Restraining the Senses: Indriyasaṃvara Practice

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:09:49

Yesterday we were looking at the structure of attention. We've been talking about the difference between the active and the receptive aspects of the practice. In the active mode, awareness is actively sent out to seek the object of awareness and hold it. In the receptive mode, awareness is simply sensitive and the object comes to us.

We talked about the way Mahasi expresses this distinction. He talks about noting and noticing. Noting is the active aspect—we go out. Noticing is the receptive aspect—we let it come to us. Yesterday we practiced with a kind of halfway house, where we send the awareness out and study the object but we also cultivate a sensitivity towards the state of the mind that's doing it. In the final exercise we were holding the attention steady but allowing different things to come and go through that.

We're playing around with the structure of attention, and today we'll take it another step further. We'll go back into pure noticing, pure receptivity and playing with that.

The particular way that we're going to do it is something extremely basic. These kinds of open awareness practices that we discussed yesterday you find throughout Buddhist traditions. In Mahayana there's a fair amount of marketing about how highly advanced they are. Dzogchen, Mahamudra, Shikantaza—these are presented as very high-level, advanced practices, and obviously if you do them, if you're not enlightened, you're well on the way.

The way we're going to play with it today is one way that the Buddha talks about this in which it's not an advanced meditation practice. In fact, it's not even a meditation practice. When we do this exercise today we will not be meditating. You will not be establishing your meditation posture.

What we're going to do is indriyasaṃvara—restraining the senses. This is such a foundational practice that when the Buddha talks about it, he places it not in meditation—bhāvanā—but in sīla. If you look at the texts on the gradual training, restraining the senses comes just before the beginning of formal meditation practice. Apparently the original context would be that if you ordained as a monk or a nun in the Buddha's time, before you started your meditation practice, during your boot camp training, this is one practice that you would do. This would prepare you for meditation practice.

This is how the Buddha talks about it. He's describing the practitioner and talking about the relationship to the six senses:

"On seeing a form with the eye, she does not hold on to its themes and features. Since if she left the eye faculty unguarded, evil, unwholesome states of longing and sorrow might invade her. She practices the way of its restraint. She guards the eye faculty. She undertakes the restraint of the eye faculty.

"On hearing a sound with the ear, she does not hold on to its themes and features. On smelling an odor with the nose, she does not hold on to its themes and features. On tasting a flavor with the tongue, she does not hold on to its themes and features. On touching an object with the body, she does not hold on to its themes and features. On knowing a phenomenon with the mind, she does not hold on to its themes and features, since, if she left the mind faculty unguarded, evil, unwholesome states of longing and sorrow might invade her. She practices the way of its restraint. She guards the mind faculty. She undertakes the restraint of the mind faculty."

The whole thing revolves around themes and features, and the relationship with themes and features. In Pali, this is nimitta and anubyañjana. Nimitta is usually translated as "sign" and we've already talked about it with that translation. Here I've translated it as "theme"—I think I got this from Ṭhānissaro—and I think it fits well when we consider how the senses operate.

If you think about the eyes and pay attention to what they do, you'll notice they're constantly scanning the visual field. They're quite active: check, check, check, check. They're very sensitive to movement. There's a bit of movement and the eye goes there: What's that? What's that? What's that?

The theme indicates the general impression of the sense object when we first notice it—what's distinctive about it.

What draws us in? This "what's that" response sets the stage for deeper engagement.

Features are the details that appear when we go in and examine the object more closely and start to chew it over, trying to get a sense of what's going on and extract something from it. Both themes and features pull us into entanglement with the experience, and we react to it. Vedana comes in. We respond to it—we like it, we don't like it. We want to do something with it, get something from it, or lose something through it. We become entangled with the sense experience, and this is called the unwholesome states of longing and sorrow, which is basically craving, tanha.

We've talked about how this works in seeing. Something will grab the eye as it scans the field, then hold the attention. Just now, as my eyes were scanning the audience, they struck René's orange sock. Bang! There was a moment when the eyes fixated on that orange—the theme. Now let's say this really grabbed my attention and I start to examine it. Then come the features: "That looks really weird. It totally contrasts with the sober black and grey of everything else. I wonder if it was an accident." I start to chew it over, and the mind begins to work the experience—liking, disliking, interest, disinterest, "what's in it for me?" I start to get entangled with it. You can see how the process works.

