Tracking Choice

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 52:51

We've been going through the four Satipatthanas. We talked at first about the body, with different exercises there. Then we explored briefly with vedana, with feeling. Now we've started on citta. Yesterday we used thinking as meditation object. Thinking is normally used as a secondary object when it becomes a distraction. Not many people use it as a primary object, as a grounding object, although some do. They are unusual.

When we talked about vedana, we discussed this whole elemental realm of affect from which comes what we do, the movements of the heart. We also talked about the role of cetana—choice, decision, intention. Today we're going to speak more about tracking choice or intention as a meditation object, as an important part of the citta.

First, a bit of background. The Buddha has a number of technical terms that center around the concept of choice or intention or decision. All of them are about the direction that we send the mind in. We've already spoken about the way the Buddha uses the image of the path. That's obviously quite important to him.

Every path has two characteristics. One is someone has been there before. You can't have a path unless someone's already been there. So path implies a tradition going back into the past. One image the Buddha uses is the story of someone who's off in the bush and discovers an ancient path—overgrown, unused for a long time but obviously once used. So he follows this path and discovers this abandoned city, then goes back and recommends to the king that they clear up the path and restore the city. The abandoned city is Nibbana and the ancient path long forgotten is the path rediscovered by the Buddha.

So path has this sense of someone else having been here before. But equally, as that story points out, path has direction. A path leads somewhere. This sense of direction is really crucial for the Buddha.

You have terms which revolve around this sense of direction. For example, sankhara, particularly in the five aggregates, the khandhas, the five bundles. Sankharakkhandha represents the stream of impulses, desires, fears, and so on that flow through the mind—the stream of choices or intentions, what we are moved to do at any particular time. They're called constructions or formations because these are the main constructive or formative influences in our lives.

When we look back as adults, we can see that what we've been doing is constructing a life—this life that each of us is living. We've been working on it for a long time. We might not be particularly pleased with the end result, or we might be very pleased with the end result, but in either case, what we've got is

something that we've been working on for a long period of time. We've been working on it through the choices that we've been making. These choices are sankharas, constructions, because they construct our lives.

In the Eightfold Path, the second factor is sammasankappa. Sometimes this is translated as right thought—traditionally the most common translation in the older translations. It could be translated as right intention, could be translated as right aim. I translate it as right aspiration. There's no exact English equivalent, but in every case it refers to the direction in which we send the mind.

In a broader sense, particularly if you look at the major decisions that we make in our lives, we send the mind in a certain direction. This is what I'm going to do. This is where the heart and the mind are headed for.

So I go through school and come to a decision that I'm going to go to university, and then I'm faced with a fundamental choice. I could study something totally useless and pointless like economics or law or business, or I could study Buddha Dharma. Which one will I do? Depending on which decision one makes, one heads off in a certain direction. That direction will have a lot of influence. I choose a particular career stream, let's say, and then I have a particular group of friends and associates.

I have a particular group of elders, seniors, teachers, and bosses. I discover there are certain things I should learn, other things I should simply keep up with and know about. There are certain kinds of conversations I will have with these people, certain fashions that I will quickly hear about, certain things that I discover are approved of or disapproved of, encouraged or discouraged. My life starts to be shaped in a certain way.

Alternatively, if I make the wise decision and study Buddha—though there isn't much opportunity in Australia to study Buddha at universities—then my life will be formed in a different way. And in the process, I will become a different person.

Then you get another term: *adhitthana*. Anybody who's done Goenka knows all about *adhitthana*. This is resolution or determination. This is a deliberately created, even forcefully created intention, choice, or direction—a determination. In terms of meditation practice, perhaps force is the wrong word. So I might make a determination: "I'm going to sit for an hour without moving." That's a determination, though it's not really forceful. If it's forceful, it's definitely not going to work. But a determination, a resolution: "I'm going to do this."

The most famous one is the Bodhisattva's resolution just before he sat down at the Bodhi tree: "Let flesh and blood dry up. May only bones and sinews remain. I will not move until I have attained my goal." When I think of that and I look around at the meditators... I shake my head. Life is full of contradictions.

