On Meditation Method

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:05:22

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.

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