You can observe this with the eyes regarding beauty and ugliness. The eyes scan the field. If they strike

something perceived as ugly, they react: "Ooh, what's that?" and get entangled—"It's awful." Equally with beauty: "Oh, what's that? That's really nice," and we start to get entangled.

For the Buddha, the senses are active, going out and scanning their respective fields. Something strikes the sensitivity—"Oh, that's of interest." That's the nimitta, the theme. There we get drawn in and start chewing it over. The Pali for this process is anubyanjana—features—and the whole mechanism is called indriya samvara, restraint of the faculties.

This works the same way with all the senses. Take the mind, for example. Thoughts constantly arise—bits of mental stuff that the mind keeps throwing up. Then the attention goes to one of these and seizes upon it. For instance, there's an image of something that happened, something that might happen, or something that is happening that shouldn't.

In other words, something irritating. And the awareness goes bang, straight to it.

It has been known—I'm sure it doesn't happen in this hall—but it has been known that meditators in meditation halls often have their minds stimulated in this way by the behavior of their fellow meditators. These are advanced and highly experienced meditators. I'm sure no aversion has arisen regarding the behavior of our fellow inhabitants of this meditation hall. But if it did happen, you would notice how there'd be something arising first of all in one of the physical sense fields—hearing or seeing most obviously, smelling as well. You've got to tell me about this later! And then in the mind, thought arises.

Now this grabs the attention. This is the theme, and the theme here would be one of irritation: "This should not be happening." And the awareness would go to that and start to expand it and turn it into a story. "What the hell does he or she think they're doing? Where do they think they are? Were they born yesterday? This is supposed to be for experienced meditators." Blah blah blah blah blah. And this story of irritation and aversion begins to unfold.

Now you notice that when this happens, we fill in the details, and then there's a particularly juicy bit and we move on. Then we stop and we go back and we chew over that bit again because that was really good and that got us really riled up. Then we move on and there's another particularly irritating bit, so we come back and chew over that. So this chewing over the experience—this is the anubhyājana, the features. The theme is the initial impression, what draws us in. And the features are the way that we chew over it. And the more we chew over it, the greater the agitation within the citta.

The features are the details, and we often find ourselves going back and chewing over the same bit because it's particularly juicy. Having experienced a bit of that myself, I could just speak for myself and say it gives me an enormous sense of satisfaction in two closely related ways. One is the satisfaction of being right when everyone else is wrong. So it's pleasurable—there's a pleasure in that. But also I feel more real when I'm doing that. And in certain circumstances, depending on how angry I am, I also feel very powerful. There's a sense of power that comes from this.

The craving for existence includes craving for pleasures.

"Can the theme for the mind be a rejection of something else rather than an attraction?"

Yes, but the attention goes to that rejection. So there's an attraction to the rejection. We're talking about the movement of the senses.

Any other questions?

Now, not holding on to themes and features—what does it mean in practice? This is a practice of radical relaxation. Basically, if I look at this whole process of themes and features, all of it involves work. It's active. Think, think, think, think, think. Look, look, look. Like, like, like, like. Dislike, dislike, dislike, etc. It's all active—I'm doing it. Actually, after a few hours of this I feel quite exhausted and I need to take a break.

Not holding on to themes and features is just relaxing. So this practice focuses on the work required to maintain this entanglement. It's active. It's energetic. It's too much work. I'll just let it go. I'll just drop it and relax.

So we learn to receive whatever comes through any of the six senses. Accept it. Relax. Let it go.

This practice is one of not doing anything, and what I discover as soon as I start to do it is that the determination to do something with the experience is really strong, so it keeps coming up. But as soon as it comes up, I recognize the doing and I drop it, and I just relax. Does that make sense?

So this is what we're going to play around with, with just three of the senses. Now we're doing this according to Buddha's instructions, so it's not meditation. So do not take up a meditation posture.

You can stand, sit, walk around, lie down—basically do whatever you like. I'm restricted to this area because I've got the recorder, so I won't be wandering around. And also, do not close your eyes because we're going to work with seeing. It's difficult with your eyes closed—you kind of miss a lot. Some people like to look out windows and whatever. Basically, we're not meditating, so just do anything.

And relax. Just relax. Don't be doing anything. Just relax.

