What Is Real

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 50:29

So tonight we're going to talk about what is real. This is something of a follow-on from what we were doing this morning when we looked at the elements.

If we're practicing insight meditation—what the Buddha calls vipassanā bhāvanā, the cultivation of insight—this is what we're practicing, which means, surely, that we want to know what's really going on. The project assumes that we accept that right now, as we get started, we do not know what is going on. We realize that we don't really know what's going on. In other words, we assume that we are mistaken in how we see ourselves and how we see our world.

For the Buddha, this is a reasonable assumption. He points out that our view of ourselves and of the world is conditioned. It's conditioned, for example, by events completely out of our control—the circumstances within which we were born, over which we had no say, along with the particular collection of sensitivities and capabilities that we were born with. Our view is also conditioned by the decades of choices that we've made throughout our life and the kind of life that we've led. This second aspect involves the teaching of karma, our kamma-vipāka, action and its ripening.

We are conditioned beings. For the Buddha, one of the major conditioning forces that shapes our lives is what he calls delusion—avijjā, or sometimes moha. In other words, we tend to believe things that are not true. Most people, I suspect, are conditioned to believe that our happiness and welfare is based on our income. But is it, really? Or does the dedicated pursuit of consumerism lead in a different direction?

If we are deluded, which is what the Buddha thinks, this means that we think we know what's going on, but we don't. The Pali word avijjā—vijjā is knowledge or knowing, a is the negative—so avijjā can be translated as "not knowing," ignorance. But the negative can be stronger than a simple "not." It can mean the opposite, like our English "anti." This is where you see translations like delusion. We are ignorant of what's going on, but for the Buddha, we're more than not knowing. We positively have views which are completely mistaken, and we believe in these views utterly.

We think we know what's going on, but we don't. As a result, we chase after what is not real, thinking that it is real, and we chase after what does not satisfy, thinking that it does satisfy.

This is one way that the Buddha expresses this. It comes from a sutta called the Two-Fold Consideration, the Dvayatānupassanā Sutta. He says: "Whatever is regarded by the world as 'this is true,' cultivated practitioners have clearly seen, realistically and with complete understanding, as 'this is false.' This is the first consideration."

"The world" means most of us, ordinary people, versus cultivated practitioners—mature practitioners who have developed insight.

"Whatever is regarded by the world as 'this is false,' cultivated practitioners have clearly seen, realistically and with complete understanding, as 'this is true.' This is the second consideration."

It's quite a powerful statement. Basically he's saying most of us have no idea what's going on. One thing implied by this is that what is really happening may be what we least expect. This further implies that if we want to discover what's really happening, we have to be very wary of our assumption that we know what's going to happen next. Because what we think will happen, won't. In fact, what we think is happening, isn't.

This comes up in our practice again and again. As the practice matures, we realize we will be taken by surprise—that this is built in. A willingness to be surprised, I think, is essential for this practice.

So we don't know what's going on. We tend to assume that we do know. As a result, we make all sorts of mistakes. How do we find out what's going on? For the Buddha, you do this by practicing presence—cultivating mindfulness, what the Buddha calls sati, which is recognized as the felt continuity of awareness. By "felt" I mean it's a discrete experience, and by "continuity," I mean awareness sustained over a period of time.

Or we could simply say the cultivation of sustained presence. We learn to be present to whatever is happening—to be deeply, intimately present with what's happening—without being led astray by our assumptions that we already know what's going on. We train ourselves to be alert only to the present, only to what is actually happening now. And we train to stay with this which is present now and to track it over time, to see what it does.

When we do this, some things become pretty obvious pretty quickly. For starters, we learn that staying present is very difficult. And in fact, if we're clear about it and honest about it, we have to admit that most of the time we are absent. We try to do something very simple, like following the breath, and we very quickly find ourselves caught up in a fantasy. Gradually we come to realize that most of the time we are not actually present. We were talking about the secondary object yesterday—an important part of the job of the secondary object is to show us vividly and clearly how most of the time we are absent, not present. And if that's the case, then it's no wonder that we actually don't know what's going on.

