing. When did the faith in the practice really solidify for you?"

I was pretty solid before I encountered Mahasi. I actually started with a very early book on the Mahasi method—Nyanaponika Thera's book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. I read that when I was a university student in the early seventies. I didn't understand what I was reading, but as I was reading it, there was absolutely no doubt in my mind: I have to do this. I really have to do this. So that was, in a sense, the beginning.

In my Zen days, I really liked Zen. I liked the way the retreats were structured because everything was completely choreographed. You were caught up, under total control. There was nowhere to back out to, which is great for lazy, resistant people like me. You were taken through this process. And I would reflect afterwards: what is it that brings me back to these things? Because it's so hard. And I realized that it's when I'm doing intensive meditation that I feel real. Things might be quite painful, but they're real. When I'm not meditating, it's like there's a layer of stuff that gets in the way, and it's not real, not authentic anymore. So I've always had that relationship with meditation.

What Mahasi gave me again was essentially the method. And the key point was when I discovered that if you're distracted, your distraction becomes your meditation object. That was a revelation.

If you think about how, over the long term, what direction do I travel in my meditation practice—what determines the direction I'm going in—I would say there are two things. One is what I'm interested in. If I'm doing a meditation practice that's just as boring as batshit, I'm likely to drop it. But if I find a meditation practice I find interesting, I'll keep going with it. So that's one factor, one vector. And the other one is what gets in the way.

What prevents me from meditating? Why is it that I cannot keep my mind on my meditation object for more than 5.2 nanoseconds? This becomes interesting because that's what I've got to work on. That is my meditation object. And it's a really important meditation object.

Of course, sometimes what you find interesting and what gets in the way are actually the same thing. In my case, I'm fascinated by distraction. I'm fascinated by the fact that my mind will not stay still. Why not? What's it doing? How is it doing it? What's happening when it moves like this? It's endlessly fascinating.

This gives me a deep sense of satisfaction because it's real. It's not artificial. I'm not pretending. Decades ago, in my misspent youth, I did some acting lessons based on Stanislavski's method. They drew the distinction between acting and *acting*. When you act, it's real and the audience can see it. When you're acting, there's a layer of "I'm pretending to do this" and it's not real—and the audience picks it up immediately. So the best actors are the ones you look at on the screen and think, "This person's not acting," but they're actually the best.

It's that sense of authenticity that I find in the actual meditation encounter. And when I can feel that, I know I'm doing the right thing.

One way that Mahasi Sayadaw sums up the practice is: you're directly aware of whatever is predominant right now. If I'm caught up in anger, anger is predominant. Anger becomes my meditation object.

Now it's nice, it's easy to say, but that's when the craft comes in. How do I do that? If I'm working with emotion—and this is true of any emotion, but let's take the emotion of anger—first of all, never believe the story. Mind, you cannot be angry unless you've got a story going on in the mind in which someone did something they should not have done. In other words, you've got a complex story with a set of values built into it, and that set of values is being violated. This is the realm of concept. Do not go there. Drop it. Come back to the body. Bring the awareness into the body.

When you're actually doing the meditation practice, use the working assumption: every thought that I think is a lie—including the thought that every thought that I think is a lie. That too is a lie. Do not believe any of them.

So what to do? Drop the awareness into the body and then feel: how does the anger present in the body? Non-conceptually, sensation. Go to the elemental qualities of the sensation. Firstly, where in the body do you feel anger? Now, if there's anger, there's tension in the body. You cannot be angry if the body is completely relaxed. So there's tension. Where is it? You focus in on that. What's the quality of that sensation? Is it hard? Is it soft? Is it hot? Is it cold?

For me, for example, generally with anger, I find anger to be hard, rough, sharp, energetic.

There's a lot of movement in there, and it can be surging throughout the whole body.

What's the feeling tone of it? Is it pleasant, or is it painful? I find anger is sometimes pleasant, when it gives me a sense of power—like "when I meet that person, I'm going to smash them." But it can be excruciatingly painful when it's associated with powerlessness. Impotent rage is particularly acutely painful.

So what's the feeling quality of it? Is it hot or is it cold? Usually I find anger to be hot, but sometimes it's cold. And I think the cold variety is the most dangerous, I suspect.

So you're going into the body, the physical sensation and the feeling component, checking the elemental quality of the experience. You might even ask yourself the question: putting aside the story, how do I know that I'm angry? What's the experience? What does it feel like? Oh, it feels like this. And then you allow yourself to feel that.

Now, when you do this, if you've got a lot of energy, if the emotion is really strong, you're not going to be very good at maintaining a nice meditation posture. So forget about it. Just do what the body wants to do. The body wants to go charging off down the street? Let the body go charging off down the street, but feel it.

And again, you'll get sucked into the story again and again. "This is what it's about." As soon as you recognize that, drop it, come back into the body. You're not interested in what it's about. You're interested in the direct experience of it. So you go right into the center of it, but without the concept, and let it burn itself out—which it will. And then you see the impermanence of it.

You'll notice that the more time you spend in the story, the more you feed the emotion and the longer you extend it. But the more time you can spend inside the sentient body, the faster it'll burn out because you're not feeding it. And when you see it disappear, that really weakens your attachment to it. Because you can see: oh, it's not permanent. It's not me.

Working with emotion is very, very interesting. But the foundation for it is working with the body, because that's where you find emotion. Emotion comes out of the body, the sentient body, the feeling body. So that's where you focus. You never believe the story. It is a lie. And for most people, that's the most difficult part, because we invest all our reality into our stories. That's our habit. And to break that habit is a really important part of the meditation practice, especially insight meditation.

A student asked: What would your guidance be for a lay person who wanted to develop equanimity in the way the Buddha talks about it, and eventually experience nibbāna? What would your guidance be for that aspiration?

In the insight approach, broadly speaking, the emphasis is on mindfulness—where mindfulness is the felt continuity of awareness. So what you want is an approach to meditation which emphasizes maintaining awareness continuously over time. That's the basic discipline.

That's the boot camp training. And basically the idea is that if you maintain awareness continuously over time, the more successful you are at that, first of all, the concentration will naturally follow and equanimity will naturally follow. When the mind is dominated by mindfulness, it's dominated by equanimity. They go together.

So you cannot make yourself equanimous. You can't force it. It's like you either got it or you don't got it. But what you can do is, by cultivating the continuity of awareness, you can develop the equanimity.

Now, you notice that if your awareness is going to be continuous, that means your meditation method, whatever it is, has got to embrace what we normally call distraction. This is one of the characteristics of mindfulness meditation practice—it's not object-specific.

Let's say you're doing breathing meditation for thirty minutes. You sit down and you track your breathing. Now, out of those thirty minutes, how many minutes would you actually be on the breathing? Five, ten, fifteen, twenty on a good day. That means you're actually not spending thirty minutes doing the meditation—you're spending five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen, whatever. Because when you're not on the breathing, you're not doing the meditation.

But if you're doing a straight mindfulness meditation, you use as your meditation object whatever is happening. So as soon as you realize, "Oh, I'm distracted," that experience becomes your meditation object. Mindfulness meditation is not restricted to any particular object. When we talk about the craft of the practice, often what we're talking about is: How do I recognize that my mind has wandered, and then how do I make that the meditation object? Like, for example, if anger comes up. And the more you can do that, the more the awareness becomes continuous. Then the more equanimity will naturally emerge—just cause and effect.

When you're working with Dharma, you are working with nature. It's not that if you're a good boy, Buddha will reward you. It's simply that if you create certain conditions, certain effects will arise. If you maintain continuity of awareness, equanimity will arise. It will just happen.

And this is just to add something when we talked about the problem with thinking—we lose our awareness when we start to think. Have you ever had the experience where you're meditating and the mind slides off into thinking, but you don't notice that it slid off? Then suddenly you realize, "Oh, I'm thinking." And you realize you've been thinking for the past five minutes and didn't even know. The problem is not the thinking. The problem is losing the awareness of the thinking.

So this is where it gets really interesting and really tricky: How can I maintain continuity of awareness no matter what I'm doing, including thinking? That's really tricky, and it's very interesting. It opens up a whole new world.

A follow-up question was asked: Would a lay person have any hope of gathering that kind of momentum of awareness throughout their daily life? Is retreat time required to get to this point of equanimity?

You have to be extraordinarily talented not to need retreat time. But it is possible. The best meditators I've known over the decades have been lay people. And the most enlightened person I've ever known was a lay person.

It's definitely available, but you do have to commit yourself to it. It's a serious training. It's like anything else—if you want to be a good quality musician, you've got to put the time in. If you want to be a good quality athlete, you've got to put the time in. If you want to be a good quality meditator, you've got to put the time in.

And it's got to be quality time. You've got to approach the whole project with intelligence. It's not just hours spent sitting on a cushion. But it is available if you do it, because it's just natural processes, natural training. You train, you train well, you'll get the result.

Basically, it's the part of insight meditation practice where the practice can actually become kind of unpleasant. Am I characterizing that fairly? And do you want to answer the question, which again is: if continuity of awareness brings about equanimity, how do the dukkha ñāṇas arise?

Yes, I think that's a fair summary.

So a couple of questions have been sent to me to ask on behalf of the asker. First: one of the stories is the story of the self. Could you please comment on daily living with awareness of the lie of that story?

That's an interesting one. For the Buddha, self is a construction project that's never quite finished. When you get to know your distractions in the meditation practice, you can see that often what the distraction consists of is the creation of a self in this situation.

There are different ways in which you could become sensitive to it. One way would be, in any given situation, to drop in the question: do I think this is mine? So an emotion comes up—is this mine? Because if I think it's mine, that's self. Self appropriates and takes as its own.

Self and clinging—or attachment—in the Buddhist teaching always go together. So if you know anything at all about the Buddhist teaching, you know that clinging and attachment are very bad things indeed, and you should stop right now. Now the question is: what is meant by that? Because obviously the Buddha never said that—he didn't speak English.

The term he uses is *upādāna*. *Upādāna* comes from *dāna*, gift-giving. Then you have the prefix *ā*—long A—and that changes the direction. If you give, the direction is out there. *Ādāna* is bringing in here, taking. *Upa* denotes intimacy. So *upādāna* is appropriation, intimate appropriation. I'm taking this as mine. And because it's mine, it's me. And because it's mine, it's really, really important.

So for example, I'm sure that all of you have dukkha. But I'm here to tell you that your dukkha is not as important as my dukkha. What makes it important? It's mine.

So tuning into this relationship can be very interesting. And it might be just as simple as when you get caught up in something, just dropping the question: is this mine? Question mark. Don't do anything with it, but just let that be there.

What the Buddha would say is actually it isn't. It's just natural phenomenon coming and going according to conditions. But if I relate to it as mine, it becomes very, very important indeed. And this is where I'm likely to screw things up.

The second question I was asked: if continuity of awareness brings about equanimity, how do the dukkha ñāṇas arise? For anyone who isn't familiar with that term, the dukkha ñāṇas refers to certain stages in the fairly well-defined, mapped-out stages of insight meditation that one typically goes through—particular stages associated with difficult experience. They're sometimes referred to as the contemplations or the knowledges of suffering, which I think is what dukkha ñāṇa literally means: knowledge of suffering. Basically, it's the part of insight meditation practice where the practice can actually become kind of unpleasant.

Basically, this takes us into the territory of insight, which for the Buddha means insight into the three universal characteristics of anicca, dukkha, anatta—notice always listed in that order. Anicca: change, impermanence. Dukkha: pain, suffering. Anatta: not-self.

They're listed in that order because they proceed from gross to subtle, from most obvious to least obvious. If you think about any kind of meditation technique designed to stimulate insight, what it will do is try to get you to notice change, to see the fact of change.

The way Mahasi does it is by bringing your attention to the fact of distraction. I'm meditating, then I'm distracted. I realize I'm distracted, I come back to meditating. In other words: meditating—change. I see I'm distracted—change. Back to meditation—change. Change, change, change, change, change. Any practice designed to generate insight is all about exposing change.

Now, according to the theory—and I think it actually works in practice—if you take something like the word anicca, usually translated as "impermanence," it sounds very abstract and rather unthreatening. But when you look at the word itself, it's *a-nicca*, which is the negative of *nicca*. In Sanskrit, *nitya*. *Nicca* in Pali, *nitya* in Sanskrit—they mean permanent in the sense of lasting unchanged over time. And therefore, they also mean reliable. If something doesn't change, it is reliable. I can depend upon it. In English you might have, for example, a perpetual endowment—a reliable endowment. You can relax now; it's all taken care of.

But what the Buddha is saying is: every time you're aware of something, it becomes clearer and clearer that it is *anicca*—not *nicca*. Not permanent, not unchanging. Unreliable. Sooner or later it does disappoint. This is built in. It is a feature, not a bug. When this becomes clear, that's when you enter into the dukkha jnanas.

When the awareness is continuous enough to really see change, then at some point deep within, the citta—the heart—realizes: wait a minute, if everything that I'm aware of changes, that means there's nothing to hold on to. That's the essence of dukkha. And then that segues into not-self.

Equanimity emerges and gradually develops throughout this process, but it really matures when not-self is the predominant perception. Dukkha is really interesting because it's the hinge.

Consider the difference between dukkha and dukkha-lakkhana, the universal characteristic of dukkha. Where there is self, dukkha is mine. This is my dukkha. It belongs to me. It is screwing up my life. You seem to be getting away with it—you're okay. What about me? This is dukkha that is not the universal characteristic of dukkha. It's dukkha mixed with self. It's *my* dukkha.

But when we actually start to perceive dukkha as not mine, but simply built into nature—that this is the nature of things—then strangely enough, the relationship to it lightens up. It's not mine anymore. It's just the fabric of the universe. It's not "Oh my God, I'm sick and eventually I'm going to die." It's: that's right. Every creature that is born dies. It's built into the system, and I'm just traveling through that cycle. The relationship there is much lighter.

The best expression of this I came across was in Thailand, at Wat Suan Mokkh, Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery. He had built this big building which he called a Spiritual Theater—it was like a dharma museum with lots of exhibits. And he had paintings on the wall. My favorite painting was this very small painting showing a fat Chinese-style monk doing a qigong stretch. He had a big grin on his face. And underneath was a little poem in Thai, translated into English as: "Oh boundless joy! Now I see there is no happiness in this world."

It sums up the teaching. Buddhadasa was always good for a brain-twisting aphorism. I find it very good.

This is dukkha mixed with not-self, and then it's a whole different thing. One can go through the dukkha jnana—which is literally the understanding of pain, of dukkha—but that understanding sees the universality of it, and therefore senses it's not about me. It's okay.

And from that, compassion arises—universal compassion. It's about samsara. It's about the human condition. And it's okay. I'm going to do something about it. I can always do something.

So I'm going to do something about it, but I'm not going to be overwhelmed by it. There's no need. And no benefit either.

And of course, although we talk about this process as sequential, it's actually a nonlinear system. If something is anicca, it's also dukkha and anatta. If something is dukkha, it's also anicca and anatta. If something is anatta, it's also dukkha and anicca. They always come together.

Now, people sometimes do, in their practice, experience it according to that system because they're going gradually deeper. But in fact, people's experiences can be all over the place. They can find themselves in particular ñanas where, if it was a strictly linear system, they would have no business being there at all. But there they are. What to do?

I have to say, I've actually not heard that idea articulated before—dukkha as your actual personal experience of unsatisfactoriness, just sort of "this sucks," versus dukkha as the universal characteristic, and drawing a distinction between those two things. And that actually, once you see clearly—especially through seeing not-self and through seeing impermanence—your personal dukkha is maybe not there in the same way. It creates a relationship with the universal characteristic of dukkha that's not intrinsically painful. It's a relationship of understanding and an almost nonchalant acceptance of that which is simply the case.

But you notice that it does have the heart connection. With anicca, impermanence, change—the perception of it is predominantly cognitive. "Oh, I can see things are changing." When you get into dukkha, the perception is affective. It's the affective relationship. That's where you enter into the realm of craving, drivenness, upadana, appropriation, clinging. And not-self kind of brings them together.

So the way that insight develops is both head and heart. And a lot of the purification of the heart takes place within the Dukkha Ñana. Not always fun. Very valuable though. It's when the tears come that you know you're getting deep.

It took a while for me to figure out, especially across time zones.

Fair enough. So someone will have to climb a little bit of a mountaintop if they want to get the teachings.

The mountaintop of your disorganization.

I need a manager. Maybe that could be someone's dāna—they can be your assistant.

So that brings us to the end of our talk. I enjoyed this so, so much, Patrick, and I appreciate you very, very much for being here with us.

Patrick, any final things you want to say before we close?

Just to thank you for the invitation. It's been fun to meet you. And if you want to do a retreat, I do Zoom retreats. The information is on the website. There's one in May, and the next one will be in October, I think, thereabouts.

So definitely check out Patrick's website to see what he's got going on in terms of retreats. And if you want to try and sneak in a one-on-one lesson or interview, sounds like he's open to that.

On the website, on the front page is a contact form. You can send off an email.

Thank you so much for being here, Patrick. And to everyone who is here with us, thank you so much for your time, your attention, your questions, and your practice. I hope you all have a wonderful night.

CHAPTER 102

On 'Concept'

Patrick Kearney · 50 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Patrick Kearney examines the powerful realm of concept (nimitta) and its role in constructing our experience of self and world. He explores how the 'river of stories' flowing through our minds becomes so seductive because it provides meaning—from trivial thoughts about coffee to our deepest emotional narratives. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching to Bāhiya, philosopher Daniel Dennett's work on consciousness, and the Japanese Zen master Dōgen Zenji's distinction between thinking, not-thinking, and non-thinking, Kearney unpacks how we habitually mistake our concepts about experience for experience itself.*
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> *The talk addresses a central delusion: we take thoughts about the past or future to be phenomenally real, even though body and direct experience exist only in the present moment. Kearney uses vivid examples—from memories that trigger physical responses to the 'real world' question that arises on retreat—to illustrate how deeply we live in a secondhand world of concepts rather than immediate experience. He explains that signs and concepts are necessary and useful, like a map or street address, but confusion arises when we mistake the sign for what it points toward.*
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> *Kearney presents the Buddha's teaching on 'signless samādhi' (animitta samādhi) and 'signless liberation' (animitta vimutti) as the practice and realization of living beyond dependence on concepts. This doesn't mean abandoning thought, but recognizing concepts as just concepts—maintaining what Zen calls 'beginner's mind.' When we know that we don't know, we stay alert and curious rather than falling into the dullness of habit. The talk concludes with the Buddha's profound instruction: 'In the seen, just the seen'—pointing toward freedom from the suffering that comes from clinging to conceptual certainty.*

But today we're talking about the realm of concept.

We start with the five physical senses, the physical world—very sharp, very clear, very obvious. And yet what we find in our ordinary lives is that often we're completely disconnected from what's happening physically in the five physical senses, because we're lost in the conceptual world of thought and perception. This is quite normal, and we perhaps don't notice what a weird situation it is.

Flowing through the mind is a river of stories. These stories have an enormous attraction for us, so that we get drawn into them. It's as though the physical world often can't hold our attention—there's not enough in it to grab us. Whereas the most mundane, repetitive story will grab our attention. We find ourselves sucked into them, and we find them very difficult to abandon.

So we want to have a look at what's going on in this realm of concept, as it manifests in the river of stories. For me, what seems central is that the stories are attractive, seductive, because they provide meaning. As human beings, we really hunger for meaning—experience has to mean something. And the meanings can be trivial or profound. Something completely trivial, like the thought that pops up in the depths of meditation: coffee now or later? That'll grab my attention. Or the meanings attached to my deepest emotions as they erupt. There's a whole range of meanings, from the lightest and most trivial through to the deepest and most profound. But what's really attracting us is meaning, and the meaning comes out of the stories.

Thinking is seductive because it represents the construction of ourselves—who we deeply think we are and what we deeply think the world is. When the Buddha is talking about a self, he's not referring simply to me in here; he's talking about me in a world. Every being is at the center of a network of sensitivities, physical and mental. Human beings have six sense sensitivities: five of them physical, one non-physical. And the six sensitivities present us with a world. So if there's a self, there's a world within which that self lives. And if there's an experienced world, there's a self to whom all this is happening. The self, for the Buddha, is always a self within a world.

Conceptual thinking creates the self—it's one of the major ways in which we create a self. And this is the world as we conceive it to be. Oddly, this is what we often refer to as the real world.

I've mentioned before that in meditation retreats, sometimes the question comes up: "But what about the real world? What about that?" The context is always that a practitioner is deep in their practice of meditation. Things are happening, some of them unusual, some of them significant. Things are changing; routine perceptions and responses are being questioned. And then out of that comes the response: "But what about the real world? How does all this that I'm going through now relate to the real world when I leave the retreat?"

If you think about what's behind this question, the assumption is that this world—the world we're actually experiencing right now, of the six senses—this world is somehow not real. The world that the practitioner is imagining, the world that isn't here except as thought, the world which may or may not turn out to be what we're imagining

today—that world is real. So this world, that which we are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding—its reality is shaky, and we have to measure its reality against a world that exists only as a concept and may never actually arise in felt experience.

If you think about how many times you've anticipated a future event, and how many times that future event has actually turned out the way you anticipated it, the odds are that the world being imagined will never turn up. And yet somehow that's the real world against which this one has to be measured.

This is an example of how powerful the world of concept is, how it takes over everything. And we just take for granted that that's the way it is.

Concept enables us to define ourselves and our world and to create a functioning identity within it. We create a sense of a permanent self who survives through time, through story. I define myself in part by my past. And what is my past? It's the stories I tell myself about what happened before. And I plan for the future. And what is the future that I'm planning for?

It's the stories that I'm telling myself about an imagined future.

The stories that we tell ourselves give us a stable self that exists through time. And this makes them incredibly attractive and valuable. The self that we're creating, of course, is real only as a concept.

This comes up nicely in the writing of the philosopher Daniel Dennett. I don't know if he's still alive—he must be pretty ancient if he is. But certainly in his time, he was one of the major philosophers of mind in the United States. He wrote a book called *Consciousness Explained*—a very attractive title—and in it he was talking about the nature of the self. He came up with statements that are very Buddhist, although he's anything but Buddhist. He says, "We do not tell our stories. Our stories tell us. They conjure us into existence." And he defines the self as the center of narrative gravity. We're constantly telling stories, but there are certain foundational stories that we keep coming back to again and again. This is the center of narrative gravity, and this is the self.

So this world of story, the world of concept, in practical terms becomes more real to us than the physical world. And I think this is why thinking—or one reason why thinking—is so seductive, and why it's so easy for a meditator to abandon physical awareness in favor of slipping off into some random dream.

This brings us to the whole issue of thinking, particularly in meditation. We've raised this question before: does this mean that thinking is bad and we should stop? Should we stop having concepts?

This question was addressed in the thirteenth century by the Japanese Zen teacher Dogen Zenji, who wrote a meditation manual called *Zazen Shin*, "The Sharp Edge of Meditation." He raised it through telling the story of the Chinese teacher Hong Dao of Yao Shan, Hong Dao being one of the great Chan ancestors, Zen ancestors.

The story goes: once when the great teacher Hong Dao of Yao Shan was sitting, a monk asked him, "What are you thinking as you sit so strongly?" The teacher replied, "I'm thinking not-thinking." "How do you think not-thinking?" "Non-thinking."

So this is the exchange. Dogen pretty much leaves it at that. You figure it out. Here's all you need to know. But we're going to expand on this a bit.

Basically, we've got three things presented to us: thinking, not-thinking, and non-thinking. Here, thinking and not-thinking are presented as two extremes.

Thinking is our normal everyday life, where we believe the reality created for us by concept. The world that concept presents to us, we take it to be true. This is it. This is the real world. That's thinking.

Not-thinking indicates the development of samadhi, of concentration, unification, integration, where the mind goes so deeply into the meditation that thinking is suppressed. It just stops. This is not-thinking. Now, some people can do this and others can't, but even if we're successful with it, what we've got is a temporary samadhi state, and all our delusions and attachments are waiting for us when we come out of that state. So we're back in the world of thinking. With these two extremes, we move from not-thinking to thinking and back again.

Non-thinking represents a new relationship to thinking, a different relationship to thinking. To get a sense of what this is about, let's look once more at why thinking is considered to be a problem in meditation.

Thinking in meditation is problematic only to the extent that it interrupts our flow of attention. From a practice point of view, this is the issue with thinking—it's bad only to the degree that it interrupts our flow of attention. The aim of mindfulness practice is to attain a felt continuity of awareness.

So awareness remains without interruption on the flow of experience, physical and mental. Thinking is a problem when it interrupts this flow of attention. Instead of maintaining that continuity, we get sucked into the world of concept. Thinking pulls us into this world, and this world can be maintained only because there's a degree of delusion present to sustain it. If the delusion isn't there, it cannot be sustained.

The delusion is found in the assumption that the conceptual object presented by the mind is in fact the pure phenomenal object. If this is a bit too technical, I can put it more simply: it's the assumption that a thought about X is X. That's the basic assumption we have when we enter into the world of concept, and that assumption makes it real and keeps it going. The assumption that a thought about X is X. And that's a delusion, because actually it isn't.

In other words, a thought about yesterday is not yesterday. But time has power over us to the degree that we are prepared to believe that our thought about yesterday is yesterday. If a thought arises about yesterday or about anything else and we attend to it as simply a thought arising now, then it's not a problem and it does not interrupt the flow of attention. When we recognize thinking as just thinking, we are not falling into delusion, and we are maintaining an uninterrupted flow of attention on experienced events. One of those events is thinking. So I'm mindful of thinking.

But when we mistake our concepts about what is happening for what is actually happening, that's when we lose the flow of attention. That's when we find ourselves living in a secondhand world of concepts defined by the river of stories rather than the actual immediate lived experience. It's like we're haunted by our thoughts, our stories, our dreams, and we can't get beyond them.

Let me give you an example. Let's say I'm minding my own business and suddenly a memory comes up from a long time ago, many years ago—a memory of a past humiliation or past trauma, something that happened a long time ago and which greatly affected me at the time. Now, I know this memory is telling me about something which is not present. It's absent. Yet when the memory arises, my body instantly reacts, instantly responds. The body cringes to some extent, or I feel tension in the stomach, or heat in the face. The body reacts instantly.

How can this be? The body is radically present. Physical experience is radically present. The body knows nothing about the past. It knows nothing about the future. It's always present. A physical experience always happens in the present. If I touch something and feel that touch, when does it happen? It happens now. It doesn't happen in the past. It doesn't happen in the future. It's now.

Yet the body is here responding to something that very clearly and obviously happened in the past, a past which doesn't exist for it. Why does the body respond so strongly? Because the mind convinces the body that this event is happening right now. Without that delusion, the body would be unmoved by the memory. The mind has this power to create an illusion so strong that the body instantly buys into it and believes it.

So the problem is not the memory, and it's not these physical sensations. The problem is the delusion that convinces me that what is not happening now, what is not phenomenally real, is happening now, is phenomenally real. This is the central delusion that comes from the realm of concept. Is this making sense? We hope so.

So let's look at life in the realm of concept. What is life like here? Concept gives us a world of meaning—I know what this means—and therefore a world of names. If you look at the Buddha's analysis of experience, how does experience work? Experience comes through the senses, which are sensitivities to particular kinds of data. Take the eye: the eye is the part of the body which is sensitive to light, so the eye sees visible form.

So light and colour. And visible form itself has no meaning. But if I'm looking in your direction, I don't just see visible form—I see *you*. Where the concept "you" is a name I place on top of what I'm seeing. So there's what I'm actually seeing, and then there's the name I put on top of it.

Similarly, the ear just hears sounds. But if I'm listening to my friend speaking to me, I'm not just hearing sound waves striking against the ear. I'm listening to something good or something bad, something useful or something useless, something interesting or something boring. My mind takes the direct experience and then creates meaning from it, and it does this through putting layers of concept on top of the direct experience. One term that the Buddha uses to talk about this process is *nimitta*, which can be translated as "sign."

This word *nimitta* indicates a label that we add to the immediacy of experience in order to create meaning. We name the experience to create meaning. We've been playing with this in the meditation when we name what we note—we do that to create meaning. This is what it is.

Let's give an example out of meditation, the sort of thing which you may be familiar with. Let's say I am sitting peacefully in meditation with no thought. Has that ever happened? And then suddenly I *know* that I'm sitting peacefully in meditation with no thought. What happens then? Often what will happen is that immediately this experi-

ence ceases. It's gone, because I've just placed a name on it to give it meaning. I name it as, "Oh, that's good. The practice is working really well." I've put a name on it and created meaning out of it, but in doing so I've just destroyed it.

Some of you were talking about this in the morning in terms of noting the thought stream. Remember the first one we did—stop thinking? I think somebody commented that, yes, they noticed the thinking, they managed to stop thinking, but then they thought, "Oh, that's good. I'm doing it." It's the same process. Something happens, but it has no significance, no meaning until I name it. So I put a name on top of it, and now it has significance for me, now it fits somewhere. But of course in this case I've just wrecked it.

When I name an experience, I separate myself from it and create a duality of me, the practitioner, having this experience over there, which is my meditation experience. And then I place some kind of value on it. That's a good experience. That's a bad experience. Then it takes on a role in my personal narrative, and its role is to advance the interests of the practitioner. So I suddenly enter into this world of concept through the process of naming the experience.

Now, this process of naming, signing, conceptualizing includes language, obviously, but signs and names go deeper than language. For example, as I walk about the house, I know where I am going. Have you ever had that experience when you're walking through your house and you know where you're going? But how do you know where you're going? I'm not thinking about it, but still I know. So this is a concept that I'm imposing upon the experience, and one that comes much deeper than mere thought.

I used to play around with this when I was doing my own meditation in a center in Malaysia where I had—this is a fair while ago—they gave me a monk's hut. In those days, the monks' huts, unlike the lay accommodation, had no electricity, because the abbot thought that good Buddhist monks don't need luxuries like electricity. So in order to get a hot drink, I used to take my thermos towards the end of each afternoon and walk down the path to a place where they had hot water on tap, fill up the thermos, and walk back. Every afternoon about the same time, I'd walk down this path, fill up the thermos, walk back again.

One day it occurred to me—because I was practicing mindfulness of walking—is it possible for me to walk down this path and not know where I'm going? So I practiced this for some time, and every now and again it would happen. I'd be walking down this completely familiar path and I wouldn't know where I was going, because the concept dropped away. But it didn't last, because not long after I noticed, "Oh, this is what's happening," it would come up again. It's quite interesting to play around with.

What we normally call thinking is a relatively superficial aspect of the meaning-making of the mind. This making of meaning goes a lot deeper than just thought. In fact, we could say that as long as an experience means something, then we're caught up in the world of concept. We're living in that world.

The *nimitta*, the sign, enables us to navigate our experience and make sense out of it. For example, let's say I'm visiting a friend, and my friend lives at 15 Smith Street. I've never been there before.

So I rely on my navigation app to get me there. My app first finds Smith Street and then takes me to number 15. It tells me I've arrived. I stop the car, I look, and sure enough, there is a sign on the fence saying 15. I've arrived. Excellent.

So I get out of the car and I stand in front of that sign that says 15. And I wait for my friend to appear. Although we had an appointment and he definitely should be here now, there's no sign of him. He's not here. So I wait with increasing impatience. Where is he? I'm where he said to be. I'm at 15 Smith Street. There's the 15. I'm right here. So where is he?

Meanwhile, my friend is in the house wondering why I haven't turned up. If eventually we meet and I berate him for not being there, he'd be quite confused about what I'm talking about. And if I told him what happened, he would have reason to think I'd completely lost it, that I was totally mad. Because he might point out—especially if he's a Buddhist philosopher—that whatever the sign is, it cannot be my friend's house, because it points toward my friend's house. A sign that says X cannot be X, because it points toward X. Whatever else it is, it cannot be that, because otherwise it wouldn't have its function of pointing toward something.

But does that mean the sign is useless? No, because without the sign, I would be lost. I would never find the house in the first place. But I would be equally lost if I stopped at the sign and became upset because my friend wasn't there.

Signs are useful. Signs are necessary. We can't function in the world without them. But if we take the sign to be the reality, if we take the sign to be what the sign points toward, then we are lost in confusion. Then we really don't know what's going on. And the confusion comes because we take the concept to be what is really going on.

From the Buddha's perspective, this is what we do all the time. We are lost in the world created by concepts because we take the concepts to be real.

So again, we use concepts to construct the self. And we need to construct the self. It's not that we can get away with not constructing a self. If we went through life without constructing a self, we would pretty much need twenty-four-hour care. The self is necessary. For the Buddha, the self is real—but it's real only as a concept. In other words, "I" is a useful sign pointing to something. And the problem is that if I try to put into words what that something is that "I" is pointing toward, what do I come up with? Another concept. This is where we get lost in this world.

So when Dogen Zenji—or rather the Chinese teacher Hong Dao of Yao Shan—says "non-thinking" in answer to the question "How do you think not-thinking?", what he's talking about is a relationship to experience in which we don't get caught up in the concepts. We don't mistake the sign for what the sign is pointing toward. This is a mind which is not lost in the realm of concept.

It's the same. But the map is useful, even though it isn't the territory. Whatever it is, it can't be the territory.

So how do we practice cutting through the realm of concept? The Buddha speaks about the signless samadhi, the *animitta samadhi*. He also talks about the signless liberation, *animitta vimutti*. The signless represents the realm not dependent upon concept—it's the realm of awakening, of enlightenment.

Notice that he describes the signless as both samadhi and liberation. Samadhi means a practice, something that we do, while liberation is a realization, something that happens to us. Let's look at it firstly in terms of practice.

We've already talked about this in our discussion of the one-way street. Remember how we spoke of noting as the active awareness of experience—the elemental quality of experience, what Nyanaponika Thera calls bare attention. A sensation is just a sensation, a thought is just a thought, an emotion is just an emotion. This is noting, and this is what we practice from day one.

In its maturity, this is the practice that the Buddha explains to Bahiya of the Bark Cloth. He says: "Then Bahiya, this is how you should train. In the seen, there will be just the seen. In the heard, just the heard. In the sensed, just the sensed. In the known, just the known. In this way, you should train yourself."

This is a very famous passage where the Buddha sums up the complete practice in one paragraph. In the seen there will be just the seen, and so on; in the known, just the known. The known here represents the sixth sensitivity—the mind—which we explored today in terms of tracking the thought stream. What we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think, or mind is just that. It's just what it is. Nothing else.

In tracking the thought stream, we're learning to pay attention to the activity of thinking, the process of thinking, and see it as just an activity, just a process, nothing more. When we do this, we learn not to take the contents of our thoughts so seriously. As this practice develops, we become actually more interested in the activity of thinking than what we are thinking about, in terms of ordinary everyday thinking. And we begin to recognize the gap between what we think a situation is and what it really is.

Again, we return to the experience of anticipation as an example. How often have you anticipated some event or situation and been excited by it or alarmed by it? And how often does it turn out that the story we tell ourselves about this anticipated event is identical to the actual event when it occurs? In my case, when I've kept account, it's never the same. Never.

It's not simply that we anticipate the future in terms of planning, which is very useful. But we become stuck in the conviction that things will turn out as we are anticipating them now—which is wrong, which is a delusion. If we can learn to recognize that anticipation is just anticipation, then we can plan for the future without losing our sense of adaptability, without losing a sense of being ready for the unexpected. Because we know, as we enter into the event, that we really do not know how things will unfold. And so we're ready to pivot as soon as we recognize what is actually happening.

But if we take the anticipation to be the future, then we charge into that future and don't see where our plans are actually counterproductive, where they're clearly not working. Our tendency is to double down and keep charging ahead because it must be right—the concept is right, the theory is right, so this must be right.

To recognize that a concept is just a concept gives us a great deal more maneuverability in the world.

Now let's look at the signless liberation from the perspective of realization. What is the realm beyond concept? What is that world like?

First of all, the world continues to function as it did before. We are still seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. We're in a world of experience. But we are no longer dependent upon a world of named experience, of conceptualized experience. Rather, we're in an unnamed experience.

An unnamed experience has a particular characteristic to it: it cannot be pinned down as anything at all. Later on, we could look back and name it as something.

But we know that the label has already missed the mark—that there's a gap between the actuality and the name we place upon it. And we can never cross that gap. There's always a gap between the actuality of the experience and the name that we put upon it.

Now, this may sound mystical, but it's something that all of us are familiar with. Let's say, for example, that I am an enthusiastic coffee drinker. Let's say that I have a friend who very strangely and very oddly drinks tea instead of coffee, which you must admit is kind of incomprehensible. So in my compassion, I may try to explain to him the unique pleasure that comes from drinking a good cup of coffee, and how this is manifestly superior to whatever pleasure you get from drinking a cup of tea. Now, no matter how eloquent I am, can I convey this experience to him? Of course I can't. It's impossible. Because no amount of concepts about the experience of drinking a good cup of coffee can ever replace a good cup of coffee. There's a gap between the concept and the real that cannot be bridged. It's always there.

And in the signless liberation, we learn to live in that gap. This is living in the *animitta*, the signless. It's a world in which names do not apply. Ordinary life goes on—we see, we hear, we think, and so on. But we learn to recognize that while our seeing, our hearing, our thinking are real, they are actually present, what we see, what we hear, what we think—these are not what we take them to be. Our perceptions and our judgments of what we are sensing are wrong. They may be useful. They may even be necessary to get us through the day. But they are fundamentally wrong.

So then we ask, well, what is right? If the concepts are wrong, then what's right? As soon as we reach out to put a label on something, to name it as something, we are clinging to certainty. And this is what the world of concept gives us—it gives us certainty. I know what this is. And we really value certainty. But the price of that certainty is clinging to a meaning, to a concept, and when we cling we are stuck and we are in pain.

But when we recognize that our label does not match the reality, that our concept is wrong, then we can relax. We can relax into uncertainty. And this uncertainty stimulates our curiosity. I don't know. So what is it after all? We become curious. We don't take things for granted, but instead we are alert to what's unfolding right now. We're present to the actuality of the experience, rather than this web of habitual concepts about our present experience.

And this attitude is really important in meditation practice—that we learn not to take anything for granted, to not assume that we know what it is, but to look: what is it? When we think we know, we fall into habit. If I think I know what's going on, I don't really need to pay attention anymore. It's like getting into a car and driving down familiar streets. I don't really need to pay attention to the act of driving because I already

know how to drive. So I can drive while thinking of something else. I can pivot my reality into the realm of concept and avoid the activity of driving the car. And I do this because I think I know how to drive and I think I know how to get from here to there.

Now, of course, in practical terms, I do know how to drive and I can get from here to there. But what's happening is I'm operating under autopilot. And the experience of driving from here to there—I'm separated from it by this web of concept. The mind is dull because it's in a state of habit. I'm just drifting and dreaming. I arrive at my destination and I might realize I have no memory of that trip. It might be that I wanted to check whether a certain shop was open because I was driving past it. And I might realize I've got no idea whether that shop is open or not. I'm not even sure that it's even there. I can't register even seeing it.

So this is the world of habit. And habit—the world of habit—is the world of habitual concept. Concept gives us certainty, which is why it's so attractive. But when we're certain, we fall back into habit, which means we're asleep. When we know that we don't know, then we stay alert. Because I don't know what's going to happen next. If I don't know what's going to happen next, then I pay attention. And then I'm present for the experience. And then the experience has a whole different flavor to it.

This is what in the Zen tradition they call beginner's mind—which is used to describe the mature practitioner.

As I like to point out to people when we start a retreat, I check to see who's new in the audience, who has never done a retreat before. A few people will very tentatively raise their hands, and I explain to them: you have an enormous advantage over these other people in this room. There are people in this room who have been meditating for many years, and they are so lost in their delusions that they think they know what's going to happen next. They think they know this will happen on day one, that will happen on day two, and they can expect this to happen on day three. Completely lost.

Whereas you, as a beginner—you know you don't know what's going to happen next. This is naive beginner's mind. And I promise them that if they practice diligently and skillfully over a long period of time, one day they will know that they don't know what's going to happen next. And this is mature beginner's mind. This is what the Zen tradition greatly values.

And this is the world of the signless liberation—stepping out of the realm of concept.

The way the Buddha explains it to Bāhiya: "When there is just seen in the seen, just the heard in the heard, just the sensed in the sensed, just the known in the known—then you are not by that. When you are not by that, then you are not there. When you are not there, then you are neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

I can't put it any clearer than the way the Buddha puts it.

CHAPTER 103

On 'The Burning Sutta' (Ādittapariyāya Sutta)

Patrick Kearney · 52 min

In this detailed exploration of the Ādittapariyāya Sutta (SN 35.28), Patrick Kearney examines the Buddha's third major discourse, delivered to a thousand newly converted ascetics atop Gayāsīsa hill. Kearney provides rich historical context, recounting how the Buddha strategically sought out the influential Jaṭila ascetics—fire-worshipping dreadlock-wearers led by the three Kassapa brothers—and spent nearly a month demonstrating his shamanic powers before finally convincing Uruvelā Kassapa that power and awakening are not the same thing.

The discourse itself represents a radical inversion of Vedic fire symbolism. Where the Brahmanic tradition revered fire as sacred and divine, the Buddha teaches that the six sense fields are 'burning' with the fires of rāga (obsession), dosa (aversion), and moha (delusion). Kearney explains how this teaching emphasizes vedanā (feeling) and the immediacy of sensory contact, directing attention away from conceptual stories toward the felt intimacy of present experience. The practice centers on the body and the 'here-ness' of experience—a portable, universal approach requiring no special implements or sacred places.

Kearney draws out practical implications for meditation, contrasting active approaches (directing attention to an object) with receptive approaches (allowing experience to come to us). The body's language, unlike the mind's stories, never lies and is always about the present moment. This discourse points toward recognizing the layers of meaning we construct atop immediate experience and learning to return to the ground of what is actually happening here and now—the path toward the 'cooling down' that is Nibbāna.

So tonight we're going to look at the world of affect. Last night we looked at the world of concept. We're coming at it from a different direction, but the way we'll do it tonight is by going through one discourse: the Āditta Pariyāya Sutta, or in English, "Burning."

This is the third full discourse of the Buddha, which he gave some months after his awakening. He became awakened at a place called Bodh Gaya, which is near the city of Gaya in what is now southern Bihar state, south of the Ganga. When he started teaching, he began his teaching career by walking northwest to a place called Isipatana, at Sarnath, just north of Varanasi.

He stayed there a number of weeks. He taught his first two discourses, he accumulated disciples, and then he decided to leave. At this point he had sixty bhikkhus, sixty monks, and all of them were fully awakened. He sends them out to teach. He says, "Wander, bhikkhus, for the blessing of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing, the happiness of devas and people. Do not two of you go by the same way. Teach the dhamma, which is lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely at the end, in both its spirit and its letter."

Interestingly, he sends them off alone—not even two by two. This is no more than three months since his awakening, but he's already got sixty students in whom he has such confidence that he sends them off alone to wander and teach.

The Buddha has his own plans. He says, "I shall go to Uruvela, to Senanigama, to teach the dhamma." What he's doing here is retracing his steps, going back towards Gaya. Uruvela is to the southwest, on the near side of the Naranjana River. This is the river that flows through Bodh Gaya, and Gaya, the city itself, is on the far side of the river. He's aiming for the near side.

Now, this area is the Buddha's old stamping ground. This is where he did his ascetic practices, so he knows this area quite well. He knows the people in it, he knows the ascetics who are practicing there. And it's a good bet that the ascetics there know him—but they don't know him as the Buddha. They know him as a fellow ascetic who disappeared at one point. Now, several months later, he's turning up again, and this time he claims to be the Buddha.

He's going there for a very definite reason. He's on a missionary journey, and he has a very clear target, someone very specific that he wants to convert. With this mission in mind, he enters the territory of the Jaṭila, the dreadlock wearers. These are ascetics who wear dreadlocks and not much else. There are three brothers who are leaders of this particular sect: Kassapa of Uruvela, who's the head of five hundred ascetics; Kassapa of the River, head of three hundred ascetics; and Kassapa of Gaya, head of two hundred ascetics. They're listed in order of their importance, and they're all living along this river. The one furthest upstream is Kassapa of Uruvela, who has the five hundred ascetics. He's the big guy, the number one. His hermitage is located at Senanigama, which is why the Buddha's going there.

These ascetics belong to a sect that combines aspects of the Northwestern Brahmanic tradition—what we know as Hinduism, and particularly the role of the Brahmins—which comes out of what is now Pakistan, out of the Northwest. Over the centuries, it gradually went southeast through the Ganges Valley. At the time of the Buddha, in this

area in the mid to lower reaches of the Ganga, the Brahmanic tradition was relatively weak and the old indigenous traditions were very strong. This sect combines both of these. We'll talk more about them as we go through.

So the Buddha heads to the hermitage of Kassapa of Uruvela. He would have known him—either he'd met him before or he knows him by reputation, one or the other. This guy used to be a neighbor and he's very important. The Buddha rocks into town, goes up to Kassapa, and says, "Kassapa, if you have no objection, I should like to spend one night in your fire chamber." Basically, he turns up as a house guest.

And Kassapa says, "I have no objection, great Samana."

Now notice what he calls him—great Samana. The Samanas are the non-Brahman ascetics and practitioners. So Kassapa is a Samana. The Buddha is a Samana. Kassapa doesn't know him as the Buddha; he knows him as a Samana, as a practitioner, but a great practitioner. Everybody has a lot of respect for him.

"I have no objection, great Samana, but there is a savage royal Naga there. He has supernormal powers. He is venomous, fearfully poisonous, and he's quite capable of killing you."

So you get this dialogue between these two big figures. One's the local king, and the other—it's like the gunslinger who walks into town, throws open the door of the saloon, and strides in. Kassapa is giving a clear warning to this visitor: mess with our patron spirit at your own risk. The naga is a serpent, of course, a serpent spirit.

So the Buddha walks in as the macho man, saying, "Yeah, I'll just stay the night in your fire chamber." In other words, he's going to stay the night in the residence of a powerful spirit who doesn't like being disturbed, who is associated with the elements of earth, fire, and water, who is a shapeshifter. What the Buddha is doing is an absolute no-no—absolutely not. You do not just barge into the personal territory of a powerful spirit. In Australian Indigenous tradition, it's the same thing. You just don't barge in. Not if you know what's good for you. If you're going to go in, you ask for permission and you'd be very careful about it. But the Buddha's not doing any of this. He's just marching up saying, "Yeah, I'd like to sleep here."

So Kassapa says, "Sure, go ahead."

The Buddha walks in and makes himself comfortable. And the Naga, the serpent spirit, is really seriously displeased. So he produces smoke and flame to chase away this stranger. And the Buddha also produces smoke and flame. You can produce smoke and flame; I can produce smoke and flame. But the Buddha does it carefully so that it

doesn't harm the Naga. The Buddha is a powerful shaman here—we have his shamanism coming out—but he also acts out of love and compassion. He doesn't hurt anybody. He doesn't harm anybody.

So the Naga angrily blazes up with flames. And then the Buddha enters into the fire element and he blazes up in flames. Our text says that with both of them ablaze, it was like the fire chamber itself was in flames, burning and blazing.

Now, by this stage, everybody has gathered around watching the show. They're watching this huge fire burning and consuming the fire chamber—except the fire chamber stays; it remains unburnt. And they say to each other, "The great Samana who is so beautiful is being destroyed by the Naga." You notice how the Buddha is perceived by others. His appearance was very striking. There are many comments about that, about people who meet him—the first thing they notice is how good-looking he is.

So you've got this fire show all night, and of course by the end of it, as far as the ascetics are concerned, there can't be much left of this character. And in the morning, out walks the Buddha holding his bowl. It's got a lid on the bowl. He walks up to Kassapa and lifts the lid. Kassapa looks in, and there is a tiny little snake. The Buddha explains how the Naga's fire was exhausted by his fire, the Buddha's fire. In other words, he's had this macho pitched battle with this powerful spirit and he wins absolutely convincingly, showing Kassapa the evidence.

And Kassapa thinks that the Buddha must be very, very powerful. But this visitor is not fully awakened like he, Kassapa, is. Because Kassapa thinks he's fully awakened.

So what the Buddha is doing here—he's putting on a performance as a mighty shaman. His audience is Kassapa. And what he's doing is challenging him. Kassapa's practice revolves around the elements, and fire element is very important to him. The Buddha, without saying it, is declaring: I am more powerful than you, and therefore I am your superior. He's showing himself to be a master of one-upmanship.

But Kassapa is not convinced, because Kassapa feels that power is one thing but awakening is another. So he respects the Buddha's power and welcomes him into the community as an honored guest—although one he treats very carefully. The Buddha is given a hut outside the main area, tucked away in a little grove.

But Kāsyapa does not take a demonstration of superior power as evidence of awakening. And therefore he doesn't take it as evidence that he, Kāsyapa, has got something to learn from this fellow.

Now, what you've got with Kāsyapa is first of all, he's very stubborn—very much like the Buddha himself, particularly the Buddha before he was awakened. But he also shows a very good instinct, because it's absolutely correct that power and awakening are not the same. People often make the mistake of confusing the two. They go looking for the powerful guru or the powerful practice that blows your head off, and they think if it's powerful, it must be better. But this is not the case. Power is one thing. Awakening is entirely another.

And this perhaps indicates why the Buddha is so interested in him, because Kāsyapa is a man of wisdom. Yet he is deluded. He doesn't understand what awakening is. He thinks he's awakened, but the Buddha knows that he's not.

So the Buddha settles in as a kind of vaguely unwelcome guest—but the kind of guest you can't quite show the door to. And he stays there almost a month, performing ever more spectacular miracles, demonstrating shamanic power. I won't go through them all because that would take all night. But it's a very spectacular show, trying to convert Kāsyapa, yet always with the same result: Kāsyapa thinks, "Yes, he's very powerful, but he's not awakened like I am."

After about twenty-four days, almost a month, the Buddha's getting fed up with this game. He changes tack. He thinks, "This foolish fellow will continue thinking like this for a long time." So he changes tactics. He decides he has to generate some saṃvega in Kāsyapa. Saṃvega is a kind of spiritual fear or agitation. One old translation of it is "shock"—it's like, "Oh, I've got to do something about this."

And what the Buddha does is he verbally puts the boot in. He says, "Kāsyapa, you are not an arahant. You are not an awakened one. And you are not on the way to becoming one. There is nothing in your practice by which you might become an awakened one or enter into the way of becoming an awakened one." So he's giving a verbal bashing—bang, bang, bang—wake up!

Now finally Kāsyapa was convinced. It took almost a month. And why would Kāsyapa be convinced now? It's because over that month the Buddha had made it perfectly clear by his actions that he knew Kāsyapa's practice, and frankly he was much better at it than Kāsyapa was. So if anybody knows where this practice leads, it's the Buddha. And he clearly is saying this doesn't lead to awakening.

Kāsyapa, who's a very sincere character—although he had convinced himself that he was awakened, and he's in a difficult position to change tune because he's a big guru, a major figure in this region—he's prepared to give up this idea. He surrenders, and he converts.

But before he converts, he consults with his students: "Are you okay with this?" And they tell him, "We have long had faith in the great samaṇa. If you lead the highest life under him, we will do likewise." In other words, out of the five hundred students that Kāsyapa had, he was the last one to figure out what was going on. I find this very interesting because, in a sense, he's a typical leader—the last one to figure out what's going on.

And then, according to our text, the ascetics "took their hair"—so they shaved off their hair, their dreadlocks—their belongings, and their implements for the fire sacrifice, and they dropped them into the water to be carried away. They took all this stuff and threw it in the river, in the Gaṅgā.

Now, why do they do this? Are they just throwing this stuff away? Are they saying, "Well, now we're Buddhists, so we don't have anything to do with this heathen shamanic stuff—get rid of it"? No, I don't think they are. What they're doing is making an offering to the devas who live in the river. They have a particular relationship with the gods and spirits who live in that river. Remember in the English language tradition, King Arthur got his sword Excalibur from the lady in the lake, a water spirit, and when he died he made sure he got back to the lake and threw the sword back in. What he was doing was not chucking it out—he was returning it. So that's what the ascetics are doing. They're not rejecting their gods; they're still paying their gods respect. They're giving back to the gods.

the implements which in their minds they got from them. But they're just changing their practice. Their way of practice has to be changed.

And this is typical of Buddhism. Buddhism absorbs. It doesn't simply reject. When Buddhism comes to a new culture, it doesn't say, "Okay, everything you practiced and believed in up until now, stop. You just do what we tell you to do." Rather, it absorbs what it feels to be good, to be wholesome, and encourages people to reject what is ethically unwholesome.

So all this equipment floats down the river and it comes to the territory of Kassapa of the River, the second brother. He fears that disaster has struck, so when he sees all this stuff flooding by, he heads upriver and goes to see Uruvela Kassapa. Uruvela Kassapa explains that he's converted, and Kassapa of the River says, "Is this better, Kassapa?" And Uruvela Kassapa says, "Yes, it is." And so that group converts. Then they shave and chuck all their stuff in the river, and the brother at the bottom of the hierarchy, Gayā Kassapa, he sees all this stuff floating down. He goes upriver and it's the same thing. So all of them convert, and then they're ready to be taught.

The Buddha takes them to a hill, Gayā Sīsa, where he teaches them this discourse on burning—the third teaching.

So after all that introduction, now we move into the discourse itself.

The Buddha has a thousand ascetics at the top of this hill. Now this hill is the one hill in the area. This is the flat plains of Southern Bihar, flat as a table. And in this area is one hill, Gayā Sīsa—Gayā Head. He takes them away from the river, across the land, and up to the top of that hill in order to teach them. We'll have a look at why he might do that later on.

But what he teaches them—he says, "Everything is burning. And what is this everything that is burning? The eye sensitivity is burning. Visual forms are burning. Visual awareness is burning. Visual contact is burning. And whatever feeling arises dependent upon visual contact, whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. Burning with birth, aging, and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair.

"The ear sensitivity is burning. The nose sensitivity is burning. The tongue sensitivity is burning. The body sensitivity is burning. The mind sensitivity is burning. Phenomena are burning. Mind awareness is burning. Mind contact is burning. And whatever feeling arises dependent upon mind contact, whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. Burning with birth, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair."

So this is the discourse, or at least the opening of it.

Now to get a bit of background here, the Buddha lived towards the end of the Vedic period, which was about 1500 to 500 BCE. The Vedic orthodoxy which was developing during this time and heading southeast is being shaken up and changed by the practices and ideas that are native to the Ganges Valley. And so you get this mixture starting to happen. The Buddha was part of this mixing.

Vedic worship centered around the elements like fire and rivers, and also the worship of heroic gods like Indra, the chanting of hymns, the performance of sacrifices. Fire was and is very important to Brahmins.

So traditional Brahmins keep three fires burning at their homes at all times. One to cook food, one to receive the offerings that are sacrificed, and one to ward off evil spirits. It was believed that the gods live in the fire. In fact, fire itself was a god—Agni—or is a god.

Now the dreadlocked ascetics, these are an offshoot. They're also focused on fire worship. They're also focused on shamanism and on sacrifice. They're not orthodox, but they're part of this broader tradition.