Open your awareness to the body. Don't work to focus on any particular part of the body. So just feel the body. Maybe the body awareness is kind of moving around. Let it move around, just spontaneously. Just feel the body. Don't do anything. Just be here.

When you feel awareness moving towards an object to do something with it, relax. Don't do anything. Just be.

Are you seeing? Bring awareness to your eyes. Relax your eyes. Receive sights. When you find your awareness moving towards something to look at it, relax. Come back to your eyes. Don't look, just see.

Are you hearing? Bring awareness to your ears. Relax your ears. Receive sounds. When you find your awareness moving towards something to listen to it, relax. Come back to your ears. Don't listen, just hear.

Are you thinking? Bring awareness to your mind. Relax your mind. Receive thoughts. When you find your awareness moving towards something to think it, relax. Come back to the mind. Don't think, just know that there are thoughts.

You can go back to meditating now.

Katie, you look exhausted.

"It is extremely difficult. That's quite a common reaction."

"I thought if you hadn't told me to do it, it was the middle of the day, dead smack, I think. But it isn't. Getting the effort right is... Did you do any sloth and torpor?"

"I didn't, but I realized that's not quite the point. So I resumed this, but the not doing of things is quite difficult for me anyway."

Anybody else? Anybody else have difficulty?

"I noticed a little reluctance at some moment when I saw something and I had the impulse to go there, and I thought, 'No, I'm not supposed to do that. Let it come to me.' So I didn't have the experience of going to the thing, and that felt strange. But I was a little... I wanted to do it."

It felt like a loss not to do it. And I had a sense—well, that's my thing. You know, that's what I do. And I can't do my thing. Anyway, I could simulate it with that feeling from waking up, from sleep to waking up. When you're slowly coming up from sleep. Yeah, that's the only way I could manage it. The mechanism of the eye, because I was lying down, always wants to get a depth of focus on something. It's sort of the way the thing works. So I had to sort of simulate a kind of blurry, relaxed eye.

When you say you simulated it, does that mean you were doing it?

I was doing it, yeah. But if I hadn't, I would have focused on something. If you hadn't done it, you would have done it—you would have done something else. That's one of the things about this exercise: it is so hard to drop doing.

I have seen this as well. It's so automated to, like you said, pull focus on something. But with hearing and thinking, I train myself to be able to sort of—I think—just let it kind of roll in without having to attach to things. So it's difficult to do it with sight, but the hearing and the thinking was easier.

Easier. And that's, you think, because of prior training? Or maybe because of the mechanism of sight and what it tries to do.

So you're not sure, in other words.

Yeah.

When I did a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita many years ago, there was a riddle he kept posing that I didn't quite get at the time. He was saying something like, "What is it when the mind doesn't go out or doesn't come in?" As far as I understand it now, it is what we're talking about. It's not going out, going onto anything. It's not coming in internally. That does describe what we were exploring, by the extent we manage to do it. But it wants to. It definitely wants to. One or the other.

Did anybody find a sense of ease?

Yeah.

Tell me about the ease.

Well, I started by accessing my inner lazy sloth. And every time an object would come up, I'd think, "Oh, I can't be bothered." And it would be as clear as clear. And I'm like, "Oh, I can't be bothered. I'm just going to chill." And then I thought, "No, I can't even be bothered to chill because that's doing something." And so, you know, I thought, "Oh yeah, not doing, just being." And yeah, that's all right. It was very relaxing. I feel very relaxed.

Good.

I found the hearing easy because I've got really strong tinnitus. I've just trained myself over the years not to go there as a meditation object. But the other senses were harder.

What about mind? Not thinking, but just knowing that thoughts are there. How did that go?

That was the easiest.

That was the hardest for you? What was the easiest for you?

The headless way kind of thing, and it just flows where you're just aware—it comes through you.

It's interesting that each sense modality is easier for different people, probably because you've been practicing it. I suspect you've been practicing it with thinking, hence easier. But it's difficult when we're not used to it. Like anything else, we can train ourselves. But the thing about this particular form of training—it's a training in not doing.

And when I do not doing, basically what I do is I set myself the task of noticing any doing. It's like I seek to become sensitive to activity. And as soon as I notice it, I let it go. Like we were talking about this morning with stretching. And sometimes I can and sometimes I can't let it go. But the project is: notice activity, notice doing, and when you notice it, relax.

