Disturbance is the Path

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 44:38

One of the meditation masters of the Forest School of Thailand, Ajahn Tate, who was a contemporary of Ajahn Chah, said that we practice so that we can know the difference between mind and the activity of mind.

Tonight I'd like to contemplate and reflect on how we practice to bring about that insight using two frames and two approaches that complement and inform each other: samatha, samadhi—the calming, steadying, jhanic path—and vipassana, dhammavijaya—the inquiry and insight. These two are necessary for the cultivation of this insight and for the path itself.

Practicing here at the Forest Refuge in this space and in the quiet stillness, we have a great opportunity to see how the mind is, how it moves, where it goes, where it dwells, and its activity. More often than not, that activity is mostly what absorbs our attention. Particularly if we're not intersecting the flow of the mind with some path activity, our normal awareness is really concerned with the activity of mind—how it flows incessantly, how it's connected with the sense of me and my narratives, and within that, the sense of time: what's memory, what's gone before, where we're going. It can be quite difficult to come out of that stream of the narrative thinking mind and to turn attention beneath or beyond or behind it. Because, you know, who are we if we're not thinking? What are we about if suddenly the sense of what we've been and where we're going starts to unravel? It can be very disconcerting to feel underneath that. You can feel a bit lost, a bit footless, a bit goalless. It can bring up some perhaps ambivalent feeling tones—anxiety, fear even.

So it's a very profound area to contemplate.

I remember when I was practicing in the monastery under Ajahn Sumedho at Chithurst Forest Monastery in the UK. We would do long retreats, anything from a month to three months every year. Sometimes they would be three-month winter retreats, and sometimes in the summer, six weeks of personal retreat. I was on one of these personal retreats, which I often used to feel like a bit of a failure at. I would notice that I practiced a lot better when there were a lot of people, a sense of sangha and holding. Left on my own, it was quite challenging, especially as a young nun with my mind bouncing all over the place. But I worked at it.

During one of these retreats, I had this moment when I was sitting late one night and the mind just stopped. What arose wasn't actually peace—it was just this enormous sense of terror and fear. It was very primal. What then arose in my mind was that I created a strategy: I had to actually face this down, this very primary fear. The structure of the self is often wound in with this energy of fear and desire, moving

toward something and moving away from something. When you feel that in a very raw sense, at a very energetic level, it's quite overpowering.

In my mind, and in the approach of the training in that style of practice in those days, there was this sort of warrior style. You just take everything on, head on. I had this idea that I should actually increase the fear so I could really practice with it—that I would take myself out into the forest and practice at night and scare myself to death and see where that went.

I had the wherewithal somehow to approach my teacher and just check if this was a good strategy. I thought he would probably be quite pleased. But actually he said he didn't think that was a good idea. He said that when these deep patterns come up, these deep reactions from the disintegration or deconstruction of what has been constructed and what we've relied upon, what you actually need is a lot of patience. Not to just push through and send your system into shock and overwhelm, but to be very patient and keep working with the core of the practice through samatha vipassana—calming and insight—and to let these states dissolve and fade away in their own time. You can't just crush what arises and what is difficult to be with.

That was a relief. I was let off the hook. It felt very true and very right and very good guidance for working at a deeper level, as we are doing now when we sometimes face not very easy states that start to arise in the space we have here.

The mind and the activity of mind—the mind in and of itself, the citta, the unobstructed citta, heart-mind—as Ajahn Chah said, is already free. It has a quality of awareness. In that awareness, conscious awareness, there is this quality of knowing, knowingness. Not so much knowing about things and cataloguing things through our filing cabinets of information. It's a knowing that exists before we know things as an object and have names, before we pull out of the interwoven nature of reality some discrete entity and have a name for it, catalogue it, and have a story around it. This is me, this is you, this is a tree, this is a bird, this is good, this is bad, and so on. Before we do all of that, the actual fundamental nature is just a pure knowing.

This word pañña, or prajna in Sanskrit, has within it the etymological meaning of a sense of before we know something. Wisdom is before we go out and objectify something. This pure state of knowing has an almost unknowing in it, a sort of unpackaging, stripping away of how we've designated ourselves in the world.