In Burma, as I said, there are heaps of different methods. I discovered one of them when I was practicing at Mahasi, which is Sayadaw U Janaka's place just north of Rangoon, not far from the main highway. At

some point the place was visited by a group of people from a neighboring meditation center just up the road, and I was invited to go and visit. So we piled into a taxi and headed north up the highway, then turned off to the left.

There was this enormous place—it was huge. At that time of year, it was largely deserted. Apparently it's full to bursting during the *vassa*, the rainy season retreat. Looking around, the kinds of people who were there were quite different from the kinds of people you see at Mahasi centers. At Mahasi centers you see middle class and upper class people. In this place, there were more lower class, working class, peasant-type people.

The practice there—this place was founded by an arahant who in the early 20th century was a local bandit. He used to go around robbing people, and his wife got concerned because she thought that he was going to head for a very bad rebirth. So she tried to convert him to religion.

The way that she did it was through a connection to a famous teacher called Sun Lun Sayadaw. He was a farmer who got religion. The only meditation instruction he got was from a fellow villager who had been to a retreat, who said, "Oh, you just note body sensation." So this farmer decided, "Right, body sensation, that's it." Complete *adhitthana*—he just noted body sensation all the time and started developing concentration. But feeling he had to go further, he dropped out from being a farmer and went into the forest and just sat. He would sit for hours, days, just noting body sensation.

If you ever try it, apparently it's a very good meditation object. What you do, if you want to try it today—let's say as soon as this talk is over, until lunch—just sit completely still. At some point body sensation will become strong, and it becomes a good object. So this is the method.

This Sun Lun was what we would call middle class, but not highly educated. He drew his audience from that class and taught in a very simple way. One of the ways in which he taught was by creating cartoon books—graphic novel-type things with lots of pictures and captions on how to do this meditation practice, so that people who weren't particularly literate could read it, and certainly not intellectual.

Anyway, the bandit's wife gets one of these comic books and she says to her wayward husband, "You really should take up meditation practice. Here's how."

He gives him the book. And he looks at the book. Now this guy is completely illiterate—he cannot read the captions. But he can look at the pictures. So he studies the pictures, works out the meditation method, and starts doing it.

Pretty soon he's abandoned being a bandit. He's also abandoned his wife. And he's living in the local cemetery, sitting on a grave. What he would do is generate a bit of samadhi by forced breathing—hyperventilation—and then just sit for hours or days at a time.

In the local area, people begin to notice that the bandit is no longer banditing. People begin to gossip:

where is he? And it turns out that he's sitting for hours or days at a time on top of a tombstone in the local cemetery. Now, in any civilized society, what would you do? You'd call the police or you'd call the local mental health team. But what do they do? They go and feed him and look after him.

After two years of this, he's an arahant—fully awakened. So he creates this meditation center.

If you go to this place, the first thing you do is sit down and start hyperventilating. If you want a decent bit of concentration, you do it for a couple of hours at least. Then you drop it and just go into whatever's left—body sensation. If you want a halfway reasonable sit, it'll be a twelve-hour session. To go into the hall and come out after three hours—that's pretty wimpy. You're obviously not serious.

Now, if at the end of twenty-four hours you haven't moved—because you're being monitored—people will come and feed you water. Particularly if you're there for several days, you'll be washed and hydrated and looked after. So you don't have to worry while you're sitting. This is intensity sitting.

I went into the hall on a normal, quiet day. They have these enormous loudspeakers, and they play dharma talks from this original founder, which I couldn't understand because it's all in Burmese. But what you'd associate with listening to a dharma talk would be something like gentle instruction about peace and calm. But the sound coming out of these loudspeakers was shouting: "You've got to sit there! Don't move! Hold on! Keep going!" The loudspeakers are made of metal—really tinny.

Apparently this is hugely popular. But to do it, you have to be incredibly physically tough. And looking around, these people are. People who spend their lives working in the fields—they are tough. We're pathetic physically in comparison. "It hurts a little bit"—that's the standard attitude of the Australian meditator—but there's none of that nonsense there.

This is adhitthana. This hyperventilation is yoga—it's pranayama—and it is very effective for settling the mind. It's fantastic, if you could do it. But it didn't take long for me to figure out that this wasn't for me. And in fact, it wasn't for foreigners.