So it's a constant letting go and relaxing. The awareness becomes, in my experience, very acute because the mind and the senses are constantly doing. It just becomes very clear. I find it especially interesting in the mind.

We did this as I said—don't meditate—because I'm presenting it partly the way the Buddha presents it. But I also do this as a formal meditation practice. I will sit down in the meditation posture and my project will be to sit there and don't do anything. And as soon as I notice myself doing something, drop it, relax.

I find—actually I found this here—when I start doing this practice, I become acutely sensitive to posture. Because if the posture's out, the body's tightening. It's working. And I become aware of that. The only way that the body can relax is if it comes back into balance and then can relax. So I find this practice makes me very much aware of posture, because that's the only way that the body can minimize its doing—by being balanced.

When I move, if I do this in walking meditation, the movement tends to become graceful for the same reason. There's minimum doing in the movement. Mind becomes peaceful because there's minimum doing, but it's not a particular samadhi state because I'm not trying to do samadhi. I'm not doing anything. But everything starts to calm down, and it's a wide open kind of awareness, which I find quite interesting.

"So if something grabs your attention, like with the looking, I was scanning the room, trying not to look, and Buddha, every time I passed, grabbed me like the impulse was there. Look! So it's like catching that before it happens?"

You catch it when it happens. It's like you notice the activity of it. What you focused on here isn't the object, but the activity, the work involved. So it caught me and said, oh, no, we're not doing that. So you might keep your eyes in the same direction towards the Buddha, but you just relax. And it does come out as a soft focus that people often experience. Sometimes people say the eyes go out of focus, but certainly the focus becomes soft.

Sometimes people say, for example, looking out the window, when they look, everything's quite clear and sharp, but with this, everything becomes a bit blurry because they're not... Yeah, and that's another thing which can happen. Peripheral vision becomes more open.

"It strikes me, Patrick, that we are doing this in our practice anyway, and maybe that's part of the reason why we get more energy. After a while we get that really very clear sort of energy which to me is different from any other energy that I experience."

Yeah, this is like we're picking particular aspects of attention and how the mind is structured and just working on that particular aspect. We're doing this consciously, whereas it's kind of in my practice.

"I think one of the difficulties I had relates to something that Marion said, when she said, do we do it before? And you said, no, you catch it when you do something like that. I think I was trying to prevent it."

Yeah, so you were actively trying to prevent action. You were doing to prevent doing, which is, of course, another form of doing. But it does show you how deep the doing goes. "I'm not supposed to be doing, so I better do this." So it becomes incredibly complicated. And sometimes people do experience this as just being mind-bogglingly complicated. But it's complicated because we haven't let go of the doing. Once you let go of the doing, it's like, ah, there couldn't be anything simpler.

You can use this as a formal practice, and when I read about these advanced non-dual Mahayana approaches, usually this is what they're talking about. But it's also very good for daily activity, where you're not doing a formal meditation practice and there's nothing to do except—let's say I'm walking from here to the hall—there's only one thing I have to do and that's to walk from here to the hall. But if I'm paying attention, I notice actually that's not enough. The mind, the senses have got to do lots of other things along the way.

Well, actually, I don't have to do any of that. I can just relax and walk to the dining hall. That's it. Nothing extra.

And when I notice the determination to do something extra, oh, no, too much work. Can't be bothered. Drop it. Just relax. So it's quite simple. It's radically simple. And when you hit it, it's really nice because it's just relaxing. I just don't have to do any of this.

But it's tricky because I find myself trying to do this. It sort of clicks in on a long walk sometimes. Absolutely. And it's all just moving through space. Something is. That's how I feel after a retreat—I'm just walking around, not having to meditate. So you can relax the effort, but all of those mental qualities you're cultivating during the retreat, they're operating. So it's like you're getting the afterglow. But here, it's like try to tune into it during the retreat.

And you notice that—I've been talking about how the Buddha presents this before meditation. I've waited a week before presenting it because it's easier to get a sense of it when you've had the momentum built up through the practice.

The context that the Buddha talks about with this is especially with the alms round for the monks and the nuns. So the monks and the nuns ordain and they go off, they live in a sheltered workshop where they can focus on their meditation practice. But the way the Buddha set the system up is once a day they have to engage with lay society. And so that's the danger time.

