Mindfulness, Memory & Wisdom

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:02:25

Tonight I want to speak about mindfulness, memory and wisdom. We're going to explore mindfulness by examining how the Buddha speaks about it, looking specifically at one section from the Mahāsīhanāda Sutta, the greater discourse on the lion's roar.

Let me set the context by reading the beginning of the sutta:

"This is how I heard it. Once the Blessed One was living at Vesali in the grove outside the city to the west. Now at that time, Sunakkhatta, a son of the Licchavis, had recently left this teaching and training. He was speaking to the Vesali assembly: 'The Samana Gotama does not have any accomplishments transcending the human, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of cultivated ones. The Samana Gotama teaches a Dhamma hammered out by reason, following his own line of inquiry as it occurs to him.'"

The scene is Vesali, located on the north bank of the Ganga in what is now Bihar state or eastern Uttar Pradesh. Vesali was the capital of the Licchavi Republic, the largest of the old tribal republics that still existed during the Buddha's time. The political landscape then was divided between the new centralizing absolute monarchies and the old tribal republics. The Buddha himself came from one of these old republics, the Sakya Republic.

Sunakkhatta, being a son of the Licchavis, was an upper-class citizen of this republic and a member of the parisa, their parliament. They practiced a form of direct democracy, and he had the right to speak in the assembly. He had recently become disillusioned with the Buddha, decided the whole thing was worthless, and quit. Now, with the Buddha visiting, Sunakkhatta was busily slandering him in the assembly.

Notice how he calls him "the Samana Gotama"—using Gotama, the Buddha's family name, rather than "the Buddha" or "the Blessed One." Samana was the category of practitioners and philosophers that the Buddha belonged to. This form of address marks him as an outsider, rather like saying "Reverend Gotama." His criticism was that the Buddha "does not have any accomplishments transcending the human, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of cultivated ones"—in other words, he's not spiritually enlightened. He claims the Buddha "teaches a Dhamma hammered out by reason," suggesting he's merely thought up some theory and is spouting nonsense.

When Sariputta, going through the city, hears about this slander, he reports it to the Buddha. The Buddha then launches into this discourse—a lion's roar, a sīhanāda. A lion's roar is a statement of absolute certainty and conviction: this is the way it is. Here it concerns the Buddha's right to leadership, defending both his enlightenment and his authority as head of what had become a huge international

organization—the Sangha and the Buddha Sāsana.

This discourse occurs when the Buddha is already an old man, about eighty years old. In fact, he will die within a year. Sariputta is also elderly and will die before the Buddha. In this conversation between two old men, as the world changes in ways they don't appreciate, the Buddha addresses the subject of mindfulness and its relationship to wisdom, particularly in the context of old age.

The Buddha tells Sariputta: "There are certain samanas and brahmanas"—the two categories of philosophers and practitioners that existed; brahmanas being the hereditary Vedic priesthood and samanas being everyone else—"whose doctrine and view is this: 'As long as this good man is still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth in the prime of life, so long is he perfect in his lucid wisdom. But when he is old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life and come to the last stage, being eighty, ninety or one hundred years old, then the lucidity of his wisdom is lost.' But it should not be regarded so.

"I am now old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life and come to the last stage. My years have turned eighty. Now suppose I had four students, each with a lifespan of a hundred years, perfect in mindfulness, retentiveness, memory and lucidity of wisdom. Suppose they continuously asked me about the four establishments of mindfulness and that I answered them when asked."

Suppose they remembered each answer of mine, never asked a secondary question and never paused except to eat, drink, urinate, defecate and rest. Still, the Tathagata's Dharma teachings, his detailed explanations of Dharma and his replies to questions would not end before those four students of mine would be dead at the end of their hundred years. Sariputta, even if you have to carry me about on a bed, still there will be no change in the lucidity of the Tathagata's wisdom.

The Buddha's not taking any nonsense from these ambitious young teachers who think wisdom diminishes with age. He's talking about mindfulness and wisdom, giving this vivid image of four perfect students, each endowed with mindfulness, retentiveness, memory and lucidity of wisdom. They're engaged in conversation about Satipatthana, the very practice we're doing here. The dialogue flows back and forth continuously. Because these are perfect students, the Buddha never has to explain anything twice. They don't need clarification—they understand every answer immediately. So they're moving rapidly through the entire teaching.

The Buddha could speak about this practice for a century and still have more to say. This gives you a sense of the vast depth within this practice of mindfulness.