To turn and to rest and to recognize just the fundamental state of mind is in some ways the easiest thing, because it's our natural state. But in other ways it's the most tricky thing, because we are caught up in the activity of being shaped by what moves through the fundamental space of the awareness of the heart.

In samatha and vipassana, samatha is just beginning to calm some of that activity through what we've been doing: bringing attention to the body breath, the foundations. This is a very profound teaching. It's

also very simple. We might wonder, what's the higher path? What's the real teaching? But actually this is pretty core and essential and profound. It's the teaching and practice that the Buddha used on the night of his awakening.

It's the practice he taught extensively. It's the practice we come back to again and again—just this simple returning to how it is within breath and body.

As we do that, going a little bit beneath the cognitive frames, we have some ground from which the activity, particularly the vacī-saṅkhāra, the mental activity, can begin to settle to some degree. And this unification, as we've been practicing and talking about—the samādhi, beginning to taste some of the pleasure and the peace of feeling the body, mind, and heart unifying within awareness, suffused with awareness, with this fundamental nature of mind, and that sense of coming together, not being disparate, not being pulled all over the place.

So this samatha is one of the bedrocks of the practice. And it's based upon training attention to what is an object of awareness, which in this case is body and breath. It can be sound, it can be color, it can be sky, it can be candle flame, it can be mantra. But for our primary purpose, we are using the first foundation of breath and body, so that attention isn't just being dragged here and there but has a steadying point of contact.

As this samatha and calming is developed in this very patient practice—as we talked about, Ajahn Lee, the Thai Forest master, would say this is like that bridge that spans the fast-running river. You have a pillar at one side of the river and a pillar at the other side, and that middle pillar going down through the deep currents of the river. It's a bit like the middle pillar of samādhi among the three factors of the path, going right down through the deep currents of the mind.

It's not easy. It takes a lot of patience. It's a lifetime practice, because those currents are very strong, currents of the mind. And when we have some steadiness, that current actually gets more highlighted because we're not just following the momentum of it. But still, it's a very important aspect of the training—to train the mind breath by breath, moment by moment. And then we get caught up, and then how is it now? We come back and we start again.

In some ways, you don't really achieve it, achieve some great—I mean, there are the deepenings of peace. As Ajahn Chah said, "Peace, more peace, more peace"—the jhānas and so on, the deepening of steadiness and unshakability and absorption. But generally speaking, it's pretty fragile for most of us, as it gets interrupted and life crashes in, or the patterns from within emerge. But it's still very important.

Sometimes we don't even recognize how much samādhi is there. It's not always perceptible, because we're sitting in a field of it. So it's not just us—we're contributing to that field, all of us together. When we come here, we're supporting that quality of samādhi. But you notice it if you sit for a few weeks and then you go outside, you get on the freeway or something. You'll notice that the state you're in is different than

everyone rushing along, moving very fast. It's just hard to see here; you haven't got that mirror so much, and it's hard to recognize it. But there is a gathering that just happens from being present and being in this context, in this container.

In many ways, the deepening of samatha, samādhi, jhāna—this steadiness, stillness, absorption—is quite dependent upon the container: non-distraction, non-interruption, a certain ability to sit with the content of what's emerging without getting overwhelmed, a certain level sometimes of body health so you have some energy, some strength.

Some of the fruits from that: you can feel some more peace, perhaps pleasant abiding, some clarity, perceptivity. There's also the healing aspect of the path—very healing for the body, for the psycho-emotional dynamic of our feeling tone. It can be very soothing. There are many benefits from the samatha.

However, it's also dependent on these circumstances, and if you take away the container, you can feel the diffusion of that gatheredness. Often when people leave a retreat and they say, "I'm losing it," what they really mean is they're losing that sense of the container and that feeling of gatheredness. When the samādhi deepens, it's a very different quality, a different sense of time, a different sense of space—something slower, grounded, rooted. You don't feel so pulled around. And that can disperse with the impingement of contact and the world around, and also with the impingement of what emerges from our own patterning and the flow of the mind itself.

This is why samatha is always balanced with, and provides the ground for, the wise discernment—the dhamma-vicaya, the contemplation of dhammas, the investigation of dhammas, or what's sometimes called vipassanā—to inquire and to see into the nature of the mind and its activity.

