On Mindfulness (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 42:28

This morning we were talking about awareness and getting a sense of what we mean by that. We spoke about it as the presence of whatever is present. Something is happening, and awareness is found in the fact that something is happening. Awareness is always linked to its object. If there's awareness, there's an object of awareness. If I'm thinking, I'm thinking something. If I'm seeing, I'm seeing something, and so on. Awareness comes to us through the six senses, which are six sensitivities: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. Awareness is the sense of presence, of something being present. If there is an experience, there is awareness. It's built in.

We talked about how awareness is just part of nature. We don't have to do anything to be aware. We are already aware. Which means we don't have to try to be aware. We are already aware.

So we played with the awareness game. There are different exercises that we can do to get a sense of awareness. The one that I've been doing for some time is this: Hold your hands together. Question: Can you feel your hands? Answer: Yes. Awareness. Question: Are you making any particular effort to feel your hands? Answer: No. Because it's just feeling the hands. That's it.

This brings in the whole question of effort that we talked about. U Tejaniya said that effort involved, for example, knowing that I'm touching my hands or knowing that I'm sitting is all the effort that I ever have to make in meditation practice, which is quite a radical thing to say. That's what he said.

So, we are already aware, but the question is, are we mindful? This brings us to this whole issue of mindfulness. The practice that we're doing, the Buddha calls satipaṭṭhāna, which can be translated as the establishing of mindfulness or the domains of mindfulness. You get different translations. It's the style of meditation practice that puts mindfulness right at the center. That's the key quality that we cultivate in this practice. So the question is, what does the Buddha mean by mindfulness?

Now mindfulness has become very fashionable, very popular, commercialized, corporatized, very much part of contemporary culture. But the way in which contemporary mindfulness is spoken of is not necessarily the same way that the Buddha himself speaks about mindfulness. What we're interested in doing this month is exploring the Buddha's understanding of mindfulness.

To get a sense of that we're going to do another meditation experiment, although this one is actually a genuine dead-set meditation experiment. We're not just going to wander about and be vaguely aware. We've got to start meditating now. What we're going to do is that exercise we were just speaking about. The meditation object is the touch of your hands. You sit and hold your hands, and that touch is your

meditation object.

If you can settle into your meditation posture, sit comfortably, close your eyes, and ask yourself, holding your hands together: Can I feel my hands?

This is not a difficult esoteric meditation exercise that I might fail if I don't work hard enough. I'm just feeling my hands. And this experience of feeling my hands is awareness—the awareness of feeling my hands.

So keep feeling your hands. Is your awareness of your hands continuous? Or do you notice any breaks in your awareness of your hands? Is your awareness of your hands discontinuous? For example, you may notice thinking in the background of your mind and then suddenly realize thinking has taken over.

Did you lose the touch of your hand? Just feel your hands. Check to see if there are any gaps in your awareness of your hands. Are there any gaps? Or is your awareness of the touch of your hands continuous, with no break?

So was the awareness continuous or discontinuous? Discontinuous. That's a bit disappointing. Though I noticed during this exercise it's probably more continuous than it's been before.

This exercise actually originally came out of a book I read a few years ago called *Ten Zen Questions* by Susan Blackmore. She's an English researcher in consciousness and a Zen practitioner. The book has since come out with a second edition with a different title. She experimented with her Zen practice because in Zen sometimes you might use a question as your meditation object. So she invented ten koans, ten questions that she investigated sequentially.

I found the first two particularly interesting. The first question she investigated—and she would spend weeks meditating, trying to penetrate this—was: Am I aware now? After extensive practice, she came to the conclusion that the answer to that question in every single instance is yes. One hundred percent. The second question she worked with was: Was I aware before? And she said the weird thing was that the answer to that question was often no.

So how could the answer to the question "Am I aware now?" always be yes, but the answer to the question "Was I aware just then?" sometimes no? I forget exactly what she said about it, but what struck me was that she was pointing out the difference between awareness and mindfulness.

