On Method

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 47:33

So tonight we're talking about method, the meditation method that we're doing in this retreat. This morning we looked at awareness. We started with awareness, and we emphasized, first of all, the elemental simplicity of awareness. Awareness is the presence of that which is present. If something is present, well, that's awareness. That quality of presence is awareness.

We talked about noticing awareness. Normally—well, first of all, we said if there's awareness, there's something we are aware of, there's the object. Awareness and its object always come together as a partnership, as a dyad. Usually, we put all of our attention and concern on the object of awareness. We think that's what's important, and we tend to miss the aware-ing itself. But in meditation practice, the aware-ing itself, the experiencing itself, becomes significant.

In any event, we started with noticing awareness, and we can use questions to remind us of this: What am I aware of now? What is clear now? What is obvious now? What's happening now?

Then we looked at mindfulness, which is essentially awareness extended through time—awareness made continuous over a period of time. This is mindfulness.

Tonight we're moving on to the particular style of meditation practice that was developed by Mahasi Sayadaw. He lived from 1904 to 1982 and was part of a major revival of meditation, especially meditation for insight, vipassanā—meditation aimed at bringing the practitioner to some degree of awakening, and in particular, getting lay people involved in serious practice.

In 1945, Mahasi published a book called *Manual of Insight*—in Pali, *Vipassanā Dīpanī*. The English translation was only produced not long ago, certainly this century. For decades it wasn't available in English; now it is. If you want a difficult, technical, and complex read in which you enter into a medieval mindscape, it's a page turner.

That book made his reputation throughout Burma, and it earned him an invitation, I think around 1947, to move to Rangoon and become the head teacher of a new centre being developed by a group of people closely associated with the first government of independent Burma. This was part of the overall Burmese effort to revive Buddhism, to allow the whole nation, if not the whole world, to face the challenge of modernity. As part of this movement, in 1956 they held a Buddhist council and got together—mostly Burmese, though they invited people from overseas—to recite and edit the Buddhist texts. The emphasis on meditation was really important.

The motive, or part of it, was this: the Buddha teaches impermanence. Everything is impermanent,

including Buddhism. In the Theravāda, the belief is that Buddhism will last 5,000 years. Under the traditional dating of the Buddha, the 2,500-year halfway point was reached in 1956. From 1956 onwards, it's guaranteed all the way down—which means there is not a moment to be lost. Don't stick around until the next life; it may not be available. This would be Mahasi's advice.

Somewhere in one of his books—most are sermons that have been transcribed—he was urging his audience in Burma to take up meditation practice. One of his arguments I found very interesting. He said, "Look, you're very lucky you've been born in Burma. You've been raised Buddhist, you're full of faith, and because you're faithful Buddhists making merit, you're making so much merit that you are in serious danger. In your next life, you might end up being born in the USA. Once you're there, you're going to be comfortable, but are you going to have an opportunity to practice Dharma? Probably not. So do it now. Get enlightened now, and then be reborn in the US." I don't know how effective this argument actually was.

Traditionally, meditation practice—but especially serious meditation practice, designed to take the practitioner from here to awakening—was assumed to be the business of an elite of full-time professionals: a minority of monks and nuns, and a tiny, tiny minority of lay people.

What Mahasi and others in this reform movement were doing was creating, crafting an approach to meditation that any lay person of reasonable health and a goodly amount of dedication could learn—and which would take that person to awakening. This was a very radical project.

So let's get into the details. First of all, we start again with awareness, as we've talked about. Awareness is the presence of that which is present. Awareness is happening already. I don't have to make any effort to be aware—I'm already aware. It's already happening.

But when we look closely, we can see that awareness has depth. I can be faintly aware, like a dream that I forget within seconds of waking up. Or I could be very clearly and penetratingly aware, such that this event I will remember for decades to come. Or anywhere in between. There's a whole spectrum of the depth of awareness. This suggests that awareness can be developed, deepened, strengthened.

So how do I deepen awareness? How do I make it stronger? I do this by practicing attention. Attention—what the Buddha calls manasikāra—is the act of directing awareness. It could be compared to the difference between seeing and looking. I don't have to do anything to see. If my eyes are open, I see—maybe not very well, but I can see. But if I'm looking for someone or looking for something, then I'm doing something. I'm directing visual awareness in a particular direction or towards a particular object.