When we practice, we begin to realize that most of the time we're caught in fantasy. What we take to be real now, we later realize was fantasy, was not real. But it can take us a long time to accept that our fantasies are not real. When we state it like that, it seems pretty obvious that our fantasies are not real. But it's in the nature of fantasy that when we're caught in them, they seem real.

For example, we may be filled with anticipation about what will happen in the future. We may be caught up in our hopes, our fears, our expectations. And when we are clear, we can see that none of this is real.

It's obvious that this is today—it's not sometime in the future. Sometime in the future doesn't actually exist. But when we're lost in a fantasy about next week, we are convinced in that moment of complete absence that next week is real. It's even more real than today. And then at some point we realize, oh, it's just fantasy. We realize that it really is today, not next week. But for some time we were fooled.

This is particularly the case when our fantasies are fed by the power of emotion. That's when the fantasies seem particularly real. I might be thinking about the future and I can see that the stories I'm telling myself about the future are not real. But if these stories are fed by strong emotion, then it's a whole different situation. Because the emotion is real—it's happening right now. The fantasy is about the future, but the emotion is happening in the present, in the sentient body. And the fantasy gets its power from the strength of the presently experienced emotion. That's when fantasy really seems real.

Even when we snap out of the fantasy, we may find that the emotion itself sticks around for a while, that it only gradually fades. But once it ceases, we can look back and we can appreciate that it too was not real. So we're fooled again, but this time for longer.

We do have this tendency to fall into delusion, to imagine that what is not real is real. So how do we know what is real? How do we stay grounded in what is real? The basic principle that this practice is working with is that what is real is what survives the practice of presence.

We played around with this this morning, with the elements. What is real now in the body? Is there hardness? Is there softness? Is there movement? Is there stillness? What we're doing in these exercises is getting beneath the surface appearances, getting beneath what we assume is real, and having a close look at what's actually happening. When we do that, the experience starts to change.

Take, for example, the distraction of random thoughts. We're caught up in thinking, but the thinking is quite random. The moment that we realize we're caught in these thoughts, in that moment they disappear. They evaporate immediately. In other words, they cannot survive presence, even for a moment. As soon as I know that they're there—bang—they're gone. So they're definitely not real. But if we have a fantasy that's charged with emotions...

it survives longer. But even emotion cannot survive presence for long, because when we are present, what is false evaporates. What survives presence is real.

And this uncovering is a gradual process because our delusion has depth. We snap out of one fantasy only to find ourselves in another. Essentially this is because we are in the habit of being absent most of the time.

This brings us to the problem of distraction. We've already given the example looking at the nature of mindfulness. Have you ever had an experience like you're driving down familiar streets and you suddenly realize you have no memory of the previous three blocks because you were caught up in thinking? So what happened in that kind of experience? We were driving and we were present to our driving, and then

suddenly we were absent. We were out to lunch, as they say. We continue driving in that state of absence when suddenly, again without warning, bang—we're present. And we know we are present in part because we can look back and realize that in the past we were absent from the scene. In other words, we are now present to our previous absence. This is an experience of what we normally call distraction.

So why are we so easily distracted? Let's go back to our driving example. If the streets that you were driving down were entirely unfamiliar to you, if you were carefully navigating your way and anxious to avoid being lost, would you be distracted so easily? Probably not. The key to the example is that when we lose it, when we fall into habitual absence, the streets we are driving down are familiar. We might say we know them like the back of our hand. So we don't need to make any effort to navigate. We already know where we are and where we're going. At that point, habit snaps in and we drift off into thought. In that moment, we are distracted but we don't even know that we are distracted. We are absent. We are not present.

When we look at what most often destroys the quality of our engagement with what is really present, what is really going on, we find it's habit. This is because habit contains the assumed conviction that we know what is going on, along with the responses that come from that assumption. Habit is central to our delusion, because when we are lost in habit, we react without awareness, because we assume we already know what is happening. So we go to sleep, and we act out of that state of oblivion.

In this practice it's important that we stop assuming that we know what's going on—that we actually start to pay attention. It's vital that we refuse to take anything for granted, especially what we take to be real, what we take to be normal. Because where does our sense of normality come from? It's a product of our blindness and a product of our habitual deluded responses.