What the Buddha did in his teaching was reverse the Vedic symbolic imagery. Remember, he taught Nibbāna or Nirvāṇa—extinction, literally extinction, the going out of a fire. In other words, he inverts the image of fire. Fire becomes the problem; the going out of the fire becomes the solution. He completely reverses this Vedic imagery. This way of talking would really seize the attention of people who come out of this broader Vedic tradition, like this new audience of dreadlocked ascetics. So he's talking to them about burning—burning with obsession, burning with delusion, and so on. Clearly fire is not good. They're being taught something completely outside their expectations. This is completely new to them. This is quite shocking.

Now these ascetics—their practice revolved around a felt intimacy with the elements. It's a very powerful, direct practice, and it's largely focused on the body. It's very physical. A lot of physical labour, including preparing the fire sacrifice, ritual bathing. They would make a point of bathing in midwinter, in the coldest time of year, and so on. They're interested in fire and they're interested in water, the water of the sacred river.

These practices that they do are dependent upon specific conditions that they have to be able to fulfill. Firstly, possessions—they need the ritual implements for performing their rituals. If you don't have these implements, you can't do it. Secondly, they're dependent upon certain places, the sacred places of river and forest.

Like elsewhere in the ancient world, spirits were very localized. A particular area is inhabited by particular spirits. When we had the welcome to country at the beginning of the retreat, we're talking about how a particular nation has a connection with a particular place. That connection is more than the physicality of the place—it includes the spirits who inhabit that area, and there's a very specific relationship. There's a sense in which you cannot do what you need to do if you're outside that area, because you don't have that immediate contact with the elements and with the spirits. The ascetics have that kind of relationship.

The Buddha's approach to practice that he's starting to teach them is very, very different. First of all, no special equipment is necessary. It's maximum simplicity. These days we do have equipment—we have nice meditation pads, cushions, a nice bell, and so on. But in ancient India, of course, you didn't need cushions and pads. You just sat on the ground. That's an approach to practice that does not require special implements. Maximum simplicity. And secondly, it's not limited to any special place. You can do it anywhere; one is free to move anywhere. This means that his approach to the practice is characterized by universalism. You see it before when he sends all his students out: wander wherever you like. There's no limitation. There are no special places that they need to confine themselves to. The tradition is portable. In fact, Buddhism is the first world religion, the first one that has this universal spirit.

So when the Buddha is teaching the ascetics, what does he do? First of all, they get rid of the implements that they normally depend upon. Then he takes them away from their familiar places. He takes them away from their sacred places. And he takes them to a place which is pretty much as opposite as possible to the place where they've been practising. They've been practising on the lowland close to a river, which of course is very low. He takes them to the highest place he can find in that region.

So he's telling them, without telling them, you don't need your sacred places.

And then he teaches them a felt intimacy with the elements in this burning. What is it that's burning? It's the six sensitivities. They have been practicing in a way that was intimate with the elements, and he's showing them another practice of intimacy with the elements, but it's turned around—it's a different style. The elements here come from the six sense fields: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding.

Now, these elements of experience are available to all of us, all the time. In other words, they're available to us right now. There's no need for special circumstances, spirits, sacred places, particular seasons. What's needed is an intimacy with the elemental qualities of experience—in other words, intimacy with vedana. This practice is all about vedana, the realm of affect. And you notice this intimacy comes via the body.

Now, when the Buddha talks about the human being, the two basic ways he does it are through the five aggregates, or five bundles, and the six sense fields. In his second discourse, he taught the five aggregates where he was teaching not-self, anatta, emptiness. And whenever the tradition talks about emptiness or not-self, they do it in relation to the five aggregates. So those of you who are familiar with Mahayana Buddhism—maybe Tibetan or Zen—you know about the Heart Sutra, which is all about emptiness. And it revolves around the five aggregates. This is very typical.

Now, if you look at the five aggregates—body, feeling (always important), perception, constructions, awareness—of the five, one is physical and four are non-physical. Then you look at the six senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding—of the six, five are physical and one is mental and non-physical. So it's a very different emphasis. It's a shift away from mind to body. But of course, as we've been discussing, you can't have body separate from mind, you can't have mind separate from body. But the emphasis here is quite distinct. It's focused on body. And the emphasis also is on the immediacy of experience.

This is contact. It's usually translated as contact. So looking at the first sensitivity, seeing—the eye sensitivity, visual forms, visual contact. Eye sensitivity, visual forms, visual awareness: the meeting of the three is contact. So experience is an event where at least three things come together—the sense sensitivity, what the sensitivity is sensitive to, and the awareness of it. These three things collide, bang, and something happens. And that connection, that collision, is contact. In Pali it's phassa, which literally means touch. So we are touched by experience through our sensitivities.

And when there's touch, there is affect or influence—vedana, feeling. And this link is very strong, as we've been discussing. And where is this contact clearest and most obvious? In the physical senses. That's where it's most obvious. So if we want to get in touch with the world of affect, of feeling—and this is something that arises with touch—then where would we go about looking for it? Well, the body. That's the obvious place: in the body, in the broad sense of the five physical senses. But the tradition also emphasizes in particular the fifth, which is touch sensitivity.

So there's an intimacy of experience. Experience is a stimulus—we're touched by something. And as soon as we are touched, we respond. This is contact and feeling. And this intimacy of stimulus is always available. It's always happening.

In other words, it's happening now, through the six senses, right now. So this is not an abstract third-person philosophical teaching. This is a felt, first-person teaching. It's about what's happening to us right now, and it's designed to bring us back to the feel of here and now. The feel of here and now is where everything is available. This is what the Buddha is teaching.

So we have touch and feeling, or contact and feeling, or touch and response—and it's already happening. This is really important when you work with vedanā, with feeling. I don't have to do anything to make this happen. It's already happening. We are already responding. We are already moved. We don't have to do anything extra to respond. It's already happening.

"Burning"—this discourse points to the immediacy of experience. The use of the fire image puts an emphasis on the pain and drivenness of experience. There's a restless dissatisfaction at the heart of things, a dis-ease or an unease which is so subtle and so omnipresent that we've ceased to notice it. We notice our thoughts and our emotions blowing about in the wind, but we don't notice the restless, dissatisfied quality deep within the heart itself—the source of our restless thoughts and emotions.

So the practice of the senses begins with the acknowledgement of dukkha, of unease, and the need to become intimate with it. It's the opposite of avoiding. A lot of our thinking is really an avoidance strategy. "I don't find what's going on now amusing—I'll just have a little think about something." This practice is about not avoiding anything, but opening up to be intimate with what is happening right now, feeling our way into whatever is happening now.

The emphasis is on receptivity. And in particular, feeling or sensing what we normally resist or reject or overlook. Something is going on, and often it's something beneath normal awareness, and that something is subtly colouring everything that's happening. You notice how you can be going along and there can be just a slight shift in mood, and suddenly it's like you're living in a different world. The day is completely different. That mood shifts again—everything's different. This practice is all about what's underneath that's colouring everything above.

Now whatever it is, it's already here, and it's not a question of looking for it—because if we look for something, that implies it's something special that may not be discovered. It's not a question of looking for it. It's a question of feeling it, sensing what is already here, already happening.

As I said, as a practice style this would suggest something more receptive rather than active. In an active approach to meditation, we deliberately direct awareness to a meditation object and hold it in our awareness. For example, if breathing is my meditation object, I direct my awareness toward the movements of the breathing, and possibly I choose to do so in a specific area of the body—the abdomen or the nostrils—and then I hold my attention onto those movements. That's active.

In a receptive approach, we allow the meditation object to come to us. For example, if breathing is my meditation object, I begin with the obvious: that I am already breathing. I don't have to start doing anything special in order to breathe. It's obvious that I am already breathing. And then I let the experience of breathing come to me, rather than me going to it. It's more receptive. It can be the same object, but it's a different relationship.

In this scheme of the six senses, the emphasis is on the body. The sixth sensitivity is mind, mano. Its role in this scheme is that mind absorbs the data provided by the five physical senses, coordinates it, supplements it with its own particular form of data—mental data—and creates a sensual unity, a unity of the senses. If you consider your sense experience right now: right now there's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching.

These are taking place now. Where are they taking place? They're taking place here. This practice emphasizes the here-ness of experience. Thought and story take us away from the here-ness of the sentient body to other places and to other times. The sense fields bring us back to here. Even mind is included in the sense of the here-ness of the mind.

So right now I am conceiving myself in my world. I'm creating an identity. I'm creating a world of concept. Where am I doing this? I'm doing it here. The mind creates worlds that are far distant in time and space. But where are these worlds being created and sustained? Here. So this practice is all about location—here.

You notice that with the ascetics, their practice is also about location, but their sense of location is that you have to have a special geographical area. And the Buddha is saying no, the special geographical area is the here that you have with you all of the time, that in fact you cannot escape.

Tracking the six sense fields as a practice centers on feeling, the world defined by affect. The world of concept is centered around story. The world of affect, of feeling, is more intimate than the world of story. It's fundamentally more real in the sense of its power, its power to move us. But paradoxically, it can be more difficult to notice, and we can have more resistance surrendering to it. We come to it primarily through the body. So our relationship to the body is absolutely central in this approach.

Now, one reason why we're attracted by stories, as we talked about, is because the mind has language, and it's the language of story. As human beings, we're fascinated by story. We're always interested in story. So we learn to listen to the language of the mind and to pay attention to it, to absorb ourselves in it.

The body also has a language. But it's different from the mind's language in that the body's language does not tell stories. The language of the body is sensational. And interestingly, the stories that the mind tells us are quite often false. But the body never lies. Everything it says is absolutely true. Yet we tend not to listen to it until it starts shouting at us, such as when we fall sick after a period of working too hard.

So this practice is very much about learning to listen to the physical senses—body in the broad sense, but body also in the narrow sense of touch sensitivity. The language of the mind tells us stories that involve the reality of time, of past and future. The language of the body is always about the present, always. The language of the mind tells us stories of places far away from here. And the language of the body is always about here, this place.

Vedanā is central to this. As we talked about, vedanā is associated with intimacy—intimacy with the immediate touch of the senses and with our response to that touch. As the Buddha says, the eye sensitivity is burning. Visual forms are burning. Visual awareness is burning. Visual contact is burning. And whatever feeling arises dependent upon visual contact, whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant, that too is burning. Whenever he talks about the senses, he talks first of all about the touch of the experience, and then he moves on to feeling. That's always central to it.

So when the sentient body is touched, it responds. And that response is motivated by feeling, by vedanā. We are moved by the touch of the experienced world. And as we said this morning, we're moved to hold on to what we experience as pleasant, to resist or reject what we experience as painful, and to ignore or be confused by what we experience as neither painful nor pleasant. Now this, as again we mentioned this morning, is not something that we have any choice about. It's just the way nature is.

It's just the way nature works.

So vedana, or feeling, represents the world as given, before we make any choice about it—but while we're already responding to it. These are the fundamental movements of the heart, and this discourse is directing our attention to these movements.

We are already entangled in the world of the senses. We are already moved. We are already responding. But what are we responding to? Are we responding to the fantasies that we create with our conceptual minds, or are we responding to the actuality of experience here and now?

The discourse goes on—we don't have time to explore it tonight—about the cooling down process. And it's basically the practice we've been doing over the past five days: recognising that the layers of meaning we construct on top of the immediacy of experience are just that—layers of meaning added on.

It's like we're building a skyscraper, and we tend to live in the penthouse. But in the practice, we're learning to move down, back to the ground, to get in touch with that foundation, to get as close as possible to what's actually happening here and now. And from here, we can then relate to the world of concept in a way which is much more useful.

The discourse ends like this: "As this explanation was being given"—and we've actually only looked at the first part of it—"the hearts of the thousand bhikkhus were liberated from the movements by not clinging." A thousand students became fully awakened.

This is actually, according to the tradition, the largest number of people to be awakened in one hit. It's one of the indications that the tradition considers this discourse very important—one of the ways they signal this. Numbers in the discourses are symbolic, as is typical of an oral society. You don't take them literally.

To return to the context of the discourse: Buddhism, the Buddha's organisation, is now getting very big. A month ago, he had sixty students. Now he's got over a thousand. It's exponential. And these characters are very well known in this area. The three Kassapa brothers are very distinguished gurus in this territory.

So what the Buddha has done is accelerate his rise as a top figure on the guru ladder. We don't have time to look at this in detail, but basically his career is now really starting to take off.

One of the things I like about this discourse, and in particular the stories around it, is that it shows the Buddha as a strategic thinker. He wants to establish Buddhism in this area. How to do it? He thinks: Kassapa. Uruvela Kassapa. Get him and I'm in. And he was right—he was in. And the rest, as they say, is history.

CHAPTER 104

On Karma

Patrick Kearney · 30 min

In this dharma talk, Patrick Kearney offers a nuanced exploration of karma (kamma) and vipāka (the ripening of action), challenging common misunderstandings that reduce this profound teaching to fatalism or a cosmic reward-and-punishment system. Building on previous discussions of sīla (ethics) as virtue ethics, Kearney examines karma as the consequentialist dimension of the Buddha's ethical framework—understanding that our actions have results that either move us toward or away from awakening.

Kearney traces the historical development of the karma concept from Vedic ritual action through Jain moral interpretation to the Buddha's revolutionary insight: that karma is fundamentally cetanā (intention or choice). As the Buddha declared, 'I declare that choice is action'—it is the impulse within the heart-mind (citta) that constitutes the essence of karma. This understanding places responsibility squarely in the present moment rather than attributing our circumstances to past lives or divine will. The Buddha explicitly rejected three fatalistic views: that everything is caused by past action, by God's will, or by random chance —because such beliefs lead to giving up rather than taking skillful action.

Using the Loṇaphala Sutta (the Lump of Salt discourse), Kearney illustrates how the same action can have radically different consequences depending on one's ethical development, the breadth of one's heart, and the cultivation of wisdom. Karma operates as natural law like gravity—not as justice dispensed by a cosmic judge. This understanding carries profound implications: if we want justice in our world, we must create it ourselves through our choices and actions. The agricultural metaphor of vipāka (ripening) and bhāvanā (cultivation) reminds us that transformation requires patience, proper conditions, and time.

Our theme from last time, where we were looking at sila, ethics. Last time, we talked about how one way of looking at the Buddha's approach to ethics is to see it as a kind of virtue ethics, where his concern is with training ourselves to become a particular kind of person—a person who's characterized by particular virtues like generosity, love, compassion, and so on. The idea here is that ethics is not about following rules. It's about becoming a certain kind of person, and becoming a certain kind of person through a system of training or education.

If you look at the eightfold path, you could see this as a system of training, or an educational curriculum. And the object of the exercise is to become a certain kind of person—most obviously, for example, to become an enlightened person. But the central thing here is that it's not a rules-based ethics.

The precepts, when we take on the five precepts, pancha sila, the five-fold sila, each one of them is a sikapada. This is a word that gets translated as precept, or training precept, but it's actually more accurately translated as "way of training." Now the difference is that a precept is a rule, but a way of training is not a rule. It's something else. It's something that we undertake to do or not do. It's something that if we undertake to do it, we might undertake to do it occasionally or full time, a little bit or a lot, depending on circumstances. So this is the Buddha's approach to ethics seen as a virtue ethics.

We looked in particular at the link between sila and samadhi, between ethics and meditation. And we said how the key point here is that for the Buddha, the purpose of ethical behaviour is to create harmony within one's own heart and mind, and within one's community. If I have harmony—internal, psychological, external, social—then meditation, samadhi, becomes much easier. So there's a very close link for the Buddha between ethics and meditation.

And here we come to the second aspect of the Buddha's approach to ethics, and that is ethics as a form of consequentialism. In other words, the Buddha is concerned with the consequences of our actions. This is another side of his understanding of ethics.

We've said that he's got a system of training. The training is known as a path, the eightfold path. And the point about a path is that it leads to somewhere. So he's got a destination in mind, and the job—what we have to do—is to get from here, wherever we are, to the end of that path, to its destination, which in classical terms is awakening.

If we're going to take on that project, that means we need to work out the difference between those actions which take us in that direction along that path, versus those actions that take us in another direction. The Buddha expressed this in terms of learning to distinguish between the wholesome and the unwholesome, the skillful and the unskillful, or the way he put it, the kusala and the akusala.

This approach includes a sense of causality. What can I do that will cause me to move toward awakening? What must I avoid because it will cause me to move away from awakening? There's a sense of causation which is built into the Buddha's approach to ethics. And of course this takes us to karma—and that's what we're going to be talking about tonight: karma and vipaka, action and its ripening.

So one approach to ethics is consequentialist. In other words, we have this sense that an action is good if it has a good result. For example, is it ethical to lie? Most people would say no, it's not ethical to lie. The Buddha certainly said it's not ethical to lie. But let's say you're hiding a refugee. Let's say the border force knocks on your door and they ask if you know where this person is. Would it be ethical to tell the truth? "Yes, actually he's under the bed in the spare bedroom. Just go down that hall and turn right." Would that be the ethical thing to do? That's the truth. Or would it be ethical to say, "Oh yeah, him. Yeah, I saw him last week. He was getting on a bus to Adelaide." Would that be the ethical thing?

So it turns out to be more complicated than we might have begun with. There are certain actions which are not inherently ethical or unethical. We can judge them on the basis of their result. And this is included in the way that the Buddha himself frames what he sees as the fundamental ethical question. Remember last time we were talking about how each of us as human beings is faced with a fundamental ethical question or problem. And the question is: How should I live? Each of us is faced with this question. Each of us has come up with an answer.

And the answer is how we are in fact living. So that's our ethics.

The Buddha's version of this question is: What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? What is praiseworthy? What is blameable? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? What, having done it, will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term?

Now, to unpack this passage completely would take a lot longer than half an hour, so we're just going to focus on noticing how the Buddha's interest is in the long-term results of our actions. What will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term? What will bring me harm and suffering over the long term?

First of all, when he says "me"—so he's talking about the individual—I think it's important to get a sense of the social context. We, in our culture, are heavily individualist. We have the rights of the individual. We really emphasize that. We have the ideal of individual activity, entrepreneurial economic activity, and so on. And our sense of the individual is someone separated from everybody else. It's a very atomistic view of human nature and of society, coming out especially in economics and anything influenced by economics.

In that sense, somebody commented that the Buddha is not interested in the individual. He's interested in the person. Because a person is always connected. A person is always in relationship. There's no such thing as a person who is not in a network of re-

lationships. So when the Buddha is saying, "What will bring me happiness and welfare? What will bring me harm and suffering?"—he's assuming that the "me" is at the centre of a network of relationships. Whatever happens at that centre is going to radiate out and influence others. And equally, whatever is happening to others is going to radiate in and influence me. It's the socially embedded person that the Buddha is talking about. He doesn't explicitly say it; he just assumes it. To him it's so obvious that he doesn't actually need to explain it. So we could say it's the person rather than the individual.

This brings us to karma. Karma is a Sanskrit word that simply means "action." In Pali, which is the language of the Buddha, it's kamma. In English, it is karma—because karma is in the English dictionary, therefore it's an English word, very badly defined of course, but it's there. So I'm going to use karma, but it means simply action. And the Buddha classified himself as a teacher of action.

Karma was a concept that he inherited from the Vedic tradition. Originally in the Vedas, karma is the action of the sacrifice—actions that are performed during rituals, and in particular during the sacrifice. The sacrifice was crucial to Vedic religion; it was the centerpiece of the whole activity. In order to perform a successful sacrifice, you had to perform the ritual actions correctly, in the right order. Otherwise you screwed up the sacrifice. So karma, action, is very important because without it, if it's not correct, you mess the sacrifice up and you don't get the result.

The Jains later took this concept and gave it a spin, including a moral consequence to the action. The idea that our actions have a moral consequence—this was developed by the Jains, but they kept the idea that actions are physical.

The Buddha inherits this tradition and he turns it around. He says, actually what's central is the state of the mind with which one does the action—the state of mind that stimulates the action and the state of mind that results from the action. This is where he focused. And again, we've got to be careful with language.

When the Buddha talks about mind, he means more than just what's going on up here in the head. He means the heart as well. So the term often used is *citta*, which could be translated as heart-mind—in some contexts simply heart—but it includes the emotional, the affective, as well as the cognitive, the thinking side. Both.

The Buddha focused on the inner effect of action, and he saw action itself as fundamentally inner. In one very famous passage, he says, "I declare that choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing." Choice is my translation of the Pali word *cetanā*, often translated as intention—that's probably a more common

translation. But in any event, it's the impulse or the movement within the heart, within the mind, that stimulates the action. And the Buddha says, that's what I mean when I'm talking about karma.

What he's getting at is that it's the choices we make that create our lives. If I want to develop a life in which I live well and happily, and the people around me live well and happily, that means I have to pay attention to the choices that I make, because these choices have consequences. I've got to learn about this. I've got to work out what are the right choices to make that will lead me in the right direction, and what are the choices that lead me in the wrong direction. The latter are the ones I need to drop, and the former are the ones I need to cultivate.

This intersects with virtue ethics. For example, the Buddha says that generosity is a fundamental human virtue. It's so fundamental for him that it's not a Buddhist virtue—for the Buddha, it's a human virtue, universal. And he says, look, it's really important that we become generous people. So again, this is virtue ethics: How do I become a certain kind of person? Well, the way we do that is by practicing generosity. If I practice generosity, I become a generous person. If I practice stinginess, I become a stingy person.

How do I practice generosity? Through *dāna*. *Dāna* means gift or giving—it's an action noun, so it's both the act of giving and what is given. *Dāna* is the practice that cultivates generosity.

If I find myself making choices to be stingy—I could give, but I'm not going to, because I think I'll save the money—then that has an effect on the heart. And the effect on the heart is to make me a less generous person. Equally, of course, I might decide, look, I'm going to give a lot in this instance because I want to become a generous person. But then later on I regret it because I gave too much, actually, for my circumstances. Again, that will make me a less generous person, because my generosity is clashing with my wisdom. So it's not necessarily straightforward. But you get the basic point: it's the impulses from within the heart that lead to action, and these actions lead to forming a human life. This is where the Buddha focuses.

Karma is a very complex and controversial subject, so I want to focus on a few key points. First, one of the major misunderstandings about karma is that it's treated sometimes as a form of fatalism. This is very common in Asia, in Buddhist Asia.

And this understanding, or misunderstanding, is used to justify social injustice. If you've got people who are poor and desperate, well, it's because they did bad things in their previous life and they should just get their act together and they'll be reborn in a better life.

Now, this view of karma as fatalism was explicitly rejected by the Buddha. In one discourse on outsider teachings, he lists three views held by teachers in other traditions about what creates the conditions of our lives. He lists these three views and rejects all of them.

The first is that whatever we experience is caused by what we did in the past. He rejects that. The second is that whatever we experience is caused by the will of God. He rejects that too. And the third is that whatever we experience has no cause but arises spontaneously. This is dead-set fatalism.

Now, the reason why he rejected these views—he didn't say, "I reject these because they're not true." He said, "I reject these because if you actually believe any of these, then you will give up, because there's nothing you can do." If everything that happens to me is a result of things that happened in the past, well, I can't change the past, can I? So I'm stuck just replaying the old records. If whatever I experience is caused by the will of God, well, I can't change his mind, or her mind, or their mind. And if there's no cause but things just arise spontaneously, everything's out of my control. So the only rational response, if I really believe this, is to give up.

The Buddha was very strong on this point: no, you never give up. There is always something we can do. No matter how bad a situation, there is always something we can do. And it's our job as practitioners to find that something and to do it. In a sense, we're never released from that obligation.

One of the implications of this is that for the Buddha, the teaching of karma is not focused on the past, which is often the way we talk about it. It's always focused on the present.

The example I like to give is this: let's say you're stepping across a busy street in the city. Let's say some crazy drunk driver, speeding, hurls his car around the corner, smashes into you, and drives off. Let's say you're lying in the gutter, broken and bleeding. Let's say a compassionate Buddhist witnesses this and comes up to you and says, "Well, that's your bad karma."

Now, obviously this person is a complete bastard, but apart from that, would he be right from the Buddhist perspective? The answer is, of course, no. It's the driver's bad karma. The driver made some really bad choices that resulted in all this suffering. That's his bad karma.

Your karma, as you're lying in the gutter, is: okay, this happened. Now what? What do I do about it? How do I respond to this? That's your karma. But you notice it's about the present and the response to the present, and how do I shape my future given this present? What choices do I make given this situation right now?

And of course, in the traditional context, karma is seen in terms of life after life after life, which means there's a very big future that we're faced with. And along with that very big future are infinite possibilities that can arise. In other words, for the Buddha, karma is a teaching of opportunity. The future is open. Let's make a good one. That's his focus on it.

Another way of misunderstanding the doctrine of karma is to see it as a system of rewards and punishments. A lot of people make this mistake, including academics who should know better.

Karma vipāka—action and its ripening—is not a system of rewards and punishments. It's a law of nature for the Buddha, like the law of gravity. If I fall down a staircase and injure myself, lying at the bottom looking up, I don't think that the staircase has punished me. That's not what happened. It's just nature: if I trip at the top of the staircase and fall down, I'm likely to be injured. It's just nature. It's got nothing to do with rewards and punishments.

The other reason why it's definitely not a system of rewards and punishments is that in order to have such a system, you have to have a rewarder—someone up there who's handing out the rewards, or alternatively handing out the punishments. And for the Buddha, there isn't anyone. So it's just the law of nature.

Now this leads us to some interesting and rather upsetting conclusions once we see it like this, which is, I think, one of the reasons why we tend not to see it like this. There's one discourse called "A Lump of Salt," where the Buddha explains the system of karma in terms of the law of nature rather than cosmic justice. He says, if you have a lump of salt and you drop it into a mug of water—he's asking students—what happens to the water? And they say, "Oh, it's salty and becomes even undrinkable." He says, if you take the same lump of salt and drop it into the Ganges River, what happens? And they say, "Well, nothing happens. It's too small. It doesn't affect the Ganges."

The Buddha goes on to say that if you have someone whose ethics is poor, whose citta—heart-mind—is narrow and limited, and whose wisdom is undeveloped, they may perform an unwholesome action which has really serious consequences for them. Whereas someone whose ethics is good, whose heart is wide, and whose wisdom is developed performs exactly the same unwholesome action and the result could be so minor that it's barely noticeable. So the same action, coming from the same impulse, the same motivation, can have radically different effects on different people, depending on how developed they are.

The results of action, in other words, do not come about automatically. They do not come about because of some cosmic code. Even in the Buddhist tradition, karma is often presented in this way, in terms of morality tale: you mustn't steal in this life because if you do, you'll be reborn poor in the next life, or you mustn't be violent in this life because if you do, you'll suffer violence in your next life. But it's actually not like that. It's much more complex.

The example that the Buddha gives in this discourse is the results of theft. He says that you can have a person who steals something, is caught, goes before the courts, and is imprisoned for what they've done. You can have another person who steals exactly the same amount and the police are not interested—he does not go to court, he does not go to prison. What's the difference between the two people? The Buddha explains that the person who is imprisoned is one who is poor, while the person who escapes imprisonment is one who is rich.

It's a very interesting example. And of course, he's being brutally honest. He says, look at society—there is one law for the rich and one for the poor, in his day. And if we look at our own society, we realize that actually things haven't changed. Not really. So he gives this example of social injustice to illustrate that it's not a system of codified rewards and punishments. It's much more alive than that. It's got nothing to do with justice. It's simply the natural workings out of cause and effect. That's all.

And one of the lessons that comes out of this, of course, is that clearly we want justice in our society, but there's no way we can shove that job onto some mystical, metaphysical, cosmic system of karma and say karma will take care of it. Justice is a human product. If we want justice, we have to create it. It's not going to drop from the sky. So this is, I think, part of the Buddha's emphasis on action and its ripening as natural process.

Finally, speaking of time, notice how when the Buddha speaks about the results of action, the term he uses is vipaka, which literally means "ripening." That's an agricultural expression—how the effects of our actions gradually ripen like fruit. Let's say I

want a nice orange. I have an orange seed. I hurl it on the ground and I stare at it fiercely, expecting it to hand me an orange. Well, no, that's not going to happen. If I want an orange, I have to have the right soil, a good seed, the right climate, the right amount of care, and I've got to give it the time to ripen.

So it's a gradual process with multiple factors involved, and eventually, over time, the result comes.

When we're talking about meditation practice, one of the terms the Buddha uses is *bhāvanā*, which means cultivation. Again, it's an agricultural term. We are cultivating the *citta*. We are cultivating our heart-mind when we are doing meditation and practicing Dharma. It's purely nature—there's no divine intervention involved. We need the right conditions, and we cultivate those conditions patiently over a period of time, and we get the result.

CHAPTER 105

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: First Foundation of Mindfulness

Patrick Kearney · 29 min

In this talk, Patrick Kearney offers a fresh examination of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, focusing on the nature of mindfulness itself and the first foundation: the body (kāya). He traces the etymology of sati—literally 'memory'—and explains how T.W. Rhys Davids established 'mindfulness' as its English translation in the 19th century. The key insight Kearney emphasizes is that sati means remembering the present rather than the past, with its opposite being forgetfulness (muṭṭhasati). He challenges the contemporary notion of the 'present moment' as a tiny sliver of time, suggesting instead that the Buddha and his students understood the present as vast and all-encompassing—everything happens in the present.

Kearney explains why the body is placed first among the four foundations. The body has two crucial advantages as a meditation object: it is always in the present (unlike thoughts which travel through time), and tactile sensation is particularly clear and unmistakable—the later tradition compared it to an iron hammer striking an anvil. Yet despite this clarity, we habitually abandon bodily awareness for the seductive stories the mind creates. The body's language is sensation, which is not 'about' anything, while the mind's language tells stories that point elsewhere.

Using the Buddha's vivid image of a man carrying an oil-filled bowl through a crowd with a sword-wielding guard behind him, Kearney illustrates the quality of embodied awareness being cultivated: intense focus extended throughout the body, graceful movement, and complete absorption in physical reality with no room for mental stories. He encourages practitioners to explore the relationship between mental activity and bodily tension, noting that when body or mind is out of balance, tension arises—and relaxing that tension restores equilibrium.

We're entering familiar territory, because I'm going to talk about Satipaṭṭhāna. I've been having another go at looking at it, and what we'll explore is mindfulness itself and the first two foundations of mindfulness.

We're practicing mindfulness meditation, which is these days very famous. This is the practice that the Buddha calls Satipaṭṭhāna, and there are four of these Satipaṭṭhānas. One way of translating Satipaṭṭhāna is as the foundations of mindfulness or the domains of mindfulness—in other words, what we are mindful of when we are mindful. The Buddha says there are four of these foundations: body, feeling, heart-

mind, and dharma. If we had a number of talks, we could get through all of these, but this evening we're just going to look at mindfulness itself and then examine body and feeling, the first two foundations.

So we start with mindfulness. This is the translation of the Pāli word sati, and sati literally means memory. It was in the nineteenth century that T.W. Rhys Davids fixed upon "mindfulness" as the translation for sati. Different translators have tried different terms. You can imagine these nineteenth-century British people—Rhys Davids was Welsh—struggling to put into English what the Buddha was talking about in Pāli when they knew absolutely nothing about Buddhism. It was quite a difficult project. Rhys Davids created most of our basic vocabulary. The basic English vocabulary we use when we talk about Buddhism was actually developed by T.W. Rhys Davids, and it includes this word mindfulness.

Now, up until then, mindfulness was very unusual in English. The adjective "mindful" was reasonably common, but very few people used the noun "mindfulness." It became popular in English through this meaning.

Mindfulness is the translation of memory. Sati literally means memory. But what distinguishes it from ordinary memory is that sati, or mindfulness, is remembering the present, not the past. Normally when we think of memory, we're thinking about the past. We don't remember what's happening now. But mindfulness is exactly that—remembering what's happening now.

For example, we meditated for about twenty-five minutes, and at one point I asked if anybody was thinking. Just out of curiosity, was there anyone? I can see a few hands. And when you realized you were thinking—well, first of all, when you started to think, when your awareness slipped away from your meditation object, from the body into thought world, did you know this was happening? Or did you have the experience that you're meditating, quote unquote, and you suddenly realize, "Oh, I'm thinking. And in fact, I've been thinking for a while." How many people had that experience? A few hands going up there.

In other words, what had happened was you forgot. You forgot that you were meditating, or alternatively, you forgot your meditation object. That's when the awareness slipped away unseen into thinking. And suddenly you remembered: "Oh, that's right, I'm supposed to be meditating." Or you remembered: "Oh, I'm thinking."

So mindfulness is memory. It's remembering what's happening in the present. The opposite of mindfulness is forgetfulness. When the Buddha talks about the absence of mindfulness or the loss of mindfulness, the term he uses is muṭṭha sati—forgotten mindfulness.

When we talk about the present, what we're remembering is the experienced present, not the present of clock time, not the concept. In contemporary dharma discourse, when people talk about the present, usually they add the word "moment." They say "the present moment." Sometimes they'll even say "the moment" when what they mean is the present. The implication, pretty inescapable, is that the present apparently is a moment. But what is a moment? It's a very, very brief period of time. Blink and you miss it. So apparently the present is really, really small, while the past is enormous and the future is huge. We're kind of squeezed in on this tiny, tiny little point, which is so easily missed.

That's not the way the Buddha or his students thought about the present. We think about the present that way, I believe, because of our technology. We measure time very accurately, so we can say, "Okay, we're going to have a Zoom meeting. The hall opens at 7:15, the sit begins at 7:30, don't be late." And if someone turns up at 7:31, you can frown and grimace at them.

And if you're the one who's turned up late, you know exactly why they're frowning and grimacing. One minute late. And that's real to us.

But of course, for the Buddha and his students, this would be completely incoherent. They wouldn't even know what you were talking about. A minute late? What's that? The moon's reasonably high—that was when we were going to gather, wasn't it. What are you talking about? They had a completely different relationship to time.

And so it was obvious—probably clearer to them than to us—that the present actually is very big. It's big because everything happens in the present. There's nothing that doesn't happen in the present. Everything happens in the present. When I anticipate the future, when do I anticipate the future? Now, in the present. When I remember the past, when do I remember the past? Now, in the present.

You might try, as a meditation experiment, to see if you can find the border where the present becomes the future, or where the past becomes the present. I've looked for these borders. I've never found them. All I've ever found is the present.

And when we meditate, when the heart and the mind really start to settle, we do have this sense of the expansion of the present. It's this expanded present that we're remembering—the extended present, the experienced present. So mindfulness remembers an extended present that flows through time, and what it's remembering is how the present flows.

For example, let's say when all restrictions end and you can finally meet at a physical location. You're going to go to the Wednesday night meeting, but you've only ever attended the online meeting, so you actually don't know how to get there. Not to worry, because a friend says, "Look, I go there every week and you're on my way. I can just pick you up and drive you. Don't worry about it—I'll take you there."

So your friend turns up at the appropriate time. You get into the front passenger seat. Off you go. As you're being driven to the hall, you're aware—seeing, hearing, and so on.

But let's say that before your friend started driving, he turned to you and said, "I can take you this week, but I'm going away and I won't be able to take you next week. Next week you're on your own." And then off you go. Again, you're aware—seeing, hearing, and so forth.

Would there be any difference in the quality of your awareness if you knew that next week you have to find your own way there, compared to if you were confident your friend would always drive you? I would suggest yes, there would be a difference. There'd be an edge of energy, of engagement, that maybe wouldn't have been there otherwise. And there would be a tracking of the flow of the journey, so that you can remember it, so you can repeat it.

That's mindfulness. That's the difference between mindfulness and awareness.

Mindfulness is all about—well, if we ask ourselves the question, how do I know if I'm being mindful? The answer is: it's the felt continuity of awareness over time. That's the experience of mindfulness—the felt continuity of awareness. And if the awareness is continuous and you feel it, it's an experience, then you can go back and track: oh, that's what happened, that's how I got here.

So this is mindfulness. Is that clear? Any questions so far?

Okay, we shall plow bravely on.

When the Buddha talks about mindfulness, he talks about these four foundations. The first one is body. He lists them always with body first. This is not an accident, and it's not because this is the alphabetical order in Pali. It's because body is foundational to this practice.

First of all, when the Buddha is talking about body, he means our experience of the body.

So he's always talking about the nature of human experience. Body means our experience of the body, the felt body. And when he uses this term, he can mean one of two things—he can have a broad meaning or a narrow meaning.

The broad meaning: body refers to all the sense data received by the five physical senses. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—that's body. So when we cultivate sensitivity to posture, for example, this is body. When we use seeing or hearing as a meditation object, this is body.

In its narrow meaning, body refers to the fifth of these five physical senses, which is essentially touch sensitivity, or sensitivity to tactile sensation. So, for example, when we sit, we feel the sensations of pressing against our cushion, our bench, our chair. That's body in this narrow sense. Touch sensation, or the sensations involved in the experience of breathing, or any stiffness or tension in the body—all of these are the fifth sense sensitivity, sensitivity to tactile sensation.

Now, body is foundational. As a meditation object, it has two major advantages.

First of all, body is now. The experience of body is always in the present. Thoughts and fantasies are in time—in our thoughts and fantasies, our minds can travel through past and through future. And we actually spend a lot of our lives doing that. For many of us, our relationship to the present is rather like it's a transit lounge on an endless airplane journey. We touch down, get out of the plane, take a breather, get back in, fly off again. The mind, as it were, is always going somewhere. But the body is always present. It's going nowhere and it's going no-when.

When we return our awareness from mind to body, we're returning from time to the present. In fact, we could say that to the degree that we are embodied, to that degree we are present. So if we want to live in the present, then we need to cultivate a felt intimacy with the body. And of course, if we're meditating, we definitely want to learn to live in the present, because it's the present where all meditation practice takes place. We really need to be grounded in it. And this means we ground awareness in body. So it's very important for that reason.

The other thing about body—and this is in particular the fifth sensitivity, sensitivity to tactile sensation or sensitivity to touch—is that it's clear. For the Buddha, all sense experience comes about through some kind of sense object striking its respective sensitivity. Light strikes the eyes, sound waves strike the ears. Bang. And there's a sensitivity there. So there's an impact and something happens.

That impact, that something happening, is what the Buddha calls contact, which is actually literally touch. We are touched by sensation. We are touched by light, we are touched by sound, we are touched by smells, tastes, and so on. We are touched by thoughts.

The later tradition—this is not the Buddha, but in the later tradition—they compare seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting, that impact, to cotton wool striking cotton wool. It's quite soft. But the impact of tactile sensation in the fifth sensitivity, that impact is compared to an iron hammer striking an anvil. Bang. It's loud and clear. And this makes it very good as a meditation object.

Has anybody ever experienced physical pain while sitting in meditation? Has that ever happened? And wasn't your experience that it was really, really, really easy to ignore because it was so soft and obscure? Or did awareness go right there? That's it. This is why in Burma they regard physical pain as a wonderful meditation object. It can be, under certain circumstances. I've never liked it though. But it's clear. So this is why body is really, really important.

We use body to ground our awareness. In the beginning of sitting, we set the posture up, basically feel the body. We're grounding our awareness in the body and therefore in the present.

But while the body is very clear and very obvious, it can be very difficult to stay with. We've all experienced how easy it is to forget our body and to slip away into the mind, and how difficult it can be to persuade ourselves—enough of that, back to the body.

Now, why is that? Why is it that the body is very strong and clear, and yet we are so willing to get away from it, to go somewhere else? Understanding that relationship is really important for a meditator, because we can start to see what's going on.

One way of looking at it is that what the mind does, one of its basic jobs, is that mind creates meaning. It builds a world. And it does so through language. In other words, our mind is telling us stories all of the time.

And we have learned to believe those stories. We've even learned to live inside them, to the point where I actually believe that I am the central character of my internal dramas. That's who I am. That's where my identity fixes.

This makes mind really, really attractive, seductive—even our painful stories. It's strange to think that the really painful stories we tell ourselves about how completely terrible our life is, these stories are deeply attractive. Because if they weren't, I could easily let them go. But I find that I can't, which means they are deeply, deeply attractive. And this is quite perverse. So it's very interesting to watch that relationship, to make that relationship part of your meditation practice.

Now, what we want to do is learn to stay with the body. A question arises: does the body have a language? Well, one way of looking at it is we could say it does, but its language does not tell stories. The body doesn't tell stories. The language of the body is sensation. So the body is actually speaking to us all of the time, but it's not telling us stories.

If you look at the difference between these two languages, first of all, stories are always about something. They have what in philosophy is called intentionality. They point toward something. They're about something. They point to something else, often somewhere else, often some*when* else. So they take us away to what they're pointing towards.

Sensations are not about anything. Now, we can make them to be about something when we start telling ourselves stories about the sensation. A sensation arises, my awareness goes to it because it's clear, it's sharp. And then I start telling myself stories about it: "Oh my God, I'm damaging myself. I'm going to die if I keep doing this. If I don't move in the next ten seconds, my leg will fall off. And that's not going to help me, is it? So I better move." But this is not the sensation. This is a story we're telling ourselves about the sensation. Sensations are not about anything at all. They are just what they are. That's it.

So we tend not to listen to sensation, and we do not study the body's language. We don't bother with that. We're busy studying stories. Some people do pay attention to the body's language in certain specialized forms of body work—in sports, for example, there's a deliberate effort to listen to the body. But these are very specialized activities, and often they don't flow across into ordinary life.

Consider people who like rock climbing, for example—which I myself cannot comprehend, but people do. And I gather that what makes it interesting is that it is impossible to live through that experience if you're thinking about something else. You

have to be present. And the present, the physical present, is really, really interesting. You're paying attention to what the body's telling you from moment to moment to moment. And people really enjoy it. But it's a pretty extreme way of getting into it.

Most of us, especially if we're eggheads, working with the mind, have trained ourselves to catapult out of our body into think, think, think, think—stare at screens, think, think, think, think. So we tend to be very ignorant about the language of the body. And if we go into meditation practice, we need to start to study it. That's one of the reasons why we did that little exercise: Are you thinking? If you are thinking, is there any tension in the body? In other words, is there an associated sensation? See if you can find it.

I once heard a physicist who writes popular science books say that thinking generates heat, and so it adds to the entropy of the universe. It's a very interesting concept, I thought. Thinking generates heat.

Does it? Can we feel it? As meditators, what we're interested in is the experience. So what's the physical correlate of thinking? When I'm thinking, what's the body doing? That becomes interesting. There is a connection, there is a relationship there. And it's a way of seducing yourself away from the thinking back into the body—to listen to the body rather than to the story.

One image the Buddha used to talk about mindfulness of body: Imagine a man carrying on his head a bowl of oil filled to the brim. This is Indian style—a turban with a bowl on top, and the bowl is filled to the very brim with oil. His job is to weave his way through an enthusiastic crowd, an audience watching a beautiful woman sing and dance on a stage, accompanied by a band. Behind him is a guard with a sharp sword, and the guard has orders to cut this man's head off if he spills a single drop.

Now imagine you're that person, weaving your way through this crowd. Everybody is looking in that direction because that's where the show is, that's where the music is coming from. People are pushing and shoving to get a good view. Imagine the intensity of focus involved. But notice that the focus is extended throughout the entire body. This person cannot—well, has to be—aware of every part of the body as it's moving through space. And so the awareness is expanding into the experience surrounding him, into the senses of seeing, hearing especially. Because that way, he can weave his way through. So not just intensity of focus, but grace and ease in movement as well. Basically, to get through this, this man is dancing. And notice that there is no room for any story about anything in this practice.

Being absorbed in the physical world with ease, with grace, with focus—this is mindfulness of the body. This is what the Buddha is getting at when he places the body first.

And that's what we have time for tonight. We'll move on to the next foundation next time. But I would recommend playing around with mindfulness of body. In particular, when you're practicing, see if what we explored today is helpful. Notice any tension and relax it. Notice the relationship between balance and tension—when the body is out of balance, there will be tension. To relax the tension means to come back into balance. When the mind is out of balance, there will be tension. Relax the tension, come back into balance.

Also, start to be interested in the relationship between what the mind is doing and what the body is doing, because there is a relationship, there is a connection. Mind and body are not separate parallel universes—they're interconnected.

CHAPTER 106

Part 1: Dhamma Talk on the Aggivacchagotta Sutta

Patrick Kearney · 27 min

In this first of a two-part exploration of the Aggivacchagotta Sutta (MN 72), Patrick Kearney introduces us to Vacchagotta, a Brahmin wanderer who approaches the Buddha with ten famous unanswered questions about the universe, the soul-body relationship, and the fate of an awakened one after death. Rather than providing philosophical answers, the Buddha systematically declines each question, revealing his fundamental concern with the nature of view (diṭṭhi) itself.

Kearney illuminates a crucial distinction at the heart of Buddhist practice: the difference between experiential view—direct, immediate awareness of what is actually happening—and conceptual view (diṭṭhigata), which involves abstract thinking, ideological positions, and the clinging that accompanies them. The Buddha's teaching focuses not on whether views are true or false, but on whether holding them moves us toward or away from liberation. Convictions become 'a jungle of views, a wilderness of views' characterized by suffering rather than leading to disenchantment, cessation, and nibbāna.

The practical relevance for meditation becomes clear as Kearney connects this teaching to mindfulness practice. When we observe the arising and passing of body, feeling, perception, choices (saṅkhārā), and awareness—the five aggregates (khandhas)—we ground ourselves in felt present experience rather than getting lost in concepts about reality. This is living firsthand rather than third-hand, learning to be intimate with what is actually happening rather than constructing stable meanings that ultimately bring pain. The talk sets the foundation for Part 2's exploration of the fire metaphor and nibbāna.

Tonight and next time we're going to take two nights to look at Majjhima 72, the Aggivacchagotta Sutta—"To Vacchagotta About Fire."

This is a very important discourse, but it will take a bit of time to work our way through, so we're doing it over two parts. It's about Nirvana, which is obvious from the title, because it's about fire. One of the basic images that the Buddha uses to talk about Nirvana is the going out of a fire. So let's get into it.

First, let's begin with our central character. This is Vacchagotta. This is his clan name—gotta in Pali, gotra in Sanskrit, means clan. So this is a person of the Vaccha clan. We don't actually know his personal name, but the Buddha calls him Vaccha, so we'll just do that.

He comes from a wealthy Brahmin family, but he's dissatisfied with the Vedic teachings. He doesn't find any sustenance in them. And so he's left home to become a wanderer—a paribbājaka, a wandering renunciate—dedicated to the search for truth. It's quite clear from the discourses where he appears that he has a very deep intellectual and existential curiosity, and he's not satisfied with any of the conventional answers to the deep questions of his day.

He appears in a number of discourses, and the Buddha clearly established a relationship with him and cultivated him over a period of time. In the Majjhima Nikāya, the middle length discourses, there are three discourses one after the other where he appears, and this is the second one. So this is our main character, Vaccha.

The Buddha is staying at Jeta's Grove, his monastery outside the city of Sāvatthī, which was essentially his headquarters. Sāvatthī is the capital city of Kosala, located near the border of present-day Nepal in what is now the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh.

One morning Vaccha comes to visit the Buddha, and he's got some urgent questions to ask. These are ten questions—a famous list. They're questions about the universe, about the relationship between the soul and the body, and about the survival of an awakened one after death. These are the big questions of his time. Let's briefly have a look at them.

The first four questions are about the world, loka—although loka could also be translated as "universe." It's not "world" in the sense of planet Earth. These people don't know about planet Earth. So it's got a much wider implication than "world" in the way we normally talk about it. The questions are: Is the universe eternal? Is the universe not eternal? Is the universe finite? Is the universe infinite?

For each question, what Vaccha wants to know is the Buddha's view on this issue. Vaccha is going through the big questions of his day, and what he wants to know is: what's your view on this? In every case, the Buddha replies, "I do not hold this view." It's like a cricketer just batting the balls away.

The next four questions concern the relationship between the soul and the body. In Pali, it's the relationship between the jīva and the sarīra. Jīva literally means "life" and comes from a root meaning to live or to breathe, so it could be translated as "life force." Jīva is what gives life to a physical body. Sarīra is one word for body, but in particular

it's used for a material body that does not have life. A corpse is sarīra. Bones are sarīra. A physical relic is sarīra. So essentially, these are questions about the relationship between material bodies and what gives life to them. Why is it that some entities are alive and others aren't?

The questions are: Are the jīva and the body the same? Are the jīva and the body different? In both cases the Buddha gives the same answer: "I do not hold this view."

So Vaccha persisted. He's got four more questions, and these are about the fate of an awakened one after death. This is really about the nature of awakening. According to the Buddha's teaching, when we wake up, when we are enlightened, we abandon what he calls the three unwholesome roots of attraction, aversion, and delusion. These three unwholesome roots condition pretty much all of our experience, so the question is: what's left after they cease? What's underneath? Clearly there's an awakened one—a human being wandering around being enlightened—but what happens after she dies? Once you drop away all the normal psychological movements and all the surface appearance of the physical world, what's underneath? This is really a question about the deep nature of awakening itself.

The questions are: Does an awakened one exist after death? Does an awakened one not exist after death? Does an awakened one both exist and not exist after death?

Does an awakened one neither exist nor not exist after death?

Now, these are the four logical possibilities. All possibilities are contained in these four questions. And for every question, the Buddha replies, "I do not hold this view."

By this time, Vaccha is getting quite frustrated, understandably. He wants to know what's going on. He's got this deep urge to understand. He has enough faith in the Buddha, because they've met before, to feel that if anybody knows the answers to these questions, the Buddha does. But the Buddha is stubbornly refusing to answer.

And at last, light dawns in Vaccha's mind. He realizes the Buddha is not rejecting or accepting these different beliefs and stances. He's rejecting the very idea of view. It's the very idea of view that he doesn't like.

Now we come to a distinction which is very important and lies at the heart of this discourse. What is view?

In Pali this is *diṭṭhi*, and it's very important for the Buddha. If you know about the Eightfold Path—which is the standard template for the Buddha's teaching—the first factor is *sammādiṭṭhi*, right view. And without right view, nothing else happens. It's absolutely foundational for the Buddha.

But the Pali word *diṭṭhi*, like the English word view, has two levels of meaning which are quite distinct. Let me give an example.

I step outside looking for some fresh air. Looking up, I see a bright blue sky, but there are dark clouds rolling towards me. Suddenly there's the sound of thunder and rain comes pouring down. I see people scatter for shelter as the traffic slows and the streets fill with water.

What am I describing? I'm describing a view. That's what I can see.

Now, as this is happening, the rain reminds me of all the weird things that have been happening to weather patterns in recent years. I've read about climate change and its potentially catastrophic consequences. I start to wonder what is the best strategy to limit average global warming. Should we go nuclear? Is that the answer? Or should we focus completely on renewables?

What am I talking about here? I'm describing a view.

You get the distinction. They're both views. But there's a big difference between them. The first one is confined to actual immediate experience. It's experiential. The second one moves away from the immediate experience to create a complex narrative based on abstract thinking. It's conceptual. They can both be called view, but they are very different.

Vaccha is beginning to realize that the Buddha is concerned with the nature of view itself. So his next question: he asks, "What disadvantage does Master Gotama see that he does not take up any of these convictions?"

You can see the discussion is moving. Vaccha's language is changing. Before, he wanted to know, "What is your view? What is your *diṭṭhi*?" Now he's speaking of conviction: "What is your *diṭṭhigata*?" *Gata* means literally "gone to"—so, gone to view. It could be translated as "immersed in view." Here I'm translating it as conviction.

Diṭṭhigata, as opposed to *diṭṭhi*, implies both view in the abstract conceptual sense—the second meaning of view—and it suggests a clinging to view. Both. If you look up Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation, he renders *diṭṭhigata* as "speculative view."

So he brings out its abstract nature. Bhikkhu Sujato translates it as conviction, which I quite like, and that brings out its suggestion of clinging, holding onto it. Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro translates it as position, and again it suggests the clinging in the sense that we take our stand on our convictions, determined to defend them. This is where I take my stand.

So our discussion is moving from what is happening in the world—for example, is the universe finite or infinite?—to how we respond to what we believe is happening. Am I clinging to my view about the universe? For the Buddha, this is vital because he's much more interested in how we live than in what we believe. Our beliefs are important because they condition the way that we live. They condition, for example, what we think is possible, what we think is impossible, what we think is desirable, what we think is undesirable. But for the Buddha, what's central is the way that we live, not our beliefs.

So what is the disadvantage of holding any of these convictions or positions, regardless of whether or not they are true? This is not an issue about truth. The Buddha says, "Vaccha, the conviction that the universe is eternal is a jungle of views, a wilderness of views, a twisting of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is characterized by suffering, by distress, despair, and fever. And it does not lead to disenchantment, the fading of obsession, cessation, peace, direct understanding, awakening, nibbāna." And so on for the other nine views.

Notice what the Buddha is talking about. He's not looking at whether or not these views are true. He's not offering an opinion about that. He's looking at the effect that clinging to any one of these views has on us and on the way that we live. In other words, does holding this view, whatever it is, move me towards awakening or not? When the Buddha talks about views, what he's really interested in is clinging.

Now Vaccha was getting confused again because he's really not quite following this. He's still preoccupied with whether or not these views are correct. He's still thinking in terms of truth and falsehood—that's what he's focused on, rather than clinging and liberation. In fact, he started to have doubts about the Buddha. He's starting to wonder if the Buddha believes anything at all. So he says, "Then does Master Gotama hold any conviction at all?"

And the Buddha replies, "An awakened one has done away with convictions, Vaccha, because he has seen this: Such is body, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is feeling, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is perception, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such are choices, such their arising, such their disappearance. Such is awareness, such its arising, such its disappearance."

So again the discussion has moved. This time the Buddha is talking about the nature of experience itself.

Let's go back to these two aspects of view, which is central to this discourse. We've got conceptual view—an abstract view or conviction, like an ideology, something that explains the world and its workings to me. For example, I might have a view: I am too easily distracted to be able to meditate successfully. I can't do it. It's too hard. Not with a mind like mine. Can't do it. This is a conceptual view, a diṭṭhigata.

Notice that this is bound up with clinging to a sense of identity. I cannot meditate successfully. Why? Because of the nature of me and the world. It's always been like this. It will always be like this. All of these movements are typical of conceptual view.

Now let's take experiential view. This is direct and immediate.

So it might be I'm practicing with my meditation object, and suddenly I am swept away by thinking. Then equally suddenly I realize I am thinking, and I'm faced with a choice of whether or not to return to my meditation object. This is the flow of actual experience. And you notice that this view is not bound up with clinging and identity.

This awareness now of the meditation object—it's not me. It doesn't belong to me. It's just awareness now of the meditation object. This movement into distraction—it's not me. It does not belong to me. This choice to continue with the thinking or return to the meditation object—it's not me. It does not belong to me.

So this is what the Buddha is talking about here when he's speaking of the arising and disappearance of body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. And the reason why he chooses those five—these are the five aggregates that construct identity. What he's saying is that an experiential view of an experienced event—now you notice he's saying arising, disappearance, arising, disappearance—an experiential view of an experienced event is unstable, changing, dynamic. But a conceptual view is stable, especially when it takes the form of an ideology or a conviction. If it changes, it changes slowly and even imperceptibly. This is the nature of concepts—they are much more stable than actual experience.

So the world changes around us, but our convictions tend to remain the same. In contrast, experiential view changes and flows with the immediacy of experience itself. Conceptual view tends to be stable, even fixed. Experiential view is moving on all the time.