They had only had one foreigner who had actually practiced there. They were hunting for others. That's why they were interested in me. I said, "You've got the wrong person."

Let me ask you something: has anybody other than the original enlightened master of that tradition ever been enlightened since? I presume so—I don't know. I mean, there are lots of enlightened people in Burma.

To clarify what hyperventilation is: it's deep breathing, deep and fast, getting the diaphragm going like a bellows. "How come you don't faint?" someone asks. Well, you can faint. Some people do, but what usually happens first is you get tingling in the face, or trembling. If you want to experiment with this, I advise you to do it in your rooms—so if someone doesn't come out of their room for a couple of days, well... *laughter*

So this is adhiṭṭhāna. But again, it's about setting a direction and putting energy behind it.

Finally, we get to the word cetanā, the most commonly used one, usually translated as "intention." I prefer to translate it as "choice."

I don't like the translation "intention"—I think it's far too weak. In English, if you say "intention," it's coherent to say that one can act against one's intentions. We have the saying "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." In our cultural context, that makes perfect sense. But in a Buddhist cultural context, it's incoherent. If hell's over there and you're going in that direction... what? It just doesn't match.

Intention seems too general for me. Choice is specific. For example, I come down here and enter this room with the intention of giving a good talk—but choice is specific. Right now I choose this word. Right now I choose that word. Right now I choose to cut off this completely irrelevant conversation about hyperventilation and change the subject! *laughter*

So intention can be very broad, but choice is quite specific. What the Buddha is talking about is something much more specific rather than broad.

"Patrick, in English they have the word 'volition.' What's the difference between intention and volition?"

Volition would fit too with cetanā. Sometimes you see it. Saṅkhāra, as the fourth aggregate, is sometimes translated as volition or volitional formations. So volition would also work—it means will, voluntary action.

Voluntary, yeah. Same root, I presume, as voluntary.

So for the Buddha, chetana goes very, very deep. That's another difference between our sense of intention and the Buddha's sense of chetana. Intention goes to a certain depth and then it stops. But for the Buddha, intention goes really, really deep.

For example, the intention to think. Some people, when they meditate, are bothered by thinking. In fact, they would go so far as to say, "If only I could stop thinking, then I could meditate."

If you become a Dharma teacher and you simply point out to them, "All you have to do to stop thinking is to decide not to," what you would be telling them is the truth. Are they likely to be happy with that? No. They'd probably get angry with you. "What are you talking about? I'm not choosing to think. It's happening to me. I don't want to think. My volition is not to think. My determination is not to think. What the hell are you saying to me?"

Well, I wouldn't quite put it that way. But the fact is that if a thought arises, it's because there's been a choice to think. Now, depending on what you mean by thought, when we're playing with thought, people are saying mental contents arise, images arise, cognitions arise. These appear to arise spontaneously, but we go in and grab one of those and we turn it into something. That is a stream of choices. As soon as we choose, as soon as we drop the choice, the thinking stops.

Was there an intention at the very birthplace of the thought, or just sort of after the proto-thought? That would be a very interesting thing to look at. As far as I can see, the mind simply throws up. That's anatta, right? That's often given as an illustration of anatta—not-self. The arising of... the birth of it. Somebody said, "If it wasn't anatta, why would I be thinking all this stuff? I wouldn't be thinking, you know, 99%..."

But that's the other thing which people find very weird about the Buddha's teaching about choice: choice itself is anatta. It arises through conditions. There's no one choosing. This is why some people will insist there is no such thing as free will in Buddhism—because what they're saying is there's no such thing as someone who has a will which is free or otherwise.

But there is choice in the Buddha's teaching, and this choice goes extremely deep, much deeper than we would normally think it goes. But it too is just another conditioned phenomenon. It comes and goes depending upon conditions.

You can see it, for example, in addiction. If someone is caught up in an addiction and then you give them helpful advice—"Why don't you just stop? Just say no"—then this advice might not be seen as helpful, because from the subjective point of view, "I'm not choosing this; this is choosing me. I'm under the grip of something."

But in fact, it is a choice, because otherwise it would be impossible for anyone ever to overcome an addiction. But people do. Circumstances reach the point where the person decides, "That's it, I'm not doing this anymore." It may have to be extreme circumstances for the conditions in which that choice can arise, but ultimately that's what it is. It's a choice.