Let's examine these qualities the Buddha mentions and how they interconnect. First is mindfulness itself—sati, derived from the verb sarati, meaning "to remember." Mindfulness is fundamentally about keeping the present in mind. But what do we mean by "present"? The Buddha isn't speaking of clock time but of experienced time—an expanded present that, in a profound sense, is the only thing there is.

If I look for the past, I cannot find it. I cannot experience the past directly. I cannot experience the future. All I have is this present moment. This is simply the nature of existence.

Yet this present has tremendous depth. It is profoundly shaped by what has preceded it. The present is what it is largely because the past was what it was. Right now we're here together in this present moment—this particular situation unfolding. But why does it exist at all? And why is it precisely as it is?

Each of us has made countless decisions and performed countless actions over many years that have culminated in all of us sitting here together now. This situation is the product of years of choices, decisions and actions by each of us, as well as by the entire network of people who conceived the vision of building a meditation center in the Blue Mountains, who actually built it, and who continue maintaining it to this day.

When you truly look at it, there's this vast network of human interactions converging to create this moment. This present is what it is now largely because of everything that happened in the past. So this present moment contains enormous depth reaching back through time.

The fact that the present is shaped by the past is precisely what makes learning possible. Learning requires time to develop. Each person in this room has cultivated their meditation practice to a certain level. When I experience my practice now, what I encounter is this present event. But this present experience is the fruit of decades of development. It simply could not occur without that foundation.

When we examine cultivating mindfulness, this involves three closely related movements.

The first movement is the most obvious. This present experience—what's happening right now—must be clearly registered. We have to be face-to-face with it, maintaining direct engagement with the present. Of course, the difficulty is that we tend to be seduced by past and future, or by somewhere else, some when else. We keep being drawn away from this immediate reality. So first, we must cultivate the ability to remain present.

Secondly, this present experience must be held within the context that surrounds it. When I'm aware of something, this something exists within a larger field. For example, when I follow my meditation object, this object is part of a wider field of sensation—it doesn't exist in isolation. The knowing of this meditation object is flavored by the mind that knows it, and this mind is in a certain condition which influences the whole experience. The mind knows it in a particular way, so there's both breadth and depth involved. This experience now, whatever it is, is dynamic. It has already transformed into this, having been something else, and is already turning into something else. Nothing stays still; everything is constantly moving. Nothing is finished yet.

Thirdly, recognizing that this present experience moves through time, we realize that to truly understand it, there must be a continuity of engagement. We have to stay with it over a period of time if we are to actually understand it. This is where we encounter tracking—anupasana—following experience over time

while maintaining continuity of awareness and attention. This is how we develop the skill we've been discussing.

Let me offer an example. Imagine you arrive at your first meditation retreat, wanting to be incredibly spiritual, only to discover that sitting cross-legged and trying to remain upright is incredibly physically painful. You have no time to be spiritual because it hurts too much. This is not an uncommon realization when people begin meditation practice.

So you decide to do something about it and take up yoga. You research carefully and hear about a particular yoga teacher. She's been practicing yoga for thirty years, teaching for fifteen. She has an excellent reputation and runs wonderful classes. You sign up.

You arrive for your very first yoga class. They're doing basic postures. In the middle of class, the teacher says, "Everyone stop." She has a student demonstrate a posture and asks the class, "Take a look at this posture and tell me what you see."

Now imagine you're standing right next to the yoga teacher, with almost exactly the same view. You're both looking at the same person doing the same posture. Are you seeing the same thing? Absolutely not.

Even assuming your eyes function identically, you're not seeing the same thing. It's obvious. The yoga teacher is seeing a tremendous amount that you have absolutely no idea about. Yet you're both in the present, noting exactly the same object—except it's not the same object, or at least not the same experience.

The difference is that you bring twenty minutes of past to this experience, while the yoga teacher brings thirty years of past to this experience. And that makes all the difference.

This reveals an important aspect of mindfulness: mindfulness is memory. It's about our relationship to the past. Mindfulness involves both awareness and retentiveness—what in Pali is called dhāraṇā or gati. These translations come from Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Gati, G-A-T-I, translated as retentiveness, is the capacity to hold something in the mind—to be aware in such a way that a broader picture can emerge.

When we take up meditation practice, one of the things we discover is that much of meditation practice is quite mundane. We could even say tedious. And we tend to grow impatient with it. It's too ordinary.