Going back to our example of climate change: "Yes, there's been some weird weather. And there's been the odd bushfire. Okay, more extreme than usual, I get it, I read the newspapers. But there's always been bushfires, hasn't there? There's always been weird weather, hasn't there? It can't actually be changing, can it? No, it can't be. It's these bloody greenies—it's their fault. They're just causing trouble." And you notice it's stable, and it resists the actual impact of direct experience. And you can build an identity and a sense of the world upon it.

So let's look again at Vaccha's questions. You notice that they all revolve around identity—the identity of the universe, the identity of the soul and the body, the identity of the awakened one. And that means they all point to Vaccha's identity. Why is he so caught up in these questions? Because he's personally invested in them.

Now remember, he's a wanderer, a *paribbājaka*. He's someone who has walked away from a secure, high-status life. He came from a wealthy family. He walked away from that in order to resolve the existential questions that are really bugging him. He's got a lot invested in finding the answers to these questions. If he can find those answers, he has justified that rash decision he made many years ago when as a young man he walked out of his normal life. At last he can be at peace, and he can be recognized among his peers as someone who has successfully resolved the fundamental questions—as opposed to being just a loser who couldn't handle the real world.

But if he cannot resolve these questions, then how can he justify, even to himself, the sacrifices that he's made in pursuing awakening?

So this is why Vaccha is so invested in these questions. And the Buddha can see this. He's keeping his focus on this deeper longing in Vaccha's heart for awakening and for peace.

So the Buddha refuses to engage in a philosophical discussion, which he knows will accomplish nothing at all. Instead, he's pointing to Vaccha's determination to cling to concepts in order to create a world of stable meaning, even if this meaning brings him pain. He's keeping Vaccha's gaze firmly on what is actually happening here and now, not on the theories that he's learned to consider really important.

And this comes out in the language that the Buddha uses. Remember that phrase: "an awakened one has seen this—such his body, such its arising, such its disappearance." In English, it's difficult to get the emphasis that is clear in the Pali. The Buddha is saying that an awakened one doesn't just see, but he sees *this*. This right here. This sensation, this thought, this feeling.

And this emphasis is reinforced by "such his body, such its arising, such its disappearance." The words he uses for arising and disappearance are the same words you would use for the rising and setting of the sun, which implies natural process. So this body sensation now is arising now as exactly this. It is disappearing now as exactly this.

The Buddha is telling Vaccha to let go of the world that he's created through his concepts and that he takes as real. Instead, learn to live in a world that is defined by the felt actuality of experience, by what's happening here and now. Ground yourself in this felt present experience and learn to relate to the world of concept from that place. Don't get lost in your concepts about what is happening, but learn to be intimate with what is actually happening. Then the liberation of the heart becomes possible.

And so the Buddha says, "That's the way the awakened one is liberated—by not clinging, with the weakening, fading, cessation, and letting go of all disturbances, all constructing of identity, all constructing of possession, and the underlying potential for separation."

Vaccha wants to know what's going on. And the Buddha is saying, forget about it. This is how liberation comes about.

And this, of course, is what we're practicing when we're practicing mindfulness meditation. We're learning to be mindful, to track our experience over time by being directly aware of each experienced event as it comes and goes. When we do that, for that moment at least, we're not getting lost in our concepts about the world. Instead, we're grounding our awareness in the immediate movements of the world itself. In other words, we're learning to live firsthand, not third hand.

It's rather like someone who is told a story about what their friend is doing and saying. And rather than simply believe it, he goes and checks for himself. This is the practice of mindfulness, where we're interested in what is happening.

What the Buddha is suggesting is that when we are grounded in this practice, we learn to abandon the obsessions that our conceptual world generates. This does not mean that we don't use concepts to develop a wider understanding of the world. But it means that our concepts are grounded in our actual experience. And when we do that, then we come closer to nibbāna.

CHAPTER 107

Part 2: Dhamma Talk on the Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta

Patrick Kearney · 43 min

In this continuation of his exploration of the Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta (MN 72), Patrick Kearney examines the Buddha's masterful use of the fire simile to illuminate the limitations of conceptual thinking. When the wanderer Vacchagotta exhausts all logical possibilities about what happens to an awakened one after death—asking whether they reappear, don't reappear, both, or neither—the Buddha responds that none of these terms apply. Patrick unpacks how the Buddha then offers a brilliant teaching device: asking Vaccha about a fire burning before him, what fuels it, and crucially, where it goes when extinguished.

The talk carefully distinguishes between diṭṭha (experiential view) and diṭṭhigata (conceptual view or conviction). Using the meditation example of tracking breath versus the story we tell ourselves about our practice, Patrick demonstrates how we habitually slide from direct experience into conceptual overlays without noticing. He introduces the concept of nimitta (sign) to show how concepts point toward reality but are not reality itself—like mistaking the sign for the Buddhist Society of Victoria for the actual building.

Patrick concludes with two Chan stories that point toward the same truth: Daowu's refusal to say whether the person in the coffin is alive or dead, and Lohan's teaching that 'not knowing is most intimate.' These stories illustrate that nibbāna is found in the direct encounter with experience before we apply meaning—precisely what we practice in meditation. The teaching emphasizes that while no story captures reality, some stories are more useful than others in bringing us closer to the cessation of suffering.

So this is part two of a long and complicated talk. The first part was last week. This is the discourse to Vacchagotta about fire. I hope you're familiar with last week's discussion, but this is a dialogue between the Buddha and a Brahmin wanderer, Vacchagotta, or simply Vaccha. He was a seeker after truth, and very intellectual. So his search for truth involved exploring the deep philosophical questions of his day and trying to get to some kind of definitive answer. And he comes to the Buddha one day with a series of these questions.

There are 10 of them, which we looked at last time, but they're basically questions about the universe, the nature of the universe, the relationship between life and the body, and the survival of an awakened one after death. We pointed out last week that

all of these questions—and these are the big questions of his time—all revolve around identity. What is, for example, the real nature of the universe? What is the real nature of the awakened one?

If you look at what Vacha is doing with these questions, he's searching for certainty. He wants to understand what is really going on because he thinks if he can just get the answer to these fundamental questions, then he will be at peace.

Now, the questions are about identity. And if you look at Vacha himself, we can see that the basis for his obsession with these questions is his sense of his own identity, his own place in the world. He came from a wealthy family of Brahmins. He walked away and joined a heretical sect that rejected the Vedic orthodoxy. He's living as a beggar. Basically, he's a dropout. He's a loser. And he has to be able to justify to himself and to others his abandonment of his family and his career. The only way he can do that is to find the answers to these questions.

It rather reminds us of the Buddha himself when he walked out of his home in search of enlightenment. Think of how frustrating it was after many years of practice that he still had not cracked that problem. Think of what a loser he must have felt, and how utterly wasted his life was—unless he could get that answer. This is where Vacha is. I think it's one of the reasons why the Buddha took an interest in him. He might have looked at his younger self.

So Vacha is going to the Buddha wanting answers to these questions, but the Buddha is refusing to engage with any of them. He just says, "I don't have that view. That's not my view." Because the Buddha's focus is not on theories and doctrines. That's not what he's interested in. He's interested in the felt actuality of our experience. And he's also interested in our determination to push aside actual experience in favor of holding onto abstract ideologies.

Last week we talked about how, when these two characters are discussing, you get different words being used. It begins with *diṭṭhi*, view. Vacha wants to know, "What's your view on this issue?" And then the discussion shifts to *diṭṭhigata* and *diṭṭha*. *Diṭṭhigata* can be translated as conceptual view or conviction, and this implies something abstract that's constructed out of an experience, which is held onto: "This is the truth." So this is *diṭṭhigata*, conceptual views. And the Buddha speaks of his *diṭṭha*, which is an experiential view.

For example, let's say you're using breathing as a meditation object. You're tracking the experience of your breathing. There's the inhalation, exhalation, inhalation, exhalation. This is *diṭṭha*. This is view. You've got a direct view of what's happening with your

breathing. Let's say at the end of the sitting, someone asks, "How was that sitting?" And you say, "That sitting was complete rubbish. I can't do this. I've never been able to do this. I don't know why I'm even bothering to try." That is *diṭṭhigata*. That's conceptual view or conviction.

Do you notice that they're both views? But one of them is grounded on the actual immediate experience. The other is blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah based on the actual direct experience.

So last week, the Buddha was making this distinction clear, talking about a state of liberation. He's pointing out how when we live in our concepts, what we do is create a fixed sense of identity—of me and my world.

And we do this in order to find certainty and stability. We don't realize that it's our very clinging to these concepts—and to the certainty and stability they're supposed to bring us—that creates our pain and our insecurity. So the Buddha speaks of a state of liberation where all these constructions of identity and possession are gone. That's the liberated one, the awakened one, liberated by not clinging.

So this is all last week. But Vaccha does not get it. He doesn't quite get this because he's so caught up in his sense of his own personal drama that he can't make the breakthrough to understand what the Buddha is talking about.

Vaccha says, in effect, "This is great. There's a liberation of the heart through not clinging, but who is the person who is liberated?" The way he asks this question is in the context of life after life, or rebirth. Vaccha takes for granted this idea—basically, you could say something happens next. So it's natural for him to inquire: the practitioner is liberated, then what? What happens next? But the way he frames the question is in terms of the next life. This is natural in the culture of the time. He says, "When a practitioner's heart is liberated in this way, Master Gotama, where does he appear after death?"

And the Buddha replies, "The term 'reappears' does not apply."

Again, the Buddha is dancing away from answering this question. But Vaccha goes on with four questions, exhausting the four logical possibilities—something either is, or isn't, or both is and isn't, or it neither is nor is not. He says, "Then the awakened one does not reappear?" Then, "He both reappears and does not reappear?" Then, "He neither reappears nor does not reappear?" These four questions cover all conceptual logical possibilities. Any answer to a question has got to be in there somewhere. But in every case, the Buddha simply says the term does not apply. *Na upetti*—does not apply.

Now what's going on with Vaccha? It's easy to dismiss him as some kind of fool, asking all these philosophical questions while the Buddha is laying out the teaching and he's not interested. But the question is very real. He's putting it in terms of rebirth, but even without rebirth, the question is real. Because if you think about what we're doing here when we practice, each of us is looking for some kind of transformation. Each of us is dissatisfied to some extent with who we are now. We want something different. We want to become someone different.

To the extent that we think about the goal of our practice, the destination of the path, how do we think about it? We think about it in terms of our own identity. What happens to me at the end of all this? I want to be awakened, whatever that means. Then what would that look like? Who would be the awakened me? How would the awakened me live? What happens to the awakened me in the future? What will my friends think about the awakened me? Have you ever thought like that?

The problem with this kind of thinking is that it continues to use the conceptual view of identity in order to understand transformation. But this is precisely the view that we have to abandon in order to undergo the transformation the Buddha is talking about. And this is why we actually don't really want to change. Because to change, to transform, we have to let go of everything that is familiar to us and plunge into something entirely unknown. That's why in our practice, fear often arises, and we find ourselves pulling back from the unknown to the familiar sense of who we are. And this is what Vaccha is doing.

So he's caught a vague glimpse of what the Buddha is talking about, but he's still trying to understand it conceptually. And that very attempt is smothering the arising of his insight.

When he asked his ten questions before, the Buddha responded by rejecting the view that was on offer. "What do you think about the view that the universe is eternal?" And for each question, the Buddha said, "I don't have this view." He's just chopping away that view. Now he's rejecting the very question itself. The question itself is wrong. It does not apply.

This always reminds me of a story about a Zen teacher and some philosophers. A friend of mine who's a Zen teacher used to gather weekly with these old retired academics to have spirited discussions about the mysteries of life. Sometimes they would ask questions about Zen. And my friend, being a Zen teacher, would give rather Zen-like answers. This would cause frustration to the retired academics, who had no idea what

he was talking about. One of them in frustration one day said, "Why can't you give me a straight answer to my questions?" To which my friend replied, "You cannot give a straight answer to a crooked question."

The Buddha is doing the same thing here. The question itself is crooked. There is no straight answer to it.

But Vaccha is getting more and more confused. He says, "I don't understand, Master Gotama. I'm confused. Now I have lost the clarity I gained from our previous conversation."

At this point, the Buddha kind of eases off a bit. He explains, "Look, your confusion is perfectly reasonable under the circumstances, given that you come from a very different tradition and what you're trying to understand is very profound and very difficult to see." And then he gives him the fire metaphor. This is at last where we come to the fire.

This dialogue is the key to the whole discourse. The Buddha says, "What do you think, Vaccha, if a fire was burning in front of you, would you know it?"

"I would, Master Gotama."

You can almost feel Vaccha's relief. He's been pounding the Buddha with all these profound philosophical questions, and now the Buddha says, "Let me ask you a question." Vaccha must be thinking, "Oh my God, how am I going to handle this?" But the question is really basic, really straightforward. Imagine there's a fire burning in front of you. Do you know that there's a fire burning in front of you? Well, of course you do.

The next question: "If somebody asked you, 'This fire burning in front of you, what does it depend on to burn?' what would you answer?"

"Asked that, Master Gotama, I would answer, this fire burning in front of me burns depending on grass and sticks."

"If this fire in front of you goes out, would you know this fire in front of me has gone out?"

"I would, Master Gotama."

"If somebody asks you, Vaccha, when that fire in front of you goes out, where does it go? Does it go to the east, to the west, to the north, or to the south? What would you answer?"

And Vaccha says, "That does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burned depending on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, in the absence of fuel, it is regarded as gone out."

"So too, Vaccha, an awakened one has abandoned that body, perception, choices, awareness, and feeling by which one conceptualizing an awakened one conceptualizes him."

We're going to unpack this dialogue because it's really important. We begin with the obvious. That fire in front of you—can you see it? That screen in front of you—can you see it? The question and the answer are simple, clear, obvious. It's about what's happening right here, right now.

Then the next question: What is it burning? Simple, clear, obvious.

When it goes out—when the fire goes out—can you see that? Again, simple, clear, obvious, immediate.

And then, with the Buddha's next question, everything jams to a stop.

When the fire goes out, where does it go?

This question is completely different. The previous questions are all about immediate experience. This question takes an immediate experience and then conceptualizes it in a way that a metaphor—a fire "going out"—is built upon the experience, and then the metaphor is treated as if it continues to be the immediate experience. But it isn't. It's something completely different.

The Buddha is taking us back to what he was discussing when he distinguished between experiential view and conceptual view. The example we explored last week: experiential view is the direct experience of a rainy afternoon. Conceptual view is when the experience of a rainy afternoon leads me to think about climate change and what we should do about it.

We would call both of these "view." I see outside a rainy afternoon. My view on climate change and what we should do about it is such and such. We use the same word—view—but they are completely different in their nature.

So the fire goes out. Where does the fire go? This question represents entry into the world of concept, where concept is mistaken for felt experience. And this is the world where we normally live. We make this mistake again and again. It's the basis for most of the decisions we make about our lives.

We begin with our actual experience here and now—this is experiential view. And then we slide into networks of concepts about our actual experience. This movement is so habitual and so subtle that we tend not to notice it. We think nothing has changed. But in fact, everything has changed.

In the dialogue, Vaccha gets it now. He understands that change. When the fire goes out, where does it go? Vaccha is struck by the absurdity of the question, and he says what the Buddha said to him: *na upeti*—it does not apply. Any answer to this question misses what is actually happening. Any answer to this question sends us off in the wrong direction.

What the Buddha is saying is that an awakened one and awakening itself cannot be captured by concepts.

Consider the question, "Who am I?"—which is a popular question. Notice how the question becomes, "Who do I think I am?" And notice how that's a different question.

I am this body—that's a pretty obvious one. This is me. You're looking at me. When you look at the image of my body, you're looking at me. But if I am my body, what happens to me when this experience of body falls away and is replaced by another experience? Is this a new me? Is it someone else? Is the old me lurking somewhere behind this experience?

Who am I? I am my body. So which body is that? Is it the slim, active version of my youth? Or is it the fat, worn-out version of my old age? Which one? Is it one of the ones in between?

Or let's say I am my feelings—another experience we tend to identify with.

So if I am my feelings, which feeling is that? Is it the feeling that I like this pizza? Or is it the feeling that I don't like a TV show? Which one? Hence the words of the contemporary sage Leonard Cohen: "I don't trust my inner feelings. Inner feelings come and go."

So this is the world of conceptual view, where we normally live and where we normally place our reality. But the more we ground ourselves in experiential view, the less we can believe that our conceptual view is presenting us with what is really going on.

How do we ground ourselves in experiential view? Through the meditation practice. That's what we're doing. The more we are in the actual flow of experience, the less we can take the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves to be true. We can't take them seriously anymore.

These stories about myself that I tell to myself—these stories are not true any more than the fire has gone out to the west. Equally, these stories are not false any more than the fire has gone out to the east. The stories we tell ourselves are just stories.

To get a sense of what the Buddha is getting at here, we'll turn to another concept that he uses quite frequently. He uses the term *nimitta*. This is a Pali and Sanskrit word, a technical term that appears in different contexts. Usually *nimitta* is translated as "sign." A story is like a sign that points toward something else.

For example, this Wednesday night meeting, when it's not online, is normally held at the Buddhist Society of Victoria. Let's say I'm going to that meeting for the first time. I take a taxi and tell the cab driver, "Take me to the Buddhist Society of Victoria." We're heading down the street, and the taxi stops in front of a building. In the front yard, there's a big sign that says "Buddhist Society of Victoria." I think, "Great, I've arrived!" I'm very happy. I get out of the cab clutching my meditation equipment, and then I stand right in front of that sign. I walk around it thinking, "It's a funny place to meditate—rather exposed to the traffic." The meeting's due to start soon, but nobody else is here. What's going on?

Then I notice other people coming, but they walk right past me and go inside a building behind me. That's odd—they're obviously going to the Buddhist Society of Victoria too.

Clearly, I've made a big mistake. The mistake is that I think the sign that says "Buddhist Society of Victoria" *is* the Buddhist Society of Victoria. But it isn't—because it *points toward* the Buddhist Society of Victoria. Whatever that sign is, it cannot be the Buddhist Society of Victoria, precisely because it's pointing toward it. Do you see that distinction?

Now, this does not mean the sign is not useful. In fact, it's extremely useful. It's what convinced both me and the taxi driver that we had arrived at the right place—and we had. As long as I can recognize the difference between a concept and the lived reality, the sign can help me find what's going on. It can help me navigate toward what's going on.

This is a basic way that the Buddha talks about the role of concepts. In a sense, all stories are false—although as we said, strictly speaking, to say they're false or to say they're true, both don't work. What works is that some stories are useful while others are not useful, and some stories are more useful than others.

If you look at the Buddha's teaching, it's a story. The Buddha is telling us stories. The fundamental story he's telling us is, first of all, that it's possible to live a flourishing life. And secondly, this is how you do it. This is a useful story. It's much more useful than a story about how I am so hopeless that whatever I do will be useless.

And I'm doomed. Now again, that story is neither true nor false. It's just a story. But it's not very useful. It creates suffering.

So some stories are more useful than others. They bring us closer to what the Buddha calls the cessation of suffering—in other words, a fully flourishing life. And also, some stories are closer to the felt reality of experience than others. None of them *are* the felt reality of experience, but some of them are closer to it than others.

For example, I'm in some kind of confrontation and I'm getting very upset. There are two possible stories I could tell myself about this situation. One is: "Right now, I'm very upset, and so I better be careful of what I'm about to say." That's one story. That is probably closer to the felt flow of experience than the story: "This person is my lifelong enemy, and I need to get my attack in first."

So some stories are more useful than others, and some stories are closer to reality than others. But all of them are just stories.

Now, this whole discourse is about nirvana. And so the question becomes: Where is nirvana to be found? This is essentially what the Buddha is talking to Vajra about. And the answer to that question is: nirvana is found here, now, in the direct encounter with the world before we apply any meaning to it. And we practice that direct encounter when we do the meditation. That's what we're doing when we're meditating. We're practicing that relationship, that encounter with the world. We're learning to live in intimacy.

Now, given that it can never be expressed through story—that is to say, it can never be captured through story—is there anything that we can say about it? This problem very much preoccupies the Zen tradition. So I've got a couple of Zen stories to finish with, just to give a sense of how one tradition deals with this problem: How do we express what's really going on? How do we express awakening?

Let's start with Case 55 of the Blue Cliff Record. This is Daowu's Condolence Call. We have two characters in the story: Daowu—or we can just call him Wu—and his student, Yuan. Wu is a Chan teacher. Yuan is his student. They come from the local monastery. One of the parishioners of the monastery has died, so they've been invited to the funer-

al. At the funeral in the house, the dead person is in a coffin. The coffin's in the main room and people are coming and paying their respects. So Wu and Yuan go to this funeral, this commemoration. Again, Wu is the teacher, Yuan is the student.

Yuan hit the coffin and said, "Alive or dead?"

Wu said, "I won't say alive. And I won't say dead."

Yuan said, "Why won't you say?"

Wu said, "I won't say. I won't say."

This is the end of the first part of the dialogue. They continue their condolence call, and then they leave. But Yuan is not satisfied. He's a young man full of vigor, and he's not going to let this alone. So halfway back to the monastery, Yuan says to Wu, "Tell me right away, teacher. If you don't tell me, I'll hit you."

Wu said, "You may hit me, but I won't say."

Yuan hit him.

So Wu's on the ground, but he still won't say. Anyway, they get back to the monastery, presumably Wu patches himself up.

And time goes by. Eventually Wu, being an old man, dies. And Yuan is off searching for another teacher.

So the story continues. After Wu died, Yuan went to Shi Shuang and brought up this story. So Shuang is another teacher. Yuan lays this whole thing out in front of him. Shuang said, "I won't stay alive and I won't stay dead." Yuan said, "Why won't you say?" Shuang said, "I won't say. I won't say." At these words, Yuan had insight. He got it.

Did you get it? Would you like another one? Which is equally obscure. But totally clear, like this one.

This also involves two characters, the teacher and the student. The context here is a Chan monastery. The way they lived, twice a year they would do intensive retreat. Each retreat lasted three months—a summer retreat and a winter retreat. So if you're a meditation monk or nun, you did three months intensive retreat, you had three months off, three months retreat, three months off, boom, boom, boom. You could do this for years, for decades. And of course you could wander from monastery to monastery, checking out different monasteries and different teachers.

In the intervals between retreats, monks and nuns would go off and do other things. They would travel, or study, or teach, or work at different projects.

So our story opens at the end of one of these three-month retreats where the teacher Lo Han is saying goodbye to his students as they leave. He's keeping his eye out for one of them, Fa Yen, because he knows this student is on the edge of insight—he just needs a little push.

When Fa Yen approached, Lo Han said, "Where are you going?" Fa Yen said, "I am on pilgrimage, following the wind." Lo Han said, "What are you on pilgrimage for?" Fa Yen said, "I don't know." Lo Han said, "Not knowing is most intimate." Fa Yen suddenly attained great awakening.

Clear as mud.

What Lo Han is pointing out is that this is where nirvana is found. This is where awakening is found. This. Most intimate. Not any story about this. Just this, here. And this is what we're practicing.

CHAPTER 108

Hands and Eyes

Patrick Kearney · 36 min

> *In this dharma talk, Patrick Kearney ventures into Zen territory, exploring Case 89 from the Blue Cliff Record and Case 54 from the Book of Serenity—the kōan of 'Hands and Eyes.' The dialogue between two Chinese Zen students, Yun Wen and Tao Wu, centers on the nature of compassionate action, using the image of Avalokiteśvara (the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion) with a thousand arms and eyes to ask: how does one actually do compassion?*
>
> *Kearney unpacks the paradox at the heart of Zen spontaneity. While the Buddha rejected the idea that things arise without cause, these traditions celebrate spontaneous action—reaching for a pillow in the dark without thought or planning. The resolution lies in understanding that true spontaneity emerges from deep conditioning through practice. The commentary instructs us to 'cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking, become clean and naked, free and unbound.' This requires years of training in virtue ethics—cultivating generosity (dāna), loving-kindness, and compassion through deliberate practice until these qualities become second nature.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance on how virtues are developed through conditioning. Using the example of generous giving, Kearney explains that the Buddha emphasized graceful giving—finding joy in the act itself—rather than giving from obligation or manipulation. Similarly, compassion develops through becoming sensitive to pain without reactive aversion, opening to suffering rather than defending against it. When we encounter a grumpy person, trained compassion recognizes their suffering rather than responding with irritation. This is the 'entire body, hands and eyes'—an intimacy with experience where compassionate response flows naturally, like 'willow-grown banks and flower-grown walls on a warm day in a gentle breeze.'*

Tonight, as Hart mentioned, we're going Zen.

I've been working on a new Dharma talk based on Bodhidharma's Don't Know. But it's quite difficult working on a talk about Don't Know, because again and again I realized, actually, I don't know. What can I do? Eventually I got to the end of the first draft, and then I remembered this other koan, Hands and Eyes. I'm going to incorporate this somehow, but I don't know yet how. Don't know. So I'm testing it out on you, and I hope you'll forgive the fact that you're being crash test dummies tonight.

We'll have the talk first and any questions or comments you might want to make, and then we'll do the meditation. If you've got any questions, jump in at any time. In fact, I think I'll be throwing in a couple of questions to you as we go through.

Shall we begin?

This is called Hands and Eyes, and it's found as case 89 of the Blue Cliff Record and case 54 of the Book of Serenity—it appears in both works. These are two Song Dynasty koan collections, and if you do koan study today, these are two of the basic books that you would study to get through the curriculum. They're right in the heart of the classical Zen tradition, and each of these books contains a number of stories and dialogues, with comments for each one. We're going to look briefly at comments made by two subsequent Chinese Zen teachers.

Let's go through the story first. We have two characters, and there's not much of a story—it's just a brief conversation. These are Yun Wen and Tao Wu. At the time of this dialogue, they're both students of the same teacher. I haven't actually looked up who that teacher was, but they're students together. One is senior to the other, so there's a hierarchy, and the hierarchy kind of comes out in the dialogue.

The subject of discussion is compassion—in particular, compassionate action. The question is asked by Yun Wen: "What does the bodhisattva of great compassion do with so many hands and eyes?"

The reference here is cultural. The bodhisattva of great compassion is a Mahayana figure. In Sanskrit, Avalokiteshvara. In Tibetan, Chenrezig—if you follow Tibetan Buddhism, you've probably heard of Chenrezig. In China, this figure often becomes female: Kuan Yin. This particular aspect of Avalokiteshvara refers to a specific way of imagining the Bodhisattva of great compassion. A bodhisattva in this context is a being that is enlightened almost, but not quite a Buddha—like a deity, in effect.

One particular kind of image of Avalokiteshvara shows him standing with eleven heads and a thousand arms and hands. The idea is that Avalokiteshvara, depending on the particular story, is one who hears the sounds of suffering in the world, one who sees the suffering in the world, and reaches out and tries to help. But of course there was so much suffering that his head basically exploded. So he's portrayed with eleven heads. And there's so much suffering to reach out and do something about that he needs at least a thousand arms to do it. There are statues showing Avalokiteshvara standing with eleven heads and a thousand arms, and at the palm of each hand is an eye—because he sees the suffering, reaches out and responds, does something about it. These are the hands and eyes.

Does that make sense? Any questions thus far? We're just setting the scene here.

So: two students, one junior, one senior. The junior student is Yun Wen, and he asks Tao Wu, his friend and senior student, "What does the bodhisattva of great compassion do with so many hands and eyes?"

What's the question about? Essentially, it's this: What is the action of compassion? How does one actually do compassion?

Wu said, it's like someone in the middle of the night reaching back for a pillow.

Have you got that image? Someone in the middle of the night reaching back for a pillow.

Yen said, I understand. He gets it.

Wu said, how do you understand it?

Yen said, hands and eyes are all over the body.

Wu said, you have said a lot there, but only eighty percent of it. Now, this is a Zen way of saying you completely missed the point.

Yen said, what do you say, elder brother?

Wu said, the entire body, hands and eyes.

So that's the dialogue. And if you're working on this koan, you've got to demonstrate reaching for a pillow. Not imitate anything, but you've got to show what this is actually about. But we're just going to talk about it, which is much safer.

Let's look first at the commentary on this case as recorded in the Blue Cliff Record. This is a commentary by Yuan Wu, who assembled all these cases to turn them into a book. He says, "Groping for a pillow in the depths of the night without any lamplight."

This is a detail you don't find in the original dialogue. There's no light. Complete darkness. "Groping for a pillow in the depths of the night without any lamplight. Tell me, where are the eyes?"

Has anybody here ever groped for a pillow in the depths of the night? Where are the eyes? How can you tell where the pillow is? There's something touching here. There's a physicality to it. Where are the eyes? He's not talking about seeing with these eyes. He's talking about an action—groping for a pillow in the middle of the night. How much thinking do we have to do to accomplish this? How much planning is there in this?

Clearly, what this is getting at is spontaneous action. And spontaneity is very big in the Zen tradition. I'm sure you're aware of it. It's the reputation of Zen teachers doing all sorts of crazy things. But what is the nature of this spontaneity? What are they actually getting at here?

The commentary continues: "You must cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking, become clean and naked, free and unbound. Only then will you be able to see this saying about great compassion."

Here the commentator Yuan Wu points out what you actually need for this spontaneity. Now, it's easy when you talk about spontaneity to think, "Well, what is it? I'll just do what I like. I'm being spontaneous." And of course, from the Buddhist perspective, are you really being spontaneous?

Because the Buddha is coming out of the basic background of dependent arising. In other words, anything that happens, happens as a result of causes and conditions other than itself. Right now you are looking at a screen, hearing words. How did this situation come about? It came about because of causes and conditions. Without those causes and conditions, it would not happen.

In fact, when the Buddha talked about dependent arising, he rejected as wrong view the idea that things arise spontaneously without any cause. For the Buddha, when he used the word spontaneously, what he meant was without a cause, without a condition—things simply arise with no causation involved. And he rejected that view as wrong view. He said no, that's complete nonsense.

If something happens, then something else has influenced it to happen. Otherwise, it wouldn't happen.

So let's assume that these two characters here are highly educated in their Buddhist philosophy, and they know this. What are they talking about if they're talking about spontaneity?

Also, let's consider the lifestyle that these two characters undergo. These are both meditation monks in traditional China. Their lifestyle is, first of all, completely dedicated to the Dharma. They're living lives of celibacy, comparative poverty—though it's hard to say poverty in a traditional society. If you're a monk or a nun in a traditional society, you get fed and housed, you get to study if you want to study, and you're pretty well looked after. So it might be poverty by our standards, but probably not poverty by the standards of the time. They were probably comfortable middle class by the standards of their era.

But they lived a very disciplined life. If you're a meditation monk or nun in traditional China—and also in current day Korea—you'd spend three months of the year doing an intensive retreat, three months off, three months retreat, three months off. And you do that for five years, ten years, twenty years, thirty years. So it's pretty intense and highly disciplined, very hierarchical. You live your life constricted by rules. There are many rules and they cover everything, right down to the details of polite behaviour. Everything is regulated.

And if you're being spontaneous, quote unquote, in that context, basically it means you have internalised the discipline. It's simply the way you behave. You're so conditioned that you simply learn to behave in a certain way—it becomes part of you. Otherwise you wouldn't fit in and you wouldn't survive in that world. So these are highly conditioned, trained individuals who are having this conversation.

What do they mean by spontaneity?

And of course, this comes out in the commentary: you must cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking. Here, the commentator is talking about two aspects, two things that condition us—the emotional and the cognitive.

The emotional is what we would call the heart. These are feelings, emotions, and so on. These are the drives. What drives us? How I feel. This is the area of what the Buddha calls craving and clinging. It's the drivenness of the heart. "I can't help myself. I've got to have this. I can't control the fact that I just feel miserable. And if this happens to me, then my life will be ruined." And this is not under my control. This is the realm of the emotions.

And then there's the realm of concept. This is the world that we create in our conceptual thinking. We create, for example, past and future. And when we meditate, just check. I don't know if this happens to any of you—does it happen to any of you that when you meditate, you sometimes find yourself thinking? Does that happen? Next time it happens, check. Just ask yourself the question: past or future? Because often what we're thinking about is either the past or the future.

Have you noticed how often past or future is actually more real than the present? Have you ever been so worried by something that you have to do tomorrow that today is miserable, even though the objective conditions are very good? Has that ever happened?

So my present reality—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—is clearly pleasant, yet I'm overwhelmed by concept, by my concepts about tomorrow. Or I remember something that happened in the past and it really upsets me. "Oh yeah, that happened. That's what that person did. If only I had done something else." And I feel really bad. The past has colonized the present.

This is the world of concept.

And Wu says, you must cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking in order to understand what's going on here, in order cleanly to reach for the pillow at night. You must cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking, become clean and naked.

This idea of clean and naked is very interesting.

Nothing added. Free and unbound. Only then will you be able to see this saying about great compassion.

Now, you notice what he's getting at. How do we cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking? What he's talking about is that we need to go through a long training to get to this point. And this is really quite important, particularly in non-dual traditions that talk about spontaneity and freedom and so forth. It's very easy for people to get caught up in the idea of "Oh, I'm already awakened, my Buddha nature is already free, and I can just do what I like." Because the reality is that what we do is what conditions us. And if I'm doing what I like, then in all probability I'm just acting according to greed, hatred, and delusion, but putting a big spiritual layer of paint on top of it and pretending to myself and others that I'm really being spiritual—which is, in this context, complete nonsense.

But if everything is conditioned, then how can there be spontaneity? This takes us to the Buddha's sense of what it is that we're doing when we undertake his training.

The Buddha's understanding of ethics teaches a synthesis. Part of his approach to ethics is virtue ethics—in other words, the cultivation of certain virtues. I'm sure if you've been around Buddhist circles, you know that generosity is regarded by Buddhist types as being a very good thing indeed. And things like loving-kindness—these are regarded as very good things indeed. Generosity, loving-kindness, compassion—these are virtues. They're qualities of the heart. And what the Buddha is saying is that if we want to live well, we need to have these qualities, and they need to be quite strong.

These qualities, these virtues, will come about because they, like everything else, arise because of conditions. So let's say I have tendencies toward being stingy, but I want to become generous. How do I do that? Well, I train in generosity. I train myself to be generous. And the name of this training is *dāna*. *Dāna* means giving, and it also means gift—both the act of giving and that which is given. So I would practice giving. It would be my practice. It's like learning to play the piano, but in this case I'm practicing being generous. And the way that I practice it is by giving.

So I get used to giving. I make it a habit. And the Buddha points out—he talks about graceful giving. How to do it gracefully, skillfully, so that the result is I become more generous. Because it is possible to give without becoming more generous.

Let's say some weird situation arises—you come to some kind of virtual meditation meeting and someone hits you with this stuff about how all the teachers are so free and generous with the teaching, and you've got to give them loot, otherwise frankly you're a very bad Buddhist indeed, and maybe it'd be best if you don't come back next time. They didn't actually say that, but... dot, dot, dot. So you think, "Okay, I've got to give them some money. He's probably got lots of money. Better give him something, I suppose. How much is enough? That'll be enough." Off it goes.

Now, the thing is, you've given something. You've practiced *dāna*. But do you walk away from that a more generous person? Well, probably not. You probably walk away thinking, "I was exploited. If they say something is freely given, then mate, it's freely given. What's all this dharma on top?"

On the other hand, you might think, "Wow, this is fantastic! I'm being taught the dharma and I'm going to be liberated!" And how much money have I got in the bank account? "Here, take it all." Which is very nice from my perspective, but from your perspective, later on you think, "Oh my God, why did I do that? I've got to be more careful from now on." So again, you don't come out of the exchange a more generous person. You come out of it a more guarded person.

So graceful giving—it's an art. And for the Buddha, it's all about enjoying the gift, finding pleasure in giving. And that includes the anticipation beforehand and thinking about it afterwards. The classic case is when you give a gift to someone you love, say for Christmas or a birthday. I'm sure you've had the experience. The big day is coming up. I want to give them a present. What will I give them? What would they like? Have you ever spent time in bookshops just going through every shelf thinking, "I don't think he's read that"?

This will be good for him, but I don't know, he might have read that. Maybe this one. Well, this might be a bit weird for him. This one. And finally—ah, this is it. This is the perfect one. He's really going to like that. And joy arises. Then, of course, you give it, and if the person says, "Wow, this is fantastic," joy arises again.

It's this joy arising which cultivates the virtue of generosity, what the Buddha calls *chāga*, which literally means letting go. So it's cultivating a virtue.

Let's give another example. You're walking down the street and there's a rather irritating homeless person who seems to have issues with personal hygiene, suddenly thrusting something at you and demanding money. Or you see them beforehand and think, "Oh, this person will want me to give them something." So you just weave your way across the street and come back. Now, it's a perfectly natural response. But of course, when you come back, are you coming back a more generous person or a more guarded person?

This is the kind of calculation that you start to make. And it's something conscious—it's a training. So you might find yourself thinking, "Okay, the next person who bails me out, they're going to get the contents of my purse, my shrapnel, my spare change, whatever it is. They'll have it." And then there it is. No holding back. You might wait to see if you can get some kind of human interaction. Sometimes people on the street who want money have no idea how to ask for it. They lack grace, because there's a graceful receiving as well as a graceful giving. Sometimes people don't play that dance, which is always disappointing. But still, you can walk away from that encounter a more generous person.

The point is not how much you give. The point is what is the effect on the *citta*, on the heart-mind, over a period of time. We are developing these virtues, and we develop them through practice.

Take compassion, for example. You have the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, which in the texts has a capital B, a capital G, and a capital C—very impressive. So how do I develop the great compassion? Well, I practice it. And I make a point of practicing it. I might, for example, start to become sensitive to seeing pain.

Now, pain is very interesting. Has anybody ever been irritated before? Have you ever been irritated and upset and angry and resentful and bitter and grumpy? When you get to my age, it's pretty much a daily occurrence. These are all manifestations of aversion. What conditions the arising of aversion? Something does, because nothing

arises without something conditioning it. Well, what conditions aversion is pain. Aversion is the response to pain—"I don't like this." It's a kind of tightening, defensive response, a kind of cringing.

If I'm going to work on developing compassion, I need to become sensitive to pain, but without getting caught up in my habitual aversive responses. I need to open and relax to the experience of pain, and take the opportunity to do that whenever I notice it's there. It might be, for example, an attitude of surrender. This hurts. Relax into it.

Now, my own pain is the most obvious to me. But as I become sensitive to the pain here, of course I also become sensitive to the pain out there. So I meet someone who's grumpy, for example. And if I'm not conditioned by my own aversion and grumpiness, then I won't respond to that by thinking, "What a grumpy old bastard." Instead I'll respond by recognizing—ah, they're suffering. Because otherwise they wouldn't be grumpy. Because they're just like me. Because that's what happens when I feel pain.

So developing that sensitivity, recognizing what's going on, and instead of responding with aversion—shut it out, resist, avoid, thump it on the head—we relax, open up, absorb it, and let it go. Don't fixate on it, but let it go. This is practicing compassion.

In this practice, we are cutting off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking. We're not getting caught up in our own responses, our own habitual responses—that's the emotional defilements. And we're not creating stories about what total bastards these people are and how I am the victim of circumstances beyond my control, living in these stories and taking them as absolute truth.

The kind of spontaneity being spoken about here is paradoxically a product of conditioning. But it's conditioning in a certain kind of way, because the Buddha's view of human nature is that we are designed to live in a certain kind of way. If you look at his basic project, the fundamental framework of his teaching, it's the four noble truths: dukkha, the arising of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, and the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. Dukkha is pain, unsatisfactoriness, suffering, dis-ease. And often he would say, "Look, I teach two things. I teach dukkha and the cessation of dukkha. That's what I'm interested in."

The cessation of dukkha, the cessation of pain—another way of talking about this is a flourishing human life. How can I live a flourishing human life? The Buddha's view of human nature is that we will flourish, we will have a highly satisfactory, meaningful, flourishing life, if we embody certain virtues such as generosity, compassion, love, joy. It's like we're designed for that, built for that. But we need to train it.

It's like the paradox of learning meditation. Gary Snyder, the American Zen poet, once commented, "Doing meditation, it is as natural for a human being to meditate as it is natural for a cat to take catnaps. The only difference is no one needs to teach a cat how to take catnaps." That's the only difference, but it is completely natural for us to meditate.

Now, if you think about your own meditation—a good meditation, when that happens—is the heart and the mind at ease, peaceful, unified? Or is it grasping and fighting and complaining? Obviously unified, peaceful. In a sense, this is the natural human condition under which we flourish.

So this is the spontaneity that the non-dual traditions are getting at. That's the aim: to be able to reach back for a pillow in the middle of the night. Here in the commentary it says "to become clean and naked, free and unbound." This reaching for the pillow is something we are all familiar with. It's completely natural, it is our natural state. But things get in the way, so we have to work with these obstacles. And of course, when we actually practice meditation, most of the time that's what we're dealing with—the obstacles. What we're looking for is for these to drop away and for this natural state to emerge. And this is the great compassion.

Getting back to our story: "It's like someone in the middle of the night reaching back for a pillow." Yen said, "I understand." Wu said, "How do you understand it?" Yen said, "Hands and eyes are all over the body." In other words, there's always an opportunity to practice compassion. It's always there. You don't have to go looking for it. It's available.

Wu replied, "You have said a lot there, but only eighty percent of it." Yen asked, "What do you say, elder brother?" Wu answered, "The entire body, hands and eyes." So even more intimate than "it's already available."

In the *Book of Serenity*, the commentary says, "It is like willow-grown banks and flower-grown walls on a warm day in a gentle breeze. Where is the spring?" Let's get a sense of that image: willow-grown banks along the river, flower-grown walls on a warm day in a gentle breeze. What's being conveyed here? A direct sensate experience—in this case, a warm spring evening with a screen in front.

And the light of the candles behind. It's just what it is.

It is like willow-grown banks and flower-grown walls on a warm day in a gentle breeze. Where is the spring?

What's that question about? "Spring," quote unquote, is a concept. Why is it warm tonight? Oh, it's spring. No—it's just warm. Do you see what he's getting at? Just the intimacy of the experience. Don't add anything to it. Just the experience.

The entire body, hands and eyes. It is like willow-grown banks and flower-grown walls on a warm day in a gentle breeze. Where is the spring? What shape is it? Clearly it's not there. *Nevertheless, it is able to accord with things and come with the time, unstopped, unhindered, like the moon in the sky, revolving naturally.*

And this is the ideal. Things just happen. The dharma unfolds. And our job is to get out of the way.

When we do this next meditation session, what is your job? Sit and be aware. Simple. That's it. Just be aware.

Notice how, again and again, you'll be pulled away from that. Something will interfere. The emotions, the concepts will get in the way. What's your job when you notice that? Is it to shake your fist and say, "Get out of here, I'm trying to meditate"? Is it to give up because it's too hard?

No. It's just to be intimately present with this thought, with this feeling. It's just the warm breeze on a spring night. There's no problem with it at all.

CHAPTER 109

"Don't Know" - Blue Cliff Record Case 1

Patrick Kearney · 45 min

In this engaging talk, Patrick Kearney examines Case 1 of the Blue Cliff Record, the foundational kōan collection of Chan/Zen Buddhism, through the encounter between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu of Liang. When the devout but worldly emperor asks about the highest meaning of the sacred truths, Bodhidharma replies "empty, not sacred." When Wu asks "who are you?", Bodhidharma answers simply "I don't know" - words that have echoed through centuries of Buddhist practice.

Kearney unpacks this exchange by exploring the Buddha's teaching on diṭṭhi (view), distinguishing between direct view (diṭṭha) - immediate, experiential awareness - and conceptual view (diṭṭhigata) - abstract narratives we construct about reality. He illustrates how we habitually prefer the conceptual world because it offers meaning, certainty, and identity, even when these stories cause us suffering. The emperor sought learned discussion and validation; Bodhidharma offered only the raw immediacy of present experience.

The practical implications for meditation are profound. Kearney emphasizes kāyagatāsati (mindfulness immersed in the body) as the foundation for practicing "don't know." Breathing and bodily sensations are not about anything - they tell no story and exist only now. By grounding ourselves in physical experience, we learn to recognize thoughts as simply thoughts, feelings as feelings. We discover we don't need the security blanket of having answers, and can trust direct experience to reveal what needs to be done in each moment.

We're talking about "don't know." Tonight's topic, if all goes well, is don't know. So we're going to be Zen-y tonight.

We're looking at the Blue Cliff Record, case one. The Blue Cliff Record is a Song Dynasty collection of koans—stories that are used for meditation in the Chan or Zen traditions. It comes with the story and then an elaborated commentary. This is the opening case of the Blue Cliff Record, and therefore, because it's the first one, it's clearly quite important.

I'll go through the story first and then we'll unpack it.

Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, "What is the highest meaning of the sacred truths?" Bodhidharma replied, "Empty, not sacred." The emperor said, "Who are you?" Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know." The emperor did not understand. Then Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtze River and came to the kingdom of Wei.

Later, the emperor asked Master Chi about this. Master Chi asked, "Does your majesty understand who this man is?" The emperor said, "I don't know." Master Chi said, "He is the Mahasattva Avalokiteshvara, transmitting the Buddha mind seal." The emperor felt regretful, so he wanted to send an emissary to invite Bodhidharma to return. Master Chi said, "Your majesty, don't say that. Even if everyone in the country went after him, he still would not return."

So this is the story. Let's have a look at the characters.

First of all, Bodhidharma. He is regarded as the 28th Indian ancestral teacher of Chan or Zen. Buddhism starts in India and then moves to China, and the Zen sect traces its lineage back to the Buddha. The Buddha, then you have 28 teachers who are part of that lineage. Bodhidharma is the 28th, and then he goes to China and becomes the first Chinese ancestral teacher. So he's extremely important for the Chinese. He lived in what is now Tamil Nadu in the extreme south of the subcontinent, so he went to China by the sea route through Southeast Asia. He arrived in Liang, which was the empire in southern China, in the year 520, according to the traditional dating. At that time, China was divided between a northern Wei Empire, which itself was divided into eastern and western, and in the south, the Liang. So Bodhidharma turns up. He's a distinguished foreign teacher, and he's introduced to the Emperor Wu, who's the founding emperor of this dynasty. And Wu was a devout Buddhist.

Then we have Master Chi, the second character. He's the emperor's personal Dharma teacher, very important in the Buddhist establishment.

Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, "What is the highest meaning of the sacred truths?" Bodhidharma replied, "Empty, not sacred." The emperor said, "Who are you?" Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know."

This is the essence of the encounter between these two men.

Wu, the emperor, was an absolute ruler—a tyrant, we would say. He fought his way to the throne through civil war. He started life as a military man, rose to become a general, and then in the previous dynasty, when it fell apart, Wu ended up the one man standing after all the battles were over. So he becomes the new emperor. He was personally devout as a Buddhist—even, let's face it, superstitious. He ran an administration that was notorious for its corruption among its high officials and members of the royal family, and it was very careless, if not profligate, with the lives of his people.

He's a devout Buddhist, a devout lay Buddhist, and perhaps not a model of how to practice Dharma in one's personal and professional life.

His question—what is the highest meaning of the sacred truths?—reveals what Wu wants: the essence of the teaching. But the problem is that given the way he lives, there's no way he could understand it. He probably thinks he can understand it, because first of all, he is a genuinely learned man who studies the Buddhist texts. He's genuinely devout, and he's bright. So he studies the sacred texts, and he's surrounded by yes-men who are praising his morality and his wisdom. He's probably convinced that he can understand the highest teaching. And here he gets to talk to an exotic foreigner who impresses everyone that he meets. So why not start at the top? What is the meaning of the sacred truths?

Now, this could be a reference to the four truths taught by the Buddha in his first teaching—that's the obvious interpretation for someone coming out of the Theravada tradition. Or from a Mahayana viewpoint, it might refer to the two truths of Mahayana Buddhism, conventional and absolute. But in any event, whatever he's getting at, clearly what he wants is the essence of the teaching. Give me the essence of the teaching.

So Bodhidharma says, "Empty, not sacred."

What has Bodhidharma just done? Basically, he's thrown a bucket of cold water all over the emperor. No learned debate. No congratulations for being such a great patron of Buddhism. Basically: look, forget about anything being sacred—just empty.

Wu, quite understandably, is shocked. Nobody's treated him like this before. What's happening? What's going on? Who is this fellow? Why is he acting like this? And so then comes his second question. This one, unlike the first, is not scripted. He didn't spend any time thinking about it. This arises spontaneously from his heart: Who are you?

Bodhidharma replies, "I don't know."

Put yourself in Wu's position. What can he do with this answer? What is he expected to do with it? Maybe the translator got it wrong—after all, he's speaking through a translator. They're not speaking directly; they have no language in common. Or actually, Bodhidharma would have learned some Chinese in what is now Indonesia. There was a kingdom in that region—Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia—where Buddhists coming from China would spend two or three years studying Sanskrit before going on to India, and Buddhists coming from India would spend two or three years studying Chinese before heading off to China. So maybe he did speak some Chinese by this stage.

In any event, Wu is still completely confused. Maybe this foreigner is crazy. Maybe he doesn't know who he's talking to. Doesn't he realize this is the emperor?

In any event, Bodhidharma decided that he was wasting his time, and he left.

The sad thing is that Bodhidharma was actually answering Wu's questions. He was treating him very seriously. In Zen terms, Bodhidharma opened his mouth and showed his liver. He gave Wu everything. But as my old teacher Sayadaw U Pandita—from a completely different tradition, conservative Theravada in Burma—once remarked, you can play the sweetest music, but the water buffalo still won't dance. And that's the situation Bodhidharma found himself in.

So he leaves. Later, the emperor brought this up to Master Zhi and asked him about it. Master Zhi asked, "Does your majesty know who this man is?" The emperor said, "I don't know."

So we have another "I don't know." You notice we've got two "I don't knows." Now, this one coming out of Wu—here we see Wu at his best. We see his sincerity appearing out of the morass of his power plays and his violence. He really doesn't know. And he knows that he really doesn't know what's going on. And he's prepared to admit it, even if it makes him look foolish in front of his subjects. So here we get some naive sincerity coming out.

The obvious question, then, is: what's the difference between Wu's "I don't know" and Bodhidharma's "I don't know"? Is there one?

Just to tell a personal story—many years ago when I was in Hawaii doing Zen training with Robert Aitken Roshi, I was working on the first koan, which is Zhaozhou's *mu*, meaning the negative "not" or "no." The interview would be going to see the teacher, the roshi. It's very formal, very Zen, very Japanese. You make your formal bows. And of course, what the roshi wanted to know is: What is *mu*? Show me *mu*. And of course, I had no idea what was going on. So I usually went in there and said, "I don't know." And once we got that out of the way, I liked to ask him questions about how to do the meditation practice.

But one day, I must have been feeling rebellious. What would happen is you have the encounter with the teacher, and when the teacher decided that the interview was over, he'd reach over and ring his bell—tingle, tingle, tingle. That's the sign for you to get out and for the next person to get in. And the interviews were quite brief—bang, bang, bang, bang.

So I go in one day. "So, what's *mu*?" I say, "I don't know." And the roshi is reaching for his bell. And I said, "Wait just a minute. Why is it that when Bodhidharma says 'I don't know,' that's great, but when I say 'I don't know,' it's 'get out of here'?"

And Roshi just paused with his hand over the bell, and he looked me in the eyes and he said, "Patrick, there is a world of difference between Bodhidharma's 'I don't know' and your 'I don't know.'" And he rang the bell, and out I went.

So what is the difference? That is an important question.

Wu is talking to Master Zhi, trying to work out what's going on. Now, Master Zhi is both very learned in Buddhist matters—he's the emperor's teacher, that's the top job—and he's a master of politics, because otherwise he wouldn't be the emperor's teacher. He was also very, very good at extracting money from the state and handing it out to the Buddhist clergy. So he's the man to explain what's really going on in any situation relating to Buddhism.

And Master Zhi, as usual—because that's his job—has an answer. Master Zhi said, "He is the Mahasattva Avalokiteshvara, transmitting the Buddha mind seal."

A mahasattva is a Sanskrit term meaning "great being," a high-ranking bodhisattva. In Mahayana Buddhism, this means a being who's on the way to becoming a Buddha and is so close to being a Buddha that, in effect, the difference doesn't count. So you have these great bodhisattva mahasattvas in the Mahayana pantheon, and they're like gods—functionally equivalent to Buddhas.

And the particular bodhisattva that Zhi says Bodhidharma is, is Avalokiteshvara, who is the bodhisattva of compassion. Question: Who's the bodhisattva of compassion today? Not a trick question. Come on, folks. Who is it? Anyone think it's the Dalai Lama? Is that familiar? That's right, it's the Dalai Lama. So Master Zhi is saying, "Look, this guy is the equivalent of the Dalai Lama."

Now, the Buddha mind seal that is being transmitted—this is a Zen concept that refers to the Buddha's awakening. All of Buddhism begins with the Buddha waking up underneath the Bodhi tree. He had some kind of experience, and this experience is, as it were, the heart of every Buddhist tradition. Every Buddhist tradition believes it's possible for us to go through this same experience. And all Buddhist practice has that as the ultimate aim.

Zen talks about this as the Buddha mind seal. It's about the potentiality for awakening that we all have.

The emperor felt regretful, as you would, so he wanted to send an emissary to invite Bodhidharma to return. Master Chi said, "Your Majesty, don't say that. Even if everyone in the country went after him, he still would not return."

Question: Why would he not return? Especially when an invitation by an emperor is a command that invites death if refused—an invitation in name only. Why would he not return?

It's not that Bodhidharma would not return. It's that he could not return. Can we return to yesterday? Can we replay that moment in the past when we made a wrong choice and our life headed off in a bad direction? Of course we can't. All we've got is now. All we can ever have is now. And no amount of regret or remorse will bring the past back to life. This is why Bodhidharma would not return.

So how can we understand Bodhidharma's "don't know"? We're finally trying to get to what this is about.

This brings us to what the Buddha calls *diṭṭhi*, or view. *Diṭṭhi* is a Pali word—in Sanskrit, *dṛṣṭi*—always translated as "view." For the Buddha, view is very important. In the Eightfold Path, the basic template for the Buddha's teaching, for the training we are meant to undergo, the first factor is right view, *sammā diṭṭhi*. The path begins with right view. If our view is wrong, then the very first step we take is wrong in the sense that it's taking us in the wrong direction—away from awakening, not toward it. Getting our view right is, for the Buddha, very important.

Now, the concept of view is ambiguous. It's ambiguous in English, and we find the same ambiguity in the Buddha's teaching. What is a view? A view is something I see right in front of me. And a view is something I have thought about and reached a conclusion. Both are views.

Consider this situation. I step outside for some fresh air. Looking up, I can see a bright blue sky, but there are dark clouds rolling in from the west. Suddenly there's the sound of thunder and rain is pouring down. I see people scatter for shelter as traffic slows and the streets fill with water. In all of this, what I am describing is a view.

Now, as I see this, the rain reminds me of all the strange things that have been happening to weather patterns in recent years. I've read about growing concerns about climate change and potential catastrophic consequences. I'm thinking about what is the best strategy to limit average global warming. Should we go nuclear or should we focus entirely on renewables? In all of this, what I'm describing is also a view.

But you can see there's a big difference between the two. The first is confined to actual immediate experience. It is direct and experiential. When specifying this, the Buddha calls it *diṭṭha*—what is seen. The second moves away from immediate experience to cre-

ate a complex narrative based on abstract thinking. This is conceptual in nature, and the Buddha calls this *diṭṭhi-gata*. While both can be called view, they are actually very different.