That choice has to be cultivated. If you're recovering from an addiction, you can feel each day that you've got to make the choice again, and again, and again, and again. The choice sets direction—your life will head in a certain direction because you're making these particular choices.

So the Buddha says, *cetanā* is *kamma*. Choice is action. The Buddha has a particular interest in this aspect of the heart-mind's activity because when we talk about *cetanā*, we're talking about that part of our experience that we can do something about. That's why it's so absolutely central.

Someone might ask: The choice of the addict—that's an act of will. It seems like an oxymoron to say that choice is a product of dependent origination. It seems so deterministic. How can you have choice if you have this process of dependent origination? Isn't it an act of free will to reject one's dependency?

This is why the radical nature of the teaching of dependent arising strikes us as so strange from our cultural perspective. We think, "How can that be?" But for the Buddha, *cetanā* is like anything else—dependently arisen.

In your sense of cause, you seem to have a model where one thing determines the result—what Aristotle calls the efficient cause. In Western philosophy, that's usually how cause is understood. But notice how in

the Buddha's teachings, people often talk about causes and conditions. The Buddha has a broader sense of cause.

The basic model is found in this little two-line verse that appears again and again:

"When this is, that is.
From the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, that is not.
From the cessation of this, that ceases."

That's his teaching in a nutshell. It's about this and that—one phenomenon, another phenomenon. When this is, that is. When this is not, that is not. That's not causation in the European cultural sense. That's association.

Let me give you an example based on a story someone told me years ago when I was doing my PhD at the University of Queensland. A friend spent time on Stradbroke Island with the traditional owners. One day they were sitting around, and out of the blue, one of the young men said, "We should go fishing tomorrow because such-and-such fish will be biting off the north head."

My friend had the presence of mind to ask, "How do you know?"

The guy looked at him as if he was a complete idiot and said, "Didn't you see that flock of birds flying south just now?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, at this time of year, when those birds are flying south, those fish will be biting off the northeast head."

He's not saying that the birds flying south causes the fish to be off the northeast head. But where you have this, you have that. When this is, that is. When this is not, that is not. This is what we would call association, but for the Buddha it was part of dependent arising.

And he says, "From the arising of this, that arises. From the cessation of this, that ceases." That's more cause in our normal sense.

For the Buddha, everything is subject to this except the unconditioned—*nibbāna* itself. And that includes *cetanā*. There's always something associated with *cetanā*. For this choice to be made, there has to be something else happening that supports the arising of this.

If I want to change this, then I change that. If I can change that in a certain way, this will not arise. So no matter what it is—I'm in the grip of an addiction and I decide, "I think I'll just have one more." Now that decision is accompanied by a lot of other conditions.

Another principle of this is there is no single cause and no single result. They don't exist. You get a whole complex bundle of causes and conditions, and the result is a whole complex bundle of results. So nothing is alone. That decision was supported by a whole series of accompanying circumstances. If I can chase the right thing in that bundle, then the decision will be, "I think I won't have another one." That's the way it works.

There's a whole different way of coming at it. It's got a lot to do about the relation with time too, because the Western mind seems serial. While this associative thing is a broad spectrum, a sort of matrix of things. So you get conditional relationships which require time, which are diachronic, and you also get causal relationships which are synchronic.

For example, when we talked about vedana, where you have contact, you have feeling—it's not that feeling comes along later. So that's a synchronic relationship, not a diachronic relationship. Whereas you might talk about if you're a good little meditator, you'll be reborn in heaven. That's a diachronic relationship. It requires time. Both forms of relationship work, including in the Patthana where the result comes first and the cause comes later.

It seems to me the very first power factor has a lot to do with the causality of choices, which is the view—right view, wrong view. And your view, not in the small, but the broad—your worldview, the matrix of conceptual frameworks that you're in—is very much the causal condition for choices. And as you get more information from Dhamma talks or from people around you, then that changes, your view changes, and then the choices that can be made arising from it change.

I don't think it's an accident that samma sankappa and samma ditthi are linked. So cetana, choice. So getting to know it from a meditator's point of view is very important—becoming sensitive to the arising of choice or intention. Thanissaro translates cetana as decision: "the decision to act," which I think is quite good.

