What Versus Why

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 53:58

As human beings, we seem to be very curious about why things happen. Many good things have come from this tendency. Civilization itself really owes its origin to this quest for why—science, technology.

We also seem to be particularly curious about why things happen to *me*. And we have a lot of experience, especially in this culture, I think, of exploring, intellectualizing, thinking about why things are happening to us.

Looking at our experience, looking at our life through this framework of why things are happening can yield some intellectual understanding about our experience, about the causes and conditions leading to our experience. And this can be helpful. Sometimes, if we're reactive—for example, if somebody says something that we feel is hurtful to us—we may know this person and know that it wasn't intentional. Having that understanding can mitigate our response, at least our outward response to the situation.

But sometimes we mistakenly think that this intellectual understanding will actually change our response, change our feelings about the situation—that we can, through intellect, through reason, tell ourselves not to feel a certain way because we see that it doesn't make sense. But actually, often this kind of intellectual understanding doesn't really cut through to the deeper aspects, the roots of our experience, what we might call—what I think the Buddha calls—the underlying tendencies of our experience. The latent tendencies.

It can help to tap into a different way of being, a different way of understanding our experience than through the thought process, through thinking back, understanding why things are happening. We have so much experience with thinking, with the understanding of why, with intellectualizing. We're very practiced at that. And we are much less practiced at an exploration, an understanding through *what* is happening as opposed to *why*.

The Buddha taught wise attention as a way to understand our experience. I'll read you a little bit from one of the suttas about wise attention. First he discusses attending unwisely:

"An untaught ordinary person does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he attends to those things unfit for attention and does not attend to those things fit for attention. This is how she attends unwisely: 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? Or else she is inwardly perplexed about the present

thus: Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

All of those questions—we could look at them as forms of "why is this happening to me?"

The Buddha goes on to talk about wise attention: "A well-taught noble disciple understands what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he does not attend to those things unfit for attention, and he attends to those things fit for attention. She attends wisely: This is suffering. She attends wisely: This is the origin of suffering. She attends wisely: This is the cessation of suffering. She attends wisely: This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering."

When I first read this—this is one of my favorite suttas—I didn't really understand so much what this wise attention through the Four Noble Truths meant. I thought it was just a reflection on the Four Noble Truths. But then, looking at it a little more closely, I saw what he said is: *This* is suffering.

This is the cause of suffering. *This*—what I am experiencing right now—is suffering. What I'm experiencing right now is the cause of suffering.

I think the sutta is saying that we can use the Four Noble Truths as a framework for exploring our present moment experience. Suffering occurs in the present moment. It doesn't occur in the past or the future. If we are suffering over something that happened in the past, what's going on is there are thoughts arising right now, in the present moment, that are creating the suffering right now, in the present moment.

Some years ago, I was an actress in a play. One night during the performance, I forgot my line. I tried ad-libbing, saying other things so that the other actors would realize, "She's forgotten her line, I need to jump in and help." After a few attempts, I realized they weren't picking up the cue. I ran out of things to say, and there was this gaping silence. The wall between the audience and the actors broke down. I looked out and saw everybody staring at me, waiting for me to speak. It was a very embarrassing moment.

For many years afterward, when something triggered that memory, I would feel the embarrassment all over again. On one three-month retreat, I remembered that moment many, many times. I got to really see what was happening. The thought would appear—I was on the stage looking out—and the feeling of embarrassment would come over me. I began to recognize that the suffering, the embarrassment happening there in my room, was happening right now. The conditions for it had occurred in the past: I had been on that stage, I had forgotten my lines, the embarrassment had happened then. But the suffering I was experiencing on the three-month retreat was happening right now. It was being constructed all over again, right in the present moment.

So not only does suffering occur in the present moment, but as the Buddha teaches, this is the cause of suffering—the cause also occurs in the present moment. The *why* occurs in the present moment. Why we are suffering, the direct cause of why we are suffering, happens in the present moment. When we can see this direct cause, the direct why in the present moment, our suffering can start to fall apart. We see it as just conditioned phenomena arising and passing. As Carol said this morning, "Empty phenomena rolling

on"—which Munindraji said many times.

Another example: in the early years of my practice, one of my main practices was observing my emotions in daily life. At one point, after a breakup of a long relationship, I was observing a lot of loneliness. In particular, I noticed that when I went to bed at night, I was lonely. This didn't particularly surprise me. I figured I understood why I was lonely going to bed at night. But I was in the practice of observing my emotions, so I just started noticing this loneliness as I went to bed. I would just notice it.