Ajahn Chah would sometimes say that samatha is a bit like a stone you put on grass. You put that stone on the grass and the grass doesn't grow, and you think, "That's great, all the problems have gone." But he said if the stone gets knocked off and the right conditions arise, the hindrances, the dukkha, arises.

Another way that he talked about this: when he came to the West for the first time and saw Westerners engaged in meditation, he was quite interested because these retreat forms weren't really how they practiced in Thailand—they came more from the Burmese lineage. They didn't really practice these kinds of retreat forms so much. So he was quite interested in these ten-day, one-week retreat forms that people were doing.

But then he came up with an interesting observation. He said, "You Westerners, you're a bit like people that have a good lawyer. You get into trouble and then you ring up your lawyer to spring you out of jail." He said, "You're out there in the world and you get into trouble and you go off on a retreat. But you don't yet understand what gets you into trouble." You need to understand what mechanisms generate that sense of dukkha and struggle. If you haven't yet resolved or transformed or overturned the hindrances, you go

back and the conditions help you sort of get yourself together, but if you just rely on that peace from samatha, then you haven't got the complete picture.

Ajahn Chah would also say that there are two kinds of peace: the peace of calm, from samatha, and the peace of wisdom, which arises from insight. And the peace of wisdom is an unshakable peace. It is the unshakable deliverance of the heart, which is the ultimate fruit of this practice—the heart, the citta, the mind in touch with the world.

It feels, it can wobble and it can feel, but it's not completely flooded and shaken and overwhelmed with what is impinging upon our experience.

So we've already, I'm sure, been exploring and practicing these two complementary tools of what brings about freedom, stability, healing, and clarity. And they're not really that separate. Another image Ajahn Chah used is like a log. If you want to pick up a log, you pick it up by both ends. One end isn't really better than the other. And it's like samatha and vipassana—the two ends of the same log.

Or he said it's like a knife. If you want to cut through something, if you just have a blade with no strength, no back to the knife, then you haven't got the power to cut through, to see through the hindrances, the dukkha, whatever is catching us.

Or he said it's like a candle—this is another image he used often. Sometimes samatha is a bit like building a candle. We can build a really, really huge candle, but if we don't light it, it doesn't illuminate anything. We get peaceful and peaceful and peaceful, but that wisdom quality is perhaps not being nurtured. On the other hand, if we're just trying to light a candle and see what's going on but we've got no wax, then the flame just blows out and we get caught up in the patterning, caught up in our conditioning, caught up in our reactivity.

One thing that is difficult for many of us—certainly for me and many fellow practitioners I've known for years—is equating the sense of being more peaceful with things going well, with being good, and then feeling that disturbance means something's gone wrong, that we're a bad meditator. But actually, it's often the disturbance that activates the need for insight in meditation. In some ways, you could say the path becomes a path of allowing ourselves to be disturbed. Disturbance is the path. It's not in the way; it becomes part of the path.

When we can't control the state, when we haven't got the conditions, when we get sick or aging or we lose our faculties a bit, when we're not in a peaceful situation, we get triggered. And if we're just relying on the peace, then we don't really have any ability to deal with what is probably ninety percent of our life.

So the seeing into requires the breath steadying, but also opening the mind, opening the awareness. This can be a choice—we can sometimes just move in and out of that. Sometimes we're just developing samatha and really want to explore that, and that's a very good practice to keep working at. We might just say, "Not now, I don't really want to look at that state," and turn the attention back. Sometimes we do that

and it keeps rising. And so then it's an opportunity to explore what's arising, what's happening here. We change our attitude—rather than "this is disturbing me" or "distracting me," we explore this as an opportunity to contemplate this dhamma.

And the dhammas that disturb us, that we will be contemplating, will be within the teaching form of what's traditionally called the hindrances—nivarana. Just to mention these: I know we've heard about them a lot. But they still trick us, don't they? We still forget. We still get carried away. We still struggle with them. So it's really important to name these territories and realize that each of them is what we'll be working with every day until they're uprooted, until they're transformed, until they no longer trick us or overwhelm us.