All afternoon I've been sitting, walking, and it's like: breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, step, step, step, step, distraction, step, step, distraction, breathe in, breathe out, distraction, step, step, distraction, breathe in... God Almighty, what is this about?

What it is about—its meaning or any understanding that it contains—is something that emerges at its own pace over time. And so in practice, one of the characteristics that a meditator needs is the capacity to wait.

To simply wait until something happens that completes the picture. Ah, this is what it's about. Ah, this is what's happening.

Retentiveness is the capacity to do this, to hold something in the mind until some kind of understanding can emerge. But again, time is central.

And then we have memory—*dhiti*. This is another word for memory. And this is the capacity to bring out from the deep places of the mind what has been previously stored there. Now, memory here implies a response to present experience that brings with it what has been held from the past. In other words, the capacity to apply one's experience to present circumstances.

The example that I like to give is about the first time that I taught in a meditation retreat. This was back in the 80s. I was a monk and not long out of Burma, and I was visiting Wat Suan Mok in southern Thailand. This is Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery, and they had set up this program where every month they would run a ten-day retreat for foreigners—basically spaced out tourists and hippies.

By this particular retreat, the whole program had developed to the point where they had actually built a meditation center on the other side of the highway from the main monastery. It's a huge thing. As far as I know, they still do it—a ten-day retreat every month is an enormous commitment. And of course the language of instruction was English.

So the monastery was always on the lookout for anyone who was: a) ordained, b) spoke English, and c) within the past decade had been within five kilometers of a meditation center. Because if you had these three qualifications, they grabbed you and they threw you into it and you were a meditation teacher.

So I was conscripted, much to my alarm. And I was given the job of interviewing the meditators. There were at least two of us who were doing this. I remember there were two of us in the same venue. This was the dining hall—this big kind of tropical place with a waist-high concrete wall and then pillars with a thatched roof so the breeze could come through. On the side of the wall there was a concrete ledge which you could sit on. I was sitting on one side and this rather eccentric German monk was sitting on the other, and we were interviewing. I was very nervous because I'd never done this before.

I was not feeling very happy about it. Anyway, I was hoping no one would turn up, but someone did turn up to sit down. I tried to make friendly conversation, but they just wanted to talk about their meditation. And worse, this fellow wanted to talk about the problems that he'd got in meditation.

So he's telling me about this problem, and I'm sitting there wondering what to do. But it occurs to me: yeah, yeah, that happened to me. And so I say, "Well, yeah, that's familiar, that happened to me. Look, try doing this. It worked for me, it might work for you."

And the fellow looks happy and he goes off. And I think, "Phew, got through that one." But someone else comes. So it goes through the whole process again. I manage to say something because, you know, I'm in...

basically, any hole that you can fall into, I've fallen into. So off they go.

And somehow I managed to survive that first round. And I was really relieved.

But the next day I'm back again. And who should turn up? The same person who turned up the day before. And he opens up by saying some of the most fearful and alarming words that any meditation teacher can hear: "I did what you told me." And of course I think, "Oh no, why did you do that?" So I say, "And what happened?" And he says, "It worked." Another relief.

So it goes on, and at some point during this process it occurred to me that I know about meditation. And it took me quite by surprise. Because you know, as a meditator, what do we do when we meditate? We're wrestling with some problem. Something isn't right. So we're kind of wrestling with it. And then we've got that more or less patched up. But by the time we finish congratulating ourselves, there's something else which isn't quite right. So we're kind of patching that one up. We've got to do something else and patch that one up. We've got to do something else and patch that one up. So all the time we feel like we're behind speed. So we're thinking, "Well, I'm not very good at this. If I'm making progress at all, it's incredibly slow."

And what we don't realize is that each time we go through this process, we're learning something. But we're so close to it that we don't recognize it. And it's only later on, when somebody says something like, "Yeah, I was meditating but this terrible thing happened," that you realize, "Yeah, that happened to me. I was completely stuck there, but I did find a way through and you could try doing this." And you suddenly realize, "I actually know about this."

This is memory in the sense that the Buddha is talking about it. It's not that I'm sitting down and thinking, "Oh, what happened then? Maybe it's in the filing cabinet somewhere." It's just that there's a problem now, and out of apparently nowhere, suddenly, "Ah, I'll try this. This seems to be the right thing to do." And often it is.