When you do that, don't just relax. You're not trying to push the evil lay society away. You're just not getting involved. You just relax. Which is very interesting. Faced with sin and temptation, what should you do? Just relax. Sin is just too much effort.

That's a very interesting teaching. Lucky you. That's the secret of my virtue—a lazy man's virtue.

It's strange to be receiving and not to be saying thank you. Thank you. Oh, actually, no, don't put that in

my bowl. You're not supposed to do that. Just receive it. Don't look at them, don't say anything. I find it very, very odd being on that. It's very interesting.

And that's the other thing. When sensory restraint is presented in meditation retreats—the way I've worked in Zen and in Theravada—it's being presented in the context of a retreat in exactly the same way: don't look around. Keep your eyes down. Don't listen to anything. Create your own little bubble and stay within that bubble. And this is sensory restraint.

Now you notice that's not the way the Buddha talks about it. Sure, open up. Look around. But don't do anything with it. It's different.

You're not trying to shut anything out. You're open to everything, but you're not going out to get involved. Because as soon as you notice yourself going out, ah, too much work—drop it.

A student asks: "Is the term 'choice-less awareness' used by Buddha?"

No, that term was invented by Krishnamurti and then taken up. It became very fashionable. But the term itself comes from Krishnamurti. Though you can see that this is where it's coming from—it's closer to that, yes. It's not quite that, but it's getting closer.

That so-called definition of mindfulness is really a very good definition of a particular style of meditation practice. And that's the other thing about these very simple practices. Sensory strength, also *sampajjana*—clear understanding—which the Buddha associates always with mindfulness, and which if you're in a Mahasi-style meditation retreat, is again very basic. But mindfulness and clear understanding the Buddha will also talk about in terms of being a very advanced practice in some suttas.

And basically it's the same practice. The simplest basic kindergarten practice, the most profound advanced practice—it's in fact the same practice. It's the same practice all the way through. It's just that we get better at it, basically. But it's the same practice. You get able to wring more out of it—squeeze more out of it.

"It's interesting that it's referred to as sense restraint, and yet it's actually sort of enhancing everything."

Because what's for the Buddha the sense—well, it's actually the *indriyasaṃvara*, the restraint of the faculties. Here "the faculties" is translated as sense restraint, but actually it's faculties. But these faculties in this context are the faculties of the senses.

Now if you look at this word *indriya*, it's derived from Indra, and Indra is one of the old Vedic gods. And he's the equivalent of the captain coach of a footy team. Indra is a war god. And he lives in this big castle in the sky. And he's a big, buffy bloke—think of rugby league.

And he gets up in the morning, and what he wants is a bit of biffo. So he gathers his mates, and they're all in the castle, and he's the leader. They leap on their horses, put on their weapons, and they charge up

looking for a fight. And fortunately the Asuras are there, all geared up and ready to go. And so they spend all day hacking and bashing and biffing and attacking the Asuras, and they win. Every day they win.

So they're really pleased, and they go home, and they feast, and they eat, and they drink, and they party, and then they crash out. And then they wake up again and—let's do it again! And this is Indra's life. But he leads from the front.

So an *indriya* is an action, an activity that leads from the front, that's going forward. So you have the *indriy as* of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom—the five *indriyas*—because these are the mental qualities that go in front towards awakening.

And the Buddha says—and this is the aspect of the senses that he's looking at—this idea that the senses go out, they head out to engage, and that's the aspect of the senses that's being restrained. So it's the restraint of the action of going out. There's no English equivalent—the intention is bound up with it, intention, activity, effort, the whole thing, the active aspect of the senses.

So it's not that you're trying to shut down the senses, but the senses have two aspects: the going out and the receptive. If you drop the going out and you just have the receptive, it is an opening out. And because you're paying attention to that, it becomes even stronger. There's that expression: keep your eyes peeled.

"If one's restrained successfully, would you say the result is a little bit like equanimity?"

Equanimity. Because first of all it's regarding all constructions, all formations—because it's all the six senses. And reactivity drops away because all reactivity is action, is activity.

So it's also... I would imagine the Buddha spoke about it as a protective measure. He says "guarding the mind"—non-harming of the self. And it involves mindfulness. Your mindfulness has to be really good to do this, or alternatively, when you do this you really cultivate mindfulness strongly. But of course if you cultivate mindfulness you cultivate equanimity because they go together. So it's closely associated with equanimity.