This is where we get a sense of why Bodhidharma and Wu are talking at cross-purposes, why they're not connecting. Bodhidharma is speaking from direct view. Wu is speaking from conceptual view.

So when Wu asks about the highest meaning of the sacred truths, what he wants is a discussion—a discussion which is learned, mystical, doctrinal. A discussion where he can impress with his knowledge of the texts and convince himself that he's a wonderful ruler who is on the way to awakening.

When Bodhidharma answers "empty, not sacred," he is saying what is immediately clear to him here and now. In a sense, what's right in front of his eyes. Right here, right now, experienced events are coming and going according to conditions. This conversation with the emperor is undulating according to conditions, and there's nothing behind it propping it up—so it's empty.

Now, if we say "sacred," we're suggesting something set apart from the ordinary, something mysterious, something mystical that only the elect can experience, only the few. But there's nothing mysterious about two old men having a chat. Empty, not sacred. Just a warm day in the palace at Yangkan, the capital city, with the breeze shifting the curtains and the coolness of the stone floor.

Do you see the difference between the two views? Is that clear thus far?

If you think about direct view, it is probably the most obvious aspect of our experience. So right now, I'm sitting here on a cushion, feeling the touch of the body against the cushion and the pad on the floor, feeling the contact of the earphones, seeing the screen in front of me and beyond it, sitting in the room, feeling the temperature. It's a bit humid this evening. We just had some rain and it's warm in civilised Brisbane. I'll refrain from disparaging remarks about Victoria.

All of this is clear. It's obvious. And yet, how easily my attention will slip away from this direct view into conceptual view—the world as I think it to be, the world as I perceive it to be—and how easily we are seduced by conceptual view. Of course, all meditators are very familiar with this.

Have you ever had the experience of sitting in meditation, tracking a meditation object which is quite clear, quite obvious—like, just as an example, the movements of your breathing, the sensations of the body—and then suddenly realizing that you've been

lost in thought for the past five minutes and didn't even know it? Did you recognise that slide from direct to conceptual view as it was happening? Or did you just figure it out later on? Once you realised you were inside the world of conceptual view, the world of thought and perception and conviction, did you take that world to be real? Did you believe that what is really going on is what you are thinking about? Did you find that world of conceptual view even more emotionally compelling than the world of direct view?

For most of us, the answer to these questions is yes. Overall, we prefer to live in a world of conceptual view rather than the world of direct view. We take the world created by our conceptual views to be real, even more real than the world of direct view. And it's certainly more attractive to us.

So why is that? Well, perhaps the most obvious thing is that the world of conceptual view gives us meaning. It creates stories that explain to us who we are and what our role in the world is. These stories give us order and they give us certainty. In this world, in the conceptual world, we know what is going on.

From the Buddha's perspective, this means that the world of conceptual view gives us much more opportunity for clinging—what he calls *upadana*, appropriation, to take something as one's own. It gives us more opportunity for clinging and it gives us more satisfaction in our clinging. When we cling to the stories that we tell about ourselves as truly explaining me and my world, at least we know where we stand. Or at least we think we know.

And this is the problem. Because do we really know? Or are we sacrificing the vividness of actual experience for the virtual reality of concept?

As an ordinary, mundane example: direct view is a direct and immediate seeing of something. It might be that I'm doing my meditation practice. Now I'm with my meditation object. And then now I'm swept away by thinking. And then now I realize I'm lost in thought, and I'm faced with the choice of whether or not to come back to the meditation object. Bang, bang, bang, bang. Clear, direct, obvious.

Conceptual view, by contrast, is an abstract view or conviction—like an ideology that explains the world and its workings to me.

"I am the kind of person who is too distracted to meditate successfully. Other people can meditate, but because of my background, my unique personality, I simply cannot."

Have you ever been tempted to believe that? Notice how easily we are seduced by a conceptual view, even when it brings us pain. Perhaps this is because such a view gives us a clear story that stars me as the main character, with my fate as the central concern. This gives us something obvious to cling to, to identify with. It's much harder to cling to the flow of directly experienced phenomena. It's possible, but it's much harder. It's far easier to cling to our imagined world where "I" star in my own perpetual drama. This is what makes conceptual view so seductive.

Conceptual view also offers the bonus of stability. Our beliefs, our convictions—this belief I hold is right today, was right last year, and will be right next year. Have you ever made that move? Even if this belief brings us pain—perhaps a belief in our own inadequacy—at least we have the comfort provided by certainty. "I know this is true." This is why despair, for example, is so seductive: precisely because it gives us certainty. When we are in despair about the future, we are convinced we know what the future will hold. We cling to that certainty, even when it brings us pain. Of course, the obvious fact—proven again and again in our experience—is that we don't actually know what the future will hold. Yet we can create an ideology in which we absolutely know it. That certainty is deeply seductive.

This brings us to not knowing. The world of "don't know" is a world of immediacy and simplicity. The first thing to recognize is that living in this world does not mean we cannot accomplish anything. Look at the two main characters in our story. Bodhidharma did not know—yet he accomplished a tremendous amount. His legacy is Zen Buddhism, and we still study his life and teachings today. Emperor Wu knew, and he worked relentlessly his whole life as a soldier, politician, and student of Buddhism. Yet his entire dynasty collapsed during his own lifetime. Living in the world of "don't know" does not mean we cease to act in the world. In fact, it can make us far more effective.

This world of direct view is immediate and intimate because it is not about anything—it is simply what it is. The world of conceptual view, by contrast, is always about something else: something separated in time, in space, in identity. We can understand this through the Buddha's teaching on *nimitta*, which can be translated as "sign." A concept is like a sign in that it points toward something else.

Consider a menu. Let's say we're thinking of trying a new restaurant. What do we do? We bring up the website. We study the images, the menu, the reviews. All this information promises a particular kind of experience when we arrive to eat. But the website can never convey the felt experience of actually eating a meal at that place.

When we go there and eat, and afterward we write a review, it would not occur to us to rate the restaurant according to the quality of its website. We rate the felt experience of eating there—the whole package of design, service, food, price. No amount of studying a website can provide that. The restaurant's website may be very useful; it may give us an accurate picture of what the experience will be like. Alternatively, the website may be so wildly inaccurate that when we arrive, we might be tempted to think we've come to the wrong address.

So we could regard the website as useful, as useless, or even irrelevant—we would have checked this place out regardless of what the website said. But no matter how we rate the website, the fact remains that the experience of eating at the restaurant is not the same as the experience of studying the website. It cannot be. The experience of studying a restaurant's website is just an experience of studying the restaurant's website. Simple, direct, obvious.

So, looking at it from Bodhidharma's perspective, which world do we live in? Do we live in a world defined by websites? Or do we live in a world that embraces both the felt experience of studying the website and the felt experience of eating out at the restaurant? The world of don't know is the world where we are clear that what we know from the website is not the feel of eating out—the spiciness of the curry, the hardness of the chair, the sound of conversations around us, the nagging doubt of whether we should have ordered something else. This is the world of don't know. And you notice that it's alive and unfinished. It's moving into something else.

So this brings us to the question of how do we practice don't know? In terms of our meditation practice, for me, our relationship to the body is really important for this. We've pointed out how the world of direct view is not about anything—it's just what it is, here and now. Whereas the world of conceptual view is always about something else, something separated from us in time, in space, in quality. So if we're going to practice don't know, this involves grounding ourselves in something that helps us to be simply present. And probably the best place for that project is what the Buddha calls kāyagatā sati—mindfulness immersed in body.

I think about the activity of sitting and tracking breathing and body sensations. Breathing and body sensations are not about anything at all. First, breathing and body sensations are not telling us a story. They are radically simple—movement and touch. In contrast, the stories that distract us are always about something removed from this immediate experience. Even if it's simply a commentary on this immediate experience, a comment about this immediate experience has just taken us away.

A very common one would be: I'm sitting, I'm meditating, breathing, body sensation, and the thought pops up, "I think this is going very well." That thought popping up—that's our entry into the world of conceptual view. And you notice how it's about something else, about something that didn't need a story. But we just, boom, put a story on top of it. And then we decide what's most important is the story. Oh, good for me. It's going well. Fantastic.

So breathing and body sensations are not telling us a story. They're just what they are. And of course, secondly, breathing and body sensations are always exactly now. They do not occur in the past. They are not an investment for the future. They're just now. And you notice that the world of conceptual view is a world defined by past and future. Things were like this before. They will be like this again. Or alternatively, they better not be like this again. But in either case, it's defined by time, by past and future.

When we learn to be grounded in the physical world, it's much easier to recognize that our thoughts, our concepts, our perceptions are just that—thoughts, concepts, and perceptions. That's all they are. These thoughts, concepts, and perceptions may well be very useful in some contexts, like the website for the restaurant. And they may be very damaging in other contexts. But whatever they are, they remain just movements in the mind, nothing else.

So when we're grounded in the physical world, we learn to be intimate with the felt flow of experience. And as we get better at this, we also learn to be grounded, to be intimate with the felt flow of mental experience. In other words, the recognition that a thought is just a thought—that's all it is. A feeling is just a feeling. An emotion is just an emotion.

And when we become intimate with the flow of experience, we can start to learn to relax into the uncertainty of not knowing. We discover that, unlike Wu, we do not need the security blanket of having an answer to every question. We find we can trust the universe to show us what needs to be done here and now.

And in this way, we can get a sense of Bodhidharma's "don't know"—and even discover his compassion for a world gone completely mad.

CHAPTER 110

Part 1: Vedanā (Feeling)

Patrick Kearney · 34 min

In this foundational talk, Patrick Kearney offers a careful examination of vedanā—the affective dimension of experience that moves us before thought intervenes. Drawing on the Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN 44), he presents the teachings of Dhammadinnā, one of the few women in the early Buddhist canon to have her discourse validated by the Buddha himself. Kearney distinguishes vedanā from Western concepts of emotion, using the evocative metaphor of flavor in food: just as flavor is inseparable from physical sensation yet distinct from it, feeling arises intimately with contact yet represents something different—our immediate response to experience.

The talk traces the dependent arising of feeling from the six sense fields through contact (phassa), explaining how our sentient body—the sāṭvijñāna-kāya—is constantly touched by streams of sense data. Kearney illuminates how the Pāli root 'vid' (to sense, to feel) suggests intimacy with experience, contrasting with roots like 'pas' (to see) used in vipassanā, which implies observational distance. This linguistic analysis reveals the Buddha's sophisticated understanding of different modes of knowing.

Dhammadinnā's teaching introduces crucial insights about feeling's relationship to stability and awareness. Pleasant feeling becomes painful when it ends; painful feeling becomes pleasant when it changes. But the third category—neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling—transforms based on the quality of our awareness itself. This points toward equanimity practice, where genuinely neutral feeling, though subtle, can be experienced as more satisfying than ordinary pleasure when met with clear awareness. The talk prepares ground for exploring the vulnerability inherent in sentience itself.

I'll introduce what the Buddha means by feeling, and then next time we'll look at sentience itself and the vulnerability of sentience. So tonight is more or less a build-up. We're going to look at feeling and focus on the teachings of Dhammadinnā on feelings.

Let's begin.

First of all, we have the Pāli word and the Sanskrit word *vedanā*. This is usually translated as "feeling," and what it refers to is the affective aspect of our experience—in other words, that which has the capacity to move us. We could talk about the cognitive aspect of experience, the head, what we know, what we understand. And then there's the affective aspect of experience, the heart, what we feel, how we respond. So *vedanā*

is all about the feeling, the heart aspect of experience. The English word would be "affect," which refers to that which has the capacity to move us. In English, we might say, "I was moved by that," or "That was very moving." This means I was affected by it, I was moved by it. So *vedanā*, or feeling, moves us to respond to what is happening. It plays a central role.

People often get it mixed up with emotion. It's not emotion in the Western sense of the word. Feeling is like the flavour of food. If you think about the experience of eating, as you're chewing away, there are lots of physical sensations involved—hardness and softness, dryness and wetness, crunchiness and smoothness, and so on. And there's also the flavour of the food. Now, the flavour is not the sensation, and the sensation is not the flavour, but they are intimately intertwined. When we have sensation, we have flavour. When we have flavour, we have sensation. Using the Buddha's language, they arise and cease together. What moves us, what stimulates our responses when we eat, is flavour, roughly speaking. We are moved to take more if the flavour is pleasant. We are moved to take less if the flavour is unpleasant. And we are moved to indifference if we can't find any flavour. But what moves us, what stimulates our response, is flavour. So this is feeling.

Now, there are three categories of feeling, each with its corresponding movement. Pleasant feeling moves us to reach out and hold. Painful feeling moves us to resist or reject, to distance ourselves or defend ourselves. And when we don't know what we are feeling—in other words, when feeling is neither painful nor pleasant—we are moved to dullness, doubt, and confusion. But notice that whatever the category of feeling, we are moved.

Like the English word "feeling," *vedanā* can refer to what we experience and also to a way of experiencing. If you use it as a noun, it indicates what we experience. I might say, "You hurt my feelings." Feelings are a something. Or we might talk about it as a way of experiencing, not a what but a how. We might say, "I think that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel that it isn't." That statement makes perfect sense. If someone said that, you would know what they're talking about. Thinking indicates one way of experiencing; feeling indicates another.

Tonight what we're emphasizing is feeling in this second sense—a way of experiencing rather than a what. When the Buddha uses the term *vedanā*, and in particular when he uses verbs based on the root *vid* (to sense, to feel), words based on this root suggest intimacy, a close encounter with something. For example, when the Buddha talks about mindfulness of breathing, at one point he speaks of becoming intimate with body during this practice.

And he says the practitioner feels the body. The verb that he uses is *vedeti*, which is one of the verbs based on *vid*. You get *vedeti* and *vediyati*—these are the two most common verbs. So when he uses these verbs, what he's suggesting is intimacy, getting closer and closer and closer.

Sometimes he'll use verbs based on the verb *passati*, to see. There he's suggesting distance and detachment. So, for example, *vipassanā*, insight, or *anupassanā*, tracking, and so on.

So where do we find feeling? The Buddha says the six sense fields condition contact, contact conditions feeling. This is basic teaching of dependent arising. He begins with the sense fields. The sense fields are the sensitivities, the six sensitivities that together constitute a sentient body. In Pali this is *saviññāṇaka-kāya*. *Kāya* is body, *viññāṇa* is awareness, *sa* means "with"—a body with awareness, a sentient body. And this is what we are. We are sentient bodies. This is where all experience happens. Each of us is a locus of sensitivity. We're a little bundle of sensitivities, located somewhere. If you want to know where, it's here. And we are surrounded by an ocean of stimuli.

Sense data is flowing into our sentient body through the sensitivities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. Because for the Buddha, mind is another sensitivity. And each sensitivity is a receptivity to corresponding sense data. So for example, when the Buddha talks about the eye, he's not talking about the physical organ the way a doctor might. He's talking about the sensitivity of that part of the body which is receptive to light and color. The eye is a sensitivity that is receptive to a particular kind of data. The ear for the Buddha is that part of the body which is sensitive to sound, and so on. Mind is also a sensitivity—it's sensitive to non-physical data.

Each of the five physical sensitivities picks up its own unique stream of data, and all of these streams flow into the mind, which has its own stream of data. The mind brings all of these together and creates a meaningful world. That's its job. And this process occurs through what the Buddha calls *phassa*, usually translated as contact.

He says—this is a very common formula—depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling. Then he goes through all of the sensitivities with the same sentence.

Contact is where experience takes place. *Contact* translates the Pali word *phassa*, which literally means touch. So the Buddha is saying we are touched by what streams through our senses. And this touch, which is happening here and now, is the immediacy

of experience. Experience is already a complex event. It's an arena in which three elements converge: sense sensitivity, sense object, and awareness. The three of them converge and something happens.

Contact conditions feeling. If contact is the arena of experience, feeling is found in the response to experience. For example, I hold my palms like this and then bring them together very slowly so they gently touch. Touch is an impact. There's warmth and softness. And when I experience this, my body immediately responds. It relaxes and opens. This response is where we find feeling.

So you notice the intimacy between touch and response. This relationship between contact and feeling is very intimate. It's stimulus and response. Where there is stimulus, there's a response. Where there's a response, there is a stimulus. Contact and feeling are different sides of the same coin. They are intimate, they are inseparable—like a sunflower turning towards the sun, like a sleeper turning in the night.

So that's our introduction to vedanā. Any questions so far?

A participant asks about vipassanā and the language of intimacy versus distance.

The Buddha uses verbs based on *vid,* to sense, to feel. From that root he creates the verb *vedati vedayati,* to feel, which is all about intimacy. But he also uses words based on the root *pas,* to see—like insight, *vipassanā*. There he's talking about not being intimate with something, but suggesting detachment, distance. If I'm having insight into something, it's like I'm over here looking: "Oh, what's that over there?"

So sometimes the Buddha uses language that suggests going in really close. Sometimes he uses language that suggests pulling back, creating a distance. The going in close is the affective, the feeling aspect. Creating a distance is the more cognitive, head aspect.

Let's move on to Dhammadinnā and her teaching in the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, the Lesser Dialectic. If you're looking for this, it's Majjhima number 44.

Dhammadinnā is an arahant bhikkhunī—fully awakened, and female. She's the only woman to give a discourse in the early teachings, as far as I'm aware. The Buddha's teachings are called *sutta.* It's not just the Buddha who delivers suttas; some of the senior teachers also deliver them. But for a teaching to become a sutta means that the Buddha has, in some way or another, listened to it or heard about it and put his stamp of approval. He says, "Yes, I would have said exactly the same thing." Then that teaching becomes a sutta. Dhammadinnā is the only woman who gets her own suttas—two of them. So she must be pretty important.

Here she's having a dialogue with her ex-husband, and they come to the subject of vedanā. This is how she explains it:

Whatever is felt physically or psychologically as pleasant and soothing is pleasant feeling. Whatever is felt physically or psychologically as painful and hurting is painful feeling. Whatever is felt physically or psychologically as neither soothing nor hurting is neither painful nor pleasant feeling.

Now, you could summarize by saying "whatever is felt is feeling," which frankly doesn't tell me a lot at all. In fact, when I first read this, I thought, "Yeah, and?"

But when we look at her full statement, we get a sense of where she's coming from. Whatever is felt as pleasant and soothing is pleasant feeling. Whatever is felt as painful and hurting is painful feeling. What she's talking about is feeling as a way of experiencing. She's saying whatever is experienced as pleasant is feeling.

Whatever is experienced as painful is feeling. In other words, she's talking about feeling as an experiencing as.

And this represents a form of knowing or understanding, but it's much more intimate than how we usually speak of knowing something. For example, when we say "I know something"—like "I know Melbourne," for instance—we're implying a subject-object distinction. There's a separation between knower and known, between the I that knows and the thing that is known. I know Melbourne. There's me here, there's Melbourne there. There's a separation.

Feeling, in contrast, implies a knowing that's more intimate and therefore less nameable, less amenable to being pinned down as something. In other words, feeling does not tell us what we are experiencing, but how we are responding to it. And in fact, it's not even telling us that it's us that is responding. It's just saying there's responding.

Is this making sense? This is getting very obscure because we don't usually think of things in this way.

Feeling is found in a response that moves us before we have had time to think about it. That's one way of looking at it. Now, there must be some kind of understanding involved, because if we are moved to reach out and grab hold, or if we are moved to resist or reject, there has to have been some kind of assessment of the event. But this is an assessment that is so foundational, so non-cognitive, that it's built into the fabric of experience itself.

In contrast, we can look at the Buddha's teaching on cetanā, usually translated as intention, but perhaps more accurately as choice or decision. Cetanā, choice, is the decision to act that arises from the perceived significance of an event.

Now, choice is extremely important in the Buddha's teaching because it represents how we construct the direction of our lives—the choices that we make as we go through our lives. He even equates cetanā, choice or decision or intention, with karma. So karma, obviously, is really central to the Buddha's teaching. And for him, cetanā is karma. Intention is action. Choice is action. So this is really, really important.

Where does vedanā, feeling, fit into this? Feeling represents the world as given to us that demands a decision. Feeling represents the world that demands a choice. The fundamental decision that we have to make is about this experience event, this which is happening right now. How is it positioned in relation to my interests and me? Is it pleasant, to be held onto? Is it painful, to be rejected? Is it neither, to be completely ignored?

Feeling has us already deciding, already engaging. Choice, intention, karma—they come in later as a kind of review of a commitment we've already made. We are already committed. Then we notice what's going on. Then we decide what to do about it. So this is what I mean when I say that feeling goes really, really deep.

And this means it's so elemental that it's very difficult to understand with concepts. It's very difficult to talk about, which I think is one reason why people don't talk about it very much. Basically, at this level of elemental response, we've come up against the limits of language.

Remember we talked about knowing something. In order to speak of something, to think of something, that something has to be an object out there, separate from the speaker, separate from the thinker.

But feeling gives us a world before we recognize it as being separate from us—in which we are already entangled, already committed, already doing something, already responding. And it's this very response that helps create the world that we can recognize as separate from us and demanding our choices and decisions.

So feeling is found in our response to what is happening now. And the Buddha says there are three fundamental responses, depending on the three categories of feeling.

If the feeling of a sensation is pleasant, we're moved to hold. If the feeling of a sensation is painful, we are moved to resist or reject. If the feeling of a sensation is neither painful nor pleasant, we are moved to ignore it as being beneath our notice. Or if we do notice it, we're moved to confusion and doubt over what to do about it. Should I hold it? Should I reject it? Hold, reject, hold, reject...

So Dhammadinnā goes on to say: pleasant feeling is pleasant in its stability and painful in its instability. Painful feeling is pleasant in its instability and painful in its stability. Neither pleasant nor painful feeling is pleasant with understanding and painful without understanding.

What she's drawing attention to, first of all with the first two feelings—pleasant and painful—is their stability. In other words, she's saying the very ordinary, everyday thing: if the degree of pleasure is the same, then something that gives me pleasure for a day is better than something that gives me pleasure only for one hour. Conversely, the longer a painful experience lasts, the worse it is. And of course, this is what makes any kind of chronic pain so difficult to endure.

These changes in pleasant and painful reveal what we really do and do not like. How do we know that we are enjoying this experience? In part, it's because of a sense of contrast—we notice we are upset when it ends, when it changes. How do we know we are not enjoying this experience? In part, it's because of a sense of contrast—we notice we are pleased when it changes. So pleasure and pain is bound up with change, with instability.

The third category of feeling is the odd one out. This is neither painful nor pleasant. Dhammadinnā does not talk about how it changes over time, but whether or not we are aware of it. She says that when we are clear about this kind of feeling, it is pleasant. When we are not clear about it, it is painful. So that which is neither painful nor pleasant changes into that which is either pleasant or painful, depending on the quality of our awareness. Our capacity to discern feeling changes feeling.

Dhammadinnā has introduced a new relationship. She's talking about the fluidity of feeling, which we're going to explore more in the next talk when we discuss sentience. Feeling is constantly changing. Pleasant and painful is bound up with stability. Experience flows, it's constantly changing, and this has a huge effect on how we feel. "I like this—okay, it's already over." "I really hate this, and it's been sticking around forever." Our relationship to time is bound up with our sense of pleasant and painful.

With the third category, it's not about time—it's about awareness. What Dhammadinnā is suggesting is that that which is neither painful nor pleasant is something which is here but not understood. And then later, it's still here but now it's understood. It's this shift in understanding that changes it. This feeling changes as it moves in and out of awareness. When we are not aware, neither painful nor pleasant feeling is painful.

Which is an interesting thing to say, because it throws up an obvious question: How can something be painful when we're not aware of it? And perhaps—this is just my own speculation—what Dhammadinnā is referring to is the painful quality of a felt sense of obscurity and its accompanying confusion.

Have you ever had disturbed sleep? Would you say it was pleasant or painful? But how can it be either if you're asleep and you don't know what's going on? If you don't know what's going on, how do you know you've had disturbed sleep? I think this is the kind of thing she's getting at. What about restless distraction when you're meditating?

Have you ever had restless distraction when you're meditating, when you don't really know what's going on? It's like you suddenly enter into this kind of restless, distracted state. But you know that when you're distracted, you don't know that you're distracted. And then later you realize, "Oh, I'm distracted." You've suddenly come out of it—"Oh, I'm really out of it." Was that pleasant or painful?

I think what Dhammadinā is suggesting is that it's painful, but what makes it painful is not knowing it. The absence of awareness, or the weakness of awareness. So something is felt—otherwise there would be no feeling. And if there's no feeling, there's no contact. And if there's no contact, there's no experience at all.

This is really important, really basic things about feeling. There's always feeling. It's impossible to have an experience without feeling. But something can be felt as here, yet only vaguely, obscurely. And that vagueness has a painful quality to it. She's suggesting that delusion itself hurts, which is interesting. But when it emerges, when we confront it directly, then it's not so bad. It might even be pleasant.

I think we've all experienced this in the meditation practice—when we're bugged by something and then we face it in the meditation. "Oh, this is what it is." And it improves.

Where this matures, I think, is in the experience of equanimity. In a state of equanimity—and this is where mindfulness practice is designed to take us—the feeling tone is genuine neutrality. It's not pleasant, it's not painful, but it's clear. Very, very subtle, but very clear. And when you notice it—and it can be easy to not notice it because it's so subtle—but when you notice it, it's actually more pleasant than pleasant. Which is odd.

CHAPTER 111

Part 2 - Vedanā (Feeling/Sentience)

Patrick Kearney · 37 min

In this continuation of his exploration of vedanā, Patrick Kearney takes a deeper look at feeling as a way of experiencing rather than merely an object of experience. He draws a vivid analogy between feeling and flavor—distinct from physical sensation yet intimately intertwined with it—to illuminate how vedanā moves us to respond before any conscious choice occurs. The talk traces feeling back to its source in sentience itself, examining why the Buddha placed such emphasis on dukkha and the inherent vulnerability of subjective experience.

Kearney explains the Buddha's phenomenological approach to subjectivity, describing how experience arises through six sense bases and the formula of contact (phassa) conditioning feeling. He emphasizes that we live in an 'ocean of affect' much like fish living in water—so immersed that we rarely notice it until disturbed. This leads to a profound discussion of sentience as the foundation of Buddhist ethics, where the circle of ethical concern extends to all beings capable of feeling pain.

The practical implications for meditation are significant: rather than pursuing clarity and accuracy through noting practices, Kearney invites practitioners to surrender into the felt immediacy of experience. This means opening to the vulnerability that characterizes sentience, staying with feeling before it crystallizes into perception, judgment, or concept. He acknowledges that we habitually flee from this raw physicality into our conceptual world, creating fantasies that separate us from felt reality. The path forward involves intimacy rather than cognitive distance—relaxing into whatever is happening now without needing to understand it or make it make sense.

This week we're going to continue to explore feeling, but we're going to take a backward step, as it were. We'll start by revising what we said about vedanā, about feeling.

Feeling represents the affective aspect of experience—in other words, the world of affect. What we mean by affect is that which has the capacity to move us. So we might say, for example, "that talk was very moving" or "I was moved by that." This is affect. It's what provokes a response, hence the idea of movement. So vedanā, or feeling, moves us to respond to whatever is happening.

Roughly, we could compare feeling or vedanā to flavor. When we eat, we have a whole series of physical sensations of the food—its hardness, softness, dryness, wetness, and so on. That food also has flavor, and the flavor is not the sensations. The sensations are not flavor. They're different, they're distinct, but they're intimately intertwined. Using the Buddha's language, they arise and cease together. In other words, if there are sensations, there's flavor, and if there's flavor, there are sensations. They come and go together, intimately entwined. And roughly speaking, it's flavor which provokes our response to the food.

We could say there are three categories of response. If the flavor is pleasant, we are moved to take more. If the flavor is unpleasant, we are moved to take less. And if we can't find any flavor, we are moved to indifference. But what moves us, what stimulates our response, is flavor. So feeling is that which moves us to respond to any experience.

There are three categories of feeling according to the Buddha, each with its corresponding movement. Pleasant feeling moves us to reach out and to hold on. Painful feeling moves us to resist, to reject, or to defend ourselves. And when we don't know what we are feeling—in other words, when feeling is neither painful nor pleasant—we are moved to dullness, doubt, confusion. But whatever category of feeling it is, we are moved in some way.

The Pali word vedanā, like the English word feeling, has a twofold meaning. It can indicate what we experience, but it can also indicate a way of experiencing. For example, regarding what we experience, I might say, "You hurt my feelings." So my feelings are a something out there. Or we might say, "I think that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel that it isn't." In other words, there are two ways in which I experience the world and judge it and relate to it: through thinking—cognitive, through the head—and through feeling—affective, through the heart. In our last talk, that's what we were focusing on, the second aspect of feeling: a way of experiencing. And this is what we're focusing on tonight as well.

The word feeling is the translation of the Pali word vedanā. Pali is the closest language that we have to the language the Buddha taught in. Vedanā comes from the root vid, to sense, to feel—in other words, to directly encounter. Words based on this root all suggest intimacy, a very close encounter with whatever is happening. This is distinct from, for example, a whole series of words based on the Pali root pas, to see, which suggest distance and detachment. You might have noticed that when you get older, sometimes in order to see something, you've got to step back, and then you can see it. So you have words like vipassanā, insight. Here you have a word based on the root pas, to see,

and again it suggests something cognitive, but it also suggests some distance, some detachment. I know what's going on there. But words based on vid suggest intimacy, getting close.

What we find as human beings—let's introduce the term sentient beings—is that as sentient beings, we live in an ocean of affect, of feeling. Imagine this very weird situation. I said this is a bit weird, but use your imagination.

Imagine living on the floor of a vast ocean of air. We move around on this floor and we live our lives, but we are so dependent upon this ocean that if we were separated from it just for a few minutes, we would die. Now, for such a being—for example, us—air surely is the most powerful and obvious aspect of our physical existence. But as you all know, we tend to ignore air completely. We often don't even notice it because we're busy with something else. Usually we notice it only when it's particularly disturbed in some way, when it disrupts our habitual activities—when we smell it, when it seems particularly hot or cold, or when we have trouble taking it in, such as during an asthma attack. If you've ever had a severe asthma attack, you know the insecurity that arises when the thought appears: "I might not get enough of this stuff." But usually, of course, we don't even notice it. It just disappears.

Actually, I'm reminded of the wisdom of my mother, who was born and lived and died in Sydney. As a true Sydneysider, she once commented, "Never trust air you can't see." I found that a very profound statement.

Now, the same is true for feeling. We live in that ocean of affect, an ocean of feeling, but we tend not to notice it until it disturbs us in some way—yet it governs everything. And so tonight, what we're going to look at is a particular aspect of this, which we could call the source of feeling, where it comes from. And this is sentience. This takes us to subjectivity.

One of the things that distinguishes the Buddha's teaching—let's call it religious teaching, or philosophic teaching, but particularly teaching that we normally call religious—one thing that distinguishes the Buddha's teaching is that what he's interested in is the nature of experience from the perspective of the experiencing subject. In other words, in Western philosophical terms, what he teaches is a form of phenomenology. He's really interested in subjectivity and what it is to experience and how experience works. Hence, you have the important role of what we call insight meditation. Insight meditation is essentially—one way of looking at it—a way of objectifying our own subjectivity. Does that make sense? It's like I'm going to look at my own subjectivity. I'm go-

ing to separate myself from it and observe: "Oh, this is what's happening to me. Oh, I'm getting upset now. Oh, I'm not getting upset. Oh, I like this. Oh, I don't like that." So this is central to the Buddha's teaching: subjectivity—what it is, how it works, what it does.

And this brings us to the Buddha's teaching of dukkha, which I'm sure you've all heard of. Dukkha is usually, classically, translated as "suffering." Sometimes it gets different translations these days. "Unsatisfactoriness" is one. Tanissaro Bhikkhu likes to translate it as "stress." Basically, dukkha encompasses all forms of distress and dis-ease, ranging from the most subtle to the most gross.

Now, why is dukkha so central to the Buddha's teaching? Why is he so obsessed with it? In part because he's acutely aware of the pain that is inherent in subjectivity. In other words, for him, if you've got subjectivity, mate, you've got pain.

How does this work? We talked last time about how for the Buddha, all experience comes to us through our senses. For the Buddha, we have six senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—the five familiar physical senses—and minding, the sixth sense of mind. Here, mind functions as a sense sensitivity. The five physical senses present the physical world within which we live.

The sixth sense is conceptual—it presents the world of thought, perception, and concept.

Now, each of these senses is a sensitivity, a sensitivity to a particular form of data. Take, for example, the eye—not the eyes in the self, but the eyes in the eyeball. The eye is that part of the body which is sensitive to light. If I'm in a dark room at night and I want to see what's going on, I don't put my hand out and wave it around because my hand is not sensitive to light. This is sensitive to light, so I have a look. The ear is that part of the body which is sensitive to sound, and so on. The mind is sensitive to non-physical phenomena such as thoughts, feelings, perceptions.

So we have six sensitivities receiving data, and this is how experience arises. The Buddha says: depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling. And then he goes on through the other senses. This is a standard formula.

Contact—this is the translation of the Pali word *phassa*, which refers to the immediacy of experience, the very moment that something happens. And if you're interested in when this moment occurs, it occurs now. The word *phassa* literally means touch. In other words, the Buddha is saying we are touched by what streams through our senses.

And this touch is happening right here and now through six streams. We experience something when we are touched by our outer world through the physical senses or our inner world through the mind.

The Buddha also uses the term *citta*, usually translated as mind, though it could be translated as heart-mind. *Citta* is our inner state. Our heart and mind is disturbed by the touch of the inner world and the outer world. And when it's disturbed, it responds —it does something. This response is feeling, and it involves three basic categories: pleasure, pain, confusion. This is his basic framework. This is how subjectivity works.

Now, if you think about experience—or just feel it—experience itself is this ever-changing stream of events shaped by changing conditions. You notice that the conditions are always changing. Right now, something is happening. Is it exactly the same as it was when this talk began? No. It's changed because of the flow of experience. How much of these changes are under our control? Well, the answer is: bugger all. Very few of them.

Along with this flow of experience is the flow of feeling. Pleasure is always bookmarked by pain. Pain is always bookmarked by pleasure. This flow of sensation and response never stops, and it's out of our control.

The response that arises—we respond through feeling before we make any conscious choice. We talked about this last time. We do not first experience and then decide whether or not we like what's going on. By the time we recognize what is happening, we have already responded. We already like, or we already dislike, or we are already confused.

So we're thrown into this world where we are already grappling with it, already responding to it before we're even clear about what it is. And this world is a ceaseless flow of experienced events that never stops and is out of our control. This ceaseless, uncontrollable flow of pleasure and pain reveals our vulnerability and our fragility. It's like we are quite literally exposed—exposed to the impacts of our inner world and our outer world. We cannot control these impacts, and we cannot control our immediate responses to them. Both are out of our control.

Nothing has solidity. Nothing can be relied upon to remain still. Nothing can be relied upon to refrain from giving us pain. So the sensitivity which is at the heart of the heart-mind, this sensitivity, this receptiveness, is in a chronic state of disturbance. The Buddha says we are like a fish pulled from the water, flapping about in a panic. If you get that image in your mind and realize that what the Buddha is pointing to here—he says this is the normal human condition—it's a bit scary.

So this brings us to sentience. We've looked at feeling, then subjectivity. Now we're looking at sentience. And sentience is a very important concept in Buddhist ethics.

First of all, what we mean by sentience: to be sentient is to be aware and to feel. For example, we might in the hot weather have an air conditioning system. And we might program our air con system to maintain a temperature of 25 degrees. This temperature is regulated by a thermostat. Every time the temperature moves above 25, the thermostat recognizes that and adapts. Every time the temperature drops below 25, the thermostat recognises it and responds. But we don't say that the thermostat feels hot or feels cold. On the other hand, we feel hot or feel cold. This capacity to feel is sentience.

Sentience is really important for the Buddha because it's at the center of his understanding of ethics. When the Buddha talks about our circle of ethical concern—who should we be concerned about?—for the Buddha, that's sentient beings. When Westerners first stumbled into Buddhist ethics, one thing that was interesting for them was the recognition that Buddhist ethics does not stop at the borders of our species. All species that we can recognize as sentient demand our ethical concern. This is a really fundamental principle for him.

If you think about the five precepts—or the five ways of training, which is a more accurate translation—the first way of training is to abstain from killing living beings. Now, the beings here are sentient beings, not just human beings, but sentient beings. These are beings who feel pain, love life, and fear death. Roughly speaking, if a being tries to escape our blow, it's covered by this precept. So this is the circle of ethical concern which goes beyond the human. And what defines it is this quality of sentience.

This concept of sentience is really important. And you notice that the first characteristic of a sentient being is that of feeling pain. For the Buddha, sentience entails pain. If there's sentience, there's pain. We could perhaps go so far as to say that the difference between a robot and a living being is not their comparative intelligence, but whether or not they feel pain. If an entity feels pain, that entity is sentient.

So we are sentient. We are aware and feel. And that means we are exposed to pain, for the reasons we talked about. This becomes evident in our meditation practice. When we hit the pause button on our habitual obsessions and oblivion, when we allow ourselves to be aware of whatever we are experiencing now, what we often recognize is a pervasive restlessness, an inability for the body and mind to settle, an inability to absorb fully into this present experience.

This is one reason why meditation is so easy to postpone. We don't want to expose ourselves to what we know is happening underneath the surface. When we give ourselves permission to feel whatever we are actually feeling now, without all the usual distractions, without the superficial preoccupations that we fill up our daily lives with, then we expose ourselves to an underlying sense of dis-ease, of restless discontent. And we do not want to see this because it reveals the vulnerability of experience, the pain inherent in sentience. It reveals the sensitivity of the heart and the uncontrollable flow of disturbances that characterize the heart when it's being bombarded by sense stimuli.

So this is why we resist meditation.

It's also a major reason why we find it so easy to get lost in our thinking. We run away from the felt reality of our immediate experience—for example, the five physical senses. Have you ever noticed when you sit to meditate, what's the most obvious thing that's going on? Isn't it the body? Isn't it the five physical senses? Isn't that really, really obvious? And yet, how long does it take before awareness goes into the thinking world, into the world of concept?

We run away from the felt reality of what's really going on now, particularly in the five physical senses, and we live as refugees in our conceptual world. We create fantasies, and the principal job of those fantasies is to separate us from the felt reality of our physicality. Get me out of here.

So if we're going to go deep into our own subjectivity, if we're going to go deep into our felt experience—which is what meditation is all about—we need to face this vulnerability. And this brings us to the role of feeling in practice, in meditation practice.

We've talked about feeling as being a way of experiencing, not just an object of experience. This understanding opens up how to practice with feeling. The key is intimacy. What we want to do when we practice is to get closer to the felt touch of contact, the felt touch of the immediacy of sensation. And in order to do this, we have to open to the vulnerability of sentience.

So when you sit, check—and you might want to play with this in our sitting period—check your feeling now. The easiest way to do it is to check pleasant and painful; they're the most obvious. So right now, am I experiencing pleasure? Let yourself feel that pleasure. Relax into it. Right now, am I experiencing pain? Let yourself feel that pain. Surrender into it.

Now when you do this, when you're working with feeling, don't worry about being clear or accurate in your awareness. This concern belongs to watching, the cognitive aspect of meditation. Here we're dealing with the affective aspect, not the cognitive. And feeling arises, as we talked about last time, before perception, before judgment, before concept. And so it lacks the clean boundaries of concept.

One of the things that is attractive about concept is the fact that it has very clear boundaries. Feeling doesn't. Sometimes it does, but often it doesn't. It's too viscous, too flowing to have those clear boundaries.

Feeling occurs before judgment, perception, and concept in the sense that feeling arises from the same place that perception, judgment, and concept come from. Feeling is found in the disturbed vulnerability that characterizes sentience before any perception or concept arises about it. It's more intimate.

If you think about the world of concept: Why do I perceive myself as this person rather than that person? Why do I perceive this experience as good rather than bad? It's because I have abandoned my original vulnerability and moved into a cloud of concepts buzzing around, trying to make sense of it, to distance myself from it.

But feeling does not make sense. Sense comes afterward. First we feel, then we make sense of whatever is happening. So don't worry about what it is or what it means, or look for any clear borders, or look for it to make any kind of sense. Just surrender into it. Don't worry about being clear; just surrender. Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling. You don't have to like it. You don't have to dislike it. Just relax into it. You don't have to do anything with it. Just relax into whatever is happening right now.

So when we practice feeling, we learn to stay with the vulnerability of sentience. And in this surrender, we do not get lost in concepts about what we are experiencing. We're just intimate with our sensitivity.

Now, of course, when we try to do this, we keep sabotaging ourselves. We continue to construct a cognitive world out of our experience. We do this all the time.

We've been doing this longer than we can remember, so we're not going to stop now. But that's fine. When we notice that we're lost in a world of perception, judgment, and concept, we surrender into it and feel the intimacy and the vulnerability of being in that world.

And again, notice how feeling flows like a river. Nothing is stable. No single experience is reliable. So we don't disturb this river, this flow, by holding on to any particular feeling. We let pleasant succeed painful and painful succeed pleasant.

Strangely enough, sometimes we find that we have habits of clinging—definitely. And perversely, sometimes we cling to the painful rather than to the pleasant, because that's where we construct an identity from. So as soon as you notice yourself doing that, notice how you've just separated yourself from the flow of sentience and feeling. And then just surrender into it. What does it feel like to be doing this? Surrender into that feeling. I don't have to drop it; I just feel what I'm doing.

And over time, feeling itself transforms. This is where, as this process develops, the Buddha talks about the arising of equanimity. But perhaps we'll talk about that some other time.

Question: Is this meditation process really just us getting in touch with what we're feeling? What about practices like noting what one is feeling—is that the mind trying to make sense of the feeling after one has had it?

When people talk about noting, usually what they want is for you to be clear and accurate about what's happening—to clarify the meditation object. This is really standard, particularly in Mahasi Sayadaw's approach. Here, we're not interested in that. Don't do it. Just feel it.

Noting is cognitive, and when it dominates the meditation experience, it means you're moving to the cognitive side of the ledger. Here, we're deliberately swinging to the other side. I just want to feel. If it happens to be accurate, fine—that's good. But don't try to be accurate. Just feel it.

And often you do find that experience doesn't have clear boundaries. Often you will find that actually, you don't know. That's the third category of feeling—neither painful nor pleasant. That's one of its flavors: not knowing. What does it feel like to not know? Surrender into that. For some people, it's quite painful. That makes a lot of sense. For some people, it's very painful and can be quite challenging.

CHAPTER 112

Introduction to Mahāsī Method

Patrick Kearney · 38 min

In this foundational talk, Patrick Kearney provides a comprehensive introduction to the Mahāsī Sayādaw vipassanā method, a Burmese meditation approach that emerged from the 19th and 20th century Buddhist revival in Southeast Asia. He begins by situating this technique within the broader framework of samatha (serenity) and vipassanā (insight), explaining that while all meditation methods contain both elements, the Mahāsī approach emphasizes insight.

The heart of Kearney's instruction centers on the distinctive feature of this method: the relationship between primary and secondary objects. The primary object—typically the rising and falling sensations of the abdomen during breathing—sustains attention over time and serves as a constant reference point. What sets the Mahāsī method apart is its innovative treatment of distraction: rather than viewing interruptions as failures, they become secondary objects worthy of investigation. When physical pain, thinking, sounds, or emotions capture attention, the meditator notes them deliberately before returning to the primary object. This noting practice involves both deliberate awareness and naming, though Kearney emphasizes that names serve only as pointers—attention should rest on the experience itself, not the label.

Kearney also provides detailed instruction on walking meditation, explaining it as equally important as sitting practice rather than merely a break between sits. He describes how to work with movement and touch as primary objects, how posture should remain fluid with the whole body engaged, and how walking serves as a bridge between formal sitting and ordinary daily activities. Throughout, he emphasizes flexibility—if naming becomes an obstacle, drop it; if sound works better as a meditation object, use it. The method serves awareness, not the other way around.

This morning I want to introduce the meditation method that we're doing. There are many different approaches to meditation, and what we're doing in this retreat is just one of them.

Broadly speaking, when the Buddha talked about meditation, he talked about it in terms of cultivating serenity and insight—*samatha* and *vipassanā*. Both of these are necessary. Serenity is the calming, unifying, receptive aspect of the mind, and insight is what we recognize as what's happening when the mind becomes calmed and receptive. Any kind of meditation method has both of these aspects, but different methods will

emphasize one over the other. Some will emphasize serenity over insight; others will emphasize insight over serenity. There are a whole number of meditation techniques available, and they have different flavors, largely depending on what aspect they emphasize.

This approach emphasizes insight. It was developed by a Burmese monk, Mahāsī Sayādaw, in Burma. He was coming out of the nineteenth and twentieth century revival of Buddhism and Buddhist practice that you found throughout Southeast Asia in particular, but other parts of Asia as well.

If we get down to basics and ask what we mean by meditation, we could say that meditation is the systematic training of attention. Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object, and awareness is the knowing of the object.

Working backwards: awareness is the knowing of the object. Awareness is simply knowing that something is happening or knowing that something is present. It's very basic. For example, visual awareness—right now, I know that you are present because I can see you. But awareness has depth, and so I can be faintly aware or very deeply aware or something in between. At the moment I know that you're here, but you exist as rather blurry blobs until I put on the glasses, whereupon suddenly you have definition and you're quite clear. I take them off again and you're still here, but you've changed. Put them on again and you've returned. So awareness has depth and shallowness. And if it has depth, it can be developed. I can become increasingly aware; I can train awareness.

Awareness is the knowing of the object, of the experience. Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on a subject. Attention is about being deliberately aware. Right now I'm seeing, and I'm not making any particular effort to see—it's just happening. But if I was wondering whether a certain person turned up to do this retreat, then I'd have to start looking. I'd have to start scanning the room. Is she here? This is the difference between seeing and looking. Looking implies something deliberate.

As soon as you talk about doing something deliberately, you bring in method. How am I going to look? Am I going to scan the room from left to right, or from right to left? From front to back, or back to front? Or am I going to just look at random? Suddenly I'm faced with choices about what do I do and how do I do it. This is inherent in the whole aspect of doing something deliberately. So if I'm going to cultivate awareness, I need to first of all work on attention. Attention is being deliberately aware. And if I'm going to develop attention, I need some kind of method, some way of going about doing it.

Meditation is the systematic training of attention. This particular approach is characterized by the division between primary object and secondary object. Any kind of meditation approach gives you something to be aware of, something to be attentive to. Probably the most common meditation object would be the breathing.

So we sit there and be aware of the breathing. Whatever the object is, there's always some kind of meditation object. There it is. Be aware of this. Pay attention to this.

We take something to be aware of and work with it systematically over a period of time so that we really get to know that particular meditation object. And in the process, we cultivate, we make the quality of attention stronger and stronger, and the awareness becomes stronger and stronger and deeper and deeper. We call this the primary object.

The function of the primary object is to sustain attention over time. If we're going to have a meditation object, we need something that is always available, and that does something, that we can track, that we can follow. This is why breathing is so popular. We're always breathing, so it's always available, and it's always doing something. There's something going on all the time. It's good for tracking and for sustaining attention over a period of time.

If we start doing this process, at some point we discover what we call distraction. At some point we realise we're not doing it anymore because the mind has gone somewhere else. Is everyone here familiar with distraction? It's a common experience. In fact, it's universal. And yet, we tend to think of it as the enemy. Often you get people thinking or saying, "Oh, I can't meditate because I get so many distractions." And if you think about it, you realise, well, wait a minute—everybody gets distractions. So what's the deal? What's going on?

What distinguishes Mahasi Sayadaw's approach is that he turns the distraction into a meditation object and calls it the secondary object. The primary object is what sustains attention over time. It's what we start with, it's what we keep coming back to. The secondary object is what grabs the attention from time to time. Another way of looking at it is that we choose the primary object. The secondary object is what chooses us.

We don't choose our distractions. They choose us. We're meditating away and then suddenly we realise our awareness is not on the meditation object—it's somewhere else. At that point we're faced with a choice. We could treat that something else as the enemy. We could see it as a signal of our failure as a meditator. We've stuffed it. We can't do this. We'd better go back and resume the meditation. Or, we can recognise: right now, this is what I'm aware of. So right now, this is my meditation object.

It's this approach that distinguishes this particular method. It's based on a very simple fact: we can only be aware of what's happening now. It sounds obvious when you say it. We cannot be aware of what did happen in the past, and we cannot be aware of what will happen in the future. It sounds obvious, but we ignore this simple fact again and again and again.

So I suddenly realise that I'm in the middle of a distraction. And then what do I do? I immediately reject this experience. This experience is no good. It's a distraction. It's terrible. I've got to get back to the past, when it was working okay. But wait a minute—I can't be aware of the past. I can only be aware of the present.

And what's happening right now is the distraction, which means the only thing I can be aware of right now is the distraction. So if I'm to be aware, I must be aware of this, which is happening now. We incorporate distraction into the meditation practice, and we call it the secondary object. When we realize we're distracted, we deliberately turn the awareness to that experience and note it.

Now, in this approach to meditation, you often hear the verb "to note." We're constantly noting the object, noting the meditation object. To note has a certain ambiguity. It means, first of all, to be deliberately aware of, to pay attention to. So to note a distraction means to be deliberately aware of the distraction. Secondly, it also means to name the experience. Here we use a naming technique to help with the attention—we name what we're attending to.

If it's the breathing, Mahasi Sayadaw recommends the breathing sensed inside the body, particularly the lower body, in the abdominal area. He says that as we breathe in, there's movement and it's like the abdomen rises. As we breathe out, it's like the abdomen falls. So there's a rising and a falling.

People often get caught up with the specifics of the anatomy when they hear about this, but it's not about anatomy. Sometimes people say, "But it's not the abdomen, it's the diaphragm." Or, "It's not rising, it's kind of moving some other way." All of this is completely irrelevant. It's really movement sensed inside the body. We call the movement associated with the inhalation "rising," the movement associated with the exhalation "falling." What you call it is really irrelevant, but if we're going to talk about it, we have to call it something. So we call it rising, falling.

As you breathe in, you feel that movement and you name it: rising. As you breathe out, you feel the movement and you name it: falling. Rising, falling. Rising, falling.

The attention goes not to the name, but to what's being named. The name is about aim—it's like a finger pointing. Right now I'm looking at this. And now I'm looking at that. And now this is happening. And now it's that. The name directs awareness to what's actually happening. Don't get stuck on the name itself.

So I'm meditating away—rising, falling, rising, falling—and then suddenly I realize that I'm distracted. The two most common forms of distraction are physical pain and thinking, but there are others of course. Whatever it is, I put my awareness on it and name it.

Let's say it's the body, physical pain. That's relatively straightforward—it hurts somewhere. I put my awareness to it and make that pain the meditation object. And I name it as accurately and as objectively as I can. I could, if I wanted to make it simple, just say to myself, "Ah, pain." And that works, except that the word pain has a negative connotation in the mind. Ideally you want something more neutral, but also something more accurate.

What is it exactly? Is it hardness? Is it pressure? Is it sharpness? Is it heat? Is it numbness? Recognize what it is, then name it. That becomes the meditation object. Put your awareness there, then come back to the primary object. Acknowledge what is going on, acknowledge the distraction, and return to the primary object.

If it's thinking, the same principle applies. With thinking, don't be concerned about what you're thinking about. Usually we get completely caught up in the story, in the narrative. Here we're stepping out of the narrative and simply acknowledging the fact of thought and the feel of it. What does it feel like to be sitting here caught up in thought? Name that. Often we feel the thought going on up in the head area. So put the awareness there and acknowledge it. Thinking. Or distracted. Or lost it. Whatever name fits. Acknowledge it deliberately, then come back to the primary object.

So instead of just trying to stay with one thing all the time and failing, it becomes: stay with the primary object, then go out, check this, that, come back. Go out, come back, go out, come back. The primary object serves as the central reference point, while the secondary objects start to define a broader field of what's really going on.

When you start to incorporate distraction, it becomes important to recognize what we actually mean by distraction. For example, I could be distracted by sound. Right now, sitting here, I can hear sounds—the birds, some kind of faint mechanical hum in the background. Or is it the highway? Yes, road sounds. So I've got birds and road sounds. Let's say I'm meditating on the breathing and I can hear birds or road sounds. Is that distraction? Well, not necessarily.

If I'm paying attention to something, attention always has the structure of centre and periphery. If I'm looking at something—above the doorway there, there's a picture of the Pope—if I look at that picture, that picture is now at the centre of my visual awareness. But I can see other things around it: the wall, the payback underneath, the corridor and the larger picture at the end, the roof, the floor, this carpet here, the people around. There's centre and there's periphery—the field.

If my attention gets drawn somewhere else, the centre shifts. I can see a person at the centre of my field while also seeing the room, the floor, and sensing the Pope up there to the right. Shift the awareness again, and the whole configuration rearranges. Wherever attention goes, there's centre—what I'm focused on—and all the activity happening around it.

So I can be with the breathing at the centre, while on the periphery there's physical sensation, maybe some thought going on in the background, sounds further out. That's not distraction. That's periphery. And as you meditate, you can find yourself becoming more and more sensitive to what's going on in the periphery.

One very common phenomenon—I don't think we experience it here—is the meditation hall clock. You start a retreat and notice there's a clock in the hall, but it's mercifully silent. After a day or two, suddenly it starts to tick. A day or two after that, it's ticking incredibly loudly. Of course, it's making the same sound all the time. But we're becoming more sensitive.

So it seems louder. You can find that the environment starts to press in. Things you didn't notice before, you start to really notice. They can really bug you. This is developing sensitivity as the mind becomes stronger through the meditation. It becomes stronger and more sensitive. You start to notice more.

Now, the fact that I'm with the breathing—the fact that I can hear sound, and even if that sound is bugging me—that's not necessarily distraction. Distraction is when I've left the breathing and I'm now obsessing over the sound. At that point, the centre of my awareness is with the sound and my reaction to the sound. Distraction is when the centre of awareness is taken from one thing to another.

The fact that I'm also thinking in the background is not distraction. Distraction is when I realize I'm completely caught up in thought and the breath has either disappeared or it's very faint in the background. That's distraction. And at that point, I acknowledge: ah, that's my meditation object now, because this is where the centre of my awareness is. It's in the thinking. It's not in the breath. And that's when I note "thinking," or, if it's sound, "hearing."

Again, if you're hearing, it doesn't matter what you hear. Just hearing itself. There's a Zen expression I heard fairly recently: "Hear the bark, not the dog." It sums it up beautifully. It's just the sound. Don't be bothered about what it's a sound of. It's just the sound. If it's sight, it's just seeing. Don't worry about what you're seeing. It's just seeing. And so on.

Does that make sense? Anybody totally confused?

When you say that at that point you say "aha, this is my meditation object now"—but actually it was, isn't it?

Yes. At that point: well, that was my meditation object then, noted, and then back to the primary object. So it's sort of a past thing that you've noted. It can be. With thought, for example, often you notice it and when you deliberately notice it, it goes. So then if you name it, you've named what just happened. With thought, that's a very useful exercise because you're training yourself to go there. Even if you get there a bit late, still you're training yourself: okay, that's going on, now come back.