One night, as I was getting ready for bed, I noticed that the loneliness began when I set my alarm clock. I thought this was kind of odd. But I just kept going, kept getting ready for bed. For the next several nights, I observed this same pattern: as I set my alarm clock, the loneliness appeared.

One night, as I was setting my little digital alarm clock, I noticed a thought pass through my mind. I was with my ex-boyfriend in Disneyland, looking up at a marquee in Tomorrowland where there was a digital clock. I could see the connection between what I was doing and the memory—an associative link between the digital clock and the memory. I could also see that the cause of the loneliness was a reactivity to that memory: "Oh, poor me, all of those good times are over." It didn't actually have anything to do with, "Now I'm single, now I'm going to bed by myself," which is what I had assumed the loneliness was about. The actual cause of the loneliness in that moment was the reactivity to a memory triggered by a physical experience—seeing the clock.

The loneliness was there anyway that evening, but I was amazed at the way the mind could see how things were triggered, how things were caused. What amazed me even more was the next night when I went to bed—

I was setting the alarm clock, and of course the memory came back. The thinking about my ex-boyfriend came back. But what really surprised me is that the loneliness did not come back. And in fact, that regular every-night-going-to-bed-lonely stopped. It was as if the seeing of the link—the loneliness being a reaction to a thought—somehow decoupled the reactivity to that memory.

So the cause of my loneliness... I had thought that the cause was the whole history of the relationship and the breakup, but it was really just a reaction to a thought. That's all. That was the cause of that loneliness. Witnessing in the present moment what is happening, seeing that directly, can have a powerful impact on the deeper roots of our conditioning.

There's a distinction between the why of history—the "why me, why is this happening to me"—and seeing the why of the present moment. As I hope this example about the clock shows, the why of history had to do with a lot of "oh poor me, I'm single, I'm never going to be happy again, I'm never going to have a relationship again." But the why of the moment was seen in the experiencing of the moment. It was a thought, a reaction to a thought, the arising of an emotion—just this empty phenomenon rolling on.

So how do we look at what is actually happening? We've been talking a lot about this in the instructions.

This is investigation—investigating our experience, investigating the present-moment phenomenon of our experience. What is happening right now? Emotions, bodily sensations. Often we want to understand why these are happening. But again, looking at what is happening in the present moment reveals a lot of information that we're not as often attuned to.

We have this wonderful opportunity on retreat to really attune ourselves to what is happening in our experience. Looking at the bodily sensations, looking at the emotional responses, noticing what thoughts are triggered, when things happen, when they arise, when they pass away. Paying attention to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—a wonderful place to explore what is happening in the moment and to see how reactivity is born out of leaping off of pleasant or unpleasant.

One student came to one of my introductory classes a couple of years ago. It was the very first or second night he had come, and he told me that he was having panic attacks—a lot of overwhelming feelings of panic at just random times, not particularly traceable as far as he could tell to any reason. He was diagnosed with agoraphobia and severe panic attacks. Someone in his support group had suggested he go to an introductory meditation class, so he appeared at my intro class.

He told me about his experience. He was a scientist, trained in this exploration of cause and effect and asking why. Why are things happening? He could see that the panic attacks didn't really have any kind of rational root. So he would talk to himself and say, "Why is this happening? There's no need for this to be happening." He would try to use his intellect to help him ride out his panic attacks.

After listening to his story, I suggested, "I'd like to give you another question to explore. Rather than asking why or looking at the experience from the why side, see if you can just notice what is happening. Ask, 'What is happening right now?'"

He was quite remarkably able to do this quite quickly. He said that he noticed the tension in his neck, the tightness, the constriction of the breathing. Just staying with the sensations, the panic did not build. And after a very short time—a matter of a couple of months—the panic attacks lessened dramatically. He told me about a year ago that he hadn't had panic attacks in quite a while and has been free of them since then, through exploring what is happening as opposed to focusing on why.

When we look at the present-moment experience, this "what" of our experience, often the cause—the why of the present moment—reveals itself, as it did for me in the example of the alarm clock. Sometimes there can be many, many layers of present-moment causes underlying a particular experience.