Attention is the act of directing awareness. And you notice that it is active. We could say that attention is awareness as a verb.

In English we tend to treat awareness only as a noun. But in the language of the Buddha, it's clearly also very closely connected to a verb. Awareness would be vijñāna, and this noun comes from the verb vijānāti—to aware. In one discourse, the Buddha is going through some key technical terms, and he plays

with the sounds, plays with the words as he does this. In English, you might say something like, "Why do we say awareness? We are aware, therefore we say awareness." But in Pali, it's, "Why do we say vijñāna? Vijānāti, therefore vijñāna." And in the Pali, you can see the very close connection between the verb and the noun. Why did we say perception? We perceive, so we say perception. Why do you say saññā? Sañjānāti, therefore saññā.

There's a very close connection in the language and in the way of conceiving how the world works between verbs and nouns in classical Indian languages that you don't necessarily get in English.

So attention is awareness as a verb. It necessarily involves some degree of engagement or effort. When we are aware, the tradition says, mind moves towards its object to engage with it. Awareness is active. It's more process than thing. More activity than thing.

This brings us to how we work with awareness in meditation practice. In the Mahasi lineage, we speak of three basic activities involved in awareing an object. These can be conveniently called, in English, the three N's: noting, noticing, and naming.

Now the first two are the most important—noting and noticing. These could also be called directed awareness and undirected awareness. Let's start with noting.

This is the word probably most associated with Mahasi's approach. Noting is directing awareness towards an object. You notice that it is essentially active in its nature—it's a reaching out. The mind reaches out to something in the world, either in the physical world or the psychological world. So we could call it directed awareness.

For example, let's say I'm going to meditate, and I've chosen breathing as my meditation object. I'm actively directing awareness to this breath, now. And then I'm actively directing awareness to this breath, now. And then again to this breath, now. I'm actively engaged, now. And again, now. And again, now. This is noting, or directed awareness.

The flip side is noticing, or undirected awareness. Noticing is awareness receiving an object. It's not active; it's receptive. I am awaring, but I'm not deliberately aiming at any specific object or in any specific direction.

For example, let's say I'm doing breathing meditation. I'm actively awaring the breath, but at the same time I can hear the sounds around me. Now I'm not interested in the sounds and I'm not actively listening to them because all my energy is taken up with the relationship with the breathing. But the sounds are coming to me. I am receiving the sounds. I am aware of them. To some degree I'm actively engaged with them, but it's very slight, and certainly I'm not deliberately directing awareness towards them instead of actively directing awareness towards the breathing.

So: directed awareness, undirected awareness. Noting, noticing. Active, receptive. In directed awareness

we aim awareness at an object; in undirected awareness, the object of awareness comes to us.

These represent two ends of a spectrum. One end directed, the other undirected. Active, receptive. And these two ends of the spectrum point to different relationships that we can have to the meditation practice.

Some meditation styles emphasize directed awareness, so they're primarily concerned with focusing awareness on a specific object—breathing, for example. Other meditation styles emphasize undirected awareness, and they are primarily concerned with simply receiving whatever is coming through the senses.

Again, it's a spectrum, and you find different approaches to meditation plotted somewhere along it. It's unusual to find one at the very end; you usually get some kind of mixture. But in the Mahasi lineage, Sayadaw U Pandita, for example, was very much into the directed approach and really emphasized that. Sayadaw U Tejaniya emphasizes the undirected approach.

In terms of which one to do, it's very much up to the individual. It's not that one is right and the other wrong, or one is better and the other worse. A lot depends on the practitioner, on their particular sensitivities.

In my experience, most new practitioners—and most practitioners beginning a meditation retreat, at least in the early stages—prefer directed awareness because it quite literally gives them something to do. It gives them an object to ground awareness on. Whereas if they just do undirected awareness, they could very easily get lost and spend days mind-wandering in a vaguely spiritual, Buddhist-y way.

Other people find that when they engage with directed awareness, it creates strain and tension—strain in the mind and tension in the body. They much prefer the sense of ease they find in undirected awareness. They find that if they simply remember—which is mindfulness—if they simply remember to recognize that mind is already aware, along with what mind is already aware of, then that's enough.