As the practice deepens, we uncover what is conditioning us and what is conditioning our reality, our sense of reality. These are our buried assumptions, our unconscious drives and needs. This is what the Buddha calls the āsavas. He translates them as influences. The old translation is cankers—I don't know if you've ever come across that. The Buddha doesn't like cankers.

But the challenge in the practice is: do not take anything for granted. Remain radically present to what is happening now.

When we try to do this, again, we get tripped up by distraction. The result is we cultivate a certain relationship with distraction. We often dismiss distraction as an interruption to our meditation practice. Have you ever had that response, that feeling?

The distraction is an interruption, it's just getting in the way. In other words, we think that our experience can be cleanly divided into two aspects: meditation object, which is good, and distraction, which is bad. But when we have that attitude, we're completely missing the point. The point is to find out what's really going on, including what's really going on with distraction.

So it's important not to dismiss distraction, but simply return to presence. And of course, returning to presence embraces distraction, because sometimes what is present *is* distraction. Do not try to avoid distraction—for a start, it's impossible. Instead of trying to avoid distraction, cultivate presence. Learn to be present to distraction by recognizing now what is happening now.

Let's look at how we might play with that in the meditation practice. We've talked about directed awareness and undirected awareness, what Mahasi calls noting and noticing. When we direct awareness, we make a choice to turn towards and aware something, and of course that something becomes our meditation object. But our mind fights us. It wants to roam wherever it decides. We do not decide to slide off into distraction—our mind decides. And it follows the well-worn tracks of habit that have been cultivated over decades. So we find ourselves in a struggle between meditation on one side and distraction on the other, and often we can't help but notice that we are on the losing side.

So what's the alternative? One alternative is to play with the spectrum of directed and undirected awareness. When we become sensitive to the movement between these two, what we find is a flow between presence and absence, and back to presence again. This flow is just part of nature, to be accepted as what is really going on—and therefore worthy of study.

When we are not sensitive to this spectrum, when we're trying to hold onto directed awareness exclusively because this is our meditation, then we find ourselves living in a hierarchy of meditation object versus distraction. The meditation object is good and distraction is bad, so we try to avoid distraction. And when we realize we are distracted, we run away from that experience to something more acceptable. We create a situation where meditation becomes work, from which we want to take regular holidays. Have you ever had that relationship in a meditation retreat? Worse, meditation can become a war where the enemy is ourselves, and so we are bound to lose—whoever wins.

Instead, what we might try to do is cultivate recognition of what we already know. We played with this before in the recognition of posture. So right now, are you sitting? Do you know you are sitting? Maybe you forgot. Maybe you were so caught up in this fantastic Dharma talk that you completely forgot your posture. But how difficult is it to remember? Right now, I am sitting. And once we remember, do we have to deliberately direct awareness toward sitting? Or do we simply recognize what we already know? Do we have to get back from somewhere, or have we already arrived?

Learning to recognize what we already know—this happens when we remember awareness itself. If we discover this, we may find ourselves in a situation where we do not have to struggle to maintain a practice. We're not struggling to be present. We simply recognize that we are already present.

Presence itself involves both directed and undirected awareness. If we place too much emphasis on directed awareness, we find ourselves bouncing between meditation object and distraction, accompanied by all the attitudes and judgment that go along with this. When we're present to the whole spectrum—a flow between directed and undirected awareness—what we find is a continuity between presence and

absence.

They're no longer opposites. They're more like different sides of the same coin. Because absence is inevitable. The real issue becomes: how do we transition between presence and absence and back again? There's no need for any hierarchy of superior or inferior. And there's no need for any judgment of ourselves or of our experience. There's just the flow of awareness. Present, absent, present, absent.

And one thing we might begin to realize is that fundamentally, presence is more important than what is present. Our obsession with distraction is one aspect of our obsession with the content of our experience. We think certain things should be happening, and certain other things should not be happening. But in mindfulness practice, what's important is presence itself, not what we are present to. That we are distracted does not matter. What matters is that we learn to become present—for example, to our distraction.