Awareness is natural; it's part of nature. It's already happening. But we easily forget it. We forget our awareness. The English word "mindfulness" is the translation of the Pali word *sati*, which comes from the verb *sarati*, to remember. So *sati* is actually memory. We won't be talking about mindfulness as far as the Buddha is concerned. What we're talking about is memory—but memory of the present, not of the past. This is what makes it different.

And of course, in railway stations you can see signs that urge the practice of mindfulness. You see those

signs that say "Mind the gap." That's using mindfulness in exactly the way that the Buddha uses it. There's a gap between the train and the platform. Mind the gap. Remember that there's a gap between the train and the platform. But it's not something that one remembers hours after the journey is over. The sign is asking us to remember it in the very act of stepping into or out of the train. In other words, it's asking us to remember the present. And the fact is, we often forget it.

The classic example I like to give is this: if you've ever been in a situation where you're driving down familiar streets and you realize you have no memory of the previous three blocks, you kind of wake up with "Oh my god, what's going on?" and start looking around. Now, if you think about that experience, if you ask yourself the question "During those three blocks, was I aware?"—my opinion is the answer would have to be yes. Because if it was no, I'd be dead. But if I ask the question "Was I mindful?" the answer is no, I was not. Because I forgot my awareness. And this, of course, is the experience of distraction.

So doing something like feeling your hands is easy. It doesn't require any particular effort. But doing something like feeling your hands for three minutes or five minutes—that turns into a job.

Awareness tends to be discontinuous. It moves. It seems to be broken up into fragments rather than being a single whole. And if we ask ourselves, when awareness moves, where does it move to? The answer in most cases is wherever habit takes it. Each of us has built up certain habits, certain long-term patterns of mind that simply take over if we're not doing something particular that we need to pay attention to. You could say that we fall into autopilot. And when this happens, we forget our awareness and we are prisoners of our past conditioning, because these habits are all expressions of past conditioning. This is the normal everyday experience of distraction when we meditate.

Mindfulness is characterized by a felt continuity of awareness. How do I know I'm being mindful? I know I'm being mindful if the awareness is continuous. And I put in that word "felt" because it's a discrete experience, a definite experience. Those of you who are experienced meditators, you know it. You know what it feels like. After some days of a retreat, you start to get into a groove and the awareness becomes continuous. It has a distinct flavor to it. This is the flavor of mindfulness.

So if we're developing a practice which centers on mindfulness, what we're interested in is remembering awareness. And this remembering actually has two flavors. Remember, we talked about how awareness always operates as a dyad—there's awareness of something. Awareness and its object. Sometimes mindfulness remembers the awareness, and sometimes mindfulness remembers the object.

For example, if you've had the experience of meditating, minding your own business, you slide off into thinking without knowing that you slid off into thinking, and then suddenly you realize, "Whoops, I'm thinking. I'm supposed to be meditating." Have you ever had that experience? Pretty common. At that point, you remember. What do you remember? You remember your awareness. "Well, that's right, I'm thinking. What am I doing thinking?"

But have you had the experience where the awareness slides off, you're lost in thinking, suddenly you know that there's thinking there, and the awareness goes bang, straight back to the meditation object? There you're remembering the object of awareness. So this remembering can have two aspects: I remember awareness itself, or I remember the object of awareness. These are the two flavors, as it were, of mindfulness.

So mindfulness remembers awareness, and it presents as the continuity of awareness. Awareness moves. And in this style of practice, we are not trying to prevent it from moving. Now, there are some meditation styles which do exactly that—styles that are more concentration or serenity oriented. If you're given the job to just focus on this particular meditation object and nothing else, what you're trying to do is stop awareness from moving. You're trying to keep it in one place.

But in Satipaṭṭhāna, that's not what we're trying to do. We're not trying to prevent awareness from moving. What we're doing is tracking how it moves and where it moves. We're following to see where it goes. And this is really important, because one thing that characterizes Satipaṭṭhāna as a style of meditation practice is that it is not restricted to any one particular object. It's not object-specific.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha talks about four Satipaṭṭhānas: body, feeling, mind, dharma. And basically this is technical code for everything. Every aspect of body and mind becomes a meditation object in this practice. This is what it's designed to do. It's not about restricting awareness, keeping it in one place. It's about tracking awareness, remembering awareness.