So this kind of experience is familiar to anyone who has cultivated a craft. You look at it properly and you know what to do about it. And someone who doesn't know the craft can think, "Wow, that's impressive." But for you it's like, you know, it's no big deal.

And then we come to *pañña-veyatia*, the lucidity of wisdom. So you can see in these previous three, what's been happening is that an understanding has been developing over a period of time. Not quickly, but over a period of time, some kind of understanding has been developed based on the basic practice of mindfulness, which is tracking experience over time.

And then we have *pañña-veyatia*, lucidity of wisdom. Now this involves the capacity to discern the patterns and directions of what's being held in the mind. So it's more than holding data—it's the ability to navigate data, to use it in some way. So something has been experienced, something has been learned, but how well do we know our way around it?

So the Buddha's lucidity of wisdom is shown in this example by his capacity to discuss all the subtle nuances of Satipatthana with these four perfect students for a century and still there's more that he knows. So he knows a complex landscape in all of its detail. And he knows how to move around.

So, for example, let's say that we're living in the big city and we join a group or an organization that meets once a week in the evening. And let's assume that these meetings take place in a part of the city that we have never been to or rarely visit. And we're a bit concerned about how we're going to find our way there on the first meeting. But fortunately, a friend rings us up and says, "Look, I'm going there too. Don't worry about it. I'll drive you. I'll pick you up at your place and I'll take you there." So at the time allotted, car pulls up, step into the front passenger seat, off you go. And he takes you there.

Now let's assume another scenario, exactly the same, except just as you're leaving, your friend says, "I can drive you there this week, tonight, but over the next few weeks I'll be away and I won't be able to drive you again. You're going to have to make your own way there." And you say, "OK, no problem," and off you go. Now in both cases, you're sitting in the front passenger seat, being driven through the city to a particular destination. In both cases, you're seeing exactly the same landscape. Is there a difference in the quality of your awareness in the two circumstances? Yes.

In the first instance, it's simply seeing. You are present—right now I can see this, right now I can see that. You are in present moment experience.

In the second instance, you are certainly in present moment experience, but something else is happening. You're not just undergoing a series of events, but placing each one into a wider context, a wider landscape. If you didn't do this—let's say your friend was taken by surprise and thought he could drive you next week, but it turns out he can't, so suddenly you're driving there yourself—the experience might be something like: "Now here, I know we turned here, but did we turn left or right? Ah, that pub—I recognize the pub, but was it early in the journey or late? And that petrol station, that looks familiar, but did I see it on the left side or the right side?" There would be general confusion. Maybe you'd get there, but if you're tracking that journey, then you're looking at each event as part of a broader landscape, mapping something out as you go. You're creating meaning out of each experienced event by seeing how it fits into a broader pattern.

And this is the action of mindfulness. This is what mindfulness is all about. It's not just awareness—it's awareness over time, in the context of remembering the pattern of events, how things flow, how things fit together.

This is why there's an association between mindfulness and wisdom. Satipatthana, the cultivation of mindfulness, the establishments of mindfulness, is a wisdom practice. Often, instead of satipatthana, people will say insight meditation. Sometimes people say mindfulness meditation, sometimes insight meditation, and sometimes they get confused between the two. But this is why there's a close association between mindfulness on the one hand and wisdom on the other. It's because of its relationship to time

and the activity of tracking experience over time so that patterns start to emerge.

Mindfulness—the job of being mindful—is not just being aware, but being aware in such a way that wisdom can emerge.

This is why, for example, I talked earlier about the relationship to distraction. I suddenly realize I'm distracted, and it can be useful at that point to look back. What happened? Just to check, to see if I can see it. Now I don't spend time thinking about it—if I have to think about it, it's not there. But I might just look there and recognize, "Oh, that happened." And so it's like seeing a pattern. In this instance, this arose because of that. The next time something happens and I recognize I'm distracted, what's that? It might be the same thing, it might be something different. But I'm checking for the pattern.

As we go through this retreat, we are interested in the patterns—for example, asking the question: What's feeding this? This has been happening, but what's feeding it? Or what does this feed? There's an interest, a curiosity involved. How does all this unfold? How does it work?

The use of questions can be useful. When we ask a question of our experience, we don't think about it. If I have to think about it, it's completely useless. The question directs awareness.