Other times it sticks around. For example, if it's sound or physical sensation, it stays. And then you are really looking at something in the present.

And then what do you do about making a decision? You say this is my object now—the bird is chirping, it's sound...

Yes, I often get caught up in... it can get complicated. Why is it stuffing around there?

What about painful sound? Do you stay with those as well? In other words, do you find sound suitable as a meditation object?

If you find that you have a sensitivity towards sound, stay there. There's no need to rush away. And when you're ready, come back.

There's nothing particularly magical about the breath. So if you find that sound works as a meditation object, stay with it. And when you've had enough, go back to the breath.

Some people use sound as their primary object. The primary object is what sustains attention over time. It could be anything. Some people use thinking as their primary object—not many, but some do. Some people use sound, some people use body sensations, some people use breathing. You can use anything, so long as you can sustain attention over time with it.

One student shared: "I find that sound can be quite good if I'm getting distracted by something else. To hear something like a bird or whatever seems to bring things back to the present, and then it's easier to go back to the breath after that."

Yes, that sounds like a good approach. So again, use sound. Stay with it. Sound has great advantages as a meditation object. It's always there—there's always some sound. It too is always moving; sound is never still. And one of its advantages is that it has depth. You can go out and get into what the Buddha calls the space element with it. It has many advantages as a meditation object. So certainly stay there. As long as it's holding your attention, stay with it.

Emotion also works this way. When emotion comes up—and emotion is always complex, with different things happening—for example, emotion is usually accompanied by thinking. Then there's also the emotional feel, the quality of the emotion itself, what it actually feels like. Now that's more stable, and it's associated with the body. Often you notice that you carry your emotion in a particular part of the body, so it has location. You can put your awareness there, stay with it, and then name the emotion. Name the emotion—not the thinking, not the story.

If I'm angry, I'm angry with someone about something. That "someone" and that "something" is just the story, just the thinking. But what I'd be focusing on is simply anger, irritation. What does it feel like? Where is it? What does it do? If I feel sorrowful, I'm usually sorrowful about something. That "something" is in the story, in the narrative—forget it. Just focus on sorrow itself. What is it? What does it feel like? Where is it?

Often, for example, I find that anger has a sharp, energetic quality to it. Sorrow often has a softer, moister quality. So you start to use the emotion itself as the meditation object. Again, until it doesn't hold you anymore, and then come back to the primary object.

So in sitting meditation, breathing sensed in the body is the primary object, and we call it the rising and falling. In walking meditation, it's the movement of the body—in particular the legs and the feet—and the contact, the touch on the ground.

Let's go through the walking practice. For walking meditation, you need a walking track, real or imaginary, that you can walk up and down. You start with standing, as we were doing this morning—feet shoulder-width apart, outside edges of the feet parallel, getting into that sense of balance. You can have the hands hanging by your side, hold them in front, hold them behind you, put them in pockets—whatever feels natural. Again, it has a lot to do with the shoulders, getting the shoulders right. Then you step out and start to walk, usually at a touch slower than normal.

Walking meditation speed is a factor. How fast do you walk? You can do fast walking meditation—it can be very effective, especially if you're feeling tired or dull after meals or whatever. If you do fast walking, you have a longer track. You can do slow walking; you get a shorter track. The advantage of slow walking is that you can develop a very strong concentration with it. So what I've emphasized here this morning is the slow walking, but you can do fast walking.

I recommend starting a touch slower than normal, not because there's anything wrong with normal pace, but because we tend to be most mindless in our normal pace. Usually we don't pay attention as we walk. We're busy thinking something. We're busy going somewhere. The thing about walking meditation is we're not going anywhere. So if you go a touch slower than normal, it makes it a bit more deliberate. You might start off like that.

Your meditation object is movement and touch. Movement of the body as you're cruising along, particularly of the legs and the feet, and touch—the impact of the foot on the ground. And you can name it: "walking, walking, walking." You get to the end of your track: "stopping, standing, turning, turning, standing, walking," and so on.

Once you settle into it, you start to slow down, and as you slow down, you become more focused on the feet and the contact. Then you can start to divide the walk into "left, right, left, right." As you become more settled into it, you can slow it down and make the awareness more precise. Start to divide each step into two: "lifting, placing. Lift, place. Lift, place."

You can be more detailed and divide it into three: "lifting, pushing, placing. Lift. Push. Place." You can divide it into four: "Lift. Push. Place. Touch"—as the weight shifts onto the foot. "Lift. Push. Place. Touch." And so on.

The slower you go, the more concentrated you become. It's very important not to try to go slow. Sometimes you see experienced meditators walking really slowly and you think, "I have to catch up with them. I've got to walk at least as slowly as they are." And you get this perverse race where the prize goes to the slowest. But it's got nothing to do with it. If you try to walk too slowly too soon, you just get really tight and agitated. If you notice that, start to speed up—even go faster than normal, get out into the garden, up and down. Allow yourself to slow down. You will slow down as you become more focused; it's a natural process. So just allow it to happen.

With the walking—slow walking in particular—posture is very important. You don't want to be too tight with it. Sometimes you see people walking like this. Do you see what's wrong? Yes, stiff as a board. Because I'm so focused down here that I'm cut off from the rest of the body. And there's a tension.

There's a mental tension, but it comes out through the whole body. So when you walk, you walk with the whole body. When we walk normally, there's a swing, there's the whole body walking. It's the same thing with the slow walking. So I'm standing, head upright. Step out with the left foot, and then lean in with the left shoulder. Step out with the right foot, and lean in with the right shoulder. So even though I'm walking very slowly, it's the whole body that's walking. And it's a much more comfortable thing to do. It's like the Theravada Buddhist equivalent of Tai Chi. You just flow with the whole body.

Walking meditation is not what we do to take a break between sits. It's a very important meditation practice. Whatever you do in the sitting, you can do in the walking—concentration, insight, whatever. The advantage of walking meditation is twofold. One is that the concentration you build up in walking lasts longer than that which you build up in sitting. So you can bring that concentration with you into the sitting, and it's like you turbocharge the sitting practice. Secondly, walking meditation is the halfway house, it's the hinge between the sitting on the one hand and the ordinary activities on the other.

When we're not doing sitting meditation or walking meditation, then we're doing something—meals, jobs, room, bathroom, and so on. This is the third aspect of the meditation, where you stay with whatever you're doing, and you stay in particular in the body. Normally we're lost in thought, and as soon as we get lost in thought, we're disconnected from the body. Drop the thinking, come back to the body. And the walking meditation is great training for that, to get into that habit of just staying with the body as it moves.

The gaze, as in the sitting, is just naturally directed down. So there's no particular length. It depends on height and so on and so forth. But it's just restfully dropped down, and then the eyes just glide along as you walk. They're not grabbing at anything, they're just gliding along. In the walking, of course, you tend to get distracted by seeing and hearing much more than in the sitting. So when that happens, note it. "Seeing." And come back.

There are different ways of doing walking. In this particular approach, the movement of the walk itself is the meditation object, so breathing would be a secondary object. But some people find that they naturally tune into the breath as they walk, and

some people find that the steps start to come into tune with the breathing. If any of that happens, let it happen. It can really help. But don't force anything. If it happens, it happens. If it doesn't, forget about it. Some people use breathing meditation in walking, using breath as the primary object. That's another way of doing it. But here we're more focused on movement and touch. There's always more than one way to do it.

In terms of the same place? Yes. Find yourself a spot and settle in there. If someone has the audacity to move in and grab your spot, it's not necessary to go up and hit them. These things happen. Find another spot.

One time Sayadaw U Janaka was teaching in Canberra and he gave a talk on walking meditation. He explained the whole thing and then asked, "Any questions?" Someone put up their hand and said, "How do you do walking meditation again?" Which is the meditation teacher's nightmare, when people ask questions like that. But his response was really good. Without hesitation he said, "You must walk to and fro, not here and there." So walking meditation isn't having a nice wander around, enjoying the view. It's choom, choom, choom, choom.

Any other questions before we proceed?

"Do you need to label all the time?"

No. The labelling is about aim. What can happen, particularly in walking, is that you find the awareness goes to the label and not to what's being labelled. If you notice that happening—and with walking it can be obvious—then drop the names. Just drop them and ignore them. Just walk. Just feel.

In sitting and in walking, the naming is meant to cultivate aim. Some people use it a lot. Some people just use it a little bit. It's very much up to the individual. Sometimes you find the naming useful, especially when, for example, the experience has changed in some way. You notice that it's changed, but you can't quite put your finger on it. Then you name it. "Ah, that's what it is." And then drop the name.

So you can use it in all sorts of ways. Don't get caught up with the names. The names help aim. If they get in the way, drop them.

CHAPTER 113

Impermanence (Aniccā)

Patrick Kearney · 35 min

In this foundational talk on the first of the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa), Patrick Kearney explores aniccā (impermanence) not as a philosophical doctrine to be believed, but as a direct perception to be cultivated through meditation practice. Drawing from the Buddha's advice to his son Rāhula—"Cultivate the perception of impermanence, for when you cultivate this perception, the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned"—Kearney unpacks how the Pāli term aniccā points to that which is unstable, inconstant, and therefore unreliable. This unreliability creates the essential link between aniccā and dukkha: when we depend upon the unreliable, disappointment is built into the structure of experience itself.

Kearney examines how we construct the perception of permanence through concept, particularly through the sense of self as the stable experiencer behind changing experience. He illustrates how craving—the movement of "this is mine"—builds and maintains this illusory stability. The talk draws parallels to contemporary resistance to acknowledging climate change as an example of how emotionally difficult it can be to accept impermanence when it threatens our way of life.

Practical guidance is offered for perceiving impermanence in meditation: attending to beginnings and endings, noticing the "flavors of change" in experience, observing how awareness moves between objects, and turning attention toward the changing nature of the knowing mind itself. Kearney emphasizes that insight practice involves returning to the mundane and obvious—like finding that what we sought as the needle was actually the hay all along. The talk culminates with the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's description of the mature practitioner who "lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world," representing the fruit of deeply perceiving that whatever arises is of the nature to cease.

Tonight we'll talk about impermanence, *anicca*. I'm preparing some talks to be given to Heart Insight, which is the local meditation group in Brisbane. I think it might be possibly five talks, but I want to go through the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. So here tonight, I'm going to be talking about *anicca*, the first of the three characteristics.

Where they fit is that when the Buddha talks about insight—the insight of insight meditation—what he's talking about is insight or perceiving the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. Impermanence or change; *dukkha* is pain or unsatisfactoriness; and *anattā* is not-self.

Let's start. Tonight we'll just talk about impermanence, but linking it to the other two characteristics because they always come as a bundle. Basically, if one of them is there, all three of them are there. It's just a question of where one's perception sits.

We'll take as our text some advice the Buddha gave to his son, Rāhula: "Cultivate the perception of impermanence, Rāhula, for when you cultivate the perception of impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned."

Just to look at the Pali, the word that he uses for "cultivate" is *bhāvanā*, which is what we normally translate as meditation. So another way of translating it would be: meditate on the perception of impermanence.

This business about impermanence is very important to the Buddha's teaching. For him, delusion is always characterized by a denial of impermanence, and awakening is always characterized by a clear perception of impermanence.

Now if we ask, what do we mean by impermanence? Or rather, what does the Buddha mean by impermanence? It's important to realize that this is not some kind of philosophical position. He's not saying, "Here's this doctrine of impermanence, and your job as a good Buddhist is to believe it." It's not a philosophical theory of change, and it's not the normal everyday sense of change that we all share, because neither of these actually leads to awakening. So what is the Buddha talking about?

Let's begin with the word that he uses. The word is *anicca*, which is a Pali word, and it's a compound. It begins with *a*, the negative prefix, and *nicca*, which means permanent. So *anicca*: not permanent, impermanent.

In Sanskrit, this is *nitya*. Now, *nitya* means stable, constant, permanent. And in everyday Pali usage back in the day, in ancient India, *nicca* refers to what can be relied upon. So, for example, you have *nicca-dāna*, a perpetual gift that you might make to a monastery—in other words, a gift which is going to last for a very long time and therefore we can depend upon it. Or *nicca-bhatta*. *Bhatta* is food. So *nicca-bhatta* is a continuous, reliable food supply. We don't have to worry about running out of food. We've got plenty, and we're going to have plenty.

So if something is *nicca*, it lasts a long time and therefore it can be relied upon. If something is *anicca*, impermanent, that means it is unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable. It cannot be depended upon. It cannot be trusted.

And this is why there's the link between *anicca* and *dukkha*, between change and suffering. When we rely on something unreliable, sooner or later we are disappointed.

And that disappointment is built in. It's not that we *might* be disappointed—we *are* disappointed, again and again, in whatever we project permanence onto.

The idea of the permanent is very important in Indian thought. In the Buddha's time, the nitya, the permanent, was regarded—and still is today in much Indian thought—as the ground of things that gives them their stability. In the Upanishads, for example, the nitya, the permanent, is the atman: the essential self that underlies everything. In other traditions, the nitya, the permanent, might be God—again, something reliable, lasting a long time, dependable.

But what the Buddha is saying is that there is no such ground. It doesn't exist. There's nothing that underlies and stabilizes what we experience as the world. In other words, it's change all the way down.

And again, notice that this is an empirical statement, not an ideological one. He's not saying, "Believe that there is no ground that stabilizes your experience." He's saying, "See if you can find anything in your experience that does not change." And by the way, good luck with that. It's an empirical statement based on a practice.

And it's not simply that things change, as we've already pointed out. In meditation practice—and I suggest you try this afterwards when we sit—a good place to perceive change is in the experience of distraction. When I teach retreats, I often like to ask the meditators, "Have you ever experienced distractions?" And one or two of them confess that they have.

Let's say I sit and decide I'm going to keep my awareness on my meditation object—let's say breathing. Suddenly I realize that I'm thinking of something that happened yesterday or that may happen tomorrow. Did you make a conscious decision that it was time to have a good think? Or did it happen despite your intention to stay with the meditation object? In general, my guess is it's the latter. It just happens.

If we go through this experience enough, we begin to notice that not only does experience change—we're swinging between meditation object and distraction—but we do not control these changes. They just happen. I begin my practice assuming I'm in charge of the project, and it doesn't take very long before I realize I am not. If anything, it is in charge of me.

Now this lack of control—perceiving this lack of control—creates anxiety. That's the natural response to it. We could even say that if we have not felt anxious because of impermanence, then we haven't yet perceived impermanence. We haven't reached that perception because we spend a lot of energy resisting it.

On a larger scale, I think a very good example is climate change. There are people who seem emotionally incapable of acknowledging that the climate actually is changing —emotionally rather than intellectually. Why is this so hard for so many people to acknowledge? Why is there so much resistance to it?

Perhaps it's because to face this change requires a radical letting go. We cannot continue to live the way we have been. Business as usual is not an option. And for many people, this is just too much to bear. It's just too painful—not the theory, not the science, but the effect that this perception must have on the way we live once we admit its reality. From the Buddhist perspective, this is a classic instance of resisting the perception of impermanence and instead cultivating the perception of permanence.

So this perception of impermanence is more than intellectual. It's not about a belief. When we really understand the fact of change, this moves us in some way. For the Buddha, this perception is linked to apprehension, to anxiety, because it involves a felt sense of the unreliability of things, the unreliability of life itself. We could say that if we are not moved by our perception of change, we have not perceived anicca.

And part of the pain is because impermanence—the perception of impermanence—uncovers our attachment. What alarms me is not change as such,

but the fact that things change from the way I want them to be, or things change in ways unpredictable to me. Whatever I seek to rely on turns out to be unreliable. Wherever I look for security, what I find is insecurity. This is what creates the pain in change.

So there's a movement from the perception of impermanence to the perception of dukkha—the pain at the core of our being, the disappointment which is inherent in any kind of clinging.

Let's have a look at the link between anicca and anatta. The link here is the absence of control. One of the ways in which the tradition talks about self is that self is the one in charge. And what anicca reveals is that there's no one in charge. Of course, there's a painful quality to that realization.

But let's begin by looking at how we create the perception of a permanent self. This is the perception of permanence, which for the Buddha is the standard human position. The perception of impermanence is unusual; it's something that needs to be cultivated.

Now, the self illustrates permanence. And remember, permanent does not necessarily mean lasting forever and ever—basically it means lasting unchanged over time. Again, we're not talking about taking on a theory. For the Buddha, something is permanent if it can be seen as not changing over time. And this is one reason why he's so preoccupied by this concept of self.

To be a self—let's say to be Patrick. Patrick is the self I'm most familiar with, so I'll talk about him. To be Patrick, this self has to remain unchanged over time. So the Patrick who begins this talk is the same Patrick as the one who finishes it. In fact, the Patrick, as introduced, who is giving this talk, has been teaching Dharma for a very long time and plans to continue to do so in the future. This is the perception of permanence in the self.

But what is it about Patrick that actually remains unchanged over time? Now, if I'm not paying attention, there's an apparent stability. But this comes through concept. For the Buddha, the self we take for granted as real, as ourselves, is real only as a concept. It's a useful concept—it gets me through the day—but it's only a concept.

We normally relate to the world through a screen of concepts. The world is what we think it is. I am who I think I am. And these concepts are stable. So for a long time now, it seems to me that... My concept of myself is very stable. I think of myself as the same person who was born all those decades ago, who was raised in that particular house, in that particular suburb, who went to those particular schools and so on and so forth.

But when I look for the experience of that person that I was in the past, I can't find it. What I've got is a memory arising now and ceasing. The experiences have vanished. The concepts constructed from those experiences remain. We project permanence onto our experience through concept.

And one of the ways in which this works is that we assume there is someone who is actually experiencing all this. So we're talking about the nature of experience. One way to look at it is: what am I experiencing? But we could turn it the other way around: Who is undergoing the experience? Who is the one experiencing this?

Our normal perception is not simply that this is happening. Rather, this is happening to someone. This is happening to me. It's about someone. It's about me. It's for someone.

It's for me. So this meeting is about me, it's for me. Therefore, I am the one experiencing this. This experience is changing, but back in here, there's something stable. This is the self.

One area where we can see this is in what the Buddha calls craving, which he identifies as a crucial aspect of the self. Essentially, craving is the urge to possess. The Buddha speaks of it as the movement, "This is mine." Now, what's the difference between something which is mine and something which is not mine? That which is mine is part of me. It's not simply an object in space—it's part of me. And to violate it is to violate me. So this relationship, "this is mine," refers to my sense that this possession is for me, about me, pointing toward me.

We make this move all the time, building a self out of it. If we ask, "What is this experience for? What is this meeting, this online meeting, for?"—it's not for nothing. It's not that it has no purpose, no meaning. Its purpose is to satisfy me in some way. The meaning of this activity is found in its function as my possession. And if there is a possession, there must be in the background its owner, the one who possesses, the one for whom all this is happening.

Which brings us back to perceiving impermanence. Particularly when I'm meditating, I can see that this experience right now is changing. It's harder to see that what this experience is *for* is also changing. Right now I might have the experience of listening to these words—that's in the foreground of experience. But what this is for is in the background: the one who is learning about impermanence. And in your experience right now, is there a sense of stability back there? Is that stability based on its hidden nature, its unexamined nature?

From the point of view of the perception of impermanence, part of the job in meditation practice is to turn awareness within to find the one that this is for, the one who's experiencing this. This can be an interesting exercise. Some people do it. And if you can find something, what people will say is, "I can see my sense of myself experiencing this." But of course, what's that for? It's for the person, the self, further back. It's like an endless going back, back, back, back, back, and never actually finding the foundation. Because whatever we turn our attention to, first of all, that changes. It does point to something further back—what it's for. But as soon as we find that, we realize it's changing too, and that's pointing to something back as well. We never actually land there. This is one reason why the perception of impermanence goes so deep.

If we talk about how we uncover impermanence, what's the method? Essentially, it's paying attention to change. If we're meditating for the purpose of insight, then we start to pay attention to change. That's a big part of the whole project. We go deep into the ordinary, mundane aspects of experience. We're learning to attend to, and therefore

value, the most ordinary mundane aspects of experience. Because we're not interested in having a particular kind of experience, but in discovering how experience itself moves.

One writer compared this to looking for a needle in a haystack. That's the job. We've got the haystack. In it, there's a needle. We've got to find the needle. And the needle is very small, very well hidden, very mysterious, while the haystack is very large. Our task seems enormous—to find that needle. The needle, of course, represents enlightenment or some kind of special insight. And the hay represents our normal everyday experience, which we have come to see as unsatisfactory. That's why we're here.

That's why we're embarking on meditation practice. This is what justifies all the trouble that we take to come and do a meditation practice—because it's not satisfactory. I want something better.

So when we're practicing, we're carefully going through the haystack, looking under each tiny little blade, hoping one day to find that needle. Eventually we realize that what we're looking for is the hay.

And this is the perception of impermanence. It's already here. Impermanence, change, is already happening. It's not that we have to train ourselves—it's just that we have trained ourselves to not notice it. We've actually gone to a lot of trouble over a long time to not notice impermanence.

So if we want to uncover impermanence, we need to return to the obvious, to return to what we assume we already know and learn to see it in a new way. And this is why we can talk about learning to value the mundane—that which we normally overlook because we want something special.

In meditating for insight, we're interested in what we could call the flavors of change. Things change—okay, that's pretty obvious. But how do they change? Our job is to become, in a sense, connoisseurs of change. We're interested in the fact that one thing turns into another. We're particularly interested in the intersections of change, the place where one thing turns into another.

Just to give a couple of pointers which you might want to play around with in the meditation. First of all, things arise and cease. They begin and end. Do I see arising? Do I see the beginnings of things? Do I see cessation, the endings of things? Or am I missing something?

If I'm missing beginnings and ends, it may be because I'm in the middle of things, between beginnings and ends, in which I perceive an assumed stability. But that which I take to be stable—is it really as stable as I assume? When I look at it closely, does it move in any way?

Now this work is very mundane. We stay with the elemental qualities of experience—the movements of breathing, the sensations of the body, the feel of thinking, and so on. Every breath, every thought has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If they had no beginning, they would not arise and would never be noticed. If they had no end, they would stay unchanged forever. And if they had no middle—the space between beginning and end—they would be coming and going so quickly we would barely notice them.

So we've got beginning, middle, end. Sometimes I find myself staying with the meditation object and everything seems smooth. Does this smoothness itself change? And the meditation object—is it really the same as before, or is it changing? And if it is, how? Is it like waves, for example? It's not begin-end, begin-end—it's more like a wave-like quality of shifting. Same thing, but it just seems to be shifting. And if it's like waves, are they choppy or smooth? Or is the object more strobe-like, with distinct beginnings and endings?

Another thing to look for: when things change, awareness moves from one object to another. Doesn't it move because the initial object just ended and a new one began? Or is it that the new object attracts me before the old object has ended? That would be more wave-like.

When the experience is over, is it completely over? Is there no trace remaining? Or is something still lingering? Is there some kind of aftertaste?

Another area to see impermanence is in the relationship between the meditation object and the mind which knows the meditation object. The object is changing, but so is the mind that knows the object. Sometimes we like the object. Sometimes we dislike it. Sometimes we think the experience is good. Sometimes we think it's bad.

Sometimes we find the meditation satisfying. Sometimes we find it unsatisfying. So can we drop our obsession with how we think things should be long enough to see how they actually are, and how they change? Can we drop our preoccupation with the object of experience long enough to check the mind that is doing the experiencing? Is that changing? And if it is, how?

The aim is to see sufficiently deeply into impermanence that we are transformed by it. And that happens as a result of seeing that everything changes—including the one who is experiencing change.

In the discourses, in the suttas, the first stage of awakening is indicated by a little Pali verse, which in English can be translated as: "Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease." This is the realization that indicates seeing the Dhamma for the first time.

Now, if we ask what is of the nature to arise—well, roughly speaking, everything except awakening itself. And this represents an understanding and an acceptance of change all the way to the bottom.

We resist this depth of understanding because it involves admitting failure. We've tried to establish a sense of stability and therefore a sense of satisfaction. And as we said, one of our basic strategies is possession—to claim as mine. So we relate to every experience as mine, as for me. And while we might be persuaded, we might be able to accept as we get older that these attempts have failed in the past, we're not prepared to accept that this failure is in the very nature of experience. We're not prepared to accept that any attempt to gain lasting satisfaction through possession is doomed.

This involves moving from the particularities of experience to the universal fact of change itself, which we don't have time to go into tonight. But basically, this realization of the universality of change, and therefore the futility of resisting it—this is the entrance into aniccā saññā, the perception of impermanence. And that surrender of resistance is absolutely central to the perception of impermanence. We no longer resist our lives, but surrender to: this is what's happening.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha describes the mature practitioner in this way: "She lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world." This is what he's talking about—a mature perception of impermanence.

CHAPTER 114

Dukkha Explained

Patrick Kearney · 1h07

> *In this illuminating talk, Patrick Kearney offers a comprehensive exploration of dukkha, one of Buddhism's most essential yet often misunderstood concepts. Beginning with the etymology of the Pāli word itself—du (bad, painful) combined with kha (space, emptiness)—he reveals dukkha as a 'painful space' or sense of lack at the centre of our being, likened to a badly fitting axle that makes the wheel of life grind with difficulty and drivenness.*
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> *Kearney carefully distinguishes between ordinary everyday pain and the deeper insight into dukkha (dukkha ñāṇa) that the Buddha taught. Drawing from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explains the three layers of dukkha: surface-level pain, the inherent unsatisfactoriness of change, and the deepest level—the pain of constructions (saṅkhāra-dukkha). This deepest layer represents the absence of rest in saṃsāra, the recognition that we are never truly in control of the ceaseless fluctuations of experience.*
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> *The talk maps the progression of insight through the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa)—anicca, dukkha, anattā—showing how perception of impermanence matures into recognition of the ending of phenomena, which gives rise to existential fear, disenchantment (nibbidā), and ultimately equanimity. Kearney emphasizes that the Buddha's instruction is not to solve dukkha but to fully understand it (pariññā), leading to the realization that 'what arises is only dukkha arising, what ceases is only dukkha ceasing'—with no self involved. This understanding dissolves rather than solves our problems, pointing toward nibbāna, the peace that comes when hunger itself ceases.*

Dukkha is a Pali word, a compound made up of the prefix *du* and the word *kha*. *Kha* means space, empty space, while the prefix *du* conveys the idea of bad, painful, unpleasant, undesirable, and so on. So *dukkha* is basically a painful space.

It's looked at in different ways. David Loy calls it a sense of lack—the painful emptiness that we find at the centre of our being. Another way that the tradition looks at it is as a badly fitting axle of a wheel. If you think about *kha*, the empty space, this can also refer to the empty space at the hub of a wheel. Of course, the wheel is the basic symbol of Buddhism. Imagine a wheel where the axle goes through and the vehicle moves. But if the axle fits badly in the hub, the vehicle moves only with difficulty and grind. So

dukkha is that sense of difficulty and grind in experience. It's characterized by drivenness, a sense of urgent necessity—the urgent sense that I've got to do this, I've got to get that, I've got to get rid of this other thing.

The Buddha teaches *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*. The cessation of *dukkha*, of course, is *nibbana*. The Buddha compares the cessation of *dukkha* to the ending of hunger. If you think about hunger, we are hungry, so we are driven to eat, have to eat, absolutely must eat. The eating satisfies us for a while, but inevitably we become hungry again. So we have to eat again, and again, and again, and again. This sense of again and again and again characterizes *dukkha* when the Buddha talks about it.

In contrast, consider the satisfaction that comes when hunger itself ceases. What would that satisfaction be? It's not the same satisfaction as satisfying one's hunger. It's different, and we could speculate that it would be characterized by a peace that cannot be found through ordinary desire. This is *nibbana*, the peace of *nibbana*. And of course *nibbana* is the cessation of *dukkha*. So *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*—this is central to the Buddhist teaching.

We were talking about impermanence last time. The Buddha talks about *dukkha* in the context of *anicca* on one side, *anatta* on the other—impermanence on one side, not-self on the other. There are always these three, what are called the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*, always in that order. And *dukkha* sits right in the middle.

Impermanence is really central for the Buddha and central for the arising of insight. If we want insight, understanding, then impermanence, *anicca*, is central. It's so important that the Buddha says to his son Rahula, "Cultivate the perception of impermanence. For when you cultivate the perception of impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned." Abandoning the conceit "I am" is code for full enlightenment. In other words, if we cultivate the perception of impermanence, it will take us to full enlightenment.

Anicca is closely related to *dukkha*, and the reason for this is again found if you look at the word itself. *Anicca* is usually translated as "impermanent." "Impermanent" is a kind of very abstract term, and it doesn't sound like there's anything wrong with it. Sounds okay. But when we look at the word itself and the way the word is used in the Buddha's time, first of all, *anicca* is a negative term—*a* means "not," so not *nicca*, or in Sanskrit, not *nitya*. To be *nicca* is to be permanent. In more everyday usage, it means stable, constant, reliable. So in everyday Pali, *nicca* refers to what can be relied upon and therefore what can be taken for granted.

To be anitya, impermanent, means to be unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable—not to be trusted. When we rely on something or someone unreliable, sooner or later we're disappointed. And this is bound to happen. So this is the link between anicca and dukkha.

Dukkha has certain characteristics. The Buddha introduces the concept in his first formal teaching, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta—Turning the Dharma Wheel—when he talks about the four truths. Dukkha is the first truth, and then you have the arising of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, and the path leading to the cessation of dukkha.

When he's talking about the first truth, he describes dukkha in three layers. The first is normal everyday pain found in any human life. And by the way, sometimes you hear people say the Buddha said life is suffering. He never said that. What he said is dukkha is a fact. Pain is a fact. If we go through a human life, at some point it will hurt. So this is the most surface level of dukkha—just ordinary everyday pain.

The next layer is the pain inherent in change. Here we see the connection with impermanence. This refers to the fact that our circumstances are in a state of continuous fluctuation and change, all the way from the micro to the macro. If you think about your meditation experience, from the beginning of a session to the end, does it change? Yes. If you think about your life, from the beginning to today, does it change? Yes. But what the Buddha points out is that it changes inevitably, and we are not in charge of these changes. That's the crucial point. We're not in control. The changes are inevitable, but we're not in charge of them.

We can look at two instances. Take physical pain. As meditators, have you noticed that we are never still for any period of time? We move constantly. And why do we move? We move because we want to get comfortable. And if we're doing that, it means we are chronically uncomfortable. Even in our sleep, we move. Of course, if you practice meditation, you come across this very soon when you realize what a difficult project it is to remain still over a period of time. Very few people find it easy. Most people find it difficult because in that stillness, the ordinary pain of the body—which is built into it—emerges.

Then there's psychological pain. Our body craves movement; our mind craves a flow of concept and stimulus. In today's world, for example, when we're separated from our devices, the mind becomes restless and uncomfortable. How often when you go into a café and sit down, realizing there's nothing happening right now, do you reach for the phone? There must be something happening. Where's the next stimulus? When we

practice meditation, we can see the mind searching for the sustenance of stories, searching for some kind of conceptual stimulus. It's got to have it. And it's very difficult to persuade the mind to just sit still and relax.

So this lack of control over the changes in our lives is painful. And it becomes clear that it's painful when we allow ourselves to notice it. Of course, we spend most of our lives deliberately not noticing it. That's one of the reasons why meditation practice is difficult—because we tend to notice it when we practice.

Then we come to the deepest layer of pain. This is what the Buddha calls the pain of constructions, and this is essentially the same as the second layer but recognized at the deepest level as being inherent to human experience. In other words, there's nothing we can do about it. We're endlessly moving from one activity or sense impression to another with no chance of finding a stable point where the heart might find lasting satisfaction and so rest. In brief, this deepest level can be seen as the absence of rest in samsara, in ordinary experience.

So what can we do about dukkha? Where does it fit in our practice, especially if we are practicing for insight or doing insight meditation?

In his Four Truths, the Buddha says what we should do about dukkha is fully understand it. This is pariñña, full understanding—not trying to get rid of it, not identifying with it, but really deeply understanding it. In the later Theravada tradition, this becomes what they call dukkha ñāṇa, the understanding of dukkha, or dukkha as insight. Here dukkha is understood as the second universal characteristic: anicca, dukkha, anattā. This involves a movement from the experience of pain to that of insight into pain. And of course, you can see they're quite different.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the root text for mindfulness practice, this is how the Buddha introduces this subject. In this discourse he gives a whole series of practices—mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of posture, and so on. These are all aspects of mindfulness of body, mindfulness of feelings, mind, and the rest. Now, at the end of each section, he has a chorus, a little section which is repeated after every verse. It's exactly the same, except there's a slight change because each appearance of this chorus refers back to the immediately preceding verse.

For example, the Buddha is talking about tracking body, being mindful of body. Then he gets to insight and describes the practitioner in this way: "She lives tracking the nature of arising as body. Or she lives tracking the nature of ceasing as body. Or she lives tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body."

Notice the change of language. The Buddha is moving from tracking body as meditation object and noticing that it changes—that shifts into tracking change itself and noticing that these changes are happening in the body. In other words, there's been a movement from the particular to the universal. This breath is changing; all physical experience changes. And this is the movement into insight.

When we're practicing for insight, it always begins with understanding the individual, the particular experience here and now. The Buddha calls this dhamma ñāṇa, understanding of phenomena, understanding into events. Then it matures into understanding of the universal. The Buddha calls this anvaya ñāṇa, which is essentially understanding through inference. This involves recognizing the universal patterns of experience as they play out over time. In other words, insight is always generalized.

So the movement from dukkha to insight into dukkha is a movement from the particular to the universal.

If you think about ordinary, everyday dukkha—has anybody here ever had a painful experience? This is ordinary, everyday dukkha. This is not yet the characteristic of dukkha because its universality is not perceived, only its particularity. This situation is dukkha. This situation hurts. But not that one. So an escape from dukkha is possible within the realm of the impermanent, within the realm of the normal. Yes, I'm suffering pain, but I feel there could be an alternative that would work, and I have reason to pursue that alternative. It makes sense to do this.

So that situation is not dukkha jnana. It's not insight into dukkha. It's not understanding of dukkha.

Now, when we have that relationship to dukkha, there's all sorts of things that can happen. For example, I think among meditators, one thing that happens is that we find ourselves living alternative lives. Has anybody ever done that? Especially on meditation retreats?

We find ourselves reimagining the past. "If only I had done this instead of that, my life would have been more satisfactory. Everything would have been okay." And we imagine an alternative future. "When I get out of here, things will be different." Have you ever had that feeling on a meditation retreat? Or we even imagine an alternative present. "Right now I'll take a break and then things will be better."

These fantasies seem real. They have power over us because our understanding of dukkha is still particular rather than universal. Does that make sense?

This is basically the entry into insight, the entry into insight into dukkha, which is really crucial. So let's go there.

How do we know that we're developing insight into dukkha? One indication of it—and this can sound very gloomy—is the realization that there is nothing we can do to solve our problem. Nothing.

And why is this? Number one, the very need to resolve this problem is an aspect of dukkha. And number two, any solution we find will have to at some point be replaced by something else. This is impermanence. And then it will have to be replaced by something else. And then that will have to be replaced by something else, and so on indefinitely.

So we stay trapped in the rat race, in the hamster's wheel, because anything we do to get out of dukkha is just another aspect of the experience of being stuck in it. It's like we're just running around and around and around. And it's the running around itself which is dukkha.

In other words, it's catch-22. This is the cheerful news of the Buddha. And when we recognize it's catch-22, that's where insight into dukkha really begins.

Shall we stop there, because it's all so cheerful? We can chew on that for a few days.

So let's look at this business of insight, or the word we're looking at is jnana, because this is the word in particular that the Theravada tradition uses. Basically, when our understanding of impermanence changes, matures, what we find is we are directly aware in change itself. And that's when the understanding of dukkha emerges.

So again, the movement from the particular to the universal. It's not that this changes and then this changes and then this changes. Rather, I realize actually what I'm seeing is the fact of change itself. It's like a foreground-background shift.

In the early stages, let's say I'm meditating and I've got a meditation object and I'm following it. And in the background, I'm noticing, "Oh yes, this meditation object changes." So I've got foreground—the particular—and background—"yes, it changes." At some point, there's a shift, and I realize actually my meditation object is the fact of change itself. And oh yes, it's happening in this particular phenomenon.

Now, this is very subtle.

It's so subtle that it can actually happen and people don't even notice it. It can take some time before a practitioner realizes, "Oh yes, that's what's different these days," because it is very subtle. And this is the entry into insight regarding impermanence.

Now, insight regarding dukkha—how does that emerge? In the Theravada tradition, centuries after the Buddha, the teachers mapped the movement all the way through from our understanding of anicca, of change, of impermanence, through to our understanding of dukkha, pain, unsatisfactoriness, through to our understanding of anatta, not-self. So this movement through the three characteristics.

Now, these are always listed in this order, probably because they're listed in order of subtlety. Anicca, change, is the easiest characteristic to notice. And in terms of practice, it's possible to structure one's attention to bring impermanence to our notice. In other words, it's possible to practice impermanence.

In the Mahasi lineage that I teach in, the way this is done is by drawing the student's attention to the fact of distraction. I'm following my meditation object, suddenly I'm caught up in thinking, then I come back to the meditation object. So the awareness is here, then it's there, then it's back here. In other words, change. Change. Change, change, change, change, change. Awareness moves and we start tracking the movements. So there's a sense in which it's possible to do impermanence. You can structure a meditation technique to get you to see it.

Those of you who have practiced the Goenka method—when he's doing insight, what does he do? Track all the different sensations throughout the body. Change, change, change, change, change, change, change, going through the body. All insight meditation techniques have this characteristic. So there's a sense in which we can get started with impermanence, with change. It's obvious to begin with, and we can actually, in a sense, do it.

Dukkha, pain, is more subtle and it's harder to see. Or at least dukkha ñana, insight into dukkha, is harder to see. Some teachers, traditional teachers, are delighted when their students report pain because they say, "Oh, very good, now you can experience dukkha." But that's very superficial. And the thing is, we cannot do dukkha. We cannot try to make it happen. Or rather, if we do try to make it happen, the result is much more likely to be aversion than insight. So it doesn't work.

Then we get anatta, not-self. That's the most subtle characteristic and the most difficult to see. And in part, this is because it's so counterintuitive. When people hear about not-self, the first response is often, "What are you talking about? I'm here. You're saying I don't exist?" So it's counterintuitive.

And also, not-self is fundamentally an absence. It's not a something. It's an absence. Something is missing rather than present. And it's always harder to see an absence than to see something that is present. Let's say you go to a party. You look around to see who of your friends are there. That's easy. But to recognize who of your friends are not there—that's a bit harder.

So in the case of not-self, we assume that a self is present, that it's lurking in the background. And it can take a while to notice that actually it isn't. This makes not-self difficult to get, to see. And of course, we certainly cannot do not-self. We cannot do anatta, because if there's someone doing it, then we have a self in charge of a project rather than not-self.

So we have these three characteristics, always listed in this order.

And one way of looking at it is listed from gross to subtle. What brings this order into the system is samādhi. Samādhi is usually translated as concentration. It could be translated as unification—the heart and the mind are unified. Integration would be another possibility. Ajahn Sujato, these days, apparently translates it as immersion, which is very good. I like that.

As samādhi develops, we go deeper into experience, and our view of what's happening is necessarily influenced by that. The deeper we go into experience, the more likely we are to pick up these characteristics. So that's a kind of linear way of looking at the three characteristics: first anicca, then dukkha, then anattā.

But it's very important to remember that the three characteristics are always a single package. In other words, where there's anicca, there is dukkha and anattā. Where there's anattā, there's anicca and dukkha. And where there's dukkha, there's anicca and anattā. All three are already present.

For practical purposes, this means that a meditation student's experience may not follow a tidy progression through these characteristics in order. Some students stumble into experiences that they have absolutely no business being in at all, and this can create problems for teachers.

But let's look at dukkha ñāṇa as mapped by the later Theravāda, just to get a sense of how the tradition speaks about it.

So, as I said, we start with impermanence. We see change. We start to see what's going on with change—things are changing. Now, if we say things are changing, they're impermanent, we're saying that they begin, they endure for some time, and then they

end. There's a beginning, somewhere in the middle, and an end. Our view of impermanence changes depending on the perspective of this process that we have when we are aware of change.

When our perception of impermanence matures, what the mind sees predominantly is the ending of things, the cessation of things, the time when things fall away. This can result in some pretty weird experiences for meditators. Sometimes, for example, in a strong experience of this, meditators might say it's like they're on the edge of a bottomless canyon, or even that they're falling into a bottomless abyss. They have a sense that there really is no ground to experience at all. If they ask themselves the question "What lies beneath?" the answer is nothing—or not even nothing.

This experience opens up into an existential anxiety, or in a strong sense, even dread. If there's nothing at all, then who am I? And what is this all about?

When this understanding is relatively weak, this can take the form of the meditator apparently losing the concentration that he had before and being unable to focus on anything. The meditator might be in a retreat—typically this would happen in a retreat. The meditation is developing. The samādhi is getting stronger and stronger. The meditator is able to stay on the meditation object for longer. And then suddenly he can't do it anymore. His attention, his awareness keeps sliding off whatever he tries to attend to. He aims his awareness on a meditation object and it's like the awareness just slides off. He can't get hold of anything. It's like trying to grasp something that slips out of your hand the moment you touch it—it's gone.

In a stronger aspect, it can be like falling into a black hole. Wherever you look, there's nothing, just blackness. Practitioners may also report the disappearance of the form of the body. Before, the meditator might have seen physical experiences break up into very specific and discrete aspects.

But there was always the background sense that these movements belonged together as different aspects of the same thing—like "me breathing."

But at this point, movement is just movement. Pressure is just pressure. Tension is just tension. There's no sense of what part of the body these sensations belong to. The sense of the whole body disappears, and all that's left is a series of apparently disconnected individual sensations. There's no body as such.

This indicates the maturing of the perception of impermanence and the entry into the perception of dukkha.

Now, when this momentum builds, the result can be the emergence of fear. And fear is very important in insight practice. In my experience as a teacher, many people report experiencing fear. And it's a good sign—it's a sign of progress.

In its strong form, this can manifest as panic. In its weak form, it can be just a sense of existential unease, a sense of nothing going right, a sense of helplessness. In other words, a sense of loss of control—the realization "I am not in control of my life."

This is an aspect of seeing dukkha. But one of the things about it, and this is where things really get strange, is that this fear is not personal. When we actually start to pay attention to it, when it first arises, the practitioner might not examine it, might not see it as a meditation object, might simply identify with it. "Oh my God, this is terrible. I've got to get out of here."

But when the practitioner remains mindful, she realizes that although there's danger here, there's no one who is in danger. It's rather like watching a scary movie—fear arises, yet even as the fear is present, there's also the understanding that the situation is not real, and so fundamentally the fear is not grounded. In other words, there's no need to fear the fear.

And again, this is an aspect of groundlessness, which is central to the understanding of dukkha. We realize that our fear of groundlessness is groundless. This indicates that underneath this sense of dukkha, underneath this sense of dis-ease and dissatisfaction, there's a developing sense of anattā. Even though dukkha is occupying the foreground of experience, in the background, when we look, we realize—ah, there's not-self there.

Then, if the practice continues to mature, the practitioner realizes the impossibility of her situation, which we touched on earlier. There's no refuge anywhere from this abyss. There is nowhere to escape to. Any fantasy of escape is seen to be just that—a fantasy that I would like to believe in, but I can't.

This sometimes arises during meditation retreats. The desire to leave becomes very strong. Then, if the practitioner thinks, "Okay, if I get out of here because I can't stand this anymore, where would I go? I could go back home"—would home be any better? No. And that becomes quite clear. Any fantasy of escape is seen as just a fantasy.

This is part of the universality of dukkha, of seeing its universality. There's nothing to hold on to, nowhere to escape to.

Now, if the practitioner persists—and of course, by this time you probably realize that sometimes it's a rough ride—but if the practitioner persists, there comes a turning point. This is disenchantment, what the Buddha calls nibbidā.

Throughout this whole process, the perception of anattā, of not-self, is growing underneath. And as this grows, it means that the practitioner's identification with the dukkha she is going through is weakening. The anattā, the sense of not-self, is increasing.

The sense of identification with the pain is going down, which means that she's not stuck in it.

Now, disenchantment is a phase where the practitioner genuinely lets go of her search for satisfaction within her normally experienced world. It's as if it becomes obvious that even if she were to abandon the practice and attain her most heartfelt desire, this too would be unsatisfactory. There's no situation she can imagine which is satisfactory. All her desires and fantasies are like ashes in her mouth. Nothing works. Nothing will work. What is the point of struggling? Instead, she simply surrenders. She gives up. And this is the crucial turning point.

It's at this point that we get what the later tradition calls the desire for deliverance. The practitioner is fed up with the endless rat race of samsara and yearns for deliverance from it. In other words, she yearns for nibbana, the cessation of dukkha. And this yearning becomes very strong.

It can be characterized by strange symptoms that may pop up at this point. For example, some people will go through a great deal of physical pain and restlessness. The meditator may be unable to hold any posture of the body for any period of time—any posture is painful. Sometimes meditators retreat to bed to sleep for as long as they can, just to escape the unpleasantness involved in being conscious. This is the crescendo of the understanding of dukkha.

And you notice how in this aspect of insight, affect is central. This is different from, or to some degree different from, impermanence. Impermanence is more cognitive—oh yes, everything's changing. But change itself isn't really all that challenging. This goes into the heart. This is the realm of affect, of feeling. This is why it's so challenging.

What is it that moves us? What moves the heart? We are moved by sukha or dukkha, to use the Buddha's language. We are moved by the pleasant or the unpleasant. And in the case of this understanding, we are moved by dukkha, the unpleasant. This realm of affect is expressed in our desires and our aversions—what we desire and what we are desperate to escape from. All of this comes up in the understanding of dukkha.

From the Buddha's perspective, the fundamental question is whether we desire what he calls the sankhata, the constructed, that which brings us pain, or whether we desire the asankhata, the unconstructed, that which brings us the cessation of pain.

Now, our deeply rooted habit is to desire the constructed, that which brings us pain. This is the world we are familiar with. This is the world we take as being normal. This is what meditators on retreats, when they're feeling irritable and upset, will call "the real world." Yes, this is all very nice and spiritual and Buddhist-y, but what about the real world? What about that? This is the world of the constructed. This is the world that creates our pain, which we're deeply familiar with.

In contrast, we don't know anything about the unconstructed, what brings the cessation of pain. So if we don't know anything about it, how can we desire it? But when we become disenchanted by the constructed, because we've learned to understand it thoroughly, then we learn to desire something else.

At first, this something else may be characterized entirely negatively. What I want is not all this. It's not what I've always experienced. I don't want this, and I don't want what I can imagine that I would experience into the future. But then what is it that I do want? What is that? This can be a real dilemma for practitioners at this point.

If I'm working within a practice tradition, it's easier. First of all, I might have a theoretical sense of what this might be. I've heard people speak about enlightenment and nirvana and so on. So I can feel encouraged in my disillusionment because I do understand, at least intellectually, that there is something, however mysterious, that's better than this. I have a sense of direction, even if this sense of direction is defined negatively: I don't want to keep doing this. I want something else.

Also, if we're in a practice tradition, if we have teachers and senior practitioners that we can look up to—what the Buddha calls good friends, kalyanamittas—then we might have a lived sense of what lies beyond the familiar, beyond "the real world." In my case, one of my main teachers, John Hale, who was also a close friend, did this for me. If I wanted to know, what is this practice all about? I'd just look at him. Ah, that's what it is. And I'd calm down.

But if I'm living in an entirely secular world, then I might be tempted to despair. Nothing works, nothing ever did work, and nothing ever will work. There's no meaning or purpose that satisfies, so what can I do?

You can see that this insight can be a rough one—it can be a very rough ride. Though not necessarily. Some people seem to glide through this stage. "Oh, yes, there's a bit of dukkha. That's okay." But other people really get stuck there, get bogged down in it, and go through it very strongly. It varies greatly from person to person.

What gets us through is a growing understanding of anattā, of not-self. This is cognitive—this is what we're seeing, of course. And this is matched in the heart, in the realm of affect, by a growing equanimity. All the way through this exploration of dukkha, equanimity develops. If we maintain the mindfulness, equanimity develops. And equanimity is essentially balance—the heart is strong and balanced.

When equanimity matures, we enter into what the Theravāda calls sankhārupekkhā ñāṇa, the understanding of equanimity regarding all constructions—all of them. At this point, what the practitioner sees is not-self. Dukkha has dropped away; it's out of the foreground. What is clear is not-self. And what dominates the heart is mindfulness and equanimity. At this stage, there's absolutely no problem, for the simple reason that there's no clinging to a problem, and therefore no one who has a problem.

Now, I'm going to ask a bold question: does anybody have the slightest idea what I'm talking about? Any questions or comments?

Question from the audience: I have a question about choice. Because when insight comes, there is a moment where choice comes in too. When you view impermanence, or the self, or even pain—you mentioned there's a cognitive element, an acceptance element—there is a choice to think, to accept. I'm grappling with this question of choice.

What you raise is very important, because there's choice all the way through. In the most summary form, there's the choice: will I continue with this, or stop? Will I continue being mindful of whatever is arising? That choice—we're always in the situation where we're called upon to make it. In a sense: what do I do about this? I'm in this situation; what do I do about it?

This is, for the Buddha, the fundamental choice that we have all the time. When he talks about karma, this is what he's talking about—the choice that we have. This is the situation I'm in; what do I do about it? We're constantly making choices, and this process, in that sense, is no different. But sometimes the choices are much more sharp, as it were, because of the situation we're in.

Question from the audience: I've attended Buddhist discourse in the Tibetan tradition where I've heard non-self described as where the self does not have inherent existence from its own side—that's a very common description in the Mahāyāna tradition. But that's not how I've heard it described from your tradition tonight. I was curious to get a better understanding of what you mean by non-self.

The absence of inherent existence, that definition, comes out of centuries of philosophy. So you have the Buddha's teaching, and then he dies, and then you get people talking about it, analysing it, arranging it, trying to work it out—what does he mean?—applying it to new historical circumstances. And this process goes on and on and on, and it's going on today.

So in the Mahayana you have this development of a genuine philosophical tradition where philosophers argue and debate and come up with these different ways of intellectualising anattā, not-self. You do get very different expressions of it, and this is only to be expected. Really, from the practitioner's point of view, the question is: what makes sense to you? As someone in the pews, on the bench, what can I make sense of? What's meaningful to me?

So if I'm hearing something from a well-established Mahayana tradition, I can pretty much trust it. These people know what they're talking about. But they're coming at it from a particular angle—very philosophical, very intellectual. The Buddha himself was not a philosopher. He didn't do philosophy, essentially because for him the arguments weren't so important. He engaged in philosophy in the sense that he debated with people, but he was much more interested in directing people's attention to their actual experience.

What he would talk about is: look, this particular experience—do you own it? Is it you? Because if you own it and it just moved, what happened to your possession? If it's you and it just changed into something else, what happened to you? So he was more interested in not-self as a kind of project. Can you find something which could reasonably be labelled self? And in a sense he's saying, my bet is that you won't—but feel free to try. He's much more interested in the actual practice and talking about what happens.

Now, we've been talking about the later Theravada. This, again, you have a philosophical tradition that heads off in a certain direction. But here they're talking about basically analysing the experience of what practitioners go through when they practice, and the sorts of things that they understand as they go through it. So the basic understanding of not-self is the same throughout the different traditions, but there are different ways of talking about it, essentially. The question is: what makes sense for you?

The question continues: in the context of tonight's teachings where you are talking about that linear connection between anicca, dukkha, and non-self, how does the non-self fit into that progression?

We haven't, of course, talked about not-self as our main focus. It's kind of out there on the far horizon—we're going to get to it eventually. For the Buddha, when he talks about not-self, I would translate anattā as "not-self" rather than "non-self." Because the way the Buddha talks about it, I think basically what he's saying is: look at this experience. Is it self, or is it not-self?

Now, for him, self is a project. It's a construction project. We are constructing ourselves. So right now I'm sitting in front of this little screen, answering difficult and learned questions, and I'm supposed to be the teacher. I'm constructing a self: I'm the teacher and I've got the answers. And so I'm going blah, blah, blah, hoping that I'll convince you that that's true. This is constructing self.

So the Buddha is saying: look, we think the self is already given—it's what you expressed as "has inherent existence on its own side." We think there's a self there. But look at what you're doing. You're creating it all the time. If you have to create it all the time, how can it be there? And what would happen if you stopped creating it? Would you feel better?

So what we're talking about in dukkha is very largely the resistance to letting go into not-self. And it's interesting that the Buddha does link dukkha very closely with anattā.

In other words—and this comes up in what the Buddha says about not-self in his next discourse, which eventually we're going to get to—when he introduces not-self, he actually introduces it as bad news. It's painful. And the entry into not-self often is quite painful, because to enter into not-self, I have to give up self. In other words, I have to let go of everything that's familiar to me and everything that I'm hanging on to. And that's really painful.

So dukkha in a sense represents the resistance to going into not-self. Some people have very little resistance—it's like, "Oh, this is great!" and in they go. Other people have a huge amount of resistance and they'll fight it every inch of the way. And you get a whole series of responses. So we're coming at it from a slightly different angle.

Question: I'm not sure if I've got this clearly because I haven't heard a lot of this before, but am I understanding right that when we have insight into specific change, it leads us to more awareness of the concept of universal change? And then the fear that can arise from that, and the uncomfortableness that arises from that. That tension builds until we reach a state where we can just release, and—I think it's not submit—surrender. We surrender to that. And by doing that, we can then release ourselves from the attachment to self, and that's more what the Buddha talks about as being enlightenment. Is that the kind of progress?

That's a pretty good executive summary. I think you're doing quite well there. It's quite esoteric and quite difficult to wrap your head around, so you don't need to understand the whole thing tonight—just get a sense that this is where the territory is. But yes, I think that's a good executive summary.

Shall we move on? We've just got a little bit more. And this is where I want to enter into the world of controversy.

If one is practicing for insight—what the tradition calls vipassanā bhāvanā—particularly insight regarding dukkha, which we're talking about tonight, we've been looking at it in terms of dukkha as pain, suffering, unsatisfactoriness, and dukkha ñāṇa, insight into dukkha, understanding of dukkha.

Very broadly, very roughly, we could see this in terms of the distinction between psychology and Dharma. Speaking again very roughly—and I say this as a non-psychologist; I know nothing about psychology, and this will perhaps be evident as I open my mouth here—we could say that psychology deals with people and their problems. But Dharma does not. And that's a major difference between these two discourses.

Dharma is all about anattā, not-self; suññatā, emptiness. It's not about people and it's not about their problems. Now, one implication of this is that Dharma practice cannot solve anyone's problems. What the practice can do is show us that we and our problems are empty. And that's all. The rest is up to the Dharma.

In other words, anyone who comes to a meditation retreat in order to solve their problems is coming to the wrong place. The Buddha makes this clear in his First Truth. He makes it clear that the practitioner's job is not to solve their dukkha, but to understand it.

When we understand our dukkha in the way the Buddha's talking about, we realize there is no "we" involved. The Buddha says to Venerable Kaccānagotta—or rather, he describes a mature practitioner to Venerable Kaccānagotta. He says the mature practitioner, quote, "has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only dukkha arising; what ceases is only dukkha ceasing."