The practice gains its own momentum—it can develop without any sense of having to do something special. It just rolls along in a very natural way.

So it's not that one approach is right and the other wrong. It's not that one is better and the other worse. But what you might find is that what suits your particular circumstances is one or the other. And that can change over time.

For example, in my experience, meditators who are getting older—let's say someone who started meditation when they were quite young, quite energetic, going through enlightenment and not mucking about—they can have a very directed, energetic, active, engaged relationship with the meditation practice. An approach like Sayadaw U Pandita's really appeals to them, and they can go a long way with it.

But the decades roll on. They start to get old. They start to lose the kind of energy they used to have.

Sometimes the earliest signs of this appear in retreat. Someone will come to an interview and I'll ask, "How's it going?" "Oh, not so well this year." "Why not?" "I just can't really focus the way I used to focus. By this stage in the retreat, I should be sitting three hours. It doesn't seem to quite work."

What sometimes emerges is that with age they simply don't have the energy for directed awareness anymore—because directed awareness takes a lot of energy, and when you get old you lose energy, so you can't sustain it the same way. I've found that older meditators tend to naturally segue into a more undirected style of practice, partly because of the energy issue but also partly because, if you're an experienced meditator, it's as though you've explored a landscape through directed awareness over a long period of time. Basically the mind is saying, "Been there, done that. I don't need to do it again. So why are you trying to push me into it?"

Because so much has been learned, so much absorbed, there's no need to do, quote unquote, anything in particular. It'll just happen, given the chance, given the opportunity. So that can occur as well. Circumstances change, and the practice changes with them.

Some people find that this whole distinction between noting and noticing, directed and undirected, dissolves entirely. What emerges is simply awareness itself—awareness awareing, and that's it. Classifications like directed and undirected, noting and noticing, become meaningless. It's just: whatever arises, I'm aware of.

So although we're laying out Mahasi Sayadaw's basic approach, one isn't stuck in it. Any kind of meditation technique, essentially, is for beginners. It's to get us going, to give us a structure, to give us something to do, and to shape the whole enterprise. But as the practice develops, all of that drops away. We find our own way of doing things, and that way will naturally emerge.

So we have active and receptive, directed and undirected, noting and noticing. And finally we come to naming.

Now, the first two distinctions are built in, as it were—this is the way awareness works, the way the mind works. This third one is an optional added extra. It's not as central as the first two.

Naming places a concept, a name, or a label onto the object of awareness. Let's say I'm tracking the breathing—breathing is my meditation object. I can name it: "In... out... in... out." And then suddenly I realize I'm distracted by thinking. I can name that too: "Thinking... thinking."

And then come back.

Now, the purpose of the naming is to stimulate aim or accuracy. It's to remind me: that's where I'm sending the awareness. I'm sending it there, not here. There, in-breath, not the up-breath—in-breath. And now it's up-breath, not the in-breath—up-breath. Now it's a thought. Now it's the breath. So it's solidifying the whole thing, reminding me: this is where I'm aiming the awareness. And it helps develop accuracy and

aim. We're going to play around with this tomorrow morning, so we'll talk about it then.

So this is naming. Again, naming is an optional added extra. Some meditators use it a lot. Some meditators never use it. Many meditators fall somewhere in between. The people I know, long-time meditators, have a whole range of different relationships to naming.

I don't use it very often. I use it in the beginning, often as questions, like "What's clear now?"—just to get me started, rev the engine up, as it were. And then it falls away. And it comes back if the experience changes and I'm in unfamiliar territory, so I'm not 100 percent sure what's going on. Then if I drop in a name, and if it's the right name—click, that's what it is. This is what's going on. And then once it's clarified, I can drop it again. So different people develop different relationships with naming.

So these are the three N's. Is that making sense? This is looking at Mahasi's approach to meditation practice in terms of what we do with the mind: direct awareness, receive, name.

But we can also look at meditation from the point of view of the meditation object—what we are aware of when we practice. So we've got the awaring and we've got the object of awareness. Noticing and naming are all about how the awaring is structured. But we can also look at how the object is structured.

Now, we've seen this morning how awareness tends to move. The mind tends to wander from one object to another, to another, to another. And especially, it's very easy for the mind to slide into habitual thinking. What we want to do is train attention so we can maintain a felt continuity of awareness over time. And the longer the time, the better.