So if we ask in this practice, what is my meditation object in Satipaṭṭhāna? What is my meditation object in mindfulness meditation? The short answer is everything. Every aspect of human experience is a meditation object.

So it does not matter what the object of awareness is in this practice. That really, genuinely does not matter. What matters is that we remember our awareness. It does not matter what we are aware of—what matters is that we are aware.

Practice cannot be restricted to any one particular experience. And one of the implications of that is it cannot be restricted to any one particular technique, because there's no one technique which covers the entirety of human experience. So there's an element of creativity in this style of practice which is inescapable. We'll be talking about that later on.

A participant asks: "This morning you mentioned that you're using the term awareness as synonymous with consciousness. In the example of being aware of a sensory sensation and then starting to think and remembering—are you saying that in the process of thinking, maybe daydreaming or planning or something that isn't desirable, the awareness is not there when you go into thinking? Because you said that awareness is always there. So where is awareness when we're thinking or forgetting?"

What happens to awareness when you forget? Is it still there? Is it not there? It's a very interesting

question to which I don't have a satisfactory answer.

There's a classical image: imagine you're on a beach near the water. You've got a stick and you draw a line in the sand, and the next wave comes up and obliterates it. You draw a line in the sand and the next wave comes up and obliterates it. This is an image of awareness without mindfulness. There's awareness, but we instantly forget it. It kind of flashes and it's gone. Flashes, gone. Flashes, gone. So we look back—was I awake? At the time, we were. But because it's weak, it doesn't last. It comes and then it disappears.

It's like when you're packing to go somewhere, like to a meditation center, and you're looking around the house and you think, "Oh yeah, that—I've definitely got to take that." In the meantime, your attention shifts. You saw it there and knew you had to pack it. Where is it? What happened? The awareness was there and then the eyes shifted and that awareness was forgotten. It was there but gone.

So awareness has depth. I can be very faintly aware of something and it's gone. I can be deeply, penetratingly aware of something and it stays—and can even be transformative. What we're doing in meditation practice is working with what's already available: awareness. But we're making it stronger. We're making it deeper. That makes a difference.

It's like waking up in the morning and knowing that you've been dreaming. You know it, but you couldn't say what you were dreaming about. You might have a vague sense of it, but it's forgotten. You were there, but then it's completely gone.

So in meditation practice, we're working with awareness.

We're making it stronger and deeper and clearer. Normal, everyday awareness can be very weak and very fleeting, but it's still there. Otherwise we couldn't function.

So as we've been playing around with awareness—am I aware? Yes, I'm aware. Am I making any particular effort? No, I'm not. So where does effort come in?

The effort comes in maintaining the felt sense of awareness over time. It comes in the commitment to remember. In other words, if we're going to do a meditation practice, we need to be engaged with it, with what's going on. There needs to be a certain sharpness of engagement rather than being completely dulled out.

It's like the fifth precept, the fifth way of training, which talks about refraining from the carelessness caused by intoxicants. If you come home from work stressed out and fling yourself in front of the TV, switch it on and just stare, the mind goes into drift mode. And that drift mode is a kind of intoxication. We don't really know what's going on. The mind is dull. It's being stimulated by the screen, by the sound, but nothing is really sticking. We enter into a kind of dull drift state of mind.

This is pretty much the opposite of what we're doing when we do a meditation practice. In a meditation practice, we're trying to be sharp and clear. This is what's going on now.

So we need this sharpness of engagement, but we also need to be relaxed. And this relaxation is quite important. If we're not relaxed, we are striving. And if we're striving, we become tense. And tension gets in the way of awareness.

One practitioner summed up the entire practice to his own satisfaction as "relax and be aware." Basically, that's it. Sometimes he would scold meditators: "Relax more!" Oh my God, I'm not relaxed enough—I've got to work harder! I'm not sure that admixture really worked.