On one long retreat at Spirit Rock, I was experiencing a lot of doubt in myself, doubt about doing long-term practice. "Why am I here? Why should I be doing this?" I was doing walking meditation, and this was plaguing me. The thoughts were just overwhelming me.

Why? Why? Why am I here? Why?

And I decided to see if I could just notice what was happening. It was primarily coming about through thinking. This overwhelming doubt attack was coming about through thinking.

So I would set myself in the walking to just do the walking meditation, focusing on my feet. But as soon as I saw a thought, I would stop and just notice what was happening in that moment—what the thought is, what the emotional response is.

I did this for some period of time, maybe twenty minutes, and I saw a number of different layers through this process of exploring the *what*. I started out with just this feeling of doubt, and then I noticed a fear of not measuring up somehow, of not being a good enough yogi. And underneath that—each time I would notice one of these thoughts, I would just note it, stop, feel the fear, and then go back to walking. Settle the thoughts and go back to walking. Then as soon as the next thought would arise, I would stop again. Often I wouldn't get more than one or two steps before the next thought would hit me.

After the fear, underneath the fear, was this feeling of unworthiness—that I wasn't worthy to be dedicating my life to this practice, having given up my job to devote my life to this practice. Under that was an insecurity about my financial situation. Under that was an aversion to that insecurity. And then there was a vulnerability. Just this feeling of vulnerability.

When I hit that feeling of vulnerability, it was like, *wow, this is truth*. And I could stay with that feeling. Just rest in that space.

This was a way to explore the layers of our experience through just looking at what is happening. What is happening right now?

Sometimes in this kind of exploration, the why of history is revealed. It's shown to us. A thought will appear that clearly connects a historical incident with the present moment experience. And that can be interesting, but it's actually not necessary. It's not necessary to uncover the historical reasons. What's necessary is to see what is happening right now—how the causes and conditions are coming together in the moment to create our experience.

Actually, if we look for a why, if we think about or try to find a why of our experience, it can lead us to conclusions that may or may not be true.

There's a strong interconnection between mind and body, particularly where emotions are concerned. Emotional changes often produce strong changes in sensation in the body. And strong sensations in the body can trigger or produce an emotional reaction. It goes both ways.

As an aside, just as an interesting confirmation of this, there's a study done by Paul Ekman and Richard Davidson. Paul Ekman is a great student of emotions, and Richard Davidson has done a lot of research on the neurological basis of experience. This is what they said about the connection between body and mind:

In the course of our research, we found something that surprised us. If you intentionally make a facial

expression, you change your physiology. By making the correct expression, you begin to have changes in your physiology that accompany the emotion. This was seen in both work on bodily physiology and some work with Richard Davidson on changes in the brain. The face is not simply a means of display, but also a means of activating emotion.

In other words, simply putting the face into a smile drives the brain into patterns typical of happiness, just as a frown does with sadness.

So bodily experience can produce emotional responses. I've often noticed when certain physical experiences come into the body, the mind starts trying to figure out what is happening and why they're happening. There's an inclination or a tendency to understand the meaning.

I've discovered in my own practice the tendency to assign an emotion to physical experience. Our minds scan our history to figure out, to assign, based on this bodily experience, what emotion we're having. And this habit of scanning, I found, sometimes assigns the wrong emotion.

I had one experience with this on another three-month retreat. I was waiting for an interview with Joseph, and as usual, I was—I thought at least—feeling anxiety.

The body was quivering. That seemed to be proof enough, and also I was in a context where I had been anxious in the past. You know, that kind of inner dialogue: "It's been three days, I haven't talked to anybody, what am I going to say? Is it going to look good?" All of those things that go through the mind. But mostly I was experiencing this quivering in the body.

So I was noticing this quivering, and I was noting "anxiety." I was using the note "anxiety." And the interview ahead of me went on for a long time, so I got to observe this for quite a while. I noticed, oddly I thought, that the anxiety didn't change much. That seemed strange to me because usually when I'm actually noticing what's happening in the moment and observing it with mindfulness, there's some shift around it. A little space opens up. But that hadn't happened in this case, and that made me curious.

So I started just opening up to what was actually happening in the experience. There's quivering in the body. And I very rapidly discovered that what was actually happening was rapture, not anxiety. After that, the sensations got very strong. The quivering became much more rapture-like.

So the body can produce sensations, and based on habit, we can scan and assign an emotion. We're in that mode of looking for meaning, assigning significance, asking "why is this happening?" It's helpful to just notice what is happening.