Now, if we're going to do that, we need to learn how to stabilize the mind. And if we're going to do that, we need to be able to ground awareness. This grounding of awareness develops what the Buddha calls samādhi—classically translated as concentration, but perhaps more accurately, unification or integration.

So if awareness is awareness of something, if awareness always has its object, and if we want to stabilize the mind, we need to be able to settle awareness somewhere in such a way that the awareness is encouraged to rest and become still.

Mahasi Sayadaw spoke of this place as, in Pāli, the *mūla ārammaṇa*. Literally this means "root object"—*āra mmaṇa* is object, *mūla* is root, like the root of a tree. Now, this root represents our foundation, our ground. So I translate *mūla ārammaṇa* as "grounding object," because this is where we ground our awareness. This is where awareness makes its home.

In standard translations of Mahasi's work, this is rendered as "primary object"—the prime, the first, the most important.

Normally, the mind chases after one thing, then another, then another, restlessly in search of a satisfaction that never quite arrives. But if we want to cultivate mindfulness and samadhi, we need to stabilize the mind, which in practical terms means we need to learn how to keep our awareness in one

place over a period of time. This is the function of the grounding object. This is what it is for. This is its job: it gives us a place where our awareness can settle and stabilize over a period of time.

One way of looking at it is that our grounding object is where our awareness remains unless it has a specific reason to go somewhere else.

Probably the most common grounding object in the world of Buddhist meditation is breathing. Mahasi Sayadaw recommends placing awareness in the movements of the breathing sensed in the abdomen. When he first taught this, back in the 1940s, it was highly controversial. Burmese Buddhism is very orthodox Theravada Buddhism, and in Theravada Buddhism, if you say "breathing meditation," everybody knows that what you mean is keeping your awareness at the nasal passage—where the breath enters and leaves the body.

Anyone who has done Goenka retreats will know this approach. Burmese Buddhism is, to put it not so politely, a touch fanatical—very orderly, very organized. You do three days of anapanasati, mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, which means you keep your awareness here at the nose, nowhere else.

So in Theravada Buddhism, if a practitioner says "I do breathing meditation," what they're telling you is that when they meditate, they keep awareness at the nasal passage. The Buddha himself never mentions this specific location—it's not in the suttas at all. It first appears in the Patisambhidamagga, which is an explicitly Theravada text and the first path manual in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. A path manual is a book that tells you how to get from here to enlightenment. The Patisambhidamagga is very early—so early that the book itself is classified as part of the Sutta Pitaka, though it was developed after the Buddha's lifetime. But this is where they established: breathing meditation means awareness at the nose. And from there on, Theravada followed this instruction.

Then Mahasi comes along and says: follow the rising and falling of the abdomen. He caught a great deal of criticism, both in Burma and elsewhere.

So why did he do it? Why open himself up to such criticism? It seems he was approaching this problem of the grounding object with fresh eyes. We need something clear, obvious, and available. He felt that the breathing sensed in the abdomen fulfilled these criteria—that most people, most of the time, would find these movements clear, obvious, and relatively easy to follow. So he was prepared to accept considerable criticism.

He called these movements the rising and the falling of the abdomen. He said it's as if, when you breathe in, the abdomen rises; when you breathe out, it falls. You can note it as "rising, falling, rising, falling." Mahasi's approach became famous for this.

But notice what it's for. He recommends it for the very pragmatic reason that in his experience, this is where most people can most readily ground their awareness during sitting meditation.

The fact is, however, that no single technique actually works for everybody. Mahasi's approach was developed by a mid-twentieth century Burmese teacher for mid-twentieth century Burmese practitioners. In my experience in twenty-first century Australia, many meditators have difficulty finding the rising and falling of the abdomen. For them, it is not obvious at all, and they struggle with it. Then they're told, "Look, what you've got to do is follow the instructions of our great teacher Mahasi Sayadaw. He says note rising and falling of the abdomen. Just do it." And they struggle to find it and hold on to it.

But this completely defeats the purpose of the grounding object. The grounding object is meant to be something clear, available, easy to find. The reality is that rising and falling of the abdomen is not necessarily a good grounding object for everybody.