Secondly, if I ask a question in the course of practice, the answer is completely irrelevant. What's important is the question. If it's a good question, it will stimulate something. Something will happen, something will become clear. The answer is just blah blah blah. But I can ask a question of my experience and then see something directly because the question aims awareness.

What we're talking about here is investigation, the second of the factors of awakening: dhammavicaya, investigation of phenomena. The way I see it, mindfulness has this very direct, earthy quality to it. It's like knocking on a door.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.

Each time I note, it's like bang, bang, bang. Let's say I'm going to visit someone and I have reason to be certain that they're at home. I knock on the door—bang, bang, bang, bang. But nothing happens. Just over there is a window. So I step across to the window and have a look inside. I can't see them, but I know they're in there somewhere. And so I keep looking in the appropriate direction.

The knocking on the door is like noting an object. There's a clear object—this is what I'm after. Looking through the window, the object isn't there, but I know there's something there. And so there's a direction to my awareness. This first one is like mindfulness and the second one is like investigation. Sometimes the mindfulness predominates and sometimes the investigation predominates, but they're both part of the scene.

If we have the mindfulness without the investigation, then we might become very mindful in the sense that we can creep about incredibly slowly and impress all our friends. We might develop very good

concentration, but we don't necessarily get any wisdom. There are people who manage to do this practice for considerable periods of time and don't seem to develop much in the way of wisdom. Maybe it's because the investigation factor is weak—the interest in and concern with the patterns of experience is not really there.

When we do this practice, we are learning to navigate our way through a landscape: the landscape of our own experience. We're learning to understand how all this fits together, how it works.

This first of all requires time. We have to give ourselves the time to acquire a skill. So don't be upset by failure. Of course there will be failure. Our old habits will reassert themselves again and again and again. But that's irrelevant.

I read in one dharma journal somebody's brief article, and I remember one bit from it. The writer said, "One of the basic qualifications for a person to learn how to meditate is the willingness to live with failure." I think this is profoundly true. For any new student who walks in the door, I think they should be questioned: Are you willing to live with failure? Because if you're not, you're wasting your time.

This willingness to live with failure—in other words, the willingness to keep at it over a period of time and give it the time for something to emerge—means slowly, gradually learning the craft. That involves applying a certain intelligence to the whole enterprise. There's also a degree of creativity involved in the practice. It's not just mechanically noting a meditation object that has been given to us by someone else. There's more to it than that.

By historical and cultural accident, I learned this practice in Burma. Burma is a very traditional and authoritarian culture in which obedience... I used to subversively think when I was at Mahasi Center that the two pillars of the Theravada are blind faith and mindless obedience. These are the two fundamental pillars of the most terrible of all the vadas: the Theravada.

They would agree with you. They would agree. That's the point. That's exactly right. As was explained to me, one of the signs of a good student is a good student never asks questions. I was told that when I visited a lay abhidhamma study group. It was interesting.

The mind state in the monasteries is medieval. The Sayadaw is up on the throne. What he's teaching you is what's in the books. You can check because the books are right there. And therefore it's the Buddha. And so that's it.

"Just believe it and do what I tell you. And no correspondence will be entered into." I remember one talk Upandita gave us. He was speaking to a room full of people who he had reason to believe would mostly end up being dharma teachers. And he was saying, "Look, you have come from other countries to Burma to learn how to meditate. You have come from other faiths, other traditions. And because you are bright and questioning and you have investigative minds, you have seen through the delusions of these false views that you were raised in. And as a result, here you are in this room listening to the Buddha Dharma.

Now you can drop all that because what I'm telling you is the Buddha's teaching and you just bloody believe it." He didn't say bloody, but that was the message. No more investigation. No more thinking. No more asking questions. You've arrived at the truth—just believe what I tell you. That's the attitude.

The odd thing was that in the midst of all this dogmatism, the actual practice that he taught was a completely open inquiry. It was astonishing how he could manage to somehow hold these together, but he did and he does. The practice itself is a completely open inquiry into the nature of experience, but at the level of concept the whole thing is totally shut down. In this culture that doesn't work.

And if we try to do it—and some people do because they're full of faith—it just gets locked down. You can get a whole series of nice meditation experiences, but really that's it. Life doesn't transform the way it's supposed to. This practice is designed to stimulate wisdom, understanding. So it requires this sense of investigation, play, creativity.

The weakness in our culture, of course, as Upandita also pointed out, is the absence of saddha—inadequately translated as faith. We, as a culture, tend to come to the practice overly cognitively and with an unwillingness to trust, an unwillingness to trust the Dhamma or the Buddha. And this really is a handicap. And it slows us down.