The first one is very powerful. It's kama tanha, kama chanda—the energy of wanting, wanting something else. Have you experienced that today? There are different forms, and we'll look at some of the different forms of that tanha, that thirsting energy. The translation "sensual desire" is often used, but in this particular formulation, it's looking at the desire to absorb into a sensory experience. I think when we're in this kind of space with very little sensory stimulation, we really get to see that energy wanting something. This isn't about being a bad person or something being wrong—it's a dhamma, it's nature. When we identify with it and it becomes "me," then it becomes a sense of self and a struggle. But when it arises and we recognize, "This is the mind in a state of wanting, it's a dhamma, it's nature," then we can contemplate it.

This is sati sampajañña—mindfully bringing clear comprehension, mindful attention, contemplation, and awareness. How is this? How does it move? What are its narratives? What are the thought forms? And where does it take us? Then, not to follow it, not to follow that movement, and to feel the agitation in that.

So much of the practice is about containing these hindrances as they arise. That's where you need the strength—like the back of that knife or the wax of the candle. You need some steadiness to contain, especially if desire is strong, or its opposite: aversion, irritation. It can range from a subtle sense of just feeling a bit off to even rage. Something comes up—a memory, someone who upset us, something that happened—and we think, "I don't really want to deal with this. I'm here on my peaceful retreat." And it crashes in. And then, there it is.

And it's very painful. But to remember, as Ajahn Chah would say, desire, hindrances—this is the path. It's not outside of the path. It's actually building our path of awakening. The strength and the enlightenment qualities needed to support our awakening don't arise in a vacuum. They arise from working with the dukkha, from working with the hindrances. So it becomes, "Oh, okay. How then am I going to be with this?"

This middle way of not absorbing into experience and continuing to inflame it, and not repressing or turning away, but to tolerate, to contain. A really good way of working with these two quite strong energies—these first two hindrances—is to go beneath, to see the cognitive thought forms, how they

perpetuate. Those are connected with the sense of me. If you notice, within all those narratives there's a star character, which is me and my opinion about it all.

But we can also explore going beneath the cognitive. This is where the practice of body awareness is so important—into the body and the felt sense. How does this feel underneath? Not to do that to try and fix, but to just bring pure awareness there. Breath, attention. Breathing with the constriction, breathing with the fire, breathing with the discontent, breathing with the longing and the wanting, breathing with the lust, with the hate, with the rage, with the upset. Just feeling where it is in the body, and trusting—because you're not trying to fix it from the sense of self. We're trusting awareness, the fundamental nature of mind, which is connected with wisdom and intelligence and healing and transformation. So our job is very simple. It's not to sort it all out, but just to bring awareness to the point of contact where the hindrance is felt. Breathing there.

The same applies to dullness, though it's more difficult because we go dull, shut down, don't want to do it, don't want to be here. It's connected with aversion, and it can be psychologically profound—this sense of "I just don't want to be." It's an aspect of desire, the desire not to be. It's quite painful to feel, so we go dull. These are habits of shutting down, of not being fully embodied. The mind also has subtler ways of dullness—just sort of sliding into sleep when we're not necessarily tired. It's just the hindrance.

Being able to bring some inquiry to that, the energy of inquiry—"What is this?"—can help. Open the eyes, shift the posture, bring a little bit of energy to explore that state. It's quite hard to explore, actually. It's easier in some ways to explore something with a lot of energy, like desire and aversion. With dullness, it's more like, "Oh, where's the bed? I just shut down." But what we can do is not have a big ambitious project about it. We simply say, "Can I stretch my awareness a little bit around this state? Bring a little more attention, stay with that. Where is it in the body? How does it feel?" Before we just slide along with it.

Similarly with restlessness, which we can really feel. Restlessness and doubt—those two are very connected, the last two hindrances. Anxiety, insecurity, lack of confidence, not being sure. These kinds of worrying. This is often a default place we go to, just worry, anxious. It's connected with that doubt and the restlessness of mind. When the Buddhist lists talk about the ten fetters and the overcoming of each on the path of awakening, the maturing of full awakening, one of the last to go is restlessness of mind. So we're going to have to be patient with these energies, from subtle to quite coarse, to quite profound sense of doubt that projects onto the sense of self. "I don't know what I'm doing, why am I here, where I'm going. I haven't got a clue, I'm useless." Or "I don't know about all of this, I don't know what to do."