Anyway, why is relaxation important? Because when we strive, we lose sight of the obvious fact that we are already aware. We don't have to try to be aware. We are already aware.

Now, if we're making too much effort in the meditation practice, what happens? We get lost in our concepts about the experience. We get lost in concepts about the meditation practice, and we lose touch with the actual experience.

Let's say we're doing something like staying with the touch of our hands—a simple exercise like that—and we notice that we tend to forget. We slide off and come back, slide off and come back. And let's say we make more effort to stay with the touch of the hands. If we try too hard, then what happens is we get lost in concepts about what this meditation exercise is supposed to be. What I am supposed to be aware of. What this is supposed to feel like. What a meditation experience is supposed to be. We get lost in concepts of right and wrong, passing and failing, winning and losing. And all of these concepts distract me from the obvious fact that this is what's happening right now.

So this is a major problem with effort. The Buddha includes what he calls *sammā vāyāma* as one of the path factors. Classically translated as "right effort," I'm not sure that's really particularly accurate. It could be translated as right energy, right commitment. But the thing about that path factor—because it is called an effort—is that it is possible to make not enough effort.

In other words, for the mind just to go dull and not be engaged. And if there's not enough effort, it's not going to work. But it's equally possible to make too much effort, and if we make too much effort, we just tie ourselves up in knots and the whole process is slowed down. So it's about finding a balance, and it can be quite difficult to find that balance. We'll talk about it later in the retreat.

In the beginning of the retreat, I think it's important to learn to recognize and rest in the natural state of awareness. To recognize that I'm already aware—it's already happening—and to rest in that state. To learn to recognize awareness and not fight it. And in particular, not to fight ourselves.

We fight awareness when we try to make something happen. We have a view, an image of what should be happening, what is supposed to happen: I should be concentrated, I should be staying with my breath, I should not be thinking. We have this image, and this image defines the whole experience for us. We struggle to realize this view, to make it real, to make this image the felt reality. And this struggle creates tension and conflict. This very struggle hides from us the fundamental fact that we are already aware.

I like Sayadaw Tejaniya's description of right effort. It comes from his book, *When Awareness Becomes Natural*, and here he's quoting from his teacher, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw. Tejaniya says: "Don't try to do anything. Don't try to prevent anything. But don't forget what is happening."

I think this pretty much sums it up. Don't try to do anything, to accomplish anything. Don't try to prevent anything. But don't forget what is happening.

We need commitment. When we allow habitual forgetfulness to take over, at that moment we have lost our commitment—not enough effort. But when we try to do something or try to prevent something, we make too much effort. We can find right effort when we are committed to reminding ourselves that right now, something is happening. So what is it? What's happening now? It's the commitment to remembering where we find the effort. But notice it's all focused on what's happening now—not focused on what I think should or should not be happening.

Does that make sense?

So in this practice, anything at all can be a meditation object. But for practical purposes, it can be very useful to have the body as the center of our focus, our anchor. Usually when we begin, we start with awareness of body. That's a very normal, everyday place to begin—being sensitive to physical experience. This means the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching.

One thing about this place is that the physical world is very in your face. Apparently this is summer, according to the locals anyway. It was summer in Brisbane, I can tell you that. But according to the weather reports, in a few days' time it'll be hot and dry.

And a day or two after that it could be cold and wet. This is the Blue Mountains. So there's a lot happening in the physical world, which is very good from a meditator's point of view, because it's obvious, it's clear.

The five physical senses are very important, but in particular, sensitivity to touch—the fifth of the five senses. This is very important because according to the later tradition (this is not the Buddha, this is the later tradition), in the Buddha's understanding of experience, experience is always an impact. There's a sensitivity, and there's something out there in the world that strikes that sensitivity.