Sometimes also, I've found, a certain constellation of physical experience can be a habit in and of itself. It's like we're so habitually attuned to a particular state that the physical experience becomes habitual, whether or not an emotion is actually there. For instance, a feeling of contraction and heaviness around the heart might be sadness. Maybe, maybe not. It might just be a habitual pattern of the body without the

sadness necessarily being present.

So be willing to explore what our experience is without rapidly assigning a meaning or a "why" to what is happening.

There's a beautiful poem that speaks to this, by Fernando Pessoa:

The mystery of things, where is it?
Why doesn't it come out to show us at least that it's mystery?
What do the river and the tree know about it?
And what do I, who am no more than they, know about it?
Whenever I look at things and think about what people think of them,
I laugh like a brook cleanly plashing against a rock.
For the only hidden meaning of things is that they have no hidden meaning.
It's the strangest thing of all, stranger than all poets' dreams
and all philosophers' thoughts,
that things are really what they seem to be, and there's nothing to understand.
Yes, this is what my senses learned on their own.
Things have no meaning. They exist.
Things are the only hidden meaning of things.

We can also get seduced by looking for meaning around meditative experiences, not just emotional ones. Something happens in our practice—suddenly the mindfulness seems elusive. Why is that? What did I do wrong? We feel like we're a bad meditator, or maybe a good meditator, depending on what we're experiencing. Somehow it means something about us.

The way through any experience is simply to notice what is actually happening.

I had an experience with this at my first three-month course, where for a period of time the mind got very settled. It was pretty easy to be with the breath; the mind wasn't wandering much. Then I started noticing one day that suddenly the mind was wandering all the time. What happened? Why is this? What's gone wrong? But I'd had enough experience by that point to recognize: well, this is what's happening.

Just notice what is happening. And paying close attention to my experience, what I saw was that when I first sat down, the mind connected very easily with the breath, and very rapidly the breath got very, very subtle, very quiet. So quiet, in fact, that it almost disappeared. And it was when the breath got that quiet that the mind would wander.

I began to see that the mind had settled to a point where the subtlety of experience was stronger or deeper—the subtlety was more subtle than the mindfulness actually knew how to connect with. So I just would stay with it as long as I could, as long as I could stay with the breath. Then I'd notice the mind wandered, and I'd come back and just notice again. And over time, the mindfulness caught up with the

subtlety of the experience.

So it wasn't necessarily a problem that the mind had started wandering. It was an indication of something shifting in the practice. Just looking at what is happening, no matter what is happening—that is the instruction. What is happening right now?

I'd like to talk a little more about the cause and effect that becomes apparent as we look at what is happening in the moment—the why of the present moment getting revealed to us. As we see what is happening, it's almost automatic that we start to see the cause and effect nature of our experience. An image arises, a reaction to the image, an emotion following the reaction, another emotion following that emotion—and there is a chain. There's a clear link between them. The arising of one experience leads to the arising of the next experience.

As we start to see this cause and effect relationship, we see that it's really just impersonal experience, impersonal phenomenon. No "I" doing anything, no "me" actually creating the reaction, but just an experience followed by another experience.

This chain of cause and effect in the present moment is not deterministic. In the present moment, we also have the opportunity—choice can arise in the present moment. Choice of how to be with our present moment experience. And one of the most powerful choices we can make is to simply observe the chain of events that are unfolding, to simply witness what is arising with mindfulness. This witnessing can start to have a deep impact on these underlying latent tendencies, on the stream of unfolding experience.

I have another example that I'd like to go through with you, one that ties together many of these different things I've been talking about this evening—the different kinds of whys of experience, the why of history, the why of the present moment. It was one of my deepest habits, one of my deepest ruts in my mind.

I'm sure most of you have this sense of some pattern that's so deep, so deeply conditioned, that it's like a rut in the mind with a magnetic pull to it. If we get anywhere near this rut, the little ball drops in there and just rolls around. That rut is so deep it seems impossible to get the ball out.

For me, one of the deep ruts in my mind was self-hatred. Through years of therapy, I had seen or understood to some extent that this pattern of self-hatred was connected with a particular relationship in my life. So I understood that, although I hadn't seen any direct evidence of it. It just made sense—kind of like it made sense to me that when I was going to bed at night alone, I would be lonely. There was a recognition: yes, that makes sense, this is why this pattern is there. But the years of therapy hadn't really touched the pattern or the habit, that rut.