It certainly is not a good grounding object for everybody.

Another reason, by the way, why I think Mahasi liked or used this is because you're keeping awareness inside the sentient body, which means you're keeping the awareness inside the emotional body. I think this is one of the reasons why he chose this. If you do meditate here at the nostril, and if you succeed with it, it can catapult you into a deep concentration state which is entirely disembodied. But for insight meditation, you want to be embodied. You do it in the body. So following the breathing inside the body makes a lot of sense.

It's important that we return to basic principles. We want to ground our awareness. The easiest way to do this is through some aspect of body or mind which we can easily find and then stabilize our awareness on. It also helps if this object of awareness is itself stable—either relatively still, or if it is moving, moving rhythmically.

So it could be the breathing. But where? When you sit, you can ask yourself the question: Am I breathing? You probably are. And then you might ask yourself: How do I know? What's the experience that tells me this is breathing? And you may find movement in the abdomen. You may find movement in the midriff. You may find movement in the chest. You may find movement further up. But basically you go for where it's clearest and most obvious, because that's where you can ground the awareness.

Other things could serve as the grounding object, like the touch sensations of the body where the body is pressed against the cushion, the bench, the chair. It could be posture. The posture itself is a very good grounding object—the Buddha himself mentions it in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. It could be the breathing, it could be something else. For most people it will be something physical, not in the mind. But again, there are some unusual meditators out there, and for some people mind is actually the best grounding object.

This is what we need to establish as we develop our own practice: Where can I most readily rest my awareness so it will remain relatively still over time? This is my grounding object. This is what my awareness will learn to call home. And you will find, over a meditation career, that this will change. So the grounding object is not so much a specific part of the anatomy—it's a function. The function of where can

I stabilize awareness.

So, grounding object. We're stabilizing awareness, we're stabilizing the mind, but the fact is, mind moves. And so every practitioner discovers that restlessness is one of the most obvious characteristics of the mind. I'm thinking, and then I'm looking, and then I'm wanting, and then I'm moving, and so on and so forth.

Now, this realization of how restless the mind is, and how little control we have over these movements—often it comes as a shock to the new meditator. One of the classic complaints of the new meditator is they're doing, say, their first retreat. And after some days in the interview, I'll say, "How's it going?" They say, "Oh, it's awful. It's going really badly." I say, "Why? What's happening?" And the person will say something like, "Look, when I came here to do this retreat, I knew that I think a lot. I mean, that's one of the reasons why I came here, to get away from it. Now I'm thinking ten times more. So it ain't working."

And in all probability, they're not actually thinking ten times more. They're just ten times more sensitive to what the mind is doing. That's usually the story.

So it comes as a shock to recognize how little control we have over our minds.

That's fine, because it's important to realize that if we're cultivating mindfulness, we're not trying to stop our minds from moving. We're learning to understand that the mind moves and to understand how the mind moves. And we can't do that if the mind doesn't move—we can only do it if it moves. Recognizing and understanding these movements is the gateway into insight.

There are some meditators, very unfortunate ones, who will come into the hall after breakfast, check the time, note that lunch is in three hours, and just sit there in deep samādhi for three hours without the slightest movement in the mind. Then, at precisely the right time, they emerge from samādhi, shake off the bliss, and go to lunch. I mean, how appalling is that? Because what have they actually learned about the nature of mind over those three hours? Pretty much nothing. If we want insight, it's about movement. It's about what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence. So the fact that the mind moves is not a problem—it's the content of the practice.

This brings us to what we call the secondary object. The grounding object is our home base, where we train our mind to stabilize. But the mind is extremely difficult to stabilize, and it dashes off to visit different places. These different places are our secondary objects, and usually they are revealed by our distractions. We're minding our own business, meditating away, and then suddenly we find we're caught up in thinking or physical pain or something of this nature. We recognize that we were brought there to this new experience by force. We were conscripted. We had no choice in it—we were just dragged there. But once we realize that we've arrived, then we volunteer for the experience and we note the distraction. We're directly aware of the distraction, and the distraction becomes our meditation object.