In other words, it's just the dukkha coming and going. It's not me. I'm not part of this picture. Once we give up on the "me and my problem, my suffering, my dukkha"—my problem is not solved; it is dissolved.

And the dissolution of the problem—this is not dharma marketing. The Buddha means this. And in practice, it actually works.

So these are two quite different discourses: psychology and dharma. Now, the fact that they're not the same does not mean that they inhabit separate but parallel universes. They intersect. They interconnect.

From our dharma practice, we can learn something about our psychological makeup, and this, in turn, can help us with both our therapy and our practice. We learn from our story. We get from our personal story both a meaning, a new variation of the story, and we learn how to regulate our attention.

For example, from our personal story we might learn where it would be most useful to aim our awareness, or what we should be using as the meditation object, or what conditional relationships are most worth exploring to shed light on how we feed what the Buddha calls the roots of the unwholesome.

But at a fundamental level, we learn we are never going to find the right story.

When I talk about this, I like to sum it up with a brief verse that I came across at Wat Suan Mok in southern Thailand many years ago, painted on the wall in Thai with an English translation underneath. It's got a picture of a fat Chinese monk doing a qigong stretch with a big grin on his face. And the verse says:

Oh, boundless joy! Now I see there is no happiness in this world.

This paradox sums up rukkhanyana.

CHAPTER 115

At Fives and Sixes: The Five Aggregates and Six Sense Fields

Patrick Kearney · 1h04

In this exploratory talk, Patrick Kearney examines two fundamental frameworks the Buddha used to describe human experience: the pañca upādāna khandha (five aggregates of clinging) and the six sense fields (saḷāyatana). Drawing from his ongoing research into the fourth satipaṭṭhāna, Kearney unpacks the Pāli terminology to reveal deeper meanings—upādāna as appropriation rather than mere clinging, and khandha as both mass and category of experience.

The talk traces how the five aggregates—body (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), choices (saṅkhārā), and awareness (viññāṇa)—become the building blocks we appropriate to construct a sense of self. Kearney explains that the Buddha's first discourse presents these as the pañca upādāna khandha precisely because clinging to them creates dukkha. The practice involves perceiving the impermanence (anicca) of each aggregate, undermining the assumption of a permanent self to whom experiences belong.

The six sense fields offer a complementary perspective, defining 'everything' as the meeting of sense sensitivity, object, and awareness. Kearney explores the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta's teaching on how contact (phassa) conditions feeling, which leads to perception, thinking, and ultimately papañca (proliferation). The practice here focuses on the bond (saṃyojana) that arises between subject and object, staying intimate with the immediate felt touch of experience rather than becoming lost in conceptual elaboration—as the Buddha taught Bāhiya: 'In the seen, just the seen.'

About the five aggregates and the six sense fields.

This talk comes out of something that I'm writing. I'm writing about the aggregates and the sense fields in terms of satipaṭṭhāna, in the fourth satipaṭṭhāna—dhamma or dhammas. The Buddha presents different schemas and then he presents a practice along with each one. So I was looking at the five aggregates and the six senses, had started writing about them and trying to work out what's the difference, and then fell over in a heap and thought, I've got to get back to basics and research them again. And so I have, and I've produced a talk about them, hoping that from this will emerge the distinction between them and why there's two and why not just one.

So let's begin.

When the Buddha talks about the human condition, he presents two important schemas. One of these is the five aggregates, and the other is the six sense fields. Tonight we're going to briefly explore both of them. We'll start with the five aggregates.

These, of course, are very famous. First of all, the thing about the aggregates is that they are always associated with clinging. The Buddha presents them actually in his first discourse. The six sense fields turn up in his third discourse, but the aggregates turn up in the very first one. He presents them as part of the truth on dukkha, and he presents them as the pañca upādāna khandhā. *Pañca* is five, *khandhā* is what we translate as aggregate, and *upādāna* is clinging. This comes as a compound, and the two basic elements in the compound are clinging and aggregates. So the question is, what's the relationship between the two of them?

Let's start with clinging, or in Pali, *upādāna*. Pali is the closest that we have to the language the Buddha taught in, so that's why it's important to go back and try to figure out what he's actually talking about.

We have this word *upādāna*, and it's constructed out of three elements: *upa* plus *ā* plus the root *dā*. It's all based on the root, and the root *dā* means give. Of course, you're familiar with this word—it's already been used: *dāna*, giving or gift. So *upādāna*, that last bit, is gift, giving. Then in front of that you have the prefix *ā*, long *ā*, and this indicates to take, to bring towards. If you give a gift, the gift is going away from you, in a direction away. But put in *ā*, and suddenly the direction is reversed—it's coming toward you. And *upa* indicates nearness or close touch. So *upādāna* is taking or bringing to oneself—appropriation, to appropriate something. *Upādāna* is taking as one's own.

Let's reapply this to the khandhās. Here is the list of the five khandhās. If you're familiar with basic Buddhist teaching you already know the list: body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness.

The first one is body. Does it make sense to you to think or to say, "This is my body"? Do you ever think in terms of "my body"? Would you ever in conversation say, "Well, my body..."? And is this meaningful to you? Well, of course it is. This is often the way we talk about body. We talk about it as "my." In other words, we have body and we take it as one's own. We take it as mine. And that action is *upādāna*—to take something as mine.

Does that make sense?

So it's usually translated in English as clinging or attachment, but this is essentially what it is. Appropriation is to take something as belonging to me. This is upadana.

So we have upadana, and then we have the word khanda. Khanda has different meanings depending on context. Khanda indicates a mass of something, suggesting something very large. For example, a big wall is a khanda. The bulk of an elephant is a khanda.

Khanda also suggests a great collection of something. Imagine a pile of sand on the beach. That pile of sand is a khanda. It's one big thing, a pile of sand, and it consists of many smaller units, each individual grain of sand. The mass of all those grains of sand results in a khanda, a pile of sand. And you notice with this example, what connects the parts to make the whole is very loose. They're very loosely connected. In other words, a pile of sand is easily scattered.

When the Buddha uses the term khanda to talk about identity, which he does, already with the language he's suggesting that what holds an identity together is not as tight as what we might think.

So khanda is a mass of something. It also suggests a big collection of something. And if we take it as a collection, which here I think we're meant to, khanda can indicate a category of something. For example, with our pile of sand, everything here that can be categorized as sand is collected into the khanda of beach. Beach is a khanda which covers the category of sand collected here.

When the Buddha talks about body as a khanda, what he's talking about is the whole mass of experiences that can be categorized as body—in other words, as physical. So the first khanda, body, means the whole mass of all those experiences which can be categorized as being physical. And so on with the others. We'll get to the others.

So the pancha khanda, the five khandas. This is a list, and of course anybody familiar with the Buddha's teaching knows that he loves a good list. This list consists of body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. These are five categories, khanda, that each contains a great mass, khanda, of individual experiences. You notice that the whole thing is about experience. And the Buddha's teaching is always about experience.

So why are these categories so important? They're important because these are the categories of experience that we appropriate—upadana—we appropriate them as "this is mine." And why is this important? Because appropriation, possession, is an essential aspect of self. In Sanskrit, atma; in Pali, attan.

If you think about self, what do we mean by self? In particular, what does the Buddha mean by self?

First of all, self is the one who acts, the one who does things—like comes along to a Melbourne Insight meditation meeting. The one who is in charge of his or her own actions. The actions she possesses, appropriates.

Which brings us to the second aspect of self. Self is the one who possesses a body and a mind, who possesses his or her actions and who therefore is responsible for his or her actions. You notice: his actions, her actions—possessed. Self is the person to whom it makes sense to refer to as "my body," "my mind," "my actions."

Now, you wouldn't refer in that way to someone else.

Self is the one to whom it makes sense to refer as "my actions, my thoughts, my experience," and so on.

This is why the khandhas are important—this particular list—because these are the categories of experience that we reach out and appropriate, taking them as "this is mine, I am this, this is me."

So the list of the five aggregates is the list of those aspects of our experience that the Buddha believes we appropriate, we cling to, in order to construct a sense of self.

First, body—physical experience. The body gives our identity a sense of solidity. There's a physical form located in space. Physical experience becomes my body, my seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. And this is who I am: I am the one who is seeing, I am the one who is speaking, and so on.

Then we have feeling—vedanā in Pali. This is the affective aspect of experience, that which moves me or stimulates a response. There are three categories of feeling: pleasant, painful, and neither. If the feeling is pleasant, I am moved to hold on and become intimate with whatever gives that pleasant feeling. If the feeling is painful, I am moved to reject and distance myself from whatever gives painful feeling. And whatever gives neither pleasant nor painful feeling, I am moved to ignore because it's not worth noticing—or I am moved to be doubtful and confused about what to do about it. So feeling tells me how I am, the distinctive pattern of feelings and responses that govern my emotional life. And again, *my* emotional life.

Perception is the recognition or interpretation of any experience—what gives familiarity and meaning to an experience. So perception gives me what I am experiencing, the world within which I find myself, which becomes *my* world, the world within which I operate. Notice how perception and feeling act together: feeling provides the affective or emotional aspect of response, and perception provides what I am responding to.

Then we have choices—saṅkhāra. These are all choices and decisions to act. They too are appropriated to give me the sense that these are my decisions and I am the one making them.

Finally, we have awareness—vijñāna in Pali. This is the most intimate of all. When we appropriate awareness, this gives me the sense that I am the one who is aware of all this. All of these experiences are part of *my* awareness.

That's the list of the five. Notice—and we'll explore this later—that of these five aggregates, one is physical and the rest are mental.

So now we can answer the question we asked before: what's the relationship between the upādāna and the khandha, between the appropriation and the aggregate? The khandhas, the aggregates, are what we cling to in order to construct a self living within his or her world. Taken together as self, the five aggregates represent our fundamental point of reference.

Self is the place from which we experience the world—going out in that direction. And it's also the place to which the world refers. We all have a sense, for example, that this meeting is happening to me. The "me" to which experiences happen is self. We have a deep sense that this is *my* life. Self is the owner of this life. Self is the reference

against which everything in our lives is measured. And the Buddha says we use the five aggregates to construct that reference.

Any questions? Yes, Patrick. Angela.

"So does that also mean that we can use the five aggregates to deconstruct ourself?"

And that is very much the practice of not-self—looking at the construction project and, in being aware of it, not getting caught up in it, and therefore deconstructing the self.

"And in that, where do the aggregates reside?"

The aggregates are always the aggregates, but they cease to be the upadana aggregates.

"Okay, yes, I think that's what I was getting a little bit confused about."

When the Buddha talks about the four truths in his first discourse, he says, in brief, the pancha upadana khandha are dukkha. Now, the Buddha has a reputation for being an old pessimist because he thinks everything's dukkha. But you notice that he doesn't

say the five aggregates are dukkha. He says the five upadana aggregates are dukkha. When we appropriate them, they dukkha. But when we don't appropriate them, they're just what's happening.

But in order to not appropriate them, given that it's our deeply ingrained habit to appropriate, we've got to have the samadhi and the sati—the concentration and the mindfulness—to be able to see ourselves constructing ourselves in real time. And then we can say, "Oh, I'm not going to do this. Too much bother, apart from anything else." And so self is something to be deconstructed.

Thank you. Any other questions? Wendy?

"Just a question. You said that only the body is physical and the other four are mental or conceptual. And I'm just wondering whether feelings might also be bodily in some sense."

They're certainly bodily in that there are feelings that move the body. There are feelings that move what we would normally call mind, or let's say the psychological realm. But feeling itself is psychological in this system.

"Okay."

They move the body. The categories are concepts. And whenever you look at the Buddha's teaching, he's using concepts. Now the thing about concepts—one thing that makes them very useful is that they have very clear borders. But experience itself is kind of messy. So it's always a problem to hold on too tightly to a concept and try to force the experience to fit the concept. There's a certain creativity in the way you apply the concept. As a meditator, what's most important is the experience and using the concepts to clarify the experience. If you want to be an academic, I'm sure there's a PhD in there about whether vedana is really bodily. But for a practitioner, you don't waste your time.

"Thank you. I'd rather be a practitioner."

Okay, shall we move on? Let's get to dukkha. Because as we said, the five khandhas are closely associated with dukkha. In the first discourse, Turning the Dharma Wheel, the Buddha says, in summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha. So they're fundamentally important because the Buddha's whole project is how we can live without dukkha. In a couple of discourses, this very brief teaching pops up where he says, "Previously and now, what I teach is dukkha and the cessation of dukkha." That's what he's focused on.

So if he's really focused on dukkha, why is he so interested in self? And why does he reject the teaching of self? It's because for him, self and possession go together, and possession causes dukkha. If we want our dukkha to cease—dukkha is, of course, pain, suffering, distress, dis-ease, the whole range of the unpleasant—if we want our dukkha to cease, the Buddha says, well, stop taking as ours what is not ours. Stop appropriating, stop clinging.

So the aggregates are important because this is what we appropriate as mine. And this is what we use to construct an identity, which we take—again, taking—to be fundamentally real. Now the problem is not that we construct an identity. The Buddha constructed an identity. He knew precisely who he was, but he recognized this identity as essentially a convenience, as a concept or a network of concepts that helped him get through the day and function well.

He did not take this self as the fundamental reality and then try to bend the world to accommodate it. Rather, he adapted his self to be able to work within the world. Does that make sense?

So now we come to the practice of the five aggregates. How do we practice with these aggregates? In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha says: "Here a practitioner understands—such is body, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is feeling, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is perception, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such are choices, such their arising, such their disappearance. Such is awareness, such its arising, such its disappearance."

So the practice is actually very, very simple, and it comes in two parts. Number one: clarify the experience. "Such is body." This word "such"—*iti* in Pali. So this physical experience, what is it? What is its real nature? Really paying attention.

Those of you who practice mindfulness meditation will recognize this as what is sometimes called bare attention, or what in the Mahasi lineage is called noting—to be directly aware of precisely this. Such is this body's sensation. Such is this thought. Such is this feeling, and so on. Be clear about what's going on, and then perceive its impermanence, its change: such its arising, such its disappearance.

The perception of impermanence is crucial here. Now, we've talked about this before, so let's just briefly go over this. Why is change so important for the Buddha?

The word that he uses is *anicca*, which can be broken up into *a* and *nicca*. *A* is the negative prefix—not. And *nicca* means permanent, but also stable, constant. In everyday usage, *nicca* refers to what can be relied upon. For example, in everyday Pali, you

have the expression *nitya dāna*, a perpetual gift—something that can be relied upon to last for a very long time. You also have *nitya bhatta*, a perpetual food supply—a food supply which is continuous and therefore reliable.

So *anicca*, not-*nicca*, means unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore ultimately unreliable. Not to be depended upon, not to be trusted. This is where you see the link between *anicca* and *dukkha*, between change and pain. When we rely on something unreliable, or someone unreliable, sooner or later we are disappointed. It's inevitable.

What self does is provide us with a sense of permanence and the security that such a sense offers. Remember that self gives us our fundamental reference point: this is happening to *me*. And self—because notice, of the five aggregates, four of them are mental—self is heavily conceptual. So self lets us project this reference point to the past: this happened to me a long time ago. And it lets us project this reference point to the future: this will happen to me.

Then we get locked into the sameness that permanence presents. "I didn't like this before, therefore I will never like it." "We did things this way before, therefore we should always do things this way." And any threat to this sameness becomes a threat to self, to me and mine. Does that make sense? This is how self and permanence go together.

So the practice of the five aggregates is all about undermining self by undermining possession.

Because if you don't have possession, if we're not appropriating, we can't have a self. And the teaching does this by undermining the assumption of permanence. So if we're practicing for insight, we train ourselves to see the change within experience. And once we really perceive change, at some point we realize that it's futile to project self into the experience. If this desire is me and it's mine, what happens to me when it changes? Is there a new me?

Normally we just assume an unchanging self back there to whom these changes occur. But the Buddha is saying, just look for this unchanging self back there. And he offers five categories of experience where we might go looking. Just look for this unchanging self back there—that one to whom this is happening. Can you find it? He's betting that anything we actually find turns out to be impermanent.

But not only do things change—when we start to really become intimate with this fact, we realize that experiences change according to the natural laws of what the Buddha calls dependent origination, or paticca samuppada. If things change according to universal natural laws, then they do not change because I decide they should. So where is self here?

The practice of investigating the five aggregates revolves around learning to deeply perceive the impermanence and unreliability of whatever I appropriate to construct "I" and "mine." So that's our potted summary of the five aggregates. Any questions about them before we move on? Otherwise, quickly you would have forgotten that there ever were five aggregates. You'd be asking questions like, "Didn't you mention something like aggregate? How many of them were there?" So now, while it's fresh in the mind, any questions?

A student raised an interesting point: "I'm often aware that the experience I'm having is not the same that my partner or somebody else in the room is having. There's a deep sense of not being able to trust the perceptions that I have about myself or even an event. To some extent, I can rely on the body to say, okay, we both heard this noise or we both feel this happened. But in terms of how it's interpreted, it's so deeply personal, depending on our own sense of self and history and experiences."

This does show how self can be undermined by just social relationships, which reveals why we choose the friends that we choose. Back in the day when John Howard ruled Australia, I was having a political discussion with some friends and we realized we don't know anybody who actually voted for John Howard. I had one person in mind whom I was too ashamed to mention—I strongly suspect my mother voted for him. But apart from her, I don't think there was anybody in my social circle who would have voted for John Howard. I strongly suspect there's no one in my social circle who votes for Scotty either.

If I was friendly with a keen Scotty fan, because the perceptions are so different, there would be a clash. And the clash would come because I would feel under threat from this person's perception. This is why we swim in the social circles that we swim in. We prefer to mix with people who do not challenge unduly our sense of self. There'll be some challenge—it's inevitable—but not too much.

The student observed, "This is very much the social self, because it just reinforces what we want to believe or think."

Yes, it reinforces the world that we're convinced we live in, along with the values we hold. It's not threatening to be with somebody that you more or less ninety percent agree with.

I got a lesson in this decades ago. I spent five years practicing Zen. I was a very early member of what was then the Sydney Zen Group and later became the Sydney Zen Centre. We brought out Robert Aitken Roshi, the first Zen teacher to come to Australia. I was a student of his. I went off to Hawaii, to his center, and spent two years there.

But I had come to Zen via Tel Aviv, and when I left Hawaii, I went to Southeast Asia and India and back to Tel Aviv. So I came back to Australia years later as part of the Mahasi lineage. And I lost friends. They just could not wrap their heads around it. I lost one lot of friends, gained another lot, but realized if I walk out of here, I'll lose them. And that's within a group of people practicing the same sort of faith or religion or practice.

The student remarked, "All of them are Buddhists."

Exactly. That's the nature of self. Talk about fixed self.

I sometimes struggle with this, particularly in terms of ethics. It sometimes crosses my mind that if I choose to steal the family's chocolate biscuits, I have permission to say, "Not me, not mine, I'm not making this choice."

You could say that, but I don't know whether it would succeed.

Actually, this reminds me of a book I read years ago. I think it was called *On Killing*. It was written by a retired colonel from the US Army who was interested in, among other things, how the army trains its recruits to kill. People have researched this, mostly in the US.

For example, they did calculations on eighteenth-century battles. You have a group of men lined up in bright, distinctive uniforms. Just over there, you've got another group of men lined up in bright, distinctive uniforms. They aim muskets at each other and blast away. This is a typical eighteenth, early nineteenth-century battle. Somebody went to the records, reconstructing what happened in these battles, and concluded that so few people were shot that it cannot be explained by how inaccurate the muskets were. A lot of the soldiers must have been shooting high. They must have been.

In the US Civil War, when people would collect guns after a battle—the rifles, still muzzle-loaders—they would often find rifles with several bullets loaded. In other words, someone had shoved a bullet in, aimed, pretended to fire, shoved another one

in, aimed, pretended to fire, so they looked as if they were doing their job, but they weren't. It's the same phenomenon. There weren't enough casualties because people could not bring themselves—and we're talking masses of people, trained soldiers—if they're looking at someone, they couldn't bring themselves to do it. They just couldn't, even if they ended up dead as a result.

So the ethical choices that we make are deeply conditioned. Some of us can do certain things, but a lot of us can't. And some people who do end up psychologically broken because they've done it. The conditioning goes very deep, including ethically. We're not just free agents.

Shall we continue? Let's move on to the six senses, or the six sense fields.

This is the second schema that's really important for the Buddha. These are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding. What they do is not create the self—rather, they provide the world within which we live.

This comes out in a number of discourses. Take one of them, the Sabba Sutta, "Everything," where the Buddha tells his students that he will teach them "everything." Now, we can imagine them settling in for a long talk, but this discourse is actually very brief. The Buddha says: "What is everything? Eye sensitivity and forms, ear sensitivity and sounds, nose sensitivity and smells, tongue sensitivity and tastes, body sensitivity and tangibles, mind sensitivity and phenomena. Whoever would say, 'I reject this everything and declare another,' if questioned on the foundation of his words, he could not explain and would become distressed. Why? Because it is beyond range."

This is really important. It brings out a basic principle of the Buddha's teaching. What he's interested in is the nature of human experience, which means he's interested in what happens in the six sense fields. He's not interested in anything else. This is why he has no time for a doctrine of, for example, a creator god—not because he says there isn't one, but because he says if there is one, then by definition it's beyond the range of the six senses. He's just not interested. He's just not going to go there. Whenever the Buddha talks about the world, he does so in terms of the six senses.

How do they work? In this passage, you get a pattern repeated again and again. We'll just go through the first sensitivity, eye sensitivity: "Depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling."

This is a basic teaching of dependent arising. You have eye sensitivity, which is sensitivity to light—one part of the body that is sensitive to light. You have visual forms. Depending on these two, when you also get visual awareness, when those three come together, you have what is usually translated as "contact"—literally *phassa* in Pali.

Phassa, or contact, indicates the immediacy of experience. And phassa—it's normally translated as "contact," but it actually literally means "touched" or "touch." So the Buddha is saying we are touched by what streams through our senses. And this touch, which is happening here and now, is the immediacy of experience where a sensitivity, a corresponding object, and awareness come together.

When this happens—when we are touched, and we are touched through all six senses all of the time—contact conditions feeling. In other words, we feel this touch. And this brings us to the question of sentience, which is a key concept in the Buddha's ethics.

We are sentient beings. I'm sure you've heard that expression in Buddhist ethics. To be sentient is to be aware and to feel. Living beings are sentient; non-living things are not. For example, we might have an air conditioning system programmed to maintain a steady temperature of, let's say, twenty-five degrees by means of a thermostat. But we don't say the thermostat feels hot or feels cold. On the other hand, we feel hot or cold. This capacity to feel is sentience, and we are sentient bodies.

Now this has important implications for the Buddha's approach to ethics, because his ethical concern does not stop at our species but extends to all sentient beings. And a sentient being is a being who feels pain, loves life, and fears death.

Notice that the first characteristic of a sentient being is that of feeling pain. For the Buddha, sentience entails pain. If we have sentience, we have pain. We could go so far as to say that the difference between a robot and a living being is not their comparative intelligence, but whether or not they feel pain. If an entity feels pain, then that entity is sentient.

So we are sentient. We are aware and we feel, and that means we are exposed to pain. This becomes obvious in our meditation practice. One reason why it's so easy to postpone meditation practice is because when we put a pause on our habitual obsessions and dullness, when we allow ourselves to be aware of whatever we are experiencing in the present, often we recognize the pervasive restlessness, an inability for body and mind to settle and absorb itself fully into what's going on. The sense fields open us to our sentience and the consequences of that sentience. We are touched by the world; we are moved by that touch.

So what happens next? In another discourse, the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta—"the sweet essence," or as usually translated, "the honey ball"—a senior disciple is expanding on what the Buddha had said, and he says: what we feel, we perceive; what we perceive, we think about; what we think about, we proliferate.

We've already talked about how closely connected feeling and perception are. Feeling is affective and gives us the world that moves us. Perception is cognitive and gives us a world we can recognize and understand. But you notice feeling comes first. We respond spontaneously through the heart and then make sense out of that movement. Our rationality is built on the foundation of feeling, and rationality then runs away into proliferation. This is essentially thinking in hyperdrive, where what we do is create a conceptual world that is far removed from what we have directly experienced.

Does that make sense? Any questions thus far? Sorry this is going on so long, but what to do?

So then we have the practice of the sense fields in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: "He, a practitioner, understands eye sensitivity, he understands forms, and he understands the bond that arises dependent on both. He understands how an unarisen bond arises, how an arisen bond is abandoned, and how an abandoned bond does not arise in the future. He understands ear sensitivity, nose sensitivity, tongue sensitivity, body sensitivity. He understands mind sensitivity. He understands phenomena. And he understands the bond that arises dependent on both," and so on.

So the practice of the senses revolves around the bond or the fetter—fetter is the normal translation—that arises in the relationship between sense sensitivity and sense object. This practice is all about the relationship between the subjective and the objective. The subjective is the sense sensitivity. The objective is the sense object. And this relationship, under normal circumstances, gives rise to what the Buddha calls saṃyojana, which is classically translated as "fetter."

And here I translate it as bond because I don't like the word "fetter" — I never actually use that word in ordinary speech.

Anyway, let's look at this word, *saṃyojana*. It's a compound consisting of *yojana* with the prefix *saṃ* in front of it. A *yojana* is a yoke — it's cognate with our English word "yoke," and also with "yoga." A *yojana* is what holds two oxen together. In the Buddha's time, most transport was by oxen cart. You would have one or two oxen pulling a cart, and most goods traveling by land moved in this way. If you've got two oxen side by side, they're joined by a yoke, by a *yojana*. It holds the two oxen together. The prefix *saṃ* indicates "together." So a *saṃyojana* yokes us, ties us, binds us, fetters us.

This binding is affective in its nature. It's a product of feeling, of our heart's response to what's happening. And this response is described as *chanda-rāga*. *Chanda* is impulse, desire, excitement, agitation. *Rāga* is literally "color" — the coloring of the heart when we're caught up in something. Traditionally it's translated as "lust," which I think is a terrible translation. It's closer to obsession. So the bond is impulse and obsession working together, a spinning off of our desires, fears, hatreds, prejudices, and so on. We find ourselves building worlds where our heart's reactions, aided by our delusions, cause us to be lost in *dukkha* — in a world of our own creation that bears little resemblance to the world presented by our senses.

Does that make sense? I realize it's heavy going tonight, but this is what happens when you're a crash test dummy. Sorry.

A question came: "That just seems crazy. Why do we do this?"

That's a very good question. I can't fully answer it. Basically, the two drives — *taṇhā* and *avijjā*, drivenness and delusion — brought together: bang. This is universal. It's not just us. Don't blame yourself. This is the way nature works.

"Okay, that's very reassuring."

Another question: "Does it always start with — like after the sense contact — is feeling always the next thing?"

The connection is so intimate it's not even the next thing. They arise together.

"So what if you're a well-deconstructed self and you're sitting in meditation and you perceive something in mind? Hasn't that come first? You've noticed it before you've noticed the feeling, but you've already moved."

This is where *vedanā* goes so deep and is so ubiquitous. I like to tell this story — I actually saw it in a TV drama, though somebody told me it came from some kind of book. Imagine two young fish calmly swimming through the water, and they meet coming toward them a much bigger, uglier, fiercer, aggressive fish. They're both feeling a bit nervous; they don't know what's going to happen. The fish comes close, glances at these two young fish, and says, "G'day, boys. Water's nice this morning, isn't it?"

And off he goes. The two young fish swim away, thinking, "Phew! We managed to escape that." They continue on for a moment or two, and then one fish says to the other, "What the hell is water?"

This is vedanā. We don't notice it because it's so ubiquitous. It's already moving us before we've made any choice. Choice comes later. So it's always there whether we note it or not, but there are times when we do notice. There are times when awareness can recognize it, can see it. And of course, some meditators are more sensitive to it than others, so it plays a bigger role in some people's practice than in others. But it's always happening. Whatever we're doing, the first thing that moves us is that vedanā.

What about neutral vedanā? This is controversial. The Buddha actually doesn't say "neutral." He says "neither painful nor pleasant." And the controversial bit is this: my working hypothesis is that if the Buddha says something, he means it. If he wanted to say neutral, he would have said neutral. He didn't say neutral. He said neither painful nor pleasant.

What does that mean? Well, he associates this third type with delusion, with ignorance. If I don't register something as pleasant—therefore worth grabbing hold of—and I don't register it as painful—therefore something I've got to get away from—then I don't bother to register it at all. I ignore it. I don't even notice it. I am moved to ignore it. Or if I do see it, I am moved to doubt and confusion about what to do. Should I grab this? Should I reject it? Should I grab it? Should I reject it? What do I do?

These are the flavors of delusion. And it's more complex than the first two. Pleasant and painful are very straightforward—want, don't want. A simple binary. But the third one is much more complex, and it includes neutral, but neutral is just one flavor of this third category.

That's my controversial hypothesis. I did a retreat with Bhikkhu Anālayo once and ventured this interpretation. He just wouldn't have it. I was happy to have a discussion with him, but there was no chance. That's when I realized—whoops, this is controversial.

Now let's see if we can finish tonight. The practice.

Now, the problem with all of this about the senses is that the difficulty lies not in the sense sensitivity itself, nor in the sense object. The problem is not in our experiencing—the problem arises from the relationship between these two, the relationship between the subjective and the objective.

So the practice of tracking the sense fields is all about the affective relationships that govern our understanding of what's going on, both inside and around us.

This involves maintaining an intimacy with the immediately felt touch of the senses. And this creates a practice trajectory that takes us directly to dukkha through sentience—and in particular, physical sentience, because the touch of the senses is more clear through the body.

You'll notice the distinction we made before between the five aggregates and the six sense fields. Of the five aggregates, one is physical, four are psychological. Of the six sense fields, five are physical and one is psychological. Both cover the entirety of human experience—they both encompass both the physical and the psychological. But the schema of the sense fields is more grounded in body. So it's not surprising that the practice of the sense fields is characterized by an intimate physicality.

The ground of all experience is phassa, contact—literally touch. This is the meeting of sense sensitivity, sense object, and awareness. So when we practice the sense fields, we hold back from the physical conceptual world-building that is based on feeling. We stay as close as possible to the actual felt touch of the experience.

This is famously brought out in the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya: "Then, Bahiya, this is how you should train. In the seen, there will be just the seen. In the heard, just the heard. In the sensed, just the sensed. In the known, just the known. In this way, you should train yourself."

The emphasis is on intimacy—staying close to the immediacy of experience, along with its entanglements. We become intimate with the entanglements when they arise, with the felt touch of the entanglements, rather than becoming lost in the layers of meaning we construct on top of them.

We tend to live our lives in the top levels of our conceptual skyscrapers. Mindfulness of the sense fields is inviting us to learn to live on the ground floor, as close as possible to what is actually happening here and now.

Thank you very much. There is much here to ponder as we continue sitting in practice.

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Thank you all. Take care. Good night.

CHAPTER 116

Exploring Not Self: Is Anyone Here?

Patrick Kearney · 1h02

> *In this technically rich dharma talk, Patrick Kearney provides essential historical and philosophical context for understanding the Buddha's teaching of anattā (not-self). Beginning with the Bodhisatta's training in the Upaniṣadic tradition under teachers like Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, Kearney traces the Buddha's journey from the ātman-centered teachings of the sage Yājñavalkya to his radical departure after awakening. The talk distinguishes between the metaphysical ātman (the transcendent, eternal self) and the psychological ātman (the everyday sense of being the one who acts, possesses, and experiences), explaining why the Buddha rejected both.*
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> *Kearney emphasizes the Buddha's radical empiricism—his refusal to speculate beyond direct experience—drawing on the Sabba Sutta to illustrate how the Buddha defined 'everything' as the six sense bases and their objects. The teaching of the five khandhas (aggregates) is explored as the Buddha's analysis of what we appropriate to construct a sense of self: body, feeling, perception, choices, and awareness. Crucially, Kearney clarifies that anattā means 'not-self' rather than 'no-self'—the Buddha never claimed ātman doesn't exist, but rather pointed out that whatever we experience is not ātman.*
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> *The talk illuminates how possession (upādāna) and self-construction are intimately connected, and why this connection inevitably leads to dukkha. Kearney draws on Majjhima Nikāya 22 (Alagaddūpama Sutta) to show that the Buddha's ultimate concern was always 'dukkha and the cessation of dukkha.' The practical implication is not to abandon identity entirely—which would be impossible—but to recognize it as a convenient construction rather than fundamental reality, allowing us to adapt flexibly to changing conditions rather than rigidly bending the world to accommodate our self-concept.*

I've been working on talks regarding insight in general, but more recently I've been focusing on anatta, not self. Tonight's talk is a combination of two other talks I've been putting together, trying to get something that might actually work. My apologies in advance—it is a bit technical.

The title is "Exploring Not Self." We're going to look at the Buddha's teaching of not self, but we're going to try to put it into context, historical context. So we're beginning with his background. Because when you look at his career as a practitioner, he was trained in a tradition that taught self—in Sanskrit, atman. This is the term he would

have been familiar with. Only after his awakening did he reject the concept of atman in favor of not atman, or in Pali, anatta. So anatman in Sanskrit, anatta in Pali, not self in English.

He's trained in a tradition where self is at the center of the whole enterprise. And then he flips it around and teaches the opposite. Why? Something's going on. This is what we want to have a look at first.

We begin with the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is the Buddha before he becomes the Buddha. As a young man, he decides to renounce home and search for awakening. So if he's going to go on a search, where to go? He lives in the city of Kapilavastu, which was the capital of the Shakya Republic. This city lay on the main east-west trading route between the kingdom of Kosala to the west, with its capital at Savatthi, and to the south-east, the Vajji Confederacy, which had a couple of capitals, but the major one was at Vesali. Those of you who are familiar with the Buddha's teaching know he spent a fair bit of time at both places, but especially Savatthi.

When the Bodhisattva walks out of home, he arrives at the highway and he's got a choice. He could turn to the right and head to Savatthi, or he could turn to the left and head to Vesali. So why did he turn left?

Where he's going is what in his day was the Vajji Confederacy, a republican confederacy located in what is now northern Bihar state. It was a successor state to the old kingdom of Videha. Videha was smaller; the Vajji Confederacy is bigger. But the old kingdom of Videha—this is the area that he's going to.

Videha, for centuries, had been a major centre for the yogic traditions that we know through the Upanishads. It was in Videha that some of the early Upanishads were composed, especially the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the Great Forest Upanishad. At the time of the Buddha, this area remained a place where aspiring yogis would go to study and practice Dharma. So the Bodhisattva would have been entering an area where the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is a very important text.

Essentially in its current form, this Upanishad is a collection of texts that preserve the teaching of the sage Yajnavalkya, who was a native of Videha. Yajnavalkya is very famous as a founding teacher of the Advaita Vedanta tradition of non-dualism—you've probably all heard of that. He lived several centuries before the Buddha. One of his central teachings was the doctrine of Atman, self. For Yajnavalkya, self is the eternal blissful essence that is found at the heart of subjective experience, and the purpose of

practice in this tradition is to uncover atman and then allow it to express itself in our lives. The way of practice is to become deeply silent. Silence in Sanskrit is muni, and one of the old titles of the Buddha is Shakyamuni—the silent one of the Shakyas.

When the mind falls silent, Atman is revealed. So roughly speaking, this is a way of practice.

Now the Bodhisattva joined this tradition. He trained with at least two teachers because we have their names recorded. These were Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. And according to the later Buddhist tradition, they taught serenity meditation up to a high level of formless absorption. Without getting into the technicalities, essentially this is very deep concentration. This may be a reference to the practice mentioned in the Brihad Aranyika Upanishad—the silence that reveals the Atman—but it's a later Buddhist perspective on this, in which they're saying, of course it's rubbish, but nice rubbish. Obviously it's not genuine. But when the Bodhisattva was practicing, this is what was going on.

He mastered this tradition, but he then rejected it as inadequate. And then he moves south of the Ganga to the kingdom of Magadha—contemporary South Bihar state, south of the Ganges. In particular, he moved to the area around the city of Gaya. This was a district known for powerful and restless spirits and for the shamans who dealt with them. It's still known for that, by the way. And here the Bodhisattva practiced independently, without a teacher. The practice he took up was extreme asceticism. So this is the second phase of his practice career.

That failed dismally.

And then he developed his own way of practice, which he called the middle way. Through this, he gained awakening. He becomes the Buddha.

So why is this relevant to our understanding of not-self, anatta, or un-atman? The point is that Atman, self, was central to the Bodhisattva's training and practice. And then once he's awakened and becomes a teacher in his own right, instead of teaching Atman, which everybody would expect, he teaches un-atman, not-Atman—in Pali, anatta. In other words, he taught the opposite of what he had been taught. This was shocking and scandalous to his contemporaries, and for many people since then. In fact, it's still a problem today. Some Indians who like to look back at the Buddha as being one of the greatest Indians still can't wrap their heads around the fact that he rejects Atman.

So why did he take this contrary path? What problem did he see in the Atman doctrine? This is the background that we're looking at.

Let's look at Atman in this Upanishadic tradition, because this is what the Buddha means when he talks about self. This has two aspects, something we tend to miss. We tend to slide these two together. But the Atman is both metaphysical and psychological—metaphysical, philosophical, and psychological.

It's metaphysical in that Atman transcends the person. For example, in this tradition, if we ask the simple question, how many Atmans are there in the world? How many souls are there in the world? The answer is just one. There's one single Atman that transcends all individual differences and therefore transcends ordinary empirical experience.

Yet how is this Atman to be found, and how is it expressed in one's life? It's found and expressed through the ordinary empirical person. In other words, Atman is also psychological. In a sense, you could say that the psychological Atman is the route to the metaphysical Atman. How do we find this transcendent Atman? We go through the physical self, into the mind. And the psychological Atman is the instrument through which this metaphysical Atman is expressed in the world. So it's expressed through the person.

We have a metaphysical Atman and a psychological Atman, two aspects of the teaching.

Now, this metaphysical Atman pops up in different beliefs, in different traditions. For example, in Hindu traditions that believe in rebirth—life after life—it's the Atman that is reborn. The Atman just cruises along while bodies and minds come and go. Of course, Christianity is an Atman tradition. And here Atman is the soul. It's the Atman, the soul, who goes to an eternal reward in heaven or an eternal punishment in hell.

So these are beliefs built around the metaphysical Atman. The psychological Atman, by contrast, is the one who acts, the one who reaps the results of action, the one who is aware of the world. This is the ordinary everyday self who identifies as the one who acts, the one who possesses such things as a body and a mind, the one who is in charge of his or her own actions. This is the psychological Atman. Does that distinction make sense?

So first of all, the Buddha rejects the metaphysical teaching of Atman. Why does he do that? Basically because this metaphysical Atman is not empirical. Yajnavalkya raises the problem in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad of how we can experience Atman—or rather, how we can be sure that Atman even exists, given that it is transcendent. He

says, "You cannot see the seer from seeing. You cannot hear the hearer from hearing. You cannot think the thinker from thinking. You cannot know the knower from knowing." This is a very famous passage.

Now, to get a sense of what he's talking about, ask yourself the question: what is the one thing we cannot see? It is a trick question, but think about it. What is the one thing you cannot see? Well, the answer is we cannot see our own eyes. We can see the reflection of our eyes in a mirror, but we cannot see our eyes themselves. Why not? Because sight proceeds out from our eyes. Whatever we see is not our eyes.

Now, the metaphysical Atman lies behind our seeing because it is the one who sees. This means that whatever we see is not Atman, not self, because it's not the one who resides behind seeing. Everything we see, hear, think, or know is not Atman, not self. And in this you can see that Yajnavalkya agrees with the Buddha—or you could say the Buddha agrees with Yajnavalkya.

But Yajnavalkya does believe in Atman. So how does this work? If we come back to the example of seeing, we cannot see our own eyes. But does anybody seriously suggest that this means we do not have eyes? We know we have eyes because we do in fact see. In other words, we infer the existence of our eyes without ever seeing them. We know we have ears because we do in fact hear, and so on.

So for Yajnavalkya, the Atman, the self, is the one who sees, the one who hears, the one who smells, tastes, touches, knows. The Atman is the one who experiences. Since it is obvious that we experience, then it is equally obvious that there is one who experiences. While it's true that we do not directly experience Atman, we know Atman is real because Atman is what makes experience itself possible. There is experience, therefore there must be one who experiences. Yajnavalkya infers the existence of the knower, the Atman, because we know—even though we can never know the knower. This is the basic stance of the Atman tradition.

This argument from Yajnavalkya would fit perfectly into Christian theology, Muslim theology, and so on. It's all the same sort of logic—the sense that there's no one here, but there's something happening.

Anyway, the Buddha will have none of this. He will not have a bar of it. There's no way. Basically what the Buddha does—or rather, what he refuses to do—is move beyond the empirical. He refuses to move beyond experience. He won't do it. In philosophical terms, the Buddha is a radical empiricist. He's interested only in the nature of human experience. Full stop. If something is beyond the range of our experience, he does not want to say anything about it. He does not say it exists. He does not say it does not exist.

And this is something that got forgotten in the later traditions. Often *anattā* is translated as "no self." But I think that's actually wrong. I think the correct translation is "not self." The difference is significant: if you say "no self," you're making a statement about what's out there or what's not out there. You're saying X does not exist. But the Buddha doesn't say that. He never actually says there isn't an *ātman*. What he says is, "This isn't *ātman*. This is not *ātman*. This experience here—that's not *ātman*. This experience over here—that's not *ātman*." But he never says there isn't one. He doesn't say there is one. He doesn't say there isn't one. He refuses to engage with any of that. He refuses to move beyond our actual felt experience in order to speculate about what might or might not exist. He will not make that move.

He explains this in a discourse called the *Sabba Sutta*—"Everything"—where he tells his students that he's going to teach them everything. In Pali, this is *sabba*. We can imagine them settling in for a long talk, but it's actually very brief. The Buddha says: "What is everything? Eye sensitivity and forms, ear sensitivity and sounds, nose sensitivity and smells, tongue sensitivity and tastes, body sensitivity and tangibles, mind sensitivity and phenomena. Whoever would say, 'I reject this everything and declare another'—in other words, for example, a transcendent *ātman*—if questioned on the foundation of his words, he could not explain and would become distressed. Why? Because it is beyond range."

So the Buddha is interested only in what lies within the range of human experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. Anything outside that range turns out to be bundles of words and concepts. If we're talking about the transcendent, the only experience we have of the transcendent are the bundles of concepts we use to talk about it. It turns out to be just blah, blah, blah.

When the Buddha is faced with a competing belief system—someone who says, "I reject this everything and declare another"—he says that if questioned on the foundation of his words, he could not explain. What the Buddha would typically do is investigate the foundation of those words. He would investigate the experience this belief is based on. What experience do you have of this? Of X, whatever it is you believe in? He would challenge the Brahmins, for example, who believed in the revelation of the Vedas: Have you actually experienced what the Vedas are talking about? What's the experience? That's a typical move he makes.

This is why he has no interest in the metaphysical *ātman*. Because even according to its adherents, this *ātman* is beyond the range of experience. So the Buddha just has no time for it. He's not rejecting it; he's simply refusing to engage with it. He's not even going to waste five minutes talking about it.

There's something else worth noting here. There was also a lot of ritual involved in how people were supposed to attain knowledge of the *ātman*. The Buddha's insistence on experience seems to cut through all of that, because certain people in society were claiming exclusive knowledge of how to get there. There's an aspect of power at play. The Buddha's stance emphasizing direct experience is actually empowering the practitioner versus empowering a certain social structure that was endemic in Brahmin society at that time.

When he turned to the left, he really was a bit of a lefty in terms of the politics of his time. He was a thoroughgoing republican. When he built his Sangha, he built it on republican principles—self-governing communities. This permeates through Buddhist beliefs and practices.

Now, a lot of this republicanism was lost because, either towards the end of his life or just after he died, a massive war broke out in the Northern Indian plain between Kosala and Magadha, the two new centralized tyrannical monarchies. They destroyed all the republics, including the Buddha's own Shakya Republic.

And so India became purely monarchical, tyrannical. And so a lot of these old Republican ideals died out. It survived in the Sangha in terms of the way they conducted their business, but for centuries, this aspect of the Buddha was kind of buried. But at the time, during his lifetime, it was really important. He saw this as very important. So, for example, when he died, he refused to name a successor. He said, "Look, it's up to you. You people figure it out. Here's the teaching. Go for it." He was committed to a Republican way—which by our standards would be Republican anarchist, a kind of community-based power structure. But that got swept away after he died.

Okay, let's look at the psychological atman.

The Buddha doesn't have any time for the metaphysical atman. He doesn't exactly say that it's wrong. He just won't go there. He won't say it's wrong. He won't say it's right. He will just probe into it.

So here we come to the psychological atman. Why does he reject psychological atman—the atman, the self that does lie within the realm of experience? Here atman, our sense of self, represents our fundamental point of reference. Atman, self, is the place from which we experience the world.

Right now I'm experiencing the world—an inner world of thought, feeling, and so on, an outer world of seeing, hearing, and so on. Where do I experience it from? From here. And this is where the self is. Atman is the place from which we experience the world as

well as the place from which we go out to the world. All of us have this sense: my world is out there. I experience the world from here, and this experience goes out there. This is the fundamental frame of reference. This is atman. This is self.

For example, we all have a deep sense that what's happening right now is happening to me. The "me" to which experiences happen is atman. Atman is the reference against which everything in our lives is measured. And here we're talking about the psychological atman. Does that make sense? Does your experience happen to you? This is the atman. This is the self.

This brings us to the problem of possession. Let's drop the philosophy and let me ask you this simple question: Does it make sense to you to think, to speak, or to act in terms of "this is my body," "these are my thoughts," "this is my decision"? Do you think in those terms on a normal day? I suspect so. I strongly suspect so.

Here we have atman, self, as the owner of this life. When the Buddha looks at how we actually experience this mysterious atman, for him it appears first as the drive to possess. It appears as the movement: "this is mine." We take possession of our experience. And from that possession, we construct a self as the owner and the controller, because owning and controlling go together.

It doesn't make any sense to own something but not have any control over it. Not really. If I am forced to make a decision, is it really mine? I'm not a lawyer, but I think the legal system wouldn't agree. And this is, I think, one reason why children are treated differently than adults.

So self and possession go together. The Buddha thinks we experience ātman very largely as the drive to possess. And this is what he calls taṇhā—literally "thirst," usually translated as craving, or we could simply call it drivenness. It's the urgent necessity to possess that matures as the movement "this is mine." I don't know if you've noticed, but this dharma talk is mine, for example.

Now craving—let me call it craving or drivenness—is characterized by a policy of aggressive expansion. Because when can we have enough of "mine"? Do we ever have enough? Economists certainly don't believe so. And if "mine" tends to expansion, so does ātman. And if "mine" tends to loss, then so does ātman. And given that possession is fundamentally insecure, then so is ātman, which makes it all very unsatisfactory.

And this brings us to the teaching of the five aggregates, which is one of the Buddha's basic schemas for analyzing the nature of human experience. I'm sure if you've been around the Buddhist traps for any period of time, you would have heard about these five aggregates. So let's have a look at them.

The five aggregates—or what Stephen Batchelor translates as the five bundles, approaching them from a different angle than we're approaching tonight—were introduced by the Buddha in his first teaching, his first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, "Turning the Dharma Wheel." They're introduced as the essence of the first truth, that of dukkha.

Dukkha is a technical term, traditionally translated as suffering, but it has a much wider range of meanings. In fact, there's no exact English equivalent to dukkha. Dukkha, in its essence, is the painful emptiness we find at the center of our being, the sense of chronic dis-ease that motivates us to make things better. So, for example, sitting around attending this particular dharma meeting—that's because of dukkha. Dukkha is the source of our motivation to undertake the practice, to undertake any activity that we think will improve our condition.

In his first discourse, the Buddha analyzes the nature of dukkha from the most superficial to the deepest. And he ends with this summing up. He says, "In summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha." So there's a very close relationship for the Buddha between the five aggregates and dukkha. We need to understand this connection. And that means we need to understand the link between clinging and the aggregates. The five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha.

So let's look at this idea of clinging, which again, if you've been around the Buddhist traps, I'm sure you've heard of—clinging or attachment. In Pāli this is the word upādāna. It's constructed from the word dāna—give, or giving, or gift—which of course we've talked about tonight. Giving dāna. It's the same word. So dāna is giving or gift. If you put the prefix ā in front of it—it's a long ā—this indicates "toward." So dāna is giving; the direction is this way. Ādāna is taking, bringing toward. And the upā at the beginning of upādāna indicates nearness, close touch, intimacy. So upādāna is taking or bringing to oneself, making one's own, appropriation.

Upādāna, usually translated as clinging or attachment, is the action of taking as one's own. And to give an example we've already discussed: remember how we asked if it makes sense to you to say, "This is my body"? The action of taking as mine—that is upādāna. Does that make sense?

"I guess I've just got a question: whose body is it then?"

That is a very good question, Evelyn. And I expect after a few years of intensive practice, you'll be able to answer it.

"Can you just tell us the answer?"

Okay. I'll give you a clue. The answer comes when the question itself dissolves.

When you realise it's completely pointless even asking the question.

"Excuse me, Patrick. You said the five aggregates *associated with clinging*. This may be just a misunderstanding on my part, but are there five aggregates that are *not* associated with clinging?"

This is one of many things that could be in this talk which are dropped because otherwise we'd be here all night. But yes, it's a really important point. In Pali, it's the *pañca upādāna khandha*. It's all one word, a compound. So *pañca* is five. *Upādāna khandha*.

Now, the Buddha says in summary, the five *upādāna* aggregates are *dukkha*. You notice what he did *not* say is the five aggregates are *dukkha*. If he said that, then we're stuffed. Sometimes people say, "Oh, the Buddha said life is suffering, everything is suffering." No, he didn't. If he said the five aggregates are suffering, then yes, sure, he would have said that, but he didn't. The five aggregates are fine. There's no problem with the five aggregates. The problem is the *upādāna*. It's the relationship to the aggregates that's the problem. And that's what we work on in the meditation practice. And this is what makes liberation possible. We can change our relationship. We can't change the world—it is what it is. But we can change our relationship to the world. And this is what he's getting at.

Let's look at this *khandha*, this aggregate business. In Pali, the word is *khandha*. It's usually translated as "aggregate." *Khandha* indicates a mass of something, and in particular, a great collection of something. So a pile of sand is a *khandha*—it's one big thing, a pile of sand consisting of many smaller units, each individual grain of sand. It's a great mass of grains of sand. And you notice in this example that what connects the parts—the individual grains of sand—to make the whole, these are only very loosely connected. In other words, a pile of sand is easily scattered. This is part of the implication of the word that the Buddha's audience would have registered, which of course we don't.

Taken as a collection, *khandha* can also indicate a category of something. So our pile of sand sits on a beach. Everything here that can be categorized as "sand"—both the pile itself and what surrounds the pile—is collected into the *khandha* category "beach." So the *rūpa khandha*, literally the body *khandha*, consists of the whole mass of experiences that taken together could be characterized as body, as physical.

So count the five as the five categories of experiences. Again you notice it's always about experience, always experience. The *pañca khandha*, the five aggregates, is a list consisting of body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. These are five categories, *khandha*, that each contain a great collection, *khandha*, of individual experiences that could be placed into one or more of these five categories.

Now, why are these five categories so important? Why are they so important that they merit their own list and they appear in the very first discourse? Because for the Buddha, they are the categories of experience that we appropriate as "this is mine." And why is appropriation important? Because it's an essential aspect of *ātman*, of self. In other words, for the Buddha, *ātman*, self, means something fundamentally different from what's being spoken of in the Upanishads. For him, self, *ātman*, is something we construct. It's not something already given.

In the Upanishads and in the other *ātman* traditions, self is the already-given primary. It's the already-given starting point from which the multiplicity of the world proceeds. And the Buddha sees things in reverse.

For him, what's given is the collection of individual events that make up the multiplicity of the world, which we appropriate in order to infer the existence of an Ātman. But this self, this Ātman for the Buddha, is not actually part of experience or directly given in experience. It's an assumption, an inference, a projection. It's a construction project. And what are the raw materials from which we construct this self? This is the list of the five aggregates that we appropriate, that we cling to, in order to construct a sense of self. Does that make sense? And this is why this particular list is important.

A question arose at this point: "I think I'm hearing about the Buddha constantly pointing to experience, and that the self is constructed. In my own very limited practice and reading, when I undertake inquiry or investigation in those other traditions—looking for 'what is this' or 'who is this,' the headless way, whatever—all of those different approaches seem to arrive at the same conclusion that self is constructed. So my confusion from tonight's talk is that experientially I get to the same place. But it seems you're saying they're not the same."

I'm saying the Buddha says they're not the same. That's the way he looks at it. So for you, it might be six of one, half a dozen of the other—the investigation in any of those traditions seems to arrive at the same conclusion that the self is a constructed concept. And if that's your experience, that is your experience, and nobody can argue with your experience. That approach is perfectly valid.

But here we're trying to work out where the Buddha is coming from. What's the problem that he sees? Whether one agrees with him or not, in my view, is neither here nor there. I mean, I'm not entirely sure that I agree with him. I'm not entirely sure I do either! I think I could happily practice in an Ātman tradition and get to the same place. But he sees certain dangers. He's flagging certain things. He's saying, "Wait a minute, hold on there. There's a problem here." And this problem is what we're beginning to uncover—what he thinks is the problem.

Another observation followed: "It seems a lot of the Neo-Advaita teachers, or however you want to frame them, have created systems where a lot of those problems do arise—particularly in terms of relationships between male teachers and female students. So it seems like there's a lot of wisdom in him challenging the structures around those traditions."

Although exactly the same problems occur in Buddhist traditions, Christian traditions—basically anywhere where there are blokes who think they're enlightened.

"It does seem to be more prevalent where there's somebody claiming guru status."

I think it's a question of power structures, and I think that's one of the things about the Buddha. When you look at the system he created, he tried to eliminate that as much as possible by having a much more republican system. And even in terms of the relationship of lay people to the monks and nuns—in traditional Buddhist societies, which are conditioned by centuries of monarchical and completely anti-democratic social structures, you might get this hierarchical thing where the job of the lay people is to obey orders. But you don't get that in the Buddha's teaching. In fact, if you look at

the role of the monks and the nuns, they have zero authority over lay people. None. A monk or a nun in relation to lay people can teach, admonish, advise, encourage, inspire, and so on, but cannot give orders. That's not part of their role.

But later on, as the traditions solidified, they created hierarchies, and you end up with monks owning vast estates with thousands of serfs. That's the political structures at work. And one of the interesting things about contemporary Western Buddhism is that we're coming at this without all those structures. So it gives us a different way of looking at things.

So, the raw materials from which we construct self are, for the Buddha, the five aggregates. Let's start with body, physical experience. Body gives our identity a sense of solidity as a physical form located in space. When appropriated, when clung to, physical experience becomes "my body," "my seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching"—and this is who I am.

Then we have feeling, *vedanā*. This is the affective aspect of experience, that which moves me or stimulates a response. I am moved to hold and become intimate with, to reject and distance myself from, or to ignore or be confused and doubtful about what to do. All of these responses are mine. And feeling tells me *how* I am—the distinctive pattern of feelings, responses, and emotions that govern my emotional life.