This is very similar to what we find in the Satipatthana Sutta, where the Buddha speaks of guarding the sense faculties. The way he's expressing it here is like what he's explaining to people when they're just starting out with it. But as I often point out, in different contexts it's really the same practice but talked about from different angles and developed to different depths. The practice itself is the same, but you can talk about it in different ways depending on context.

It's definitely mindfulness. When you look at what he says—if she left the higher faculty unguarded or unprotected—when he talks about mindfulness, he talks about the function of mindfulness to guard, to protect. So mindfulness is implied. "Unwholesome states of longing and sorrow might invade her. Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, she leaves tracking bodies." It's the same expression.

So that tendency to go for something is craving. This practice really puts you right in touch with craving.

It's right on the edge—it makes craving really evident. I've got all this vision now, these hordes of galloping energy, galloping out through all my sense doors, being all very excited and looking for something. We definitely want drama. I mean, why else are soap operas so popular? You've got to have a bit of drama.

The sequence goes: contact, which includes vedanā, and then craving, and that's where your action is. Contact, vedanā, craving. But vedanā comes with the contact. So the contact's there, but this practice is about not acting on the craving. The non-doing is actually between the feeling and the craving—a non-acting on craving.

When the Buddha talks about craving, he talks about its restless quality. If you look at craving, you notice how the mind will move from one thing to another to another—this, this, this, this, this, this. What's consistent throughout is what I call a sense of urgent necessity which accompanies craving, but the object of craving is constantly moving. I want this, I want that, changing. So craving has this restless energetic quality to it.

Here you're addressing that not in terms of the object of craving but in terms of the energetic feel of it. And you're bringing in your dharmic laziness. It's like it's just not worth the effort.

Just relax.

This approach gives us a chance by recognizing this faculty and sense in the moment when we can actually intercept and do something skillful. Once you settle into this practice, all of these different qualities—these different mental factors—can become apparent as playing some part in the unfolding drama of experience.

In practice, each individual meditator will notice different aspects. One meditator might notice the cetanā, the volition, and then it becomes a cetanā exercise for them. Another meditator might notice the vedanā, the feeling tone, so for them it becomes a vedanā exercise. Another meditator notices something else entirely, and for them that defines their particular exploration. But all these factors are present and playing their part in every moment.

I recommend this to you as a daily activity practice, and also, if you want to explore it as a formal sitting practice, it's quite interesting. Of course, you can do exactly the same practice in both contexts—formally and in daily activity. What we're doing here is presenting possibilities. This is one possibility; it's not compulsory. If this doesn't appeal to you as something worth exploring, don't bother with it. Just keep doing what you're doing. But if this feels like it could be useful or interesting to investigate, go ahead and explore it.

Someone asked about the exercise we did yesterday, where we were looking at the movement of awareness as objects came into awareness: "Is that doing? Because the awareness does move from object to object."

In both cases, we're simply letting it move. Like yesterday, we maintain a posture of attention and just allow the awareness to move naturally. This current practice is very, very similar. Maybe in practical terms you can't tell the difference, and that's perfectly fine.

This points to how our training often works—we're always uncovering what previously we had not seen. In yesterday's exercise, you were doing that by having this project: "I'm going to notice that movement. I'm going to notice when awareness goes somewhere." It becomes a matter of "Ah, gotcha. Gotcha. Gotcha." It's a very interesting exercise because it's making you sensitive to those movements.

The day will come when you don't have to make such a deliberate effort. You won't need to think "Gotcha!" You'll just see it naturally. It'll simply be obvious. But when you start, it's necessarily a deliberate project. You're training yourself to notice these subtle movements. As people were sharing yesterday, they could do it in one sensory modality but not another, because they had practiced with that particular sense door before. When you practice something, it becomes natural.

One person mentioned, "The thing that really distracts me is sounds. My mind immediately goes to 'What was that? That's a bird' or whatever." If you practice this approach specifically with sound, those sounds begin to relax their grip on attention. You might choose to practice just with the auditory sense door and not bother with the others, because sound is particularly problematic or particularly interesting for you—it stands out.

Another question arose: "If you're doing this with mental formations—images and thoughts coming up—and you're not noting them, you're just sort of letting them be, how can you not get attached? How can you just let them be without doing vipassana?"