Both are important: saddha and paññā, faith and wisdom. We might talk about these later in the retreat. But in terms of the way that we actually learn the method, it's not about reproducing someone else's instructions. It's about taking the instructions and making them our own and finding a way to use them to investigate and navigate this whole inner landscape of our experience and get to know how it works—what it does, how it moves, the patterns of it, the rhythms of it. And this is the wisdom aspect of the practice. And as you can see, it's closely associated with mindfulness.

Faith is the heart aspect. It has to do, for example, with the commitment, the passion, the ardency. And it has to do with the opening up of the whole field of vedanā as well, to me. And it also has to do with the opening to possibility. The universe is a lot bigger than anything I think it to be. And the willingness to open up to different possibilities is an aspect of saddha.

One way of looking at it, a very traditional way of looking at it, is: once you get a sense of the Buddha then you recognize he actually knows more about what's going on than I do. So I think I'll trust his opinion on the matter. I won't necessarily believe it, but I will certainly trust him. I would want to find out for myself, but I would be willing to step out in that direction if he recommends it to be a good direction.

Which obviously increases as your practice develops and you see the Buddhist teaching. So you get a confirmation system going. You first recognize, particularly in this culture, first comes... You try it out for perhaps cognitive reasons. That is to say, mindfulness is popular, psychologists like it—how could the psychologists be wrong? So you give it a go, and you're prepared to give it a go. And then perhaps quite quickly you recognize, "Oh yes, something's happening. This has a real possibility," or it's already helped.

And so you have that little amount of saddha and then you take another step forward and it works, and so the wisdom develops and the saddha develops so that they relate to each other. And I think at some point there is a click, there's a shift in which the saddha extends beyond the wisdom. There's a willingness to trust which involves a willingness to leap into the completely unknown.

There are some people who seem to maintain a cognitive relationship to it. And this is always like a balance sheet: this amount of effort, this amount of investment—what result will I get from it?

And at some point, I think basically progress stops. It's like you can get so far with that kind of attitude, but then that's it. At some point, you've got to be willing to take the leap if you really want to go further. And you won't take that leap without saddha.

So it suggests the heart has more breadth than the mind - the heart can hold more. I would agree with that. The heart definitely holds more and goes deeper than any cognitive understanding. Cognitive understanding is always just catching up.

I remember one Dharma gathering on the mid-north coast. We used to have these discussion sessions at the end. There were three teachers: Christopher Titmuss, the main teacher; Subhana Vazaghi; and me. One time, the question came from the audience: "Is Buddhism a religion?" Subhana answered first, explaining, "No, no, no, we're studying the mind." Christopher gave a similar answer. When it was my turn, I said, "Well, I don't know if Buddhism is a religion, but I do know that I speak to Buddha and sometimes he answers." That's how I feel.

Could you expand on that - when you speak to Buddha, he answers?

Sometimes. Mostly he just listens. But sometimes he answers. And when he answers, he always says really good stuff. He's been very helpful over the years.

I'm not sure if I'm tricking myself, but to me there's a close link between the imponderables and faith. Some people are unwilling to go along until rebirth and nirvana and everything is explained perfectly according to how they can currently understand things. Whereas anything I don't understand gets bundled in the imponderable - which in my case is an enormous basket of stuff, not four things but forty million. This mental approach allows faith to continue because it's like, "Yeah, he'll tell me later," or whatever. It may or may not be revealed. Do you agree that's the link between cognitive understanding and faith?

Yes, it's one way of approaching it. It's one way of recognizing the limitations of the cognitive. Sometimes in retreat discussions, it's like a traffic jam where a person is wrestling conceptually with something I've said, which they don't conceptually get, and they just won't let go. Everything jams to a halt because this one person won't let it go until they hear a verbal formula which can be appropriately filed away within their cognitive structure.

When I say, "Look, don't worry, just forget about it. Maybe in five years, maybe in ten years it'll click, maybe not. You don't have to understand it," they respond, "No, that's not good enough. You've got to give me the formula so I can tick the box."

So there's a limit to cognitive understanding. But there is an understanding which goes beyond that, and that understanding is part of saddha. Saddha is not belief - not belief in a doctrine because someone says it's true. It's the heart's recognition of what is true.