On one three-month retreat, something happened. I had noticed this feeling of self-hatred arise on many, many retreats. But on this particular retreat, it was very prevalent. And I began to see the more direct connection, the more direct link between that relationship and the present moment experience of the self-hatred.

As I described a little while ago, sometimes as we're observing our present moment experience, we can see an image or a thought from history that makes a clear link to our experience. I could see that this relationship was central. I actually experienced the centrality of that relationship to the self-hatred.

And I felt a huge opening around that. A lot of compassion came up for this person and for the suffering they experienced—suffering that made them treat me in such a way that I would end up with such low self-esteem. There was a huge release around that. And I actually thought that it would have some effect or impact on that rut in my mind.

But the rut was just as deep. It actually surprised me. The next time the self-hatred came up, it was just as strong. Because I felt like, wow, I had this real huge release around this—shouldn't this have done something?

What it did do—I would call that a psychological insight, that recognition of the connection in our present moment experience to a historical event. What it did do for me was allow me to be a little less threatened by the experience of self-hatred. I could see that it was a pattern of conditioning, so it was less threatening. There was less resistance to the self-hatred because of that psychological insight. That was a benefit.

But I still got to experience that self-hatred over and over and over again during that retreat. I would see it come, I would be in it, and sometimes it would be so painful that I couldn't do much with it but just feel the self-hatred. But I would see that it came and went. There were times when it just wasn't there at all, and then I would experience it coming back. Just watching it come and go, seeing that it was impermanent.

Then one day, one evening in the hall, Joseph was doing a question and answer session, and he talked about a technique for when we get really stuck in something. The technique when we're really, really stuck, when the experience we're having is so sticky and hard to see through—he talked about using a double note. The double note is contact and then feeling tone. So for me, in this experience, the self-hatred was unpleasant, and "contact, unpleasant" would be what I would note.

I just heard this instruction that evening. As I left the Dharma Hall, I wasn't particularly in that mode of self-hatred, but as I walked up the stairs, I felt it descend. And I felt powerless. It was so strong, and again, that rut was so deep—it's like there's almost no way to pull yourself out. But having just heard this instruction, I went back to my room and started seeing if I could notice the moment I felt any additional movement towards that self-hatred. Just contact, unpleasant. Contact, unpleasant. I tried to have that note come right at the moment when I felt that movement of "you're no good."

I usually used a little alarm to tell myself when a sitting was ending. My beeper went off at some point, but I was right in there, just noticing the movement towards this self-hatred. I realized, this isn't the time to get up. I'm just going to keep looking at this.

Maybe about ten minutes later, noticing contact, unpleasant, seeing "this is just a thought"—the ephemeral

nature of that thought was shown by looking at it just so precisely. Contact, unpleasant. The next moment, there was this moment of seeing the ephemeral nature of that thought: this is just a thought. The next moment, a split second later, the body was flooded with bliss. The next moment, the mind recognized: ah, this too is impermanent. There was a recognition that even though I had seen this, it didn't necessarily mean the self-hatred was gone. That was kind of the feeling of the bliss—"oh, never again, I've figured this out." But the next moment was just: this too is impermanent.

That recognition, that seeing into the ephemeral nature, the anattā nature of that thought, cut really deeply into that habit of self-hatred. It was like the rut went from this deep to that shallow in the space of an instant. I didn't trust it for years, actually. It was a long time before I felt self-hatred again.

But what I began seeing after a while was just this: the thoughts are still there. "You're no good." But the belief is what's been undermined. There are still tendrils of the pattern hanging out, and I think we need to watch for those tendrils. They can take root again.

So looking at what is happening, no matter what is happening—we often need courage to stay with present moment experience. It can be really frightening. It can feel very counterintuitive to stay with something that feels so threatening, like self-hatred. But we can witness suffering and its cause in the present moment.

Looking at what is happening in the moment can decondition our deep habitual tendencies, our deep patterns, the deep patterns in our mind. And it can open us, no matter what we're paying attention to. It doesn't matter what we're paying attention to. We can be paying attention to self-hatred. We can be paying attention to the most sublime states of bliss. What's important is noticing what is happening to them—what it is and what happens to it as you observe it.

This leads us to the discovery of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, of not-self. This is the path to freedom from suffering.

Let's sit for a moment.

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