Well, perhaps that letting-be is vipassana. Maybe it's a non-active form of vipassana. When you're not getting entangled with the mental formations, they don't take on a life of their own.

This brings up an interesting point: How many of you felt that you could successfully relax the mind? And how many thought, "What does that even mean?"

I find this question fascinating. Mind is a sense activity—it's a sense door with its corresponding sensitivity, but it also has its corresponding activity. If there's an activity, it should be possible to relax it.

So can I relax the mind? Relaxing the other senses is also relaxing the mind. I had this moment where I looked at Blake's notes and I just dropped it. That was a mental thing. It was a visual thing, but also a mental thing.

With relaxing the eyes and the ears, they have location. So you can find them in order to relax them. Bring your awareness to your eyes—I know where they are. But where's the mind?

A student asked: "In this receptive awareness, is there also space for occasional light naming of things?"

Yes, if you want to. You reduce the floundering, you work out your own way of doing it. You don't obey orders. This is a different way of relating to the experience, and once you start to play with it, you start to modify it according to your circumstances—how you can actually explore this and what you can do with it. It's much more important than rigidly following orders.

"But isn't sort of a bit of... Naming feels like doing something."

It is doing something. But it kind of just stops the chaos just for a moment, slows it all down.

Buddha has the expression "using a thorn to extract a thorn." So in this case, using activity to drop activity. It's right effort. It would be an example of right effort.

Another student shared: "The first two exercises, I felt like I had some understanding of what we were doing there, but I was aware of the commentary in the mind all the time—how I was doing it right. Even when I felt the gaze was soft, still that commentary all the time in the mind. So then when we came to the mind, commentary is still there about the commentary."

In that case, you might want to just do it with the physical senses. Keep it simple. So you get a feel for it in the physical senses. Once that's established, you might be able to do it in the mind as well. Because as René was pointing out, you actually cannot relax the physical senses without relaxing the mind. The mind has to relax when you're relaxing the senses. But you might just stick to the physical senses and not worry about the mind until you get a clearer sense of what's going on. Just let it run—too much effort to try to get rid of it.

"I'm not trying to be too theological, but doing nothing is doing something, isn't it?"

You could say that, but that's alright. Circular.

"I often forget the names of things and I've always wondered whether it was dementia or not. I don't think it is dementia because it's always been this way. I can never remember the names of people or things. But when I'm meditating, sometimes I'll try to think of something. There'll be a thought that comes up—what's that name? And I notice an effort to try to remember the name. And I literally let it go. And maybe that's reinforcing my condition. But it's that practice of letting... There's an urge, there's a desire to want to know the name or something. I notice the urge and I let it go."

That urge to name is really fundamental. And in fact, one of the terms the Buddha uses for mind is nāma, which literally means "name." It's the process of naming an experience.

So nāma-rūpa... Rūpa is form in its original sense of visual form—how something appears to the eyes. Ajahn Sujata's translation of nāma-rūpa, which I think is sheer genius, is "named appearance." So something appears and we name it. And that's what we're doing all the time. Often it's translated as "name and form." Sometimes the old translation was "mind and body," but that misses the point.

Not being able to know what something is leads it to fall into the neither positive nor negative category, and then it just agitates. There's that challenging quality—it's so difficult to simply say you don't know. We want to give it a name, even a placeholder like "imponderable," because not knowing is quite agitating.

Someone asked: "Does this mean that as you get older, the imponderables increase?"

Yes, they do. I'm reminded of a koan where the abbot is saying goodbye at the end of a retreat—they have three-month retreats, and then the monks scatter. He was asking each departing monk, "Where do you plan to go?" One of them replied, "I don't know." And the abbot responded, "Not knowing is most intimate."

That's the flip side of confusion—the intimacy of not knowing.

When Emperor Wu of southern China was interrogating Bodhidharma, the emperor asked, "Who are you?" Bodhidharma replied, "Don't know."

There's that famous Korean Zen teacher who went to the USA—Seung Sahn Sunim. He would say, "Just keep that don't-know mind." But you can't maintain the don't-know mind until you actually reach it. Getting to it can be quite a journey.

I think it was he who kept asking "What is this?" throughout his meditation practice, right to the end. He claimed there was no other meditation—only "What is this?" This is one of the basic koans used in Korea, one of the most popular koans in the Korean tradition.

Thank you very much.

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