Then we get perception. This is the recognition or interpretation of any experience, what gives familiarity and meaning to an experience. Perception gives me *what* I am experiencing—my world within which I find myself. And notice how feeling and perception act together. Feeling provides our response to what is happening, and perception provides us with what we think is happening. The response comes from feeling; the what comes from perception.

Then we get choices. These are all choices and decisions to act, and these are appropriated to give me the sense that these are *my* decisions. I am the one who is making them, and I am responsible for them.

And then finally we get awareness, most intimate of all. When we appropriate awareness, this gives me the sense that I am the one who is aware of all this. All these experiences are part of my awareness, and they refer back to me.

Finally, notice that of these five aggregates, one is physical and the rest are psychological, because the construction project that builds self is essentially conceptual, psychological in its nature. Self is constructed by mind from what we directly encounter, and when it emerges to the surface, it emerges as a view—*diṭṭhi* in Pali—and particularly the view of the reality of the person, what's called *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. The aggregates are what we cling to in order to construct a self living at the centre of his or her world.

Now, once we arrive here, we can move on to what the problem is from the Buddha's perspective. Because you notice that from his perspective, these five aggregates, these five *khandhas*, are closely associated with *dukkha*. He says, "In summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are *dukkha*," or "the five appropriated aggregates are *dukkha*."

This is really important, because if we look at the Buddha's project, what is it? His project is: how do we cultivate a way of life without *dukkha*? And this is why he's so interested in self—because he sees that our construction of self gets in the way of living without *dukkha*. But his focus is the cessation of *dukkha*. He'll talk about self and he'll talk about not-self, but only to get to somewhere else.

In one discourse, the Simile of the Snake in Majjhima 22, he talks about how our view of self plays out in all sorts of ways. But then he gets down to what he's really interested in. He says, "Previously and now, what I teach is *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*." That's it.

The Buddha rejects the teaching of self because for him, self and possession go together—particularly a psychological self—and possession causes *dukkha*. That's the problem for him. So if we want our *dukkha* to cease, then we have to stop taking as ours what is not ours. In other words, we have to stop appropriating, stop clinging.

The five aggregates are important because this is what we appropriate as "mine," and we use them to construct an identity that we take to be fundamentally real, against which everything is measured. Because for the Buddha, the problem is not that we construct an identity. We have to construct an identity—otherwise we can't function. And the Buddha constructed an identity. He knew precisely who he was, and he made sure that the people around him knew it.

But he recognized this identity as essentially a convenience. It's a concept, or a network of concepts, that helped him get through the day and function well. He did not take this self as the fundamental reality and then try to bend the world to accommodate it. Instead, he took the opposite approach: he adapted his self to be able to work within the changing conditions of the world.

Does that make sense? And it's one of the problems with translating *anattā* as "no self," because then it gets confusing. Well, does it mean no identity? How do I function without an identity? The answer is, we can't. But we don't take this identity as the absolute, primary, already given reality and bend the world to it—which will fail. Rather, we ground ourselves in the world and adapt the identity to be able to surf the conditions.

So the Buddha is not interested in the doctrine of *ātman* that he inherited because this doctrine is just a bundle of concepts referring to something beyond the world of experience. And all he's interested in is experience itself. So he rejects the metaphysical *ātman* that he was trained in. But more than that, he feels that any concept we have of *ātman*, of self, any way we have of substantiating it in the world, is bound up with drivenness and pain.

And this is because of the deep ties between "this is mine" and "I am this"—and finally emerging as the view, "this is my self." So we hold on to possessions in order to maintain an identity, and as our possessions crumble, so does our identity, and all of

this creates pain. The Buddha is trying to cut through all this philosophical stuff and get down to what's actually important. Since from his point of view, holding to our instinctive view of self necessarily causes pain, then drop it.

We get lost in our concepts about self and the drives that give it life because it turns out that that's all that *ātman*, that self, is—it's a bundle of concepts and drives. From the Buddha's perspective, this self that everybody seems so concerned with has no real basis in experience and is actually the source of our troubles. And on the other hand, since self is just a bundle of concepts and drives, it provides an entry into the Buddha's examination of experience. So you believe in this self—what's your experience of it? And then the inquiry might move on to: does having a belief in this self help you cultivate the wholesome and abandon the unwholesome? Or does it get in the way, because at some point it encourages clinging to whatever you identify as self?

So this is where he's getting at with his rejection of self and the promotion of the doctrine of not-self.

CHAPTER 117

The Freedom and The Fall

Patrick Kearney · 1h03

> *In this penetrating exploration of anattā (not-self), Patrick Kearney examines the Buddha's radical departure from the Upaniṣadic tradition of Ātman. Drawing on the Yavakalāpī Sutta (SN 35.248), he illuminates how we are constantly 'threshed' by sense experience, with a seventh threshing added when we project ourselves into future existence through the self-making process. The talk unpacks how the psychological self operates through upādāna (appropriation) and taṇhā (craving), creating an illusion of control that inevitably generates dukkha.*
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> *Kearney then guides practitioners through the stages of insight meditation in the Mahāsī tradition, showing how direct awareness of physical and mental phenomena progressively undermines habitual perceptions of self. As mindfulness matures, the practitioner witnesses arising and passing away with increasing clarity, eventually confronting the groundlessness of experience. This encounter with impermanence opens into an existential anxiety—the perception that there is no stable ground beneath experience.*
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> *The talk's central insight emerges in the resolution of this apparent crisis: when we fully recognize that groundlessness itself is groundless, fear loses its foundation. What felt like terrifying free fall reveals itself as freedom when we realize there is nothing to fall against. This perception of not-self culminates in equanimity—a clear, balanced awareness where meditation proceeds effortlessly and life becomes remarkably simple. Kearney concludes by describing how this maturation can lead to the dhammacakkhu (vision of Dhamma), the first stage of awakening where the view of self is fundamentally and irreversibly weakened.*

I just consented to being recorded. Does this mean that Google and the Pentagon will hear this talk?

No, not necessarily. It might have other things to do, but you're being recorded now for posterity on our YouTube channel, Patrick.

This is very dodgy, very worrying. Anyway, we better begin.

I call the talk "The Freedom and the Fall," although really this comes in at the end, but maybe it might make sense.

Let's review what we did last time. We were talking about self and not-self. The Buddha taught not-self, or *anattā* in Pali, or in Sanskrit, *anātman*. Now, this was a shock at the time because he was trained in the teaching of *ātman*, of self. He would have been trained in the Upanishadic tradition where *ātman* is absolutely central. But then when he started to teach, he taught not-*ātman*, which was quite a radical departure.

When we talk about this *ātman* tradition, to get a sense of the context of what he's talking about, there are two aspects of *ātman* in the tradition of the Upanishads: the metaphysical or transcendent *ātman*, and the psychological *ātman*.

The metaphysical *ātman* is the transcendent One with a capital O—the One who is, or what is, behind all experience, which makes experience itself possible. There is only one *ātman* in this sense.

Then we have the psychological *ātman*. This is the person who is the one who experiences, the one to whom things are happening, the one to whom this experience refers. So we're in a Zoom meeting, there's something going on, but something is happening to someone. This is the *ātman*, the psychological *ātman*, the psychological self. This is the one to whom this experience refers, the owner of the experience, and the agent who makes the decisions. Who was it who decided to come to this talk? Who is it who is deciding to stick around for a while? It's the *ātman*. This is the psychological *ātman*.

Now, this was the aspect of *ātman* that the Buddha was focused on. He didn't have time for the metaphysical *ātman*, but his focus was on the psychological *ātman*. We talked about this by introducing the question: to what extent does it make sense to think, to speak, or to act in terms of—for example—"this is my body" or "these are my decisions"? If it makes sense to speak like that, to think like that, to perceive like that, to act like that, this is *ātman*. This is the manifestation of a relationship to *ātman*.

As we talked about last time, possession is inherent to *ātman*, to self. For the Buddha, possession is based on what he calls *upādāna*. I usually translate it as clinging or attachment—perhaps more accurately, appropriation. *Upādāna* refers to taking as one's own. So *ātman*—for example, "my body"—means I'm taking an experience of physicality and taking it as my own. "These thoughts"—I'm taking these thoughts as my own. This is appropriation, this is *upādāna*.

Appropriation is always tied up with craving, what the Buddha calls *taṇhā*—literally "thirst," but usually translated as craving; it could be translated as grasping. Appropriation, grasping, and craving are intimately entwined with *ātman*. What appropriation

does, its function in a sense, is to give us the illusion of control. If I'm convinced that this is mine, at the back of it is the sense of "Well, I'm in charge." Does it make sense to claim to own something that we do not control? No, it doesn't make any sense at all.

So at the center of self—the psychological self, which is the Buddha's main focus—is appropriation and the effort to control one's world. The Buddha would suggest that this causes pain. Don't do it, because his focus is the cessation of *dukkha*, the cessation of pain. He thinks the perception of self is necessarily bound up with pain for these reasons. So what he wants to do is undermine it.

Does that make any sense? Any questions thus far? So far we're just revising what we did last week.

Shall we move on? Let's look at how the Buddha talks about the perception of self. I recently discovered this very interesting sutta, this discourse—the *Yavakalāpī Sutta*, "The Sheaf of Barley." The translation is based on Sujato's translation on Sutta Central, and I've modified it. The Buddha begins with this idea of a sheaf of barley.

He says, "Suppose a sheaf of barley was placed at a crossroads. Then six people come with flails and start threshing this sheaf of barley, so it is thoroughly threshed by those six flails."

Now, a flail is a stick with a hard piece of wood attached, and threshing is the process of bashing the harvest to separate out the seed from everything else. It's a bashing process that brings out what you're looking for—the seed—by separating things out.

"And then a seventh person comes..." But wait—why six people? Why not five? Why not twelve?

Six senses. Exactly. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. These are bashing away, thrashing away at the sheaf of barley. So at this point, things are pretty bad for the barley.

But then the Buddha says, "And then a seventh person comes with a flail and gives the sheaf of barley a seventh threshing. That sheaf of barley is even more thoroughly threshed." By the way, in English the verb "to thresh" originates from the same word as "to thrash." So the seventh one—this is getting pretty extreme. What is going on here?

The Buddha explains: "In the same way, an ordinary untrained person"—this is the average person—"is struck in the eye by both pleasant and unpleasant sights. They're struck in the ear, in the nose, in the tongue, in the body, in the mind, by both pleasant and unpleasant phenomena."

So we're being bombarded all the time by sense data, which we recognize as "Oh, I like this" or "Oh, I don't like that." This is the threshing. That's the six threshings.

And then the Buddha adds: "If that ordinary untrained person is committed to future continued existence, that foolish person is even more thoroughly struck, like that sheaf of barley threshed by the seventh person."

Now, "committed to future continued existence"—this is usually translated in terms of rebirth, like "One day I'll die, but then I'll be reborn." But when you look at what the Buddha is actually saying, he doesn't say that. He says basically "continued becoming in the future." He doesn't say it's beyond one life. He just says the future.

So my situation as an ordinary person is already pretty bad—I'm being bombarded all the time by these six flails. But I add an extra one if I have a preoccupation with continued existence in the future. In other words, if I want to project this into the future. And it's pretty obvious that at this point we're talking about self.

Let me inquire: do any of you have any sense of projecting your experience into the future? Does anybody anticipate waking up tomorrow morning and continuing their business tomorrow that they began today? And what makes it possible for that to make any sense? It's the sense of self. This is what the Buddha is getting at. He doesn't mention the sense of self explicitly, but this is what he's talking about.

And it's linked to our determination to remain the same over time—the sense that the one who is experiencing this right now will be the same as the one who will experience something else later. Survival over time is a basic indicator of an identity, an ātman in the psychological sense. This is what the Buddha is getting at in this discourse.

Then he goes on to tell a story.

Once upon a time, a battle was fought between the gods and the demons. Vepacitti, lord of demons, addressed the demons. (The "demon" here translates asura—they're the anti-gods, as it were. The suras and the asuras, the gods and the anti-gods. These words come via Sanskrit from Iran, but in Iran it's the opposite: the asura is the god and the sura is the demon. But we have this sense of devas, beings of light and harmony, and then their opposite—the demons.)

So the lord of the demons, Vepacitti, addresses the demons: "If the demons defeat the gods in this battle, bind Sakka, lord of gods, by his limbs and neck and bring him to my presence in the city of demons."

Meanwhile, Sakka, lord of gods, addressed the gods of the Thirty-Three: "If the gods defeat the demons in this battle, bind Vepacitti by his limbs and neck and bring him to my presence in Sudhamma, hall of the gods."

If you're getting a sense of two football teams lining up against each other, I think you're getting the feel for what's going on here.

Now, in that battle, the gods won and the demons lost. So the gods of the 33 bound Vepacitti by his limbs and neck and brought him into Sakka's presence in Sudhamma, hall of the gods. So far, all is happening according to Vedic tribal culture—constant warfare, humiliation for the defeated.

And there Vepacitti remained, bound by his limbs and neck. That is, until it seemed to him that it's the gods who are principled while the demons are unprincipled. "Now I belong here in the city of the gods." Then he found himself liberated from the bonds on his limbs and neck. He entertained himself, supplied and provided with the five kinds of heavenly sensual stimulation.

By the way, those of you who are inclined towards belief in rebirth and thinking of heading off to heaven—the Indian Buddhist heavens are much more interesting than the Christian heaven. In the Christian heaven, first of all, there's only one of them, which is a bit crowded. And apparently people don't do much; they hang about in white sheets and sing hymns. But if you go to one of these Indian Buddhist heavens, you are endowed with the five heavenly sensual pleasures, stimulations. So it's basically party time.

So Vepacitti changes his mind about the situation and suddenly he's liberated and having a good time. But when it seemed to him that the demons are principled and the gods unprincipled—"Now I will go over there to the city of the demons"—he found himself bound by his limbs and neck and the five kinds of heavenly sensual stimulation disappeared.

That's how subtly Vepacitti was bound. You get a sense that the devas, the gods, are very subtle in the way they imprison people. No crude dungeons here. But the sutta adds that the bonds of Mara are even more subtle than that.

Now, Mara is a functional equivalent of the devil. But unlike the devil, he's not demonic in the sense that he's not lord of a hell realm. He's actually lord of a heaven realm. He's a deva, a god. But he's a god with a rather bizarre obsession: he likes to keep track of beings whom he regards as underneath him, which includes us. He tracks people through their bodies, but above all through their citta, their hearts and minds.

The problem is that it's very difficult for him to get a hold on practitioners, and it's impossible for him to get a hold on an awakened one. So he's constantly frustrated by this practice and enlightenment business, constantly trying to persuade practitioners not to be practitioners. And if you look at the suttas where Mara turns up as the tempter, his voice is the voice of good common sense. It's like, "Why on earth are you doing this to yourself? Why don't you go home, live a comfortable life? Look, if you want to support Buddhism, that's great—give lots of dana to all these monks and meditators, and it'll be wonderful for you. Why are you putting yourself through that?" So he's a very subtle tempter.

Mara refers to death—death and limitation. Death here being what happens when we don't do the practice, don't attain some measure of awakening. The Buddha says, "But the bonds of Mara are even more subtle than that. When we conceptualize, we are bound by Mara. When we do not conceptualize, we are free from the wicked one."

Conceptualizing is the verb *mañ*ñ*ati*, the noun *mañ*ñ*ana*. It's a technical term. *Man* refers to mind, and it's translated in different ways. Some people translate it as "thinking," but I think that's pretty inadequate here. Let's have a look at what the Buddha's getting at.

First of all, the Buddha's not talking about *ātman*. He's not talking about self. But it seems pretty obvious that the bonds of Mara are the bonds of ātman. The message is that when perception changes, everything changes. When our minds change, our lives change.

I think we've all experienced this. Meditators will recognize it—like if you've ever done a meditation retreat and one day you step out of the hall and look around, and you realize...

What's going on? The sun is sunny and the tree's a tree and the breeze is breezy and there's no problem. I'm sure I had a problem, but I can't remember what it is. It's just a shift in perception. Or sometimes you might have an argument with someone and then at some point there's a kind of click, a shift in perception. Oh, there's no conflict anymore.

So when the Buddha's talking about self, he's talking about something that binds us, something that causes dukkha. But at the same time, it's something created by the activity of the mind, which is inherently unstable—and it can go click and shift in a moment.

Then the Buddha talks about the forms of conceptualizing. These are forms of conceptualizing: "I am" is a conceptualization. "I am this." "I will be." "I will not be." And so on. He can recognize these are the movements of self. Conceptualizing is a disease, a boil, a dart—in other words, it's painful. So you should train yourselves like this: "We will live with a heart that does not conceptualize."

Basically what he's saying is that what we think is going on—our perceptions, the way we see the world—perceptions are based on concepts and the drives that fuel concepts. These are piled on top of the actual experience. We have the actual experience of the six senses, the six sensitivities. Now, these are difficult enough, and then we pile something on top—this is the seventh threshing. When we do that, we separate ourselves from the felt actuality of this present experience. We catapult out of it into a world created by mind and the drivenness that mind feels and expresses. So we create a world characterized by separation and by pain. And this is the self project. This is the project of creating atman, the self.

So what to do? Now we're going to talk about practicing not-self. Any questions thus far?

So how does this work out in terms of practice? The context I'm speaking of here is the Mahasi lineage of mindfulness meditation or insight meditation, which is all about cultivating ñāṇa. Ñāṇa means understanding—developing a different understanding of our experience. We're going to go briefly through this process, but see how it culminates in the perception of not-self.

If we're meditating, what happens is we're given a meditation object. This is the standard thing. "Okay, I want you to sit here for half an hour. Try not to move and just focus on your breathing." Or "Just do a body scan," like in MBSR. Those are the two basic ones. Probably breathing is the most common meditation object.

So let's say it's breathing. "Okay, I want you to sit here for half an hour and just focus on the breathing. Now, when you find yourself thinking blah, blah, blah, blah, just drop it. Go back to the breathing. And when you think, 'Oh my God, my leg hurts, I can't do this anymore,' just drop it. Go back to the breathing." You probably recognize this is a pretty basic meditation method.

Now, what are we doing if we do this? Well, basically what we're doing is getting in touch with the elemental qualities of experience, in particular via the body. We're training ourselves to directly aware the specifics of this experience right now. In the Mahasi

lineage, the verb they use to directly aware is "to note." But essentially, it's to aware, and it's active. It's like, "What's this? Be aware of this." And we usually begin with body—let's say breathing.

So what have I got? I've got this in-breath. Then what happens? Oh, I've got this out-breath. What happens after that? Ah, this in-breath. Ah, that's right, this out-breath. And so on.

Now, at some point we're distracted. In the Mahasi approach, when we realize we're distracted, we directly aware the distraction. Oh, I'm thinking—okay, got it. Come back to the breath. Oh, it's painful. So what's the actual sensation? Oh, it's sharp and hard—okay, got it. Now come back to the breath.

What we're doing is we're trying to stay at the ground level of experience, and in particular physical experience. Now, theoretically it doesn't have to be physical experience, but it's much easier when we're working with the body, so most people do. And as we do this, our clarity of engagement with the immediacy of physical experience develops. As that develops, we start to forget our habitual perceptions and responses. Mindfulness grows. We get a clearer sense of what's going on right now, and our habitual reactions and perceptions start to fade into the background.

Now, where do we find ātman, self? We find it most obviously in these habitual reactions and perceptions. That's where it's obvious to us.

The way the Buddha, particularly the way classical Theravāda picks up this and talks about this process—classical Theravāda describes it in terms of the activity of knowing or awareing. So I'm awareing, I'm directly awareing in-breath, out-breath. And the flip side: that which is known or awared. So if I'm being aware of the breathing, then I've got two things happening. One is the awareness, and the other is the breathing.

When we work with the body, we get to know the qualities of physical experience—what the Buddha calls the elements. It's hardness and softness. Can anybody feel hardness in the body right now? Anybody feel softness? It's lightness and heaviness. It's movement and stillness, and so on. We're getting to know the elemental qualities of the body as they manifest in the present.

And we're also getting to know the qualities of awareing itself, experiencing itself. For example, we become familiar with awareness—what the Buddha calls vijñāna. We see how awareness moves towards its object; this is manasikāra, attention. We see the flavor of experience—sometimes it's pleasant, sometimes it's painful, sometimes nothing much; this is vedanā, feeling. We see how we recognize an experience as something

familiar or unfamiliar. So I know what this is—this is the in-breath. Now something's happening. What is this exactly? Not sure. Oh, that's what it is. This is saññā, perception.

These are psychological activities. We're getting to see physical elemental qualities and the elemental qualities of the process of experiencing itself. And when we do that, when we're keeping with the felt actuality of experiencing, there's no room for our habitual perceptions to arise. They're just pushed out of the way. For as long as our mindfulness is unbroken, we are not conceptualizing worlds and getting lost in them.

So these habitual perceptions are held at bay by mindfulness. You can feel when you're doing this—there's an effort involved. You've got to stay with the experience. No, no, don't get caught up. Stay with the in-breath.

What is happening is we are being introduced to a new way of viewing the world, a way that we weren't particularly familiar with. Some people are familiar with it—for example, I think people who play sports are familiar with this, and that's one of the reasons why people like sports.

Now, this new way of viewing the world is very shaky, because as soon as we relax our effort, as soon as we forget our mindfulness—bang, habit kicks in and the self is back. So we've got to start again. It's very shaky. But something new is being introduced, and the longer the practice continues, the stronger and more familiar this new perception becomes. This, for the classical Theravāda, is the beginning of insight.

Any questions? Okay.

We're studying the flow of experience—material, mental, physical, psychological. And we're getting to see that experience is a whole series of phenomena, of events that come and go. An in-breath begins, it dances, and it ends. Then a thought begins, dances, and ends. A physical sensation begins, dances, and then ends. These are events, phenomena coming and going.

We begin to recognize that they come and go according to certain patterns. They come and go according to conditions. So we begin to see what the Buddha calls *paṭicca samuppāda*, dependent arising. And we see it in different ways.

For example, we see that mind conditions body. Without awareness, there's no physical experience. For there to be an experience of my breathing, there has to be the awareness of it. Has anybody ever had the experience where they forget that they're breathing? You figure you must have been breathing because you're alive, but you haven't actually noticed it for the past five minutes, or thirty minutes. Have you ever

had that kind of experience? So we have a physical process going on—breathing—but we don't have the awareness of it, which means the experience of breathing drops away. Mind conditions body. You've got to have awareness to have an experience.

Another example, which the Mahasi teachers—the Burmese teachers—really emphasize when they teach this practice, is intention, choice, decision. Without an intention to move, there can be no movement. I'm waving my hand about to emphasize various points. There has to be an intention, a decision, for me to move my hand—which is mind. And if there isn't, there's no movement. Mind conditions body.

But equally, body conditions mind. If there was no visual object to see, there'd be no awareness of the visual object. Or if I see something, that seeing, that physical experience, conditions a whole series of thoughts and responses. "Well, that's nice. I like that. How long has that been here? I haven't noticed that before. Who does that belong to?" Body conditions mind. Mind conditions body.

When painful thoughts arise, the body reacts by stressing, by patterns of tension. When pleasant thoughts arise, the body relaxes. Mind conditions body.

Mind conditions mind. I'm meditating and there's an initial distracting thought that pops up in the mind. Then mind seizes upon this and creates a storyline. Mind is conditioning mind.

And body conditions body. What appears to be one movement of the body, when we see it in detail, we see is actually a whole series of movements, and each movement conditions the next.

So we're starting to see not simply physical and psychological phenomena, but we're starting to see the connections between them. In the roughest sense, we're seeing the connections between body and mind, mind and body, body and body, mind and mind. And as we do this, we are also cultivating the perception of impermanence, because when we actually start to track phenomena coming and going, what we're seeing is change.

The perception of impermanence is central to opening up insight. Remember, we talked about how self is characterized by this sense of a projection into the future, sameness through time. The opposite perception is impermanence, is change. It isn't the same through time. And this becomes clear to meditators as they practice. The practice doesn't stay the same. It changes. And if you're practicing for insight, for *ñāṇa*, for understanding, you start to get interested in this.

You start to notice that as attention becomes sharp, you might see in particular the moment that an experience begins, although you might not notice when it ends. A very common experience—people will say, "My attention is drawn to experience A, and then I'm examining this, and my attention is then drawn to something else, to experience B." Now A hasn't stopped; it's just that I go from here—bang—to there, or something else is happening. And then I realize, "Oh no, there's something else happening," so I go from B to C.

And so on. I'm seeing the beginning of an experience. Oh, what's that? I'm seeing something of the middle. Oh yes, that's what it's doing. But I'm not noticing the end. Rather, I'm saying, oh, something else has just begun. And this characterizes this very early level of insight into change, into impermanence.

Along with this, there can begin an inferential understanding. So far, there's been no conceptualization. But then there's room for a kind of conceptualization, though it's a different kind of conceptualization. It's an inference, because what we're doing is looking at the structure of experience. And then it begins to dawn on us that actually, if this is the way experience is structured, well, it's always like this. These processes that I'm seeing now, they must have been happening in the past. And surely they're going to happen in the future.

With this, the perception of the permanence of the self is being challenged. The self is under some slight degree of challenge. On the one hand, it's being held back because I'm so focused on just tracking the actual experience. But on the other hand, because what I'm seeing is the constant change of experience, then the assumption of the stability, the permanence of self is beginning to be challenged. It might be very slight. Some people get a clear sense of this. Some people really get it very early. Other people don't. It varies hugely.

One of my teachers in Burma, Sayadaw Ujanaka, liked to tell us a story about when he went to the US and ran a retreat. This was in the South, a very conservative part of the country. There was one man who had an experience of—let me see if I can remember exactly what it was—essentially that there's just the in-breath and the out-breath and the knowing of it. Basically that's what there is. But it hit him so hard. He had spent his life as a devout Christian. And at that point, he abandoned Christianity. Bang, forever. Came to Sayadaw Ujanaka—he was a Buddhist. No more Christianity. Went off to Burma, did intensive practice. And that's all it took. Just: wait a minute, what's going on here? There's the breath coming and going. And there's the awareness of the breath. That's all there is. Bang. He had this profound entry into not-self.

Now, that's very unusual. For most people, they wouldn't notice anything like that degree. But you can see that something is beginning to happen. There's a subversion going on, even if the meditator is completely unaware of it. It's happening.

So the practice develops, and the perception of impermanence also develops. Attention becomes sharper, more subtle. The practitioner is seeing more of the change process, seeing the beginning, the middle, and the end of the experiences that are happening. Seeing the complete process of something arising, manifesting, ceasing. Arise, manifest, cease. And this starts to open up the perceptions of dukkha and anatta, of pain and not-self.

Again, the degree, the extent to which these perceptions become noticeable depends hugely on the individual. For some people, they become obvious, but for others, they don't. For example, some practitioners at this point will feel very painful sensations in the body—not the usual aches and pains you get when you begin to meditate. They've gotten over that. The practice is developing, and suddenly there are acutely unpleasant painful sensations arising with no apparent physical reason for them. Some people have disturbing images come up in their meditations, disturbing thoughts or images. Some people become extremely irritable for no apparent reason. And all of these are indications that the perception of dukkha, of pain, is starting to be aroused.

But others just sail right through this and nothing much happens. There are enormous individual differences.

Then the perception of impermanence continues to mature, and change starts to be seen as moving faster and faster. Again, the complete cycle becomes very clear—arising, manifestation, cessation—with body and mind both affected. The body and mind both seem very light. Posture becomes easy. Pain usually disappears at this point. The mind is very clear. Faith gets very strong—confidence in the practice, in the dharma. If a person is a Buddhist, then faith in Buddhism will become really strong at this point. If a person is not a Buddhist, faith can arise in other ways, like you're meditating away and you think, "Wow, this is really, really good. I've got to tell my friends about this." This is faith arising, confidence.

And everything at this stage is a sweet spot. People enjoy this one. It's known as udayabbaya ñāṇa, the understanding of arising and cessation, things coming and going. People have a good time at this point. Some people think they're enlightened when it's really strong. And then they discover their error, because then there's a turn. And this is bound up with the nature of impermanence.

When we say that things are impermanent, we say that they begin, they endure, and then they end. And what view of impermanence we have changes depending on what perspective our minds take as our attention and awareness shifts. Remember Vepacitti—he changed his mind about his situation, bang, "Oh, it's great." And then he changed his mind again, "Oh, I'm caught." When the Buddha was talking about the way insight develops, he was talking about how subtle it is, that a perception can just go click and everything is different. This is one of the reasons why you can't depend on a particular set of experiences always happening when you meditate. Because the more we do the practice, the more the perspective our minds are taking on experience is changing. And with that, everything changes.

Now here, when our perception of impermanence matures, what the mind focuses on, what the mind notices predominantly, is the ending of things, the disappearance of things. We talked about this in a previous talk about dukkha. Here is where the perception of dukkha starts to become predominant. And you get different people who report different things. Sometimes people will say that they feel like they're on the edge of a bottomless abyss, on the edge of a cliff. Or they're falling into it. Or they have a sense of the groundlessness of experience. It's just coming and going, and what's really there? What's underneath all this? Nothing. What lies beneath? Nothing.

This can open up into an existential anxiety or even a dread, depending on whether it's strong or relatively weak. It could be just an anxious feeling coming up. If we're familiar with anxiety, it might be a very familiar anxiety—"Oh yeah, I recognize this." Or it might be a lot stronger. But what's happening deep in the citta, in the heart, is this sense of: well, if all there is, is changing mental and physical phenomena, what's underneath? And if there isn't anything, what happens to me? And what's all this about?

At this point, it might be a weak aspect. This understanding can take the form of the meditator apparently losing their ability to focus on anything. So suddenly, the practice that was going well—samādhi, concentration, faith, confidence, lightness, and so on and so forth—and then suddenly I can't do it anymore. I try to focus on something, and the attention just slides off. It's like trying to hold something, and as soon as you try to grasp it, it slips out of your hand. This is one form in which this perception of the cessation of things can manifest.

In a stronger form, it can be like falling into a black hole. Wherever you look, there's only blackness. Again, there's a whole range of possibilities of actual symptoms, but what will emerge is some kind of fear or anxiety. In a strong form, this can manifest as panic. In a weak form, it can be just a sense of existential unease, a sense of nothing go-

ing right, of generalized anxiety. There might be a felt sense that I'm not in control of my life. And you can see the connection with the psychological ātma. It's the self that's the controller. So with this sense of dukkha, the sense of self is being challenged.

So what we've got is this: with the understanding of change, an understanding of dukkha develops. And with the understanding of change and dukkha, an understanding of not-self develops. But it can be like an underground stream that we tend not to notice, partly because it's very subtle. Not-self is an absence. Change is something definite. Pain, unsatisfactoriness—these are something definite. But not-self isn't something definite. It's an absence. So it's much more subtle, and it can be much harder to actually get a sense of, "Oh, that's what's going on." In fact, one might at some point realize, "Oh, I've been experiencing not-self for some time now. I just didn't notice it." That can easily happen.

So this felt sense of the absence of control is painful, but it's also an indicator of not-self. It becomes clear that things come and go according to conditions that are not under anyone's control. They're certainly not under my control. They just move according to nature. This sense of being in the hands of nature grows stronger. Some people find this comforting and can relax in it. Other people find it threatening. Again, the response varies from person to person and time to time.

Another way in which the understanding of not-self emerges in the perception of pain is through the very strange realization that this anxiety that I have, this fear, is real, but it's not personal. When I'm mindful, I realize that there's something wrong here, but there's no one who is suffering wrongness. There's danger here, but there's no one who is in danger. It's like watching a scary movie. Fear arises, but even as the fear is present, there's also the understanding that the situation is not real. And so fundamentally, the fear is not grounded. There's no need to fear the fear.

This sense of groundlessness—we enter into the perception of pain, of dukkha, through recognizing groundlessness through change. And it's painful. But not-self emerges here in our perception that this groundlessness is itself groundless. Our fear is equally groundless.

Here we're beginning to get a sense of the freedom and the fall. Some people say that they have an experience like free fall—it's like they're falling into something, falling into the abyss. But if I'm falling into something, what exactly is the problem? Well, the problem is I fall and at some point, splat. And that's why I'm fearful. But what if we recognize there's no ground? There's nowhere to go splat. When the citta at a deep level—and this is deeper than thinking about it—when the citta starts to recognize that, then the fall, the free fall, the fall drops away, and what we've got is the free.

This is how we move through impermanence and dukkha into not-self.

As the practice matures, what's happening in the mind, in the heart, through this practice over time is that mindfulness is getting stronger and stronger and more continuous. And along with that, equanimity develops. Equanimity is essentially balance. The mind becomes very strong, very clear, very sharp, and very balanced. When the balance sets in, all forms of pain fade away. Sometimes they just disappear—bang, they're gone. Sometimes they just fade. Or sometimes there's just a sense of them being very minimal, just in the background. There's very little or no sense of mental disturbance.

The other thing about this stage—and here not-self is becoming predominant—is that you get a sense of the meditation carrying on by itself. There's very little or no conscious effort on the meditator's part. She finds that she can sit and walk, meditate for long periods of time. Some people find they don't need much sleep at this stage.

Also, the practice really settles in the sense that it becomes very normal, very unspectacular. The attention just rests naturally on a few experiences and stays there for a period of time. We might have been having quite interesting experiences of impermanence and dukkha and this and that, but at this point we're just coming back to in-breath, out-breath, in-breath. It's just happening by itself, and it's quite interesting, and nothing else needs to happen, really.

So these are all indicators of equanimity, and equanimity is an indicator that the mind is perceiving not-self. Things can get very interesting at this point. The meditator may feel that they understand the practice as if for the first time. It's like, "I never realized it was this simple." And this attitude of clarity and simplicity carries over into everything else. Life itself becomes much more simple, and things become much clearer and more obvious. We start to wonder, how on earth did I ever get myself tangled up in these enormous problems which exist only in my mind?

So at this point, everything is fundamentally okay. When you hear the dharma rhetoric of "I'm okay, you're okay," and so on, this is actually what they're talking about—the experience of equanimity. And the experience of equanimity is the indicator of the perception of not-self.

At this stage in the practice, the meditator is very difficult to upset. Remember how we talked about how sometimes you might be meditating and become very sensitive and very irritable? If you go to a residential retreat, there are all these rules about correct behavior, and it's basically about not disturbing the meditators because they're really sensitive. But at this point, you're not really sensitive. It's like, "Oh yeah, him. This

is the guy who just cannot figure out how to close the door quietly and how to walk quietly across the meditation hall. That's interesting. In-breath, out-breath. What to do? Equanimity." And it's there because of the perception of not-self.

You notice that the perception of not-self isn't necessarily anything spectacular. It's just like, "Oh, that's odd. This guy doesn't irritate me anymore." That might be all it is. It's because it's part of nature—it's not the big revelation of Buddha speaks. There can be strong experiences, but equanimity can be very, very normal.

If you find yourself in this stage, you have to be careful about effort because it's very easy to stop making effort when everything's cruising along on its own. The later Theravada tradition, looking at equanimity and analyzing it, asked the question: what's the near enemy of equanimity? In other words, what can trip it up? And the answer is indifference.

So the irritating meditator bangs the door and stomps through the meditation hall. In a state of equanimity, you're fully aware of this, but it's okay. But equally, it might be okay because you've become indifferent. "I don't care." Indifference is not equanimity. For a start, indifference is a dull state of mind. Equanimity is very clear and sharp. But if I get into cruise mode, and if I drop the commitment—the path factor of right effort—then the whole thing starts to crumble. I don't notice it crumbling, and the equanimity actually segues into indifference. By the time I realize that I've stuffed it up, I've already crashed and burned. I've got to start all over again, which is really frustrating.

So at this point, you've really got to be careful about the quality of effort—not too much, that'll kill it, that'll smother it, but not too little either.

This is where not-self opens up. We're in free fall, but we realize there's nothing to fall onto. Because if there's no ground, there's nothing to fall against, and so nothing to fear. Free fall becomes free. And this is the freedom of not-self.

Now the doctrine of Ātman—both the metaphysical Ātman and the psychological Ātman—is all about giving a foundation for us and our world. We construct a self because we need a ground. We need something to refer to, to measure against.

But when we go through the terror of groundlessness and emerge on the other side, we finally recognize that not only can we not find a ground—there isn't one. And in fact, we don't need one. The universe itself provides the ground. I don't need to do it. It's already happening.

This is where insight meditation, or mindfulness meditation, is designed to bring us —to this point, to stay with this perception as long as possible. And this matures the citta, like the awakening factors mature naturally. There's a kind of ripening process, and at some point the penny drops and we realize nibbāna itself. The view of self, the view of "I am," "I am this," drops away. And it never returns in quite the same way. We cannot have the same relationship to experience again.

This is what the early tradition calls the first stage of awakening, that of the Dhammacakku—the vision of Dhamma. You notice that it's a very cognitive expression. It's like, "Oh, this is what's going on."

Now, of course we will forget our vision. Times will come, things will happen, and we forget. The view of self and the clinging to self flood back. They come because they're deeply, deeply ingrained. But it will be a different relationship. It will be fundamentally weakened compared to what it was before. And once we recognize that we're caught up in it and we're aware of it, it can't survive the awareness. It starts to fade.

So our baseline has changed. We have the normal rhythms of life that we've always had, but the baseline, instead of being here, is up here. This is the point where we enter into the noble eightfold path, as opposed to the eightfold path. This is where the path actually begins. It begins with this vision of Dhamma. Then we're in the path.

Another expression used is that we are in the stream—we have entered the stream. There's a momentum in the practice which is taking us to full awakening. And the Buddha says, look, it may take seven existences. Now, this is usually translated or interpreted as seven human lifetimes, or lifetimes as a deva, or whatever. But he doesn't say that. He says existences. So how long is an existence? Well, another way of asking this question is: how long is a ball of string? If there's no one who exists, then how long is an existence? It doesn't really tell you much about time.

But the seven is important because numbers in an oral tradition, like what the Buddha worked in, have symbolic importance. The number seven seems to indicate a natural cycle. So natural cycles of life will keep rolling on, but they're limited now.

One image—I don't know where it comes from, but I think it's in the later tradition—is that life after life in saṃsāra is like an ocean, a vast ocean, and we're stuck in it. When we have the vision of Dhamma, boom, the ocean is gone. All there is is a puddle. Of course, if the ocean is infinite, it can be a pretty big puddle. But you get the sense that something has changed, and we're not going back to what it was before. We can't. We're on the way.

CHAPTER 118

Part 1: Establishing Mindfulness

Patrick Kearney · 37 min

In this illuminating dharma talk, Patrick Kearney examines the Buddha's language around mindfulness (sati) to reveal its essential nature. Drawing from key suttas including the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Ānāpānasati Sutta (MN 118), and Dantabhūmi Sutta (MN 125), Kearney unpacks the Pāli verb 'upaṭṭhahati' (to establish) and its root 'ṭhā' (to stand), showing how mindfulness involves firmly grounding awareness on experience with intimate, face-to-face directness. He offers a fresh interpretation of 'parimukhaṃ' as an adverb meaning 'directly facing' rather than the orthodox reading of 'around the mouth.'

The talk explores three powerful similes the Buddha uses to illustrate mindfulness: the strong post that tames the wild elephant of our habits; the six animals (representing the six sense fields) tied to a pillar rather than to each other; and the fish thrashing on land, depicting the normal restless human heart. Kearney explains that without mindfulness, we are pulled in different directions by our strongest desires and aversions, lacking any central stability.

Practically, Kearney emphasizes that body-based meditation (kāyagatā sati) provides the essential anchor for practice, since the body is always in the present moment. He challenges the common assumption that breath must be the meditation object, noting that any experience can serve this purpose. The talk also explores how mindfulness relates to memory—sati literally means 'to remember'—and how losing mindfulness (muṭṭha sati) is a movement into oblivion and delusion. Crucially, the moment we realize we've been distracted is itself the arising of mindfulness, complete in that very instant.

Good evening, everyone.

Tonight and in my next talk, I'm going to be talking about mindfulness. Tonight we're going to focus on establishing mindfulness. The idea is that we're trying to get some understanding of what mindfulness is through the activity surrounding it and the kind of language that the Buddha uses when he talks about it.

When he talks about generating mindfulness, the term he uses can be translated into English as "establishing." Then we're going to look at how he talks about the absence of mindfulness—how we lose mindfulness. Two sides to that coin. And finally, we're going to examine the importance of continuity for the practice of mindfulness.

Let's start with how we generate mindfulness. We'll begin with meditation practice. The suttas are an oral tradition, so they're very formulaic and very dense. You get a lot of meaning packed into very few words, which means there's always the job of unpacking the sutras, the discourses. This is commentary. They're very compact because they were memorized and chanted. They're not texts to be read; they're chants to be sung in choir. So we have to take these formulas and unpack them.

When the Buddha talks about formal meditation practice—how one begins meditation practice—there's one sentence which appears again and again to describe this, roughly translated as: "The meditator sits down, crosses her legs, straightens her back, and establishes her mindfulness directly." Then it goes on to describe whatever meditation practice the person is doing. You notice it all begins, actually begins with posture, but you set up a posture in order to establish mindfulness.

The original Pali word translated here as "establishes mindfulness" is the verb *upaṭṭhahati*, from the root *sthā*, which in Pali becomes *ṭhā*, but the Sanskrit root *sthā* gives us "stand," "station," "stable," "stability," "establish," and so on. So you have this root *sthā*, and then you have the prefix *upa*, which denotes nearness or intimacy.

This use of the root *sthā* implies a firm grounding or stationing of the mind, so awareness is firmly grounded on something, something quite definite. And that grounding is very intimate, which is the *upa* aspect. This is emphasized when the meditator is described as establishing her mindfulness directly.

Now, this takes the word *parimukhaṃ*, which gets translated here as "directly," and often you don't see it translated like that—it's a bit controversial. Basically, this word is *mukha*, meaning mouth or face or entrance, and the prefix *pari*, which can mean "around" but can also mean "completely." So *parimukhaṃ*: around the entrance, or around the face.

In two important meditation discourses, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the Ānāpānasati Sutta, this expression comes just before instructions on using breathing as the object of mindfulness. You have that sentence and then you get launched into a description of breathing meditation.

In the Orthodox Theravāda tradition, *parimukhaṃ* is taken as a noun and read literally as establishing the mindfulness around the mouth, or around the entrance—in other words, placing mindfulness at the point where the air enters and leaves the body. This tradition comes very early; it begins with the Paṭisambhidāmagga, which is the

first path text in early Buddhism that tries to systematize the Buddhist teaching and create this whole path from beginning to end. All the Theravāda follows this interpretation.

But personally, I don't think it's right. So I'm not Orthodox Theravāda. What I'm doing is grammatically perfectly correct: I'm reading *parimukhaṃ* as an adverb, not a noun, as part of the action of establishing. And I'm also reading it as an idiom, not to be read literally.

It's like in English, if we want to travel by taxi, we might say, "I want to catch a taxi." Now, this does not mean that we go out on a hunt, perhaps armed, and then capture a taxi cab, presumably overpowering the driver. What it means is we hire the services of the taxi and its driver. It's an idiom.

If we see *parimukhaṃ* as an adverb and an idiom, we can see, first of all, that it does not refer to where mindfulness is established—around the face—so working out what's the object of mindfulness. What it does is qualify the action of establishing. So *parimukhaṃ* should be read as something like "completely" (*pari*) "facing the object of experience." It indicates a face-to-face encounter with the experience.

And of course, when you do meditation practice, especially when you do intensive meditation practice, you often get this sense of being face-to-face with what's going on. In fact, often that can become uncomfortable, and it's a reason meditators might want to take a break. This is too much.

So this conveys a sense of being firm and direct in how we engage with the experience, whatever the experience is—establishing mindfulness directly.

And this fits in with the later Abhidhamma understanding, where mindfulness appears as the state of confronting or being face to face with an object.

So for example, let's say I'm working on breathing as my meditation object, but my mind is preoccupied by some thought stream or other, and I'm feeling discontented with the state of my meditation. Has anybody had that kind of experience in meditating? It might be just me.

Now, in this situation, clearly I am aware. If somebody asked me later what happened when we were meditating, I could complain about the whole situation. But although there's awareness, mindfulness is weak. And the reason why mindfulness is weak is because the mind is wobbling between at least three fields of experience: there's breathing, there's thinking, there's discontent. There's body, there's a cognitive

aspect of mind, there's the affective aspect of mind or the heart. And I am not directly confronting any of these fields of experience. The mind is not face to face with the situation but floating around it. The mind is not established.

Question from participant: Is that why there is that unclear feeling, that unclearness?

Yes, I would say so. And that lack of clarity is a sign that mindfulness is weak. One of the signs that mindfulness is getting stronger is that the experience becomes clearer.

I just came from teaching a nine-day retreat in the Blue Mountains, where people had the classic experience—it was cold and wet and windy, with this big garden. It was quite lovely actually, very good, because I came from a Brisbane heatwave. But people were reporting, you know, "The sky is incredibly blue, bluer than ever. The grass is greener than ever. The birds are birdier than ever." Everything is fresh and new. And this is characteristic of mindfulness.

So mindfulness is all about establishing a firm connection with what is really happening. In this situation, for example, I might realise that what's governing things is my attitude of discontent and resistance. And this is why I'm half-hearted about the breathing, easily distracted, generally restless.

So what to do? I turn toward my discontent. I face it fully. I put awareness bang right on it. Or I might renew my determination to place awareness on the breathing and just go for it. Or I might make the thought stream my meditation object. Or I could make even the whole package—the complete experience of sitting here and mentally wobbling—my meditation object. This last one is probably the most difficult, by the way. But in any case, what I need to do is to fix awareness firmly on something, and then mindfulness can emerge.

One way that the Buddha talks about all this is through the image of the strong post or pillar. Let's look at the Dantabhūmi Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 125. Here the Buddha is explaining how people can be tamed from their normal everyday wildness to living with a heart that is unified, cooled and at peace. And he uses the extended metaphor of taming a wild elephant.

Elephants were extremely important in the Buddha's time in terms of the economy. They were a major form of heavy machinery, heavy equipment, important for transport, very important for military uses. Training elephants was big business, and successful elephant trainers were highly regarded and presumably very well paid.

So he's using this extended metaphor of taming a wild elephant to indicate the practice, and he compares mindfulness to a large post firmly planted in the earth. He says, "Just as the elephant trainer plants a large post in the earth and ties the forest elephant to it by the neck in order to subdue his forest habits, these four establishments of mindfulness are ties for the cultivated student's heart in order to overcome her habits, her memories and intentions, and her distress, fatigue and fever based on the household life, so that she may attain the true way and realise Nibbana."

This is the Buddha's exposition of how mindfulness works. Basically what he's pointing out is: look, we come to the meditation practice. Why? We want the clarity of mind, the peace of heart spoken about by the Buddha. And then we start to practice. And what we find is that we're constantly hindered by our restlessness, our obsessions, our determination to live in the past and the future rather than be centered on the present.

The practice of establishing mindfulness is designed to ground us in the present. This is the post planted firmly in the earth, and mindfulness has this firm face-to-face quality that allows us to clearly confront our hindrances in order to see through them. It's training us to live in such a way that we are always directly facing our experience, regardless of what it is or what we want it to be. This is the habit that we're developing.

The Buddha says the cultivated student—the Arya Savaka, basically the mature practitioner—the cultivated student's "memories and intentions" are overcome by mindfulness. The memories represent the habitual fevers and concerns of our ordinary everyday lives. They keep dragging us away from engaging with the present and into our habitual dreams and fantasies. And then you get "intentions based on the household life"—this refers to the ordinary movements of the heart restlessly seeking satisfaction based on the stimulus of the senses. Mindfulness counters this restlessness through the firmness of its stability, found in maintaining this continuous relationship with the meditation object.

That pillar or post—for example, the most obvious place we find it is in setting up a posture when we practice. I plant myself here, and now I'm going to face whatever comes. I'm not going to run away. I could run away physically, but I could also run away mentally and emotionally, just drifting off into thinking about this or that. But mindfulness is the opposite of running away. It's confrontation, face to face, direct.

A participant asked: "How does this work for someone who has been conditioned their whole life to think in certain ways, to react in certain ways? If you've spent fifty or sixty years living like that, can mindfulness still help? Can people still change, or is it very difficult?"

It's both difficult and change is possible. But certainly the older we are when we get started, the more stuff we have to work through. So it's always best to start as soon as possible, which in practical terms means let's start now. I could decide, "Look, I'm over sixty, that's it, it's too late, maybe next lifetime." But what am I doing then? I'm postponing the whole thing. What's important is my relationship with now. Right now I'm confronting what's going on.

The training in mindfulness is to keep coming back to the present. What's happening now? What's happening now? What's happening now? Usually when you take up meditation training, you're given a meditation object. They say, "You've got to spend the next thirty minutes face-to-face with meditation object X." But from a mindfulness point of view, it can be any meditation object.

You have more flexibility than people sometimes realize when they actually take up this practice. Often people are told they must make the breath their meditation object, and some find that very difficult. They then decide they can't practice mindfulness because they don't have a good relationship with their breathing. But the point is it can be anything. The posture itself can serve as a good meditation object. It doesn't matter what the object is. What matters is that I'm going to confront what's happening now.

So when my habits take over—think, think, think, think, think—what is it that's happening now? It's the thinking. It's the habit. So what do I do? I confront it. This is it. This is what is going on. This is what it feels like. And I'm mindful. Gradually I learn to turn the Titanic around. It can be done.

Let's look at how mindfulness works within the realm of the six senses, or the six sense fields. We're going to examine the simile of the six animals, which refers to the six sense fields of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding.

The Buddha says, suppose a man caught six animals, each with their own domains and feeding grounds, and tied each with a strong rope. We know immediately this man is not very nice. He caught a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal, and a monkey, tied each with a strong rope, tied the ropes together, and then released them. Those six animals with their different domains and feeding grounds would each pull in the direction of its own domain and feeding ground. When these six animals became worn out and exhausted, they would be dominated by the strongest among them, submitting to it and coming under its control.

So this image centers entirely on the six senses. The senses include mind, for the Buddha considers the mind a sense because a sense is a sensitivity—a sensitivity to a particular kind of data. The eyes are sensitive to light and color. Ears are sensitive to

sound, and so on. Mind too is a sensitivity, responsive to its own particular stream of data: thoughts, perceptions, and so on. But it also takes in the data from the five physical sense fields. So in total, six senses.

These senses are always hungry. They're searching for pleasant stimuli and trying to avoid painful stimuli. This continual searching does not allow for any rest. What should I do now? What should I think now? What do I want now? We're living out an endless search for satisfaction that never comes, or if it does come, quickly ends. This searching in conflict reveals what the Buddha calls dukkha.

Notice that each of the senses heads off in its own direction. In other words, our impulses are not unified and coherent. Each sense searches for its own particular pleasantness and struggles to avoid its own particular pain. The senses, the Buddha is saying, are like six disparate animals tied together, lacking any firm central point of stability or direction, tossed about by their different obsessions. We find ourselves pushed and pulled according to our strongest aversion or our strongest desire of this moment.

This is our situation when mindfulness is absent. This is the unmindful person. Do you get a sense of what he's talking about? You quickly see it when you start to meditate.

And then the Buddha goes on to explain what happens when mindfulness is present. Here, instead of tying the animals together, the man ties them to a strong post or pillar. And the Buddha says, when these six animals become worn out and exhausted, they would sit or lie down right there. This is the difference. Instead of being exhausted and pulled about by whatever animal is strongest for this particular moment, and then being dragged off in another direction when that animal is exhausted but another animal has another go, they're in the same place and that's where they lie down or sit down.

And the Buddha says the strong post or pillar represents mindfulness immersed in body. This is Kayagata Sati. So first of all, mindfulness gives us a central point of stability and balance. It gives us a place where we are at home and we can face our normal human drives and impulses. Without mindfulness, we don't have stability of the heart.

In one very striking image, the Buddha compares the normal state of the human heart to a fish that's caught and thrown up onto land. This comes from Dhammapada 34. The fish is thrashing about in a blind panic and it's not still for a single moment. And the Buddha says, this is the normal human condition. This is what we're doing all the time. And if the heart is to be tamed, trained, cooled, it has to be led into stillness, and mindfulness is absolutely central to this. It's central to meditation practice.

You notice how the mindfulness that's emphasized here is mindfulness immersed in body. The Buddha sees this as absolutely fundamental to the practice. And in fact, most modern meditation techniques use body as their central reference point in some way or another, as a kind of anchor to hold the heart and the mind firmly so the practitioner can calm down.

For the Buddha, our relationship to the body is absolutely central to the practice because when we're mindful of body, we are in the present. Body is necessarily and always in the present, and mindfulness practice can only take place in the present. So our relationship to body is extremely important.

One mistake that people make, especially beginners, is that they try to go for a subtle awareness right from the very beginning. "I'm going to track the movements of my breathing." Now, that's a very good meditation object, but it's relatively advanced. You need to be reasonably calm and clear to be able to do it. And of course, we're not calm and clear. So using body, setting up your meditation posture, feeling the whole body, and then opening yourself up to all the disturbances within the body—that's much more clear, much more obvious. And you can get your mindfulness going with that.

Maintaining that posture, refusing to move, again plants you. It creates that situation I call a posture of attention. It's like, here I am, confronting what's going on. And what's going on might be hopeless distraction—let's say sixty or seventy years of bad habits. Well, fine. That's what I'm mindful of. That's the meditation object. And it's a very good meditation object.

So this is how the Buddha talks about establishing mindfulness. How does he talk about losing it? And what does this tell us about mindfulness?

Let's actually look at the Pali word that gets translated as mindfulness. And this of course is sati. Sati literally means memory. It comes from the verb sadati, to remember.

So the opposite of mindfulness is forgetfulness. When the Buddha speaks of lapses in mindfulness, the way that one loses mindfulness, one term he uses is *muṭṭha sati*, where *muṭṭha* means "forgotten" and *sati* is mindfulness. So: forgotten mindfulness. *Muṭṭha* comes from the verb *mussati*, to forget, to pass into oblivion—this according to the old Pali-English dictionary. So the opposite of mindfulness is oblivion, and specifically, the oblivion that comes from forgetting.

This has its own peculiar characteristic, its own peculiar flavor. When something is here, then suddenly it isn't. And that moment of loss is a total absence.

We can see this in normal everyday forgetting. Let's say we're cruising along, we don't have a worry in the world, and we confidently and calmly reach for our wallet. But that's odd—it's not there. There's a moment of confusion. That's very odd. It should be there. And then there's panic. It definitely should be there, but it definitely isn't. And then panic might be joined by realization: I must have left it in that shop. Suddenly, a clear understanding of the whole situation arises. I have a problem. I am acutely aware of all its dimensions. And I have a fairly good idea what to do to solve it. So I head back to the shop, and sure enough, there's the wallet. I paid for the item, I was so pleased with my purchase that I grabbed it, turned around, walked out, and forgot the wallet.

Now, if we look closely at this process: at the moment we forgot our wallet, did we have a problem? The answer is no. Nothing's the matter. All is well in the world. In fact, I'm clutching my new item and I'm very pleased with myself. In other words, there's no problem that can be discerned within the total absence that is *muṭṭha sati*, forgotten mindfulness.