The one key point is this: we can only be present to what is happening now. Presence involves intimacy. And intimacy does not care what is present. It does not care whether we think of what is present as being a distraction or whether we think of it as a meditation object.

Now, I'm not simply dismissing meditation objects. Meditation objects can be useful because they provide a stable point from which we can look out at what's going on. We've been talking about this in terms of a grounding object. The meditation object gives us something to do while we wait for something to happen. But of course, what are we waiting for? We're waiting for what is already happening, but which we might be too busy to notice.

Immediacy is only concerned with now and what is happening now. So don't get caught up in progress. Don't get so caught up in progress that you miss what is happening now because you're busy waiting for the meditation to come good sometime in the future. Don't get trapped in images of what should be happening or what should not be happening. The only interesting question is: what is happening? Because what is happening is what is real.

Which brings us back to where we began. In the lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw, the basic practice is described as noting, which means being directly aware of whatever is happening now. We begin with the body, with physical experience. And we do this for purely pragmatic reasons: for most people, the body is easy to be aware of and relatively easy to stay with over a period of time.

As we're directly aware, we notice that whatever we are aware of changes. Nothing is stable. Nothing stays still. Experience is dynamic. And where does this dynamism come from?

Let's look at what the Buddha says in Dhammapada, verses one and two. The Dhammapada is a classic collection of verses, each with stories attached to it. In the Theravada tradition, it's a real classic. But there are Dhammapadas in other Buddhist traditions as well—each tradition created its own collection of verses. The Theravada Dhammapada begins with these two verses:

Mind shapes experiences. Mind is first. Experiences are made by mind. If we speak or act with corrupt mind, pain follows us like a wheel follows the ox's foot.

Mind shapes experiences. Mind is first. Experiences are made by mind. If we speak or act with pure mind, happiness follows us like a shadow that never leaves.

These are very famous opening verses. Notice the image: if we speak or act with corrupt mind, pain follows us like a wheel follows the ox's foot. The ox is pulling a heavily laden cart.

And it's really working. It's really slogging away. The cart is full. There's somebody sitting on the cart giving the occasional biff to the ox to get it moving. Slog, slog, slog, slog. That's if we speak or act with corrupt mind. But if we speak or act with pure mind, happiness follows us like a shadow that never leaves. If you're walking along on a sunny day, have you ever felt that your shadow is holding you back? That you're dragging this heavy weight of the shadow? You don't even notice it.

What we want to focus on in these two verses is the mind itself, talked about in terms of its activity. "Mind shapes experiences. Mind is first. Experiences are made by mind." The Buddha is directing us to look at what the mind does—to look at its activity, its dynamism. When we note something, when we are directly aware of something, we feel the mind moving toward that object. Breathing, physical sensation, whatever. Mind is active. Mind is doing. Body, as a meditation object, is not doing. It is done. It is shaped by mind. It is targeted by mind. But the dynamism is in the movement of awareness itself. And this movement of the mind towards an object comes from a choice made now to be aware. This is the work we're undertaking: now, make the choice to be aware.

Decades ago, in 1984, when I first started practicing in this lineage, I spent a week at Mahasi Centre in Rangoon. In those days, you could only get a one-week tourist visa. There were no meditation visas. You could only get into Burma for one week. So I popped in there, travelling between India and Thailand, and walked through the front gate. They admitted me, which was nice of them, and I was instructed to turn up from eight to eight-thirty every morning for instruction by the monk whose job it was to teach the foreigners.

At the time, that monk was Sayadaw U Pandita, who was also the head monk of the place. He'd just taken on the job of teaching the foreigners, and because he was very busy, he only had thirty minutes a day in which to do it. But when I turned up, I was the only foreigner. So I had thirty minutes a day with him, which was a very good introduction.

At some point during that week, U Pandita gave me a very clear instruction. He said, "Look, what this practice is all about, what you're here to do, is this: be aware of everything that happens throughout the day, from the moment you wake up in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night, right down to the blinking of your eyes. That's your job."