It's rather like falling in love. You meet someone and you know this is the right person. Now imagine if you have that experience, but then an appropriately trained psychologist brings you a checklist requiring you to write down the data which supports this radical conclusion. Of course there isn't any. There's no way there could be. It's just impossible.

Saddha represents a different kind of knowing - a knowing through the heart rather than through the head. What we've been talking about tonight, this paññā, paññā-vimutti, the liberation of wisdom, is essentially the cognitive aspect. Saddha is the heart aspect. But when both are mature, they come together. They're like two sides of the same coin.

When we go to those deep places in meditation - I don't know how you respond - but those places are beyond the cognitive, aren't they? Being cognitive doesn't work there. There are no thoughts, no concepts. But if you want to explain it to somebody else, then it becomes cognitive again. We need to be able to drop all that conceptual framework and go, and I think saddha actually carries you there.

And the cognitive is bound up with language. So it's socially necessary. When the Buddha was awakened and he first thought—or it was suggested to him—that he should teach, he didn't want to because he thought there's no way that anybody's going to understand this. There's no way I can put this in words. Absolutely no way.

But he struggled and he found a way. And that's one of the reasons why the tradition reveres him—that he actually managed to do that, so that others can actually get a glimpse of it. But even then, of course, it's not just the words. You structure attention in a certain way. You do a certain practice. And then, ah, that's what he's talking about.

"Isn't that the function of the insight knowledges—to develop faith?"

Yeah, I think that's one function of the insight knowledges. It develops both wisdom and faith. And some—it's like udayabbaya ñāṇa, arising and passing away—faith is very strong there. But of course faith can be challenged in the dukkha ñāṇas.

So if you don't have the faith, if you don't have the saddhā, then you have a much harder time. And in this culture, this is a problem for people who do go through the insight knowledges. In this culture in particular, I think, they lack the degree of saddhā that you would have if you were Burmese.

"Interesting. It's saddhā that gets you through those."

"I've never experienced this dukkha that you speak of."

Let me ask you one simple question. Has it ever been horrible, horrible, horrible? If the answer is yes, you've experienced the dukkha.

"Strangely, when you said before that to meditate one has to have the willingness to live with failure, my hearing aids and my misperception—actually, I heard you say to meditate you need to have the willingness to live with faith. That's what I heard."

Interesting.

"And I translated that as trust and confidence. Because I know what you mean."

I think it's quite true. I mean, that's what you've ended up saying. You've also said that you have to have a willingness to live with failure, of course. But you also said that what drives us—we don't have a conceptual understanding of what nirvana is, and the reason we continue is because we have faith in that. We can see that we have confidence that there's something—there's freedom from suffering. That's why we have the willingness to meditate.

There's also, actually related to this, the problem of secular mindfulness. A lot of the propaganda in favor of mindfulness is all the "hallelujah brethren, this will solve all your problems," and it completely ignores the dukkha aspect.

"Absolutely. And people are in for a rude shock."

Well, they're already—I mean, can I just go off a little bit? They're already doing that now. I'm going to write a paper on it because there's already articles coming out—bad press about mindfulness now—because people are experiencing dukkha ñāṇas. They're experiencing negative side effects. There's "the dark side of mindfulness." Listen to all the articles—"dark side," "bad press." When you pay attention to experiences, what happens?

"Many years ago I was on a ten-day retreat with Sayadaw U Janaka, and this very new yogi asked, 'How does one get enlightened?' And he replied, 'One has to be able to know disappointment.' I thought that just really struck a chord with me."

I was reading through some of the websites and articles on the dark side of insight, checking it out and seeing what they had to say. And it was very obvious that there was a major lack of faith, a major lack of any appreciation of the devotional aspects of Buddhism, a lack of appreciation for things like the brahmavihāras as practice—reverence, faith, those religious-type aspects that I think keep the heart stable and keep the heart open and malleable and soft.

When you are facing dukkha, it's the heart stuff that's described by the Buddha as—is it appamāṇa,

immeasurable, boundless? Whereas all the cognitive stuff is never described as boundless. It's always the qualities of the heart that are described as potentially boundless.

So I think that the religious aspect comprises the protective practices that keep you balanced.

The use of the word "religion" opens up a huge minefield. Well, you know, I'm in robes. I don't know how to say it otherwise. We'll grant you that permission.

It's delicate territory to negotiate. But we seem to have wandered off the point. I've forgotten what the point is.

So, thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

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