Tracking Heart-Mind (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 48:50

So these morning workshops and talks, we've been going through different aspects of the practice, working our way through the four Satipatthanas.

The first one is body. We start with body, and we spent a fair bit of time talking about and playing with our relationship to body. We moved on to vedana, feelings. Then yesterday we started working on citta, classically translated as mind. Yesterday we looked at one cognitive aspect of mind—the cognitive aspect that is concerned with thought, perception, understanding, and so on. We looked at thinking in particular.

Today we're going to look at the affective aspect of mind, which is about feeling in our normal everyday sense of the word, and emotions. Again, we're doing it in the structure of grounding object and secondary object. The grounding object represents where our awareness makes its home—where we stay, unless we have a reason to go somewhere else. Our secondary object represents how we work with distraction, how we work with whatever pulls us away from our grounding object. In other words, in most cases, what presents to us as a problem.

Now that we're coming to the affective aspect of mind, we're going to look at it from the perspective of working with disturbing emotions that can arise as a distraction, as a problem. For some people, disturbing emotion can be a major distraction. For other people, not so much. But if it does present as a difficulty, then we need to know how to work with it. This is what we're talking about today.

We'll start with defining our terms. This third satipatthana is what the Buddha calls citta. The classic translation for citta is mind. Citta plays a crucial role in the practice because when the Buddha talks about bondage or hindrance or fetter, what is it that is bound, hindered, fettered