So there's light and form, and there are two parts of my body, one here and one here, which are sensitive to light. Now this part of my body is not—my hand doesn't know whether it's night or day. But these two parts of my body are sensitive to light. Light streams in and strikes the body, touches the eye, and something happens. It strikes the sensitivity and something happens. These two parts of my body are sensitive to sound. Sound strikes that sensitivity, something happens. So there's an impact between sense object and sense sensitivity. Bang.

When that impact occurs—and this is what the Buddha calls *phassa*, usually translated as contact—something happens. According to the later tradition, when you're dealing with seeing, hearing,

smelling, tasting, the impact of the object on the sensitivity is like cotton wool striking cotton wool. It's very soft. But the impact of a touch sensation striking the body is like an iron hammer hitting an anvil. It's very strong. It's very clear.

This makes touch very, very good as a meditation object. It's easy to find and easy to stick with. That's why you have things like breathing and body scan as meditation objects—they all involve touch. So in the beginning, be open to whatever is happening, but be particularly interested in the experience of touch. It's one of the reasons why we emphasize posture, because that opens up that whole field of touch.

The other thing about the physical world, especially clear in relation to touch, is that a physical experience is always in the present. Mind time travels. Mind can convince us that past is more real than present, or that future is more real than present. But body can't do that. Whatever the body feels, whatever it impacts, is always in the present.

Now, the job of this meditation practice is done in the present. We can't do it in the past, we can't do it in the future. If we're going to ground ourselves in the present, the most obvious way to do it is to ground ourselves in body. Again, in body, the most obvious is touch.

So if you're still settling in, basically just hold your awareness in your ordinary everyday activity. This is everyday mindfulness, where the meditation object is the normal flow of experience—wherever your awareness naturally goes, just track it. This is where the awareness is. But give priority to the body, because this helps to ground awareness in the present rather than allow us to drift off into past and future.

A few things to try. One is to feel your posture. Get a sense of what the body is doing now. How does the body occupy space now? What does the body feel like now, in a general sense? Feel your posture, and then ask yourself: what am I aware of now? It doesn't matter what we are aware of, but am I clear about what I am aware of? You might try the question: what is clear now? Or what is obvious now? Something is clear.

Something is obvious. What is it?

So becoming interested in what is happening now, rather than trying to make something happen. And remembering to drop in those questions. This is like switching on a light—we are switching on our awareness. And it doesn't matter how quickly the light goes off again. When you realise the light's gone off, just turn it on again. Switch it on again. Which means, switch it on now.

Tonight we'll talk about the actual meditation method taught by Mahāsī Sayādaw. So we're gradually getting into it. But just for today, perhaps in general, some basic tips.

Firstly, do not be in a hurry. Often the instruction is to slow down, and often that means really slow down. But don't try to slow down, because again, that's too much stress, too much concept getting in the way. Just don't be in a hurry. And notice when you find yourself hurrying, because you may find underneath the

hurry is some tension. Feel the tension and relax. And how is your posture when you relax?

So don't be in a hurry. Be graceful. I think we've already mentioned this. Which in practice means be committed to noticing those moments when you realise you are clumsy. When you drop something, or bump into something, or trip over something, or make a loud noise doing something—be interested in those moments. You may notice that a moment of clumsiness is conditioned by a momentary loss of mindfulness, a moment when we lost awareness of the body and dropped into a habitual concept.

Don't be in a hurry. Be graceful. Recognise awareness. When you're meditating, do not try to be aware—just notice that you are already aware. Just switch on the light.

And finally, to help this whole process, every now and again you might drop in a question like: What is clear now? What is happening now? What is obvious now? And just see what it is.

Any questions? Is this all too basic for you? You're experienced meditators, you're thinking, "This is kindergarten playtime—when are we going to get stuck into it?" That's probably what you're thinking.

But meditation is really, really simple.

Now, some of you are not familiar with the great game of rugby league. This is a game in which big blokes get a footy, divide into two teams, and assault each other vigorously in an effort to get the ball across the line. Rugby league and meditation as activities have an enormous amount in common—very, very similar. Meditation, like rugby league, is a simple game with simple rules for simple people.

So don't make it complicated. Something is happening. What is it?

Thank you very much.

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