If you're looking for it as a meditator, how does it present? How do you know that you find it? Actually, if you do the classic Mahasi method, then noting intention is an important part, and they usually present it in walking meditation first on the grounds that it's easier to find in the walking.

I have to confess that when I went through this classic Mahasi training, this is part of the training that I found incredibly frustrating because I could never find intention. Just never found it. And it was really embarrassing.

In Burma when you go for your interview, it's kind of lined up and it's very assembly line. So you listen to the people who are just in front of you. You get to know several people's practice because you're in the room at the same time. Sayadaw U Janaka really used to emphasize intention. Part of the questioning in every interview would be, "And are you getting intention in the walking?"

And the meditator would say, "Yes."

And Sayadaw would nod in satisfaction.

"Next, are you getting intention in the walking?"

"Yes, very good."

"Next, to me, are you getting intention in the walking?"

"No."

"Please, try harder."

I just never got it.

There was one time when I was doing walking meditation early in the morning before breakfast. And suddenly and completely spontaneously—I wasn't looking for it—there it was.

I was walking down the hall and there was this cascade of intentions. It wasn't one per step—nothing so gross, nothing so crude. It was this flow, like a waterfall of little golden intentions. Hallelujah! And it just flowed down, flowed back up again. And it's never happened again. Not once.

I could find intention in the mind. So I've had to work on intention because it's always been so obscure to me.

How does it present? To me it presents in either two ways. It can present as an impulse—either physical or mental, so either impelled by body or impelled by mind. For example, the impulse to scratch, the impulse to look at something, the impulse to reach for something, the impulse to listen to something. This morning when I came out into the staff room for breakfast, I won't mention names, but I did hear voices from people who are apparently meditators speaking. And so there was an impulse to listen. The impulse to think.

So it can present as an impulse, or sometimes it presents as a decision between possibilities. There's a moment in which, well, I could do this or I could do that, and I'll go for that one. You might see it, for example, when you're meditating and you suddenly realize you're thinking. I could keep this going or I could go back to the meditation object. I'll keep going. It's right in front of you. Suddenly there are these different possibilities and I'll take that one. It's over in a nanosecond but it can be quite clear.

Kim, are you raising your arm for a purpose? Or not? I could embarrass myself for heaping on more seconds. I'll just check and see if anyone's looking. And of course they are. I find that everyone's looking at me all the time.

We can see it in changes in body posture. Let's say I'm doing walking meditation and I'm standing at the beginning of the path, and I'm about to move. How do I know I'm about to move? Or I'm coming to the end of the path and I'm about to stop. How do I know I'm about to stop?

You can see it in terms of changes of body posture. One obvious way to do it is when the posture hurts and you decide, I want to move to get comfortable. This is where an adhiṭṭhāna might be useful. You could set an adhiṭṭhāna, a determination: I will not move. And then that makes the impulse to move really clear. And then you can just—ah, there it is. Of course, at some point you move, but getting to know that impulse and the decision is useful.

In the walking, it may be easier in the non-routine movements, like stopping, turning, starting, and also in the distractions.

"What was that?"

"Patrick, in the example you gave when you were doing the walk and you had all those intentions arise for you, like a cascade of them. What were some of the other ones other than lifting, placing?"

"Well, there was no conceptualization like that. That kind of conceptualization would have been too crude."

"Or the pre-verbal impulse?"

"Yes, pre-verbal."

"You said there was a cascade of them. I'm just wondering what some of the others might have been."

"No, just movements."

It's like every little bit of the movement was accompanied by its own intention. It was like walking through water. It's quite strange. But it wasn't me doing it, it just happened.

You can see it in distraction. The mind is clear and it's on the meditation object. Now because it's on the meditation object there is a whole series of choices to keep it there. And then suddenly the mind decides to go off into habitual thought or habitual anything. At some point you get that impulse, and that's the manifestation of the choices. So to have a look at that impulse.