Forgotten mindfulness, or simply forgetting, is a state of oblivion, of delusion, where there's no problem because there's no awareness of any problem. There's not even the awareness of the possibility of a problem. We don't know, and we don't know that we don't know. And this state, of course, is the very essence of delusion.

So the movement from mindfulness into loss of mindfulness is a movement from memory into forgetting, from clarity into delusion, from wisdom into ignorance. And conversely, the movement from forgetting to mindfulness is the movement from delusion to understanding—when suddenly you know the whole situation. That's right, I put the wallet down to pick up the item, and thinking I was done, I sped off without it. In that moment, everything is clear.

Mindfulness begins with the movement out of oblivion. And it is, in a sense, complete in that very moment. Because in that very movement, oblivion ceases and understanding arises.

For example, have you ever had the experience of sliding into distracted thinking? Has that ever happened? Do you notice that when you slide into thinking, you don't know that you've slid into thinking? You start to get distracted, you start to think, and you actually don't know that you're thinking. You think you're meditating. And then suddenly—five nanoseconds, five seconds, five minutes, five hours later—it's like, "Whoops, I'm thinking. Aren't I supposed to be meditating?"

Has that ever happened? This amazing capacity to be thinking of something but not even know that we're thinking—this is just a miracle of the human mind. Here we have awareness, but we don't have mindfulness.

Now, the moment when I realise, "Oh, wait a minute, I'm thinking, I'm not supposed to be thinking"—that already is mindfulness. It's not that I come out of distraction and then think, "Now, where did I leave my mindfulness? I've got to pick this up somehow. I think I'll take a break first." The very action of realising "Oh, I'm distracted"—that is already mindfulness. And the mindfulness is already complete.

In other words, that moment for a meditator who's practising mindfulness is pure gold. Because you very clearly get a sense of what mindfulness is all about, what it feels like. So never take that moment for granted, and never waste it by criticising yourself: "Hopeless, I can't do this. I'm thinking again. It's ridiculous."

What you should be thinking is, "Wow, that's fantastic! I've just experienced spontaneous mindfulness. I did everything I could to prevent it, but I failed and the mindfulness arose. This must be because in previous lives I've practised mindfulness meditation, and now I'm expert at it."

So that moment of realising "Oh, I'm distracted"—watch that, because that's the movement from delusion into mindfulness.

CHAPTER 119

Mindfulness as Guarding the Heart/Mind (Part 2)

Patrick Kearney · 43 min

In this talk, Patrick Kearney continues his exploration of mindfulness through the Buddha's vivid simile of the frontier city from the Saḷāyatana Saṃyutta (SN 35.245). The image presents the sentient body as a fortified city with six gates representing the six sense fields, and mindfulness (sati) as the wise gatekeeper who must actively discern who to admit and who to refuse entry.

Kearney emphasizes that for the Buddha, the body is not separate from mind but is the "saviññāṇakāya" — the sentient, aware body that forms the stage for practice and awakening. He clarifies that Buddhist ethics differs fundamentally from Western commandment-based morality; the five precepts (pañca sīla) are not orders to obey but "sikkhāpada" — training paths we voluntarily undertake. The ethical project becomes discerning kusala (wholesome) from akusala (unwholesome), understanding what leads to long-term welfare and happiness.

The talk illuminates how mindfulness differs from ordinary perception (saññā). While both involve memory, perception remembers the past and creates a stale, familiar world of habitual associations. Mindfulness remembers the present, creating freshness and direct encounter with experience. This quality allows the practitioner to recognize when unwholesome thoughts arise — such as self-defeating narratives during meditation — and to consciously refuse them entry, redirecting attention to what is wholesome. Through practice over time, the gatekeeper becomes increasingly skilled at this ethical discernment.

In the good old days, when you actually had to go somewhere to give a talk, if you were speaking at a new place, you could cheerfully and confidently give the same talk you gave last week to another group, on the grounds that it was a different group of people. But when it's online, you just don't know—anybody could turn up. So this year, what I've been doing across a number of online talks for different groups is going through a series on mindfulness.

Last time at Melbourne Insight, I talked about establishing mindfulness. The idea here is that we're going through a series of discussions about mindfulness—the role of mindfulness, the nature of mindfulness—by looking at different ways in which the Buddha himself talks about it, taking up different images and expanding those.

Tonight we're going to look at mindfulness as guard: the function of mindfulness as guarding the mind or guarding the heart, the *citta*. This is important in part because it shows us the very clear link between the practice of mindfulness on the one hand and living an ethical life on the other.

We're starting with the image of the frontier city that the Buddha gives. This is taken from the Simile of the Parrot Tree, Saṃyutta Nikāya 35-45: "Suppose a king had a frontier city with strong ramparts, walls, and arches, and with six gates. A gatekeeper posted there would be wise, experienced, intelligent, one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances."

This is the basic image. First, the Buddha explains that the city is the body. But of course, when the Buddha says body, he means the sentient body—the body that is aware, the body that feels. The city is the sentient body. The six gates are the six sense fields. And the gatekeeper is mindfulness.

These images provide a picture of the practitioner and her practice. You have the stage upon which the drama of practice and awakening takes place: this is the city, the sentient body, one's own sentient body. The Buddha points out that it includes the lord of the city who is, quote, "sitting in the central square." The lord represents awareness itself—awareness at the center, as the coordinating center of the city.

The city is the body, what the Buddha calls *saviññāṇakāya*. It's physical in that it is sustained by food and subject to death. It's psychological in that it is aware and subject to pain.

In these kinds of images the Buddha uses, one thing that comes out is his very strong affirmation of the essential physicality of the human being. I think this is really important for getting a sense of what the Buddha is talking about—that his view of human nature, of the human being, is very strongly physical. This contrasts with the classical European tradition that tends to divide the human being into body on the one side, and then mind, and in fact on top of that even spirit, on the other. In that view, the center of the human being is in mind or spirit, not in body. The body is what we have to put up with in order to be fully human.

But for the Buddha, that's not the case. The body is at the very center, but it's the sentient body—the body which is aware, the body which feels.

When we come to practice meditation, for example, we do not do so just with the mind. We practice with the whole package: the physical mind, the sentient body. And of course, this is something obvious to every practitioner as soon as you sit down and try to meditate.

So this is the city. And it's a frontier city, strongly defended. In other words, this city is on the edge and it's expecting trouble. And perhaps it's planning to push the frontier deeper into enemy territory.

Here we find an image that fits in with the traditional way of talking about meditation practice as war. This is a metaphor very common in the traditions but very unfashionable for our time. We tend not to go for that—it's not very attractive, really.

In fact, one of my main teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, used to come up with this: "Meditation is war." At one time, when he was in Nepal teaching a group of practitioners, he was going on about this meditation-is-war image. When giving Dharma talks, especially when saying something he knew was controversial and would stir up the meditators, he would stop and ask for affirmation. I think he was just deliberately stirring the pot.

So he did this and zeroed in on one of the meditators, a woman, and said, "And what do you think? Do you think meditation is war? Do you agree?" He's doing this in a context where you never disagree with the Sayadaw. You don't do that. And her response came back: "Well, actually Sayadaw, to me meditation is more like a relationship."

There was a moment of silence in the hall. And then the Sayadaw says, "Yes, I think you're right about that." And then he moved on.

So this meditation-as-war doesn't quite fit, but it's very much traditional. To understand what it's getting at: the war is the war between the unwholesome and the wholesome, between the akusala and the kusala. In other words, it's fundamentally ethical in its nature. Sometimes in our practice, it appears that the unwholesome is winning. The job of the frontier city is to push back the unwholesome and win more territory for the wholesome, push back the akusala and win more territory for the kusala.

This brings us to the Buddha's approach to ethics, which we need to have a sense of—it's very different from our tradition. Western ethics is based fundamentally on the Ten Commandments. The important thing isn't that there are ten of them; it's the fact that they are orders from above. Virtue or ethical behavior, an ethical life, is a life of obedience. We obey the commands and we're doing okay. We disobey the commands and we're not doing okay. And who decides what is right, what is wrong? Well, it's him upstairs who's giving the orders. It's not up to us.

But the Buddha's approach is very different because for him, there's no one upstairs who's in charge. Take, for example, the classical five precepts, the pañca sīla. Now, this word "precept" is actually not a very good translation of what the Buddha was getting at. Pañca sīla—sīla is ethics, pañca is five—so it's the fivefold ethics. But this system of

ethics, which is the Buddha's basic teaching of ethics for laypeople, consists of five sikkhāpada. A sikkhāpada is not an order. It's a pada, a way or path. And pada, you notice, is essentially the same word as path. It's a path which involves sikkhā, and sikkhā is training. So these are paths of training, ways of training. They're not orders.

You cannot disobey a sikkhāpada, because it's not an order. If you decide to take up training—if you, I don't know, let's say you decide to take up meditation, just for a radical suggestion—let's say you decide, "I'm going to take this seriously. I'm going to meditate thirty minutes every day."

Let's say one day you think, "Oh, not today. Not today." So you don't do it. Now you've failed to fulfill your sikhāpada. Have you disobeyed anybody? No—you're just not fulfilling a commitment that you have made. And you might decide, "Well, this commitment's unreasonable. I'll change it. I'll change my training." It's a completely different approach. We're not talking about orders here. We're talking about how we train.

And of course, mindfulness is an aspect of this training. The Buddha's path is divided into the three trainings of ethics, meditation, and wisdom—sīla, samādhi, paññā. So sīla is the broad term that covers the whole area of ethics and morality.

Now, if we get down to it, what do we mean by ethics? What is it about? The concern of ethics is how we live. We could express this as saying that the central ethical question all humans face is: How shall I live? What do I do with this life?

Each of us has faced this question, and each of us has developed our own answer to it. The answer is how we are living now, how we are living today. This is our answer to this question.

This is a universal question, and this is how the Buddha himself talked about it. The way he puts it is: What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? What is praiseworthy? What is blameable? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? What, having done it, will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term? If you're looking for this question, it's in the Lakkhaṇa Sutta, number thirty in the Dīgha Nikāya.

So you see that for the Buddha, the central question is all about how should we live—and in particular, how can we live well and happily over the long term. The key to this is discerning the difference between the wholesome and the unwholesome, kusala and akusala.

Basically, something is kusala if, firstly, it's good in itself—something which is intrinsically good. For example, health. If you meet someone and they say, "How are you?" and you reply, "Oh, I'm doing very well. I'm very healthy," and the person responds, "What's so good about that?"—you would be puzzled. It's not quite computing, is it? Because it's obvious that health is a good thing. We don't have to justify why it's good. It's obviously good. It's an intrinsic good.

And kusala—one of its meanings is essentially health. That which is kusala is that which is healthy. So that which is good in itself, intrinsically good.

The other aspect of kusala is that which leads to a good result—that which is skillful. So often you get this translated as "skillful" and "unskillful" rather than "wholesome" and "unwholesome." This is taking the other meaning of kusala, which comes from the word kusha.

Kusha is a kind of grass that grows in Northern India and elsewhere. This grass is highly respected in the Indian yogic tradition as being very strong in positive prana. One of its uses is to weave mats for meditation that assist the yogi in their practice. The kusha grass is very sharp, so the people who handle it, who harvest it and weave it into various useful objects, have to be very skilled in working with this grass because it's very easy to injure yourself and very difficult to work. These people are very skilled. So kusala also means skillful, which carries the meaning that it leads to a good result.

Thus kusala is both inherently good—it's good within itself—and it has an instrumentalist value in that it leads to a good result. Akusala is the opposite. And you notice that in this quote, the Buddha is emphasizing the instrumentalist aspect: What, having done it, will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term?

So the ethical project is essentially this: How do I construct a life that enables me to live well and happily over the long term? This is the essence of the Buddhist project.

Hence, this brings us back to the frontier city. Now this city is exposed to the outside world through six gates. On the inner side of the gate are the six internal sense fields—the sensitivities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding. That is, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. On the other side of the gate, outside the city, is the world made up of the six external sense fields: forms, sounds, odors, tastes, tangibles, and phenomena known by the mind.

Now you notice that for the Buddha, mind is a sense. It's a sense because for the Buddha, a sense is a sensitivity. Each of the senses is a sensitivity to particular forms of data. The eyes, for example, are sensitive to light and form. Right now, light is falling

upon my body. My hand doesn't know this. My hand doesn't know whether it's night or day, frankly. It doesn't know whether it's dark or light. But there are two parts of my eyes that are sensitive to light. These are the eyes. Equally, there are two parts of the body that are sensitive to sound—the ears. So each of the senses is a sensitivity to a particular form of data.

Mind is also a sensitivity. The data that the mind is sensitive to is not direct physical data, but the inner world of thoughts, perceptions, and so on. The mind also brings in the data from the five physical sense fields and then brings them together, creating a coherent world out of it.

So these are the six sense fields, and you'll notice that they are internal and external—what's happening inside the sentient body and what's happening outside the sentient body.

If we ask what mediates between these gates and the external world, between the external and the internal world, it's the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper keeps watch at all the six sense doors, checking the traffic to and from the city. That's their job.

Now the gatekeeper is described in this discourse as wise, experienced, and intelligent. Her job is twofold. The first part is to hold back or refuse entrance to the aññāta, the unknown or strangers. The second is to allow to enter, or even to welcome in, the ñāta, the known or the well-known—acquaintances, friends, and so on. These are the two aspects.

And you notice that the job involves far more than mere awareness. Mindfulness is more than just awareness. The gatekeeper is not a silent, non-interfering witness of the traffic. She's not like a CCTV.

She takes an active role in regulating the traffic. After all, this gatekeeper is a gatekeeper of a fortress in a conflict zone. And she's not really doing her job if she cheerfully admits a suicide bomber because she thinks her job is just to impartially witness whatever happens.

So sometimes people think that we should avoid all judgment when we practice meditation. Now certainly judgments can be dangerous, particularly when they're based on our habitual drives and delusions. But judgment in the sense of discernment is central to our practice.

This reminds me of a story, something I witnessed many years ago at Mahasi Center in Burma, where I was ordained. I was a bhikkhu practicing meditation along with other foreign bhikkhus, and we had our own small meditation hall, separated from the

Burmese. There were hundreds of Burmese men, and first of all, men and women were always separate. As one teacher explained, men and women sharing a dance hall—fine. Sharing a meditation hall—no. So men and women have their own halls, which is actually very good for the women, because frankly, the atmosphere in the women's hall was always a lot better than the men's hall. But that's another story.

We were separated from the Burmese men because the Burmese were so delighted to see foreign meditators that every day at least one person would come up and say, "Oh, you're a foreigner! Where do you come from? So wonderful you've converted to Buddhism! Are you going to teach this when you go back?" Which was incredibly distracting. So we were segregated.

We had this little hall, and it was hot season. In the center of the ceiling there was a fan, and on the wall were the controls. One of the meditators was a rather eccentric senior Korean monk. When he would come into the hall to practice, he would sit right under the fan and turn it on full blast. The fan would just pound down on him. He was in this gale, his robes flapping all over the place. The noise was horrendous. The wind for everybody else was horrendous. But he would just sit there and enter into some kind of samādhi. It was astonishing.

Now, one of the other meditators was a very sensitive chap who really didn't like this, and it got him quite agitated, this whole business of the gale. So one day he gets up, goes to the wall, and goes click, click, click, click, click—turns the controls down to one. Now the fan is just going very gently around and around in this nice breeze. Everybody's going, "Ah, this is good."

But sometime later, you can see the Korean monk come out of his samādhi, look around, get up, go over to the controls, and go boom, boom, boom, boom, boom—full blast again. He returns and sits there. After a while, the other monk gets up, goes across, click, click, click, turns it down, goes back. And this would continue. It continued for a number of days. But as time went by, the time gap between the two monks grew shorter and shorter until the inevitable happened.

One day, there they were, staring at each other at the controls. And at that point, the greatest scandal erupted at the Mahasi Center that ever happened when I was there: two monks in fisticuffs. It was a huge scandal. Sayadaw U Pandita was outraged.

The defense of the sensitive monk, who couldn't stand the noise—he was obviously influenced by the New Age—his defense to the Sayadaw was, "Honestly, Sayadaw, it wasn't me. I was just witnessing the experience."

But I'm afraid the Sayadaw did not accept this, and he got into serious trouble. U Pandita was applying the ethical principles of the gatekeeper to that particular situation.

So mindfulness is associated with wisdom, experience, intelligence.

In other words, mindfulness is associated with what can be learned, what can be absorbed over time. Mindfulness does not simply witness—it actively assesses whoever is at the gate, admits some, and refuses admission to others. The job of mindfulness is to recognize, and recognition requires experience gained over time.

Now, on her first day on the job, mindfulness cannot recognize anyone. She will make mistakes by admitting those who should not be admitted and excluding those who should not be excluded. But mindfulness learns from experience gained over time, and it becomes increasingly discerning and discriminating. This is recognition, which is a very important aspect of mindfulness.

Notice that recognition and perception are very, very close. So let's look at perception. In Pali, this is *saññā*, and it's extremely important in the Buddha's teaching. It's one of the five aggregates that make up our sense of self. Perception is what allows us to make sense of the world.

For example, let's say you're listening to a dharma talk unfold. Your mind is engaging in a great deal of complex mental processing, translating the sounds heard in your ears into meaning in your mind. It's also recognizing your response to this. Normally, we're not aware of all this processing—we feel like we're just listening. But we can get a sense of how much training and work is involved in the simple act of listening to someone speak when we learn a second language. If you've ever done this, you know how much work is involved in learning to recognize that this pattern of sounds represents this pattern of meaning.

Most of our normal everyday perception happens underground. We could say that when perception does its work effectively, we don't notice it. We simply assume that we know what's going on. So perception is recognition—and usually unnoticed recognition. It's largely responsible for creating what we take to be real, our habitual world. Perception presents us with a world that feels familiar, that makes sense, and it does this on the basis of habits of recognition that we have built up over time.

Mindfulness is closely linked to perception because both are aspects of memory. We talked about this in the last talk. Mindfulness is the standard translation of the Pali word *sati*, which literally means memory. It comes from the verb *sarati*, to remember. Memory, like perception, allows us to make sense of the world by recognizing it from

the past. This bed I wake up in is the same bed I fell asleep in last night. These thoughts I begin the day with are a continuation of the thoughts I was having yesterday. My world makes sense to me when it's recognized and remembered as familiar.

But mindfulness as memory operates differently from perception. It's definitely close to perception. According to the Abhidhamma—the post-Buddha systematic philosophy and psychology of early Buddhism, very sophisticated, very intellectual—one of the immediate causes of mindfulness is a "strong perception." This refers to the direct, face-to-face encounter with experience that generates mindfulness, what we were discussing when we talked about establishing mindfulness and how the Buddha speaks about this.

Mindfulness begins with our normal everyday encounters with the world. But these encounters are made clear, made sharp, by a direct energetic encounter with present experience. This encounter creates the possibility of cutting through the baggage of habitual associations that are a normal aspect of perception. And this is because mindfulness as memory remembers the present, not the past.

The example I always like to give is the signs at railway stations that say, "Mind the gap." We're being asked to remember something—we're being asked to remember the gap between the train and the platform. But we're not being asked to remember it hours later when we're at home. We're being asked to remember it in the very act of stepping into or out of the train. We're being asked to remember the present.

Mindfulness and perception are similar in that they're both aspects of memory, but they differ because perception is based on memory of the past, while mindfulness is based on memory of the present. And we can feel this difference in our practice. Perception, for example, is stale. I know this.

I've been here before. I've seen this before. I've felt this before. I've thought this before. This is perception, and it has this quality of familiarity and staleness.

But mindfulness is fresh.

Those of you who have done meditation retreats know that practitioners engaged in sustained mindfulness practice often come to a point where they say the world appears as fresh and new. The sky seems bluer than before, the rain seems wetter, the plants seem greener, the creatures seem more alive. We recognize these things—we know we've seen and felt them before, we know this is the sky and those are the plants. But they are new. They are fresh, clear, absorbing. This sense of the newness of things is a flavor of mindfulness, because mindfulness is established firmly on the present rather than the past.

When mindfulness is relatively weak and perception dominates, our reactions and responses are the habitual responses we've built up over a long time. But when mindfulness dominates, our encounter with the world is so direct and clear that our habitual associations don't have the opportunity to take over. They still arise, of course, but they can be recognized, remembered as just associations—nothing else. Just habits—nothing else. Mindfulness continues to remember this encounter by returning again and again to its directness. This is what's happening right now.

And this widens our awareness. We don't just know the world; we know that we know the world. This gives us the opportunity to understand *how* we know the world.

When our habitual perceptions take over, they do so through forgetfulness. We forget and slip into habit, and we do this again and again in our meditation practice. In this state, we know, but we don't know that we know. We've lost touch with this understanding. When this happens, our ready-made habitual perceptions are again defining reality for us. Then we remember—oh, that's right, I'm meditating. Mindfulness returns. We remember that this experience now is just this experience now. Suddenly we find ourselves in a world that is new, not a product of habit.

Let's take an example. I'm tracking my meditation object—breathing or whatever it is—and then I slip into habitual thinking. When this happens, the thinking presents me with a world so familiar that I don't even think to question its reality. I don't even know that I'm thinking; I take it for granted to such a degree. Have you noticed that? When you slide into thinking during meditation, at first you don't know that you're thinking.

And then suddenly I realize that I'm thinking. This is where mindfulness kicks in with that realization: oh, this is what's happening. As a practitioner, I might actively acknowledge or note the thinking itself, perhaps even naming it: "thinking," or "a thought is just a thought." Now I'm not just thinking—I am aware of thinking. And I'm open to recognizing that this familiar world the thinking provides is a fiction, the product of a restless and driven mind.

When I realize this, it becomes easier to drop the thought and ground myself again on the felt flow of experience. In other words, using our image, the gatekeeper has just decided to close the gate on this particular traveler. Mindfulness provides the foundation for the gatekeeper's judgment.

Mindfulness as gatekeeper takes this understanding of the thinking mind one step further. This is the ethical dimension.

I recognize that the thoughts which entangle me in an imagined world that I take to be real, the thoughts that break the continuity of awareness by plunging me into habitual mind-spin—these thoughts are unwholesome. They are akusala.

For example, if I'm having a hard time with the meditation practice, I might find myself slipping into the thought, "I can't do this. It's too hard. Others can do this, but I can't." These thoughts are feeding our sense of self, and they solidify us as someone defined by the past who can never move beyond that past. These are thoughts that do not move me along the path to awakening.

But what mindfulness gives us is the opportunity to recognize what's really going on. And there we have thoughts that represent this conceptual recognition of what's actually happening. For example: "Oh, I'm caught up in thinking again. Where was I before this happened?"

These thoughts are wholesome. They're wholesome because, first of all, they're closer to the actual felt reality of the present. And they're the product of mindfulness, energy, and investigation—not a solidified sense of self defined by the past. They lead me in a much more wholesome direction, a much better direction.

So it's the gatekeeper who's discerning all this. The gatekeeper makes the judgment, creates the distinction between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, as she learns to recognize who to admit and who to refuse. And this recognition is also perception, but it's perception reshaped, educated by mindfulness.

Now, both mindfulness and perception are based on memory, because it's memory which allows a judgment. And of course, strictly speaking, we're always making judgments. Even the idea that we should not be making judgments is itself a judgment.

So mindfulness allows the emergence of judgment partnered with wisdom, understanding, discernment. This is judgment—or we could say discernment—that is more in tune with reality than our habitual judgments, those long-standing products of our delusion. This discernment helps us guard and guide the mind.

CHAPTER 120

Part 2: Anattā (Not-Self)

Patrick Kearney · 1h05

> *In this illuminating talk, Patrick Kearney continues his exploration of the Buddha's revolutionary teaching on anattā (not-self), examining how it emerged as a direct response to the Upaniṣadic tradition of ātman (self). Kearney explains that while the Upaniṣads positioned self as the fundamental reality from which multiplicity proceeds, the Buddha radically reversed this view—asserting that the multiplicity of experience is what's given, while self is merely an inference, a projection we construct.*
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> *Central to this teaching are the five aggregates (pañca khandha): body (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), choices (saṅkhārā), and awareness (viññāṇa). Kearney unpacks how these categories represent the raw materials we appropriate (upādāna) to construct a sense of self. Drawing from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he shows how the Buddha connected the aggregates to dukkha—the painful emptiness at the centre of our being that motivates all our striving.*
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> *The practical implications are profound: the Buddha taught not-self not as philosophical doctrine but as liberation strategy. As Thai master Ajahn Buddhadāsa expressed it: 'Give back what does not belong to you.' Kearney guides practitioners toward investigating experience directly—clarifying each aggregate and perceiving its impermanence—rather than trying to eliminate self through force of will. This investigation naturally reveals how little of our experience conforms to our agenda, opening us to the workings of dependent arising (paṭicca samuppāda) and the freedom that comes from releasing our grip on what was never truly ours.*

The Bodhisattva headed to this area, and this is where he practiced for years. This is the area associated with that Upanishadic tradition where Yajnavalkya was a great ancestral teacher.

When the Bodhisattva became the Buddha, he flipped around, and instead of teaching ātman, which was what all his teachers were doing, what all his fellow students and co-students were doing, he turns around and teaches anātman—not ātman.

We talked about the background of that last week, and tonight we're going to go into his understanding of anattā in Pali, anātman in Sanskrit—not-self. We're going to do it by looking in particular at the five aggregates, the pañca-khandha.

Now, if you know anything about the Buddha's teaching, you've probably heard of the five aggregates. The five aggregates is one of the two basic ways in which the Buddha looks at the human condition, analyzes it, and talks about how it works and what to do about it. You have the five aggregates and the six sense fields. Tonight we're talking about the five aggregates. Maybe some other time we can talk about the six sense fields.

The Buddha introduces these five aggregates in his first discourse, the Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta, Turning the Dharma Wheel. He presents this as the essence of the first truth, that of dukkha, which I'm sure you've all heard, usually translated as "suffering."

Dukkha is a technical term, and it's got a much wider range of meaning than just suffering. In fact, there's no exact English equivalent. If you look at this word, it's a compound word made up of *kha*, where *kha* is empty space, and *du*, the prefix, which indicates bad, difficult, painful, and so on. So *dukkha* is the painful emptiness that we find at the center of our being—the sense of chronic dis-ease that motivates us to make things better.

Dukkha is the source of our motivation: our motivation to undertake the practice, our motivation to undertake any activity that we think will improve our condition. The Buddha begins there, and he analyzes the nature of dukkha from the most superficial to the deepest. He sums it up at the deepest level of dukkha, saying: "In summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha."

So if we're talking about the five aggregates, we need to talk about dukkha. There's a close connection between them, and the connection is clinging—in Pali, this is *upādāna*.

Now, of course, one of the problems we have is that we approach the Dharma in English. So we think that the Buddha is talking about "clinging" or "attachment." It may come as a statement of the bleeding obvious, but it could also come as a surprise to realize that nowhere ever in his teaching, in his entire career, does the Buddha ever mention the word "clinging." He never mentions the word "attachment" either. The reason why is obvious: he didn't speak English. What he talked about was *upādāna*.

Let's have a look at this word. It's a compound word made up of *dāna* and prefixes. This *dāna* is exactly the *dāna* that Tammy is talking about—it means gift or giving. Then you have the prefix *ā*, which means "toward, this direction." And then you have *upa*, which indicates intimacy. *Upa-ā-dāna*: to bring or give toward oneself. Not to give, which is going this direction, but to take in this direction. And *upa* suggests intimacy. So *upādāna* is taking or bringing to oneself, making one's own. Appropriation.

Basically, *upādāna*, that we translate as "clinging" or sometimes as "attachment," refers to taking as one's own.

For example, we have the five aggregates, which is a list. The first item in the list is body, *rūpa*. Does it make sense to you to think in terms of "this is my body"? Does it make sense to you to speak in terms of "this is my body"? Does it make sense to you to act in terms of "this is my body"? Do you ever do that?

Well, this action of taking as mine is *upādāna*. Does that make sense?

Do you get a sense of just how deeply embedded this is? Sometimes people talk about, "Oh, clinging, attachment—you mustn't cling, you mustn't be attached," as if you can just stop doing it now.

The very thought, "Oh, I can stop doing it now," is upadana. It's not this fluffy little thing floating at the top.

So we have *upadana*, and then we have *khandha*—the five aggregates or khandhas. What does *khandha* mean? Khandha indicates a mass of something, a huge quantity of something, and in particular, a great collection of something. For example, a pile of sand is a khandha. It's one big thing—it's a pile of sand—but it consists of many smaller units, each individual grain of sand. So a whole collection, khandha, of sand indicates a mass of sand, a khandha.

You notice that in this example, what connects the parts to make the whole are very loosely connected. A pile of sand is easily scattered, and this is part of the associations of this word *khandha*. So khandha indicates a mass of something, a great collection of something, and taken as a collection, khandha can also indicate a category of something. For example, we have a pile of sand that sits on a beach. Everything here that could be categorized as sand—above the pile itself and what surrounds the pile—is collected into the khandha "beach."

If you look at the five khandhas, the first one is body, the body khandha. This indicates the whole collection, the whole mass of experiences that we can categorize as body, as physical. Does that make sense? And you notice that with this concept—in the Buddha's time, people hearing this would pick up on it immediately—what holds all this together is actually very loose. It's not really tight at all. We don't get that so much today.

Then we have the five aggregates, the *pañca khandha*. Now this is a list. And of course, if you're familiar with the Buddha's teaching, you know the Buddha is very fond of a good list. I think he was probably extremely proud of this one. This list consists of

body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. These are the five categories, khandha, of experience. And each one of these categories contains a great collection of individual experiences that can be placed within it.

Why are these particular categories so important? They're the categories of experience that we appropriate as "this is mine." And why is appropriation important? Because appropriation, for the Buddha, is an essential aspect of *atman*. This is where the Buddha begins his critique of the teaching of self, of *atma*.

If we think about what we mean by self—last week we talked about the metaphysical self and the psychological self in the Indian tradition at that time. The Buddha focuses on the psychological self. Self is the one who possesses a body and a mind. Self is the one who possesses his or her actions and who therefore is morally responsible for those actions because they belong to him or her. So self is the person to whom it makes sense to refer to my body, my mind, my actions, my life. Does anybody here ever find themselves thinking in these terms? Have you done that before?

For the Buddha—and this is where he parts company with his contemporaries—self is something we construct. It's not something already given. In the Upanishads, it's the opposite. Self is the already given primary. Self is the starting point from which the multiplicity of the world proceeds.

Think about your experience right now. What are you experiencing? Are you experiencing seeing—a collection of things you're seeing? Hearing—a collection of things you're hearing? Smelling, tasting, touching, minding? Are you experiencing all sorts of different things? In other words, is there a multiplicity out there that you are experiencing? We have this sense of the world of multiplicity—there's a lot happening. And at the other end, we have a unitary point—me—who's experiencing this. This is the nature of experience. And for the Upanishads, self, the one who experiences, is the foundation.

This is the already given primary. This is the starting point from which the multiplicity of the world proceeds. This forms part of the basic doctrine.

The Buddha reverses that. For him, what's given are the collection of individual events that make up the multiplicity of the world. That's what's real for him. And from that, we infer a unitary self. But the self, for the Buddha, is not what is actually given in experience. It's an assumption. It's an inference. It's a projection.

Do you see the difference there between the Buddha and his contemporaries? Both have this sense that there's a multiplicity of the world, and there's a unitary point where all this is experienced. In the Upanishads, they say this self is what's real, and the multiplicity is not so real. The Buddha reverses it. He says, no, actually the reality is in the multiplicity. It's this unitary point which is not real.

This is how he's so radical within that context. He's flipping over the whole thing. It's like he's tossed over the entire chessboard. We're not going to play by these rules. We're going to play by these other rules.

Again, for him, the self is not something already given. It's something we construct, and we are constructing it right now. Now, if we're going to construct something, we need the raw materials from which we can construct self. And what are they? These are the five aggregates. This is what we appropriate—*upadana*, what we cling to—in order to construct a sense of self.

First we have body, *rupa* in Pali. This is physical experience. Body gives our identity a sense of solidity. I identify myself as a physical form located in space, this space. And when appropriated, physical experience becomes my body—my seeing, my hearing, my smelling, my tasting, my touching. This is who I am.

Next in the list is feeling, *vedana*. This is the affective aspect of experience, that which moves me, that which provokes a response. The Buddha talks about three basic movements: I am moved to hold and to become intimate with; I am moved to reject and distance myself from; or I am moved to ignore or be confused and doubtful about what to do. What the Buddha is saying is that all of these responses are appropriated as mine, and feeling tells me how I am.

Then we have perception. Perception is the recognition or interpretation of experience—what gives familiarity and meaning to an experience. Perception gives me what I am experiencing. It gives me my world within which I find myself. So that's what I'm looking at: that's a computer screen. And that little visual collection of rectangles—that's my audience. This is perception.

Notice how feeling and perception act together. Feeling provides our response to what is happening. Perception provides what I think is happening—what I'm responding to.

So they work together.

Next we get choices, sankhāra. These are all choices and decisions to act. And these are appropriated to give me the sense that these are my decisions—I am the one who is making them, and I am responsible for them. Because here we come to the teaching of karma.

And then finally, the fifth khanda is awareness, viññāna. This is the most intimate one of all. Awareness, when it's appropriated, gives me the sense that I am the one who is aware of all this. All these experiences are part of my awareness.

And so now we can answer the question we asked before. The aggregates, the khandhas, are what we cling to in order to construct a self living at the center of his or her world. That brings us back to self. We take these together as self, and they represent our fundamental point of reference. This is what we talked about last week. Self is the place from which we experience the world—I experience the world from here, going out. And it's also the place to which the world refers. It refers back to here.

We all have a sense, for example, that this is happening to me. And the me to which experiences happen is self. We have a deep sense that this is my life. Self is the owner of this life. Self is the reference against which everything in our lives is measured. And the Buddha is saying that we use the five aggregates to construct that reference.

Any questions so far about aggregates and things of this nature? Are you enlightened or just stunned? I'll assume you're enlightened and I shall move on.

So let's look at the five aggregates, the khandhas. The Buddha says they're closely associated with dukkha. He says, in summary, the five aggregates associated with upādāna, with clinging, are dukkha. These khandhas, these aggregates, are really fundamentally important. Because if we ask, what is the Buddha's project? It's to cultivate a way of life without dukkha. That's what he wants.

I sometimes say that when I give Dharma talks, I open my mouth and channel Buddha. Now, the reason why I'm so confident about this is because I feel Buddha and I understand each other. And the reason for this is very simple. I'm a Taurean. And there's one thing that a Taurean wants—it's to be comfortable. We don't want dukkha. We don't like it at all. So I feel that I understand Buddha, because we've basically got the same life project. This is what he's all about: how do we live without dukkha?

And this is why he's so interested in self—because he thinks that our construction of self gets in the way of living without dukkha. But what he's focused on is not self and not-self. What he's focused on is the cessation of dukkha. In one discourse, he discusses

how our view of self plays out, and then he gets to what he's really interested in. I think we quoted this last week. He says, "Previously and now, what I teach is dukkha and the cessation of dukkha." Full stop. That's it. This is in the Simile of the Snake, Majjhima 22.

The Buddha rejects the teaching of self because for him, self and possession go together, and possession causes dukkha. That's the logic of it. Possession here is upādāna, which we usually speak of in terms of clinging or attachment. In other words, if we want our dukkha to cease—and the Buddha says, frankly, we do—if we want that, then what we have to do is stop taking as ours what is not ours. In other words, stop appropriating, stop clinging. And the five aggregates are important because this is what we appropriate as mine.

And we use them to construct an identity that we take to be fundamentally real, against which everything is measured. And this, of course, in terms of philosophy and doctrine, is the position of the Upanishads. This is self, this is ātman.

Now, it's important to realise that the problem for the Buddha is not that we construct an identity. Sometimes people think that this is the problem—that we're not supposed to have an identity. This is nonsense. Apart from anything else, the Buddha obviously constructed an identity. When you read the texts, it's quite clear he knew precisely who he was, and he made sure that the people around him knew it and treated him accordingly.

But he recognised this identity as essentially a convenience. It's a concept, or it's a network of concepts, that helped him get through the day and function well. So he did not take this self as the fundamental reality and then try to bend the world to accommodate it. Instead, he adapted his self to be able to work within the world.

You see the difference between those two. The Upanishadic tradition says what's fundamental is the self. The Buddha says no, it's not—it's actually the world. And there's an ethical response that comes out of it. That means it's not my job to make the world conform to me. It's my job to conform to the world. It's a quite different attitude.

Any questions thus far?

It's a bit mind-blowing, just this conforming to the world. What do you mean by that—just being adaptable, or accepting things, like life on life's terms, being adaptable, changeable?

Yeah, essentially adapting to what's really going on as opposed to being insistent that the world adapts to me.

Actually, given that we had an election quite recently, I'm political in my thoughts. I hope you'll forgive me, but I noticed that there are certain politicians who are overtaken by disaster and they don't seem to have any concept of why. Someone who's been completely, thoroughly bashed by the electorate says, "I did a really good job, and we did great things for the country," blah, blah, blah, "and we're fantastic." When you look at these people, you think, are they really that abominable? Well, they might be, because that's the nature of self. It's not my fault, obviously. I'm not wrong. So they must be wrong.

You could say that the fundamental principle of the self-teaching is "the customer is always wrong." And you do meet people who are like that. This is where the self is particularly strong. But if the self is seen as just a useful construct, then there's much more room for adaptation. It doesn't mean you give up and lie down and let people walk over you. It means you apply wisdom and flexibility to the situation. You adapt to the circumstances in order to pursue what you feel is important.

So in some ways it's an extremely pragmatic teaching. You can see in the example of the Buddha's life that he was an extremely pragmatic person, which is why he was so successful.

For example, the Buddha's politics were republican. He came out of the Shakyamuni republic. But he had to deal with tyrannical monarchs, and these people were just crazy. There are two major ones in his time: Pasenadi of Kosala and Bimbisāra, and then later his son Ajātasattu, of Magadha. Now the person who gets spoken of the most in the discourses is Pasenadi of Kosala, because the Buddha spent most of his time in that kingdom.

Both of these kings were his personal students. And you really get the sense with the stories about Pasenadi that the man was a lunatic—which is fair enough, he had absolute power. I mean, that would drive you crazy. And the Buddha managed to steer him in the appropriate direction. He was very, very skillful.

But it's clear from the way he set up his sangha, which was set up as a republic, that he must have loathed that monarchical system. He must have absolutely loathed it. But he didn't complain about it.

He simply worked with the situation as it was, in order to do some good in the world and to help Pasenadi himself.

Ethically, I think the teaching of not-self is deeply relevant. So now, how do we practice with these five aggregates? In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha says: "Here a practitioner understands: such is body, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is

feeling, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is perception, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such are choices, such their arising, such their disappearance. Such is awareness, such its arising, such its disappearance."

This is his instruction for practicing with the five aggregates. And you notice that the practice focuses on the impermanence of the aggregates. This takes us to impermanence, to change.

Now again, this all links together. Remember that the Buddha speaks of insight—insight into the three universal characteristics of anicca, dukkha, and anattā: impermanence, suffering, and not-self. These are intimately connected.

So why is change so important? The Pali word for change or impermanence—usually translated as impermanence—is anicca. The prefix "a" means "not," and nicca comes from the Sanskrit nitya, meaning stable, constant, or permanent. So anicca means not stable, not constant, not permanent.

In everyday usage, nitya refers to what can be relied upon. We've been talking about dāna, about giving, and you encounter mention of nitya dāna—a perpetual gift, an endowment, something that can be relied upon to last for a very long time. So anicca, impermanent, means unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore unreliable—not to be depended upon, not to be trusted.

You can see the link between anicca and dukkha. When we rely on something unreliable, sooner or later we are disappointed. And the fact is that we know from experience we are disappointed again and again and again.

We use self to deny impermanence, to pretend it's not there. For the Buddha, permanent means lasting unchanged over time. And the word is saying that which is permanent—that which appears to be permanent—can be relied upon. That which is impermanent cannot be relied upon. Self gives us a sense of permanence and the security that permanence offers.

Self provides us with a fundamental reference point: "This is happening to me." Self lets us project this reference point into the past: "This happened to me." And we can project it into the future: "This will happen to me." Then we get locked into the sameness that permanence presents: "I didn't like this before, therefore I will never like it." Or at a more abstract level: "You disagree with our eternal truth—you must be a threat." Any threat to this sameness becomes a threat to me, to mine.

Self creates an illusion of permanence, and so it is threatened by the perception of impermanence. This is anicca saññā, the perception of impermanence, which for the Buddha is absolutely central to developing insight.

We know that things change—that's pretty obvious. But why do things change? Do things change because I decide they should? Do they change in ways that I want? Because if that were true, then it would appear that self is real, since self is the one in charge of me and my life. The changes that self makes would naturally be convenient to it.

But clearly, when we examine our experience, it becomes painfully clear that things do not change as we decide. They change because of a multitude of natural conditions that are beyond the range of me and my control. Things change because of the workings of nature, and my choices and decisions are just one facet of these workings.

Now it's very important to underscore that for the Buddha, my choices and decisions are real and they are important, because they represent what I can do to change my life for the better. This is the teaching of action and its ripening—kamma vipāka.

But my choices and decisions are just one part of a much wider fabric of conditions that determine the nature of experience. This wider fabric and its workings is what the Buddha calls dependent arising. So my experienced world does not operate as a dictatorship with me as the dictator. It operates more like an infinitely complex republic with me having one vote. Now, it's a very significant vote, but it's just a vote.

And as we track change and the pain inherent in change, our view opens up. We see the workings of dependent arising. In other words, we see not-self. So the practice of tracking the five aggregates matures into perception of not-self. In fact, in most instances where the Buddha speaks about not-self and emptiness, he does so in terms of the five aggregates. Probably most famously in the Buddhist world is the Heart Sutra, which is very important in Mahayana Buddhism. Clinging to the five aggregates, appropriating the five aggregates, constitutes self. Letting go of the five aggregates, allowing them to function in their own way as part of nature, constitutes not-self.

Question from the audience about the Buddha's definition of permanence when everything is impermanent.

What the Buddha is talking about is the way that we normally perceive. Let's say the self that lasts for a hundred years—let's assume that I live for a hundred years. I know intellectually that the self is impermanent because at some point it falls off the twig. That's quite obvious. But then the way I relate to it at a deeper level is: who is the self who's going to fall off the twig in another fifty years or twenty years? It's me. It's the

same self that was born so many decades ago, and that's the self which is going to die in the future. So it hasn't changed over that period of time. That fundamental point of reference is the same. That's the projection, that's the inference, that's the assumption, that's the concept.

But what the teaching is saying is that if you actually look at the experience, you can't find any one aspect of the actual experience that satisfies that criteria. Everything is changing. But even when I can see everything is changing, still I have the determination to project back: is there someone to whom everything is changing? So self has this kind of pernicious quality to it. It's not something we can ever get a hold of.

Follow-up question about why permanence enters into this discussion if self is being constructed all the time.

I think he's just talking about the nature of human experience, that we do have this sense. I have this sense that the person sitting here tonight giving this talk is the same person who got out of bed at six o'clock this morning. I just feel this. I don't have a philosophy about it.

But it's a personal experience based on an inference. The Buddha is saying it's not a directly experienced event or series of events. It's an experience of an inference that I take. It's a stepping back from the actual events that are going on.

We're trying to examine the nature of experience as it flows. And the Buddha talks about the elements. He says if you actually get your awareness really closely into what's happening right now—let's say you're doing breathing meditation—you start off with the assumption "I am being mindful of my breathing." So you have me, you have breathing, and the relationship is that it belongs to me. And that makes perfect sense.

But if the samadhi really does develop, at some point the sense of "this is me" falls away, the sense that "this breathing is mine" falls away, the sense that "this is breathing" falls away, and all there is is a series of physical events and the awareness that goes along with it. In other words, self has dropped away. But of course, as soon as I'm not paying close attention, it's back again: "Oh, that was a good meditation. I completely forgot about myself."

So that sense of self is characterized by permanence, while that sense of being intimate with the actual flow of experience is characterized by impermanence.

A student asked about the witness having a sense of permanence from one moment to the next, while the ideas of the self change over time. They noted that you can have those deeper states, like jhana, where your sense of ego dissipates, but even through

that experience you have a witness. They also raised the Buddha's teaching that self is useful—there's a joke that you need enough ego to know whose mouth to put the food in at the dinner table, so you don't put it in the wrong person's mouth, but not so much that you become an egoist, the dictator of your realm. Just enough day-to-day awareness that's not excessively clinging.

Yes, except the Buddha would say that this sense of an unchanging witness is also a delusion. He says if you actually look for this witness, you can't find it. This is where he separates from the Upanishadic tradition. In that tradition, the goal is to get down to what's really at the basis of experience—the witness. But the Buddha is saying, "Okay, look, where is the witness in your experience? What aspect of your experience doesn't shift?"

The witness is associated with awareness itself, and the Buddha says awareness is impermanent. It changes. It comes and goes depending upon conditions. He has this whole analysis of the nature of awareness.

He had problems getting this across even in his own lifetime. There's one famous discourse where one of the bhikkhus is reported by his fellow monks because he actually thinks that awareness is permanent, that consciousness continues unchanged. He's brought before the Buddha, and the Buddha just rips into him: "Haven't I said in so many times, in so many ways, that awareness is impermanent? It comes and goes according to conditions."

But it's interesting that this discourse exists, because it indicates how much this teaching was resisted, even among his own students. They wanted to believe in permanent awareness. And what the Buddha was saying is, "Look, you can believe whatever you like, but do you experience awareness as unchanging?" His challenge is that if you look at experience closely enough, you will see change. You will see impermanence. He's quite ruthless in that respect. And even in his own time, even among his own students, people had difficulty accepting this.

But this is what he was saying. It is quite radical.

And then from there, you get the ethical dimension when it comes to what we talk about as ego—the inflated ego and so on. And this does naturally segue from this teaching of not-self. It's much harder to construct an inflated ego if you can see that nothing actually lasts. Everything's changing. So it's not about me, it's about conditions. And that does have ethical implications. But the teaching is very radical. And for a lot of people, absolutely counterintuitive. Like this fellow in the discourse.

Okay, shall we move on? Time is... Oh, another question. Tammy.

"Yeah, I have a question, Patrick. So if our sense of self doesn't exist, what about other people's sense of self? Or do other people exist?"

What the Buddha is saying is you can't find it in your experience. The background here is that what the Buddha is interested in is the nature of human experience. That's all that he's interested in. So in Western philosophical terms, you could categorise him as a radical empiricist. He's interested only in the nature of experience.

So for example, he rejects metaphysical teachings like, "Oh, there's this metaphysical self." Equally, he rejects teachings like, "Oh, there's a creator God." But let's take the creator God one. This is scandalous for people like Christians, Jews, Muslims, people from theistic traditions, Hindus. Why does he reject the teaching of a creator God? He doesn't reject it because he says there isn't one. He rejects it because you can't experience one.

If there's a creator God from which everything, from which creation comes, we're in the creation. We cannot get to the creator. That's just in the nature of the whole thing. And so the Buddha is saying, "Look, I'm not interested in this creator because it's just a concept. I can't actually experience it. I'm not interested. And I'm not going to talk about it."

And this is where the teaching of not-self comes in. He's saying, "Look, you can't actually experience it. So forget about it. It just gets in the way."

But then he adds something more: in your determination to believe or to act as if there is a self, as if your self is real and other people's selves are real, the only way you can do that is by appropriation. If you do the appropriation, it will cause you suffering. So if you solidify other people's selves, it will cause you pain. So why do it? What's the point?

And again, it's both mind-blowing, but it's also extremely pragmatic. He's saying, "Look, it doesn't work. So drop it."

I don't know if I'm answering your question or just blathering.

"I think that was helpful. Thanks."

Daniel, you've got your hand up. No, you're on, Daniel.

"It's Jessica here. I'm using someone else's computer."

I thought it was you, Daniel. This is not you.

"You're looking at the example of not-self. I'm interested in the relationship between not-self and experience. If the goal is non-self or not-self, then you can't really have the experience because no one is experiencing anything. Or you can't know you're experiencing because it's not-self. So what's the point of experiencing? I feel like I'm getting in a circle in my thinking."

The point is not to get to not-self. The point is to stop suffering.

"Not what?"

The point is to stop suffering.

"Right."

And the Buddha is saying, if we appropriate, if we take something as mine that isn't mine, then we'll suffer. And how do we experience the self? We experience the self by taking things to be mine. "This is my experience." If we do that, we suffer. So let's not do it.

One of the things to understand is that the Buddha is not a philosopher. He's not laying out a philosophical doctrine of no-self. Later in the Buddhist tradition, they talk about this extensively—there's this whole Buddhist philosophy in which they're proving no-self or non-self or what have you. But that's not the Buddha. The Buddha is interested simply in stopping suffering. And he's saying, as far as I can see, self is something that I construct. I construct it by appropriating as mine. And whenever I do that, I suffer. So let's not do it.

One way this is expressed is by a contemporary Thai teacher, Ajahn Buddhadasa. He taught not-self as a practice. He said, "Give back what does not belong to you." That's your practice. Give back what does not belong to you. Do that and you'll be happy. And what is it that does not belong to us? Body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness—everything. Give it back and you'll be happy. Keep it and you'll be miserable. So what do you want? Do you want to be miserable or do you want to be happy?

This is not a philosophical doctrine. This is a practical strategy. If you try to overthink it, then either you're going to drive yourself crazy, or you're going to become a great Buddhist philosopher. But neither of those would help.

"I'm curious about that instruction to just give it back. That claiming that occurs—at least here—doesn't seem to be predicated on a claimer. So to say 'just give it back' seems to be predicated on a separate being who claims or doesn't claim."

What we're talking about, of course, is letting go. And letting go is very tricky. Because if we try to let go, we're holding on. It's like saying "relax." I want you to relax now. When you hear the instruction "okay, relax," you're doing something and now you've got to do this extra thing to a sufficient degree that you can prove that you're okay now—which means you're not relaxed.

"Yeah, it seems like it's adding an unnecessary extra step. There's the claiming that happens or the relaxing that happens, but it seems like there's an adding in of a relaxer or a claimer, which isn't actually real."

That's right. And that's where it gets really tricky. That's where it gets so subtle. That relaxation, like not-self, is not that we do something extra, but that we stop doing what we do. And it's very difficult to talk about. You recognize it when it happens. We can't claim that "I did that."

It's like the experience meditators will often describe. They're meditating away and something happens, everything works, and they think, "This is fantastic! I've cracked it!" And then that experience never comes back—because it wasn't them that was doing that. It just happened according to conditions. And this is the teaching of dependent arising: it happens according to conditions.

Going back to earlier when you were saying awareness is also impermanent—but that ineffable thing you're talking about, of the good sit or whatever, that just "happening"—that does seem to be permanent, that happenings are always happening. But I don't know, I'm going back to that earlier conversation and I'm aware of the time, so we don't have to get into that.

But that experience you have is perfectly valid, and you must never think, "Oh, that's the wrong experience because the Buddha disagrees." That's your experience. From a Buddhist perspective, it's like, "Oh, this is interesting—investigate more." What is that? What's going on?

And the whole point, when we get to the practice aspect, is what the Buddha is doing: he's setting up this framework and saying, "Okay, now have a look. Is there something that doesn't change?" And you say, "Oh yes, this doesn't change. X doesn't change." That's what he's doing. He's not saying, "X doesn't change, and if you don't believe this, you're out." He's saying, "Oh, that's really interesting that you say X doesn't change. Please look more closely. See what you come up with."

Thank you. Beautiful.

Thanks. And again, the Buddha's not a philosopher—he's a practitioner. Buddhist philosophy comes later; it's after him. He's not teaching philosophy. He's teaching practice.

So let's talk about this practice. The Buddha says, "Here a practitioner understands: such is body, such is arising, such is disappearance—feeling, perception, choices, awareness." He goes through the same thing.

If you look at that, there are two aspects. First, clarify the experience. Such is body. This physical experience—what is it exactly? This feeling or this concept—what is it? What does it do? When we practice, particularly when we're practicing for insight, it's like we are interrogating the experience. We're interested, we're curious about the nature of experience. What is it exactly? What is going on?

And in particular, in this section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha is saying: look, if you're interested in getting a flavor of self, clarify that which you regard as yours. Don't try to force it, but notice your relationship to experience as you practice. Is this mine? Just have this question in the back of your mind. What you're doing is applying investigation to your awareness.

Now, the investigation may appear simply as a sense of curiosity. For example: Does this memory affect me? Does this desire affect me? Does this aversion, this dislike, affect me? Why? Is it mine? Is this happening to me? Don't do anything with the perception—just notice when it's there and what happens once you notice it. Be interested in it. You're not trying to get rid of it. You're just interested in what it is and how it behaves.

So first, clarify the experience, and then perceive the impermanence of the experience. Such is arising, such is disappearance. This tracking of impermanence involves seeing change itself, but also developing a broader view of what conditions change. When I'm teaching retreats, I like to emphasize getting to know your distractions. Distraction is a change. If I'm meditating and then I'm distracted—whoops, I realize I'm distracted and I get back to meditation—that's change. What conditions that change? Did I do that?

Does it belong to me?

When we start to see change, especially once we get this wider view, we may begin to see the dynamics of change—what stimulates change. And we may start to recognise how little of this change has to do with me and my decisions. We may start seeing that things change according to natural patterns that do not fit my agenda. And so then notice how I am disappointed or frustrated by change. Did I do that? Did that happen to me? Or did it happen simply according to the natural flow of conditions?

So when practicing not-self with the five aggregates and just experience, there are two parts. First, clarify the experience, and second, perceive its impermanence—the fact that it changes and how it changes. Essentially, this is the practice that the Buddha is presenting.

A question arises: Is the self also not-self?

Yes, what we would take to be self is actually not-self. This is what the Buddha would say. This brings us, by the way, to translation. I translate *anattā* as "not-self," not "no-self" or "non-self." All those renderings are grammatically possible, but when the Buddha talks about it, he talks about it in terms of a something. He says, "This is not-self." So this particular experience—is it self or not-self? And what he's saying is that if you're making that investigation, focus on change. And along with that, focus on who's responsible for the change.

Now for him—and this is coming out of the ancient Indian tradition—to qualify as self, it's got to be you that's making the change. This view is fundamental not only to the Indian understanding of self but also to the psychological sense of self. The self is essentially the one in charge. It's the boss. I don't have a functioning sense of self if I can't make the decision to stand up from this chair. The fact that I can—that I'm in charge of whether I'm sitting down or standing up—gives me my sense of self.

Hence the suffering of people who are struck by illness and can no longer do that. They lose agency. The suffering of people in nursing homes—they lose agency and therefore lose their sense of self. So when you're making this investigation, one of the things to be interested in is: who's in charge of this?

Another reflection emerges: Even the ego-concept arising in consciousness right now as I listen—there was no volition, no choice to engage that concept. So in that sense, the ego-concept, the personality appearing in consciousness, that's also anattā?

Correct. When you talk to the scientifically minded, they will say it's evolutionarily necessary—otherwise we'd all have been eaten by sabre-toothed tigers. So it goes very, very deep. And it's not so much that we are producing the self, but that the self is producing us. It's the determination to draw the self. Incredibly deep.

I think we should finish on time because I'm sure people have things to do. I'm disappointed that I went on for so long and we never got the chance to actually try this out.

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