When he told me that, my response in my mind was, "That is impossible." But I had been there long

enough to know that the correct response was, "Yes, Sayadaw." That's what I said, and I went off and gave it a go. I have to admit that after a day or so, I decided it really is impossible. I was right. It just can't be done.

But what I realised was that what is possible is to be aware of what is happening now. It's impossible to be aware of everything throughout the entire day. But it's always possible to be aware of what's happening now. And that is the key: the choice made now to be aware.

So the mind's distinguishing characteristic is movement.

Movement toward its object. And the movement of awaring is clearest, according to Mahasi Sayadaw, when the object we are awaring is clearest. If that object is clear, the movement towards it is clear. So look for what is clear and obvious, and aware it now.

As we were discussing, we start with the obvious. We use questions like: What is obvious now? What is clear now? Or we could give ourselves something specific to aware, something which is clear and easily found. It could be the breathing—what is my experience of breathing now? It could be physical sensations—what is the clearest sensation in my body now? It could be my posture—how is my body arranged now? We start now with that which is clear, that which is obvious.

If we maintain awareness over a period of time, if we're committed to this job, this involves effort. And effort is found in the commitment to renew the choice to aware again and again. In other words, to renew it now. Because once we make the choice, it's already over—it's a new now, and it's time to make the choice again. The commitment is to do this despite all the obstacles that the mind throws up to persuade us to postpone this choice. For example, to postpone the choice to aware until circumstances are better: "After a day or two when I've settled down, it would be much easier."

So what to do if obstacles come up? When do the obstacles come up? Now. Choose to aware the obstacle. Actively aware whatever seems to get in the way. This is what we've been calling the secondary object.

The traditional aim of the practice is the experience of Nibbāna—in English, nirvana. Nibbāna is the complete cessation of dukkha, the complete cessation of pain. And why do we come to meditate? Let's face it—why would otherwise sensible people spend their month's holiday at a meditation centre instead of going to a resort where they can enjoy themselves? What are you doing here? Why do we come? It's because we have dukkha, and we know we have dukkha, and we want to do something about it. That's why we're here.

So we are driven by our dukkha, which means that dukkha sets our agenda. But the Buddha is saying that dukkha is not real. Dukkha also does not survive presence. Continual presence dissolves pain. Our problems feed on our absences, and the more continually and radically present we are, the more our problems dissolve. Because ultimately, as far as the Buddha is concerned, our problem is not real. It's a fantasy.

What's real is this—what's happening now. Just immediate intimacy, about which fundamentally nothing can be said, because any words that we weave around it are just words woven around. And this now is always available. It's available right now. When we learn to take refuge in the present, what we find is that our suffering will dissolve.

And keep in mind that presence cannot be postponed. The choice is made now or it's not made. Presence is not something that is going to happen tomorrow or next week. Presence is happening now, or not at all. So please use this retreat as an opportunity to cultivate presence.

A question arose: "In the beginning you said that fantasy is charged by emotion for survival. But the emotion itself—does that survive?"

No. The stronger the emotion, the sooner it departs, because it requires so much energy to maintain it. But when a fantasy is fueled by emotion, it seems much more real, because the emotion is real in the present.

"But emotion itself—is it real?"

The emotion itself is real because it's powerful. We feel it in the body. But does it survive the present? Have you ever had an emotion that never goes away?

"No, but it sometimes lingers for a while."

It lingers for a while. And so that makes it more real than, for example, a fantasy about some random subject. A random thought that has no emotional charge—you realize, "Oh, I'm thinking," and then it's over. But a story I'm telling myself which is fueled by emotion could last for hours, could last for days. Yet sooner or later, it ends. What gives it that sense of reality is the emotion itself. And the emotion is felt very intensely because it's in the body. So it carries much more charge and it lasts longer. But it too ends. It too dissolves. And then I look back and realize, "No, that was a fantasy. I was caught up in something that actually, right now, doesn't exist."

"And emotion is something you don't have control over."

That's right. Again, it's conditioning. We are conditioned. Our experience is deeply conditioned. This is part of the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising. And this is why his teaching of karma is so central. Karma literally means action—but it's action that comes from choice. And again, it comes back to choice.