One way of playing with it, if you're doing it in the walking meditation, is you've got your track standing at one end, and you make the adhitthana, the resolution: from here to the end of this track, I will not think. And then you just walk. Now you may or may not think during this course but if thought arises you're more likely to catch the impulse to think. Another variation would be, if that's too ambitious, from here to the end of this track I will catch the very first arising of thought. And so you catch the moment that it pops up and along with that you might catch that initial impulse to think. At the end of the track you stop and then you reflect on what happened, and you review the experience.

Turn from here to the end of the track, either I will not think or I will catch the moment that thought arises, and then you just meditate normally. But you set yourself up to be alert to the arising of the thought, and so you can catch it very quickly, and you may even catch the intention, the decision to think.

And again, this is another way of working with thought. If thought is a problem, it can be very useful not to have the attitude of I'm going to smash it with a hammer and suppress it, but rather I'm going to find the impulse to think.

Some people, the classic way, of course, in the walking meditation is the impulse, the decision to lift the foot, the decision to push the foot forward and the decision to drop the foot. And you notice one of the weird things that can happen is if you're really, really on the intention, you're paralyzed because it doesn't arise. It doesn't like the spotlight. I find that interesting. So if someone's standing completely still for long periods of time, they could be doing standing meditation or they might be tracking the intention to move. You don't quite know. If they've got one foot up in the air, that's a giveaway.

A few games you could play with it. The intention to think I find really interesting. That's an intention I can catch. I can't find the intention to walk, but I can find the intention to think. And this, one of the things that's important about this is it's all about aim.

All of these exercises are exercises in aim. So instead of aiming the awareness at the thought stream, for example, aim at the stream of choices that produce the thought stream. It's this very subtle shift in the aim. Instead of tracking the movement, aim for the stream of choices that produce the movement. Again, it's this shift in aim. Very subtle.

Tracking mind especially, working with the mind, is always a matter of refining aim. So, for example, not the sensation, but the painful tone of the sensation. Or not the painful tone of the sensation but the aversion that arises because of the painful tone. These are little shifts in aim of the awareness. Not the content of the narrative that the mind is producing but the emotional flavor of the narrative. And again it's just a little shift in aim of pointing the awareness somewhere else.

When you work with aim, for example in tracking choice, even if you fail, you succeed. Because even if you don't find what you're looking for, because you're practicing your aim, your mind is getting more precise. So, for example, and this has been my experience, you might have the intention or the resolution to do walking meditation and to follow the intention to move rather than the movements. I find I don't get the intention to move. I fail. But the movements themselves become a lot clearer because the aim is getting better.

So if you do these, treat them as exercises in aim, and it doesn't matter if you don't hit the target. Your aim is getting better anyway. And as such, it's very useful. So it's always useful to refine your capacity to aim awareness as accurately as possible, especially when you're working with the mind.

That is sammasankappa. Right aim, right aspiration, on the microscopic level. So on the macroscopic level, it's what will I do with my life?

On the microscopic level, it's will I know this or that? Will I send the awareness here or there? So sammasankapa is right... Sankapa is aim or intention, the second path factor. This is Upandita's

translation. He was the first one who said this. He said this can be seen as right aim in the context of meditation. It does fit. And again, path, aim, direction—they all fit together.

The Buddha is very strong about this. Sometimes the discussion comes up about obsession with goals, and I pointed out the Buddha doesn't talk much about goals. He talks a lot about setting a direction and aim, and this is part of that. But getting to know one's intentions or choices or decisions and how they come up from the unconscious, how they bubble up, is extremely useful for getting to know oneself and for what one is doing with one's life.

This is all in the area of karma—the choices that I make, the decisions that I make. What conditions my choice to do this? Why is it that I always choose this? What's conditioning it? What's feeding this?

So working with choice or aim is all about uncovering that whole morass and bringing it up, bringing it to light. Once it's uncovered, then there's the possibility of doing something else. The thing about habitual action is that there seems to be no choice because I don't see the choice. But if I see the arena of choice, then there's the possibility of something else.

I think when the Buddha talks about freedom, this is what he's talking about: that in any given situation, in this situation, I have a range of possibilities. There's something I can do about this. But to have that full range of choices, I have to be very clear about what's happening in the depths of the mind. What are the possibilities of choice? What's conditioning my normal choices? What's behind it? What's accompanying it?

Any questions or comments?

Okay. Thank you very much.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.