I think this is probably the central characteristic of Mahasi Sayadaw's approach to meditation practice. As soon as our mind rebels and we realize that our awareness has been taken somewhere else, that we have been distracted, quote unquote, that new object of awareness becomes the meditation object—which means that distraction disappears. Because what we previously used to call distraction simply becomes a secondary object. So we note, we actively aware the secondary object, and then we come back to the grounding object. And again we're distracted. As soon as we know we're distracted—so what is it? What's going on?—we actively aware the experience, and then we come back. And then we're grabbed again. We actively aware the experience, and then we come back. So we're moving from grounding to secondary to grounding to secondary to grounding to secondary. And these movements reveal the habitual journeys that our mind undertakes, journeys that normally we don't really notice.

Now the question always comes up: how long do we stay with our secondary object? In the early stages of the practice, the answer to that question would be not long at all, because we need to stabilize the mind. In the early stages, this is the major job. So we acknowledge the distraction, we note it, we are actively aware of it, but not for very long, and then we come back. Basically, we favor the grounding object. We give it preference. And that relationship with the grounding object is what builds the samādhi over a period of time.

Now sometimes our secondary object will not let us go—for example, pain, physical pain, or obsessive thinking. If that's the case, we stay with the secondary object longer. How we stay with the secondary object—that is a question of skill. That's the craft of the meditation: how to do it, how to work with this particular object.

And this is what we'll be exploring during this retreat. We'll talk more about it as we go through.

Over time, the practice develops. It matures. And the method that Mahasi lays down is for beginners. So over time, the distinction between grounding object and secondary object evaporates, and the meditation object simply becomes the flow of experience itself. Conceptual distinctions between grounding and secondary object cease to be relevant. All we've got is the flow of experience.

In one place, Mahasi says the meditator's job is to note, to be actively aware or directly aware of whatever arises in any of the six senses as it arises. No primary, no grounding object, no secondary object. If it's happening now, it's the object. But this is something that naturally develops over a period of time. Sometimes people make the mistake of hanging on to that initial structure for too long. But basically, at some point, you start to let it go and realize: what is my meditation object? It's whatever is happening now. That's the meditation object.

I think that's pretty much it. Any questions?

Someone shared a story: "I needed a tool from the tool room once. I knew it was in a green box, and I went in looking for it. There was attention, but I couldn't find it. I looked again with directed attention, but still

couldn't find it. The third time, I decided maybe it's not in a green box—and I found it, by the way."

I don't quite understand it, but it sounds very profound! You can miss things very easily because that quality of directing—where is it coming from? It's coming from a mind that has certain expectations.

How do you work with that? If you don't know whether you had an expectation—well, did you? Perhaps it wasn't a very strong one. But that kind of experience illustrates the importance of not taking anything for granted. I think this is one of the great challenges of meditation practice. We tend to take experience for granted. We tend to assume we know what's going on, or we assume we know what will happen. And that blinds us to what's actually occurring.

Sometimes you can see this attitude emerge in experienced meditators who say, "Oh yes, well, today's day three, so such and such will happen. Today's day four, then this will happen." They've already written the script. But how do they know?

This willingness to be—what I would call it is the willingness to be taken by surprise—is important in this practice. For me, it's part of the creativity of the practice. You don't get locked into a technique. There's that degree of creativity always involved in it, which I think your little story illustrates.

Another question: "What's the role, if any, of visual overlay—maybe imagination—onto direct sensation? You're directly sensing something, but on top of that there's a visual overlay. Does that develop as the practice develops? Does it get stronger?"

I'm not sure. For some people it does. What appears to happen is that as the mind becomes stronger and clearer, the conceptual world that it throws up becomes ever more vivid, more real.

So you can, one form that this takes is that people—not so much in Australia, but certainly in Asia—will talk about having visions. In Thailand, for example, it used to be quite common for meditators doing this style of practice, after some days of sitting, to freak out because they start to see ghosts. In different cultures, people have different kinds of visionary experiences. Sometimes it's clear that it's not something external appearing, but rather that the visual world is suddenly thrown up by the mind, quite clear and strong.

So these sorts of things happen. The mind will play, you could say, all sorts of tricks as it gets clearer and stronger. And the response is always the same. You just note it. Seeing, for example. The visual overlay—that's just seeing. But you're seeing with the mind rather than with the eyes. It's just another experience. But it's probably an indication that the samādhi is getting stronger.

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