To be able to tolerate this is profound—to be able to tolerate doubt, to know that that which knows doubt isn't doubtful. It can be confident. It's important to see this is just doubt, mind in doubt, because it happens a lot. And it has this seduction—this feeling that I've got to come up with a plan, some clarity, be firm and sure. But it's okay not to know. Just tolerate that state. I don't know. But I know that I'm aware and I'm present. I'm just here, and that's enough. Simply here, watching and being with the activity of mind as it's

rising and passing, manifesting and shaping the sense of self within the fundamental awareness and presence of conscious attention.

Ajahn Chah spoke about this. When we have the experience of hindrances, when we find ourselves triggered and different states arise, feeding the activity of mind—particularly that which is difficult to be with—he said to know and watch your heart, and to know that it's pure. Its fundamental nature is pure, but these states come in and colour it.

the awareness, the heart, the citta. So he said, be like a tightly woven net—catch what arises and examine what's present before you react.

That's very good advice, by the way. How often do we react on strong emotion or feeling, and then we have to live with the karma of it and clean up the mess? So to practice with these states in this container, we have the space to really get to know very thoroughly how they operate within us. So that when we get triggered and they arise, we don't just get shaped and reactive and pulled along, but we can know: "That's desire, that's wanting. I can let it go, let it be. I don't have to be born into that." Or: "That's aversion, I'm really averse. Just be patient, just soften." Whether it's dullness or restlessness or doubt, agitation, worry, fear, anxiety, and so on—just to recognize that a moment of knowing these states just as they are is a moment of nourishing the seed of liberation. It's not a wasted moment. Sometimes these states can get more fierce before they begin to lose their intensity, before they lose their power over us.

This work that we're involved with here, it's not a magic wand, really. One sort of wishes it was. Take this pill—blue one or red one—and out of the matrix, boing! Even that wasn't an easy path. It's why it's called practice. So we just pace ourselves. We're in a long stream of practice and awakening. And as mentioned on the first night, from the text, the path activity in and of itself breaks up that which obstructs. And then the fruit of that path activity arises according to the Dhamma. We don't have to manufacture the fruit. We're tending the ground so that fruit can arise.

But it is important to recognize moments of the fruit, actually, because they're always here. We might not be in the ultimate jhana, but there's a little bit more peace. There's some more interest and inquiry into what's really happening here. What is this state? I'm really interested in this. How does it feel? I can be with this. I can breathe with it. And then perhaps a moment of really seeing through its density, its seduction, the sense of me-ness about it, and realizing: "Oh, it's Dhamma. It's just nature. It's not self. It's not defining ultimately who I am. It's anicca—arising and passing and pulsing and lacking any substance."

The Buddha said that once you're working with and seeing these hindrances, the fruit of that, as you become less entrapped by them—he said you're going to feel like someone who's free from debt. The heaviness, the sense that you owe something, that you're burdened by something, starts to lift. Or it's like being free from a sickness. You don't even know that you're suffering from this kind of sickness until it starts to lift and you think, "Oh, I feel pretty good. There's some space, there's some joy, there's some energy, there's some authentic sense of well-being, some clarity."

It's like being freed from prison. When we're caught up in the hindrances, it's like the mind has become imprisoned, has lost its true nature. Or it's like being free from servitude—you're not just being pulled around by this state and that state. You have choice, agency. "I don't really think I want to go down that route." That's what mindfulness will do. It will deliver us and give us more mindfulness, more choice. "I don't need to be pulled down there." And that's very liberating.

Or he said, it's like leaving a desolate territory. You've been a long time in a barren, desolate place, and you come to an oasis where there's a pool and coconut juice.

I'm elaborating now—I don't think that was in the suttas—but anyway, you have that feeling of enjoyment, pleasure, the pleasure of being alive. You're reclaiming your human nature: kindness, compassion, well-being, empathy, clarity. The spiritual faculties start to naturally emerge. We can divert them, certainly, but they are inherently present within this true nature of mind. They begin to become visible for us.

So little by little, whatever has been happening for us today, or if we've had any difficulties—never give up on yourself or this practice. Remember, that's part of the practice. Sometimes I can feel completely done in, lost and overwhelmed. But remembering that it's always possible, whatever is happening, to return again and again to this moment, this breath—we find our way back to the path, one breath at a time.

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