Classically, let's say I'm meditating and I slide off into a fantasy. I don't know that I've slid off into a fantasy—it's conditioned by the past. Then suddenly I know I'm thinking. And as soon as I know that I'm thinking, I'm faced with a choice. Well, I could just finish this story off. Or I could simply drop it now. That's the karma. That's the choice. And that choice conditions my future experience.

So if I make the choice to simply be present—right now it's just "I'm thinking," that's it—then the habit of being lost in thinking weakens. The choices that we make are really, really central for the Buddha. This is

the whole teaching of karma. Becoming sensitive to the choices that we're making right now is an important part of the practice—and also recognizing how much of my experience I can't do anything about.

It's conditioned by the past. But there's always one bit of my experience where I have a choice. And the Buddha says, this is really, really important. Pay attention to it and see if you can make a good choice.

This is the balance between samadhi and sati, between concentration and mindfulness. Part of the role of the grounding object is to develop samadhi, concentration or unification. This is the stability of the mind, and this gives depth to the experience. The job of the grounding object is to provide that stability and stillness and depth.

If we spend too much time on secondary objects, particularly in the early stages when we're getting started, many people will find that they just fluff about. They're just drifting from one thing to another. So they feel that they need to really stay with the grounding object.

Now again, we talked about this very early on. A lot depends on the individual. For some people, they really need something to hold on to. They really need a clear grounding object to stabilize the mind enough so they can begin to see the movements of the mind and the body without getting swept away. So, grounding object, grounding object, grounding object, stick with the walking. Other people find that just ties them up in knots, and it doesn't really work for them. They find that they can settle much more easily if they open up, and they're more oriented towards what we call the secondary object.

So it does depend on individuals. It's not that one single technique fits everybody. Part of your job as a meditator is to find out what works for you, what strategy works best for you.

The basic principle of this style of practice is that mindfulness leads concentration. The emphasis is on developing mindfulness. If the mindfulness gets stronger and stronger, the concentration will follow. Other forms of meditation lead with the concentration. First develop the concentration, and the mindfulness will come along in its wake. So you can go in different directions. In a general sense, this style of practice emphasizes mindfulness. But even then, some people, and it's partly an expression of their personality, really emphasize the concentration aspect of it.

For example, in the formal sitting and walking, they're really going for slow, deliberate movement. In the sitting, really staying with the grounding object. And in the ordinary daily activity, that's when the mindfulness comes in. But other people find that doesn't work for them. So they have a different relationship. It's up to you to decide what relationship suits you best.

I remember one student who used to practice here. There was one retreat that she did, a nine-day retreat, and she was really going for the concentration. She was not mucking around. And she was moving so slowly that when the bell went for lunch and she was in the hall, it took her an hour to get to the dining hall. I'm not exaggerating. The staff would keep the food warm for her. And it would take another hour to

get back down. It was really slow walking, and she went really, really deep. But what she was doing was quite deliberately doing a samadhi or concentration-oriented style of practice. Other people, if they tried to do that, their heads would explode and they wouldn't get very far. So they do something else.

It's very much like you use the basic structure and work out what's my relationship to it, what works for me. But the general principle is stay present to whatever is happening. Does that make sense?

If you're forcing it, then the best thing to do is to speed up. Because what we want to do is to be mindful, to be aware the whole day. If I'm forcing something, I cannot do it the whole day. I just fall over in a heap at some point. So with right effort, sustainability is really important. What relationship can you have to experience that you can maintain over the entire day?

That's the key point. Now sometimes in a day, you'll be really focused and high energy. At other times of the day, you won't be, because you simply don't have the energy. So again, you adapt to individual circumstances.

The term that the Buddha uses is *manu*, which is one of the terms for mind. But I think what he's getting at by mind is the whole process of knowing, of awareing. So both the kind of elemental quality—I know that this is the in-breath, I know that this is the out-breath—but it's also perception, feeling, the judgments about it, the whole bundle of relationships that I project onto the experience. I think that's what he's talking about there.

Tonight was very technical, but not to worry. As the month goes on, we'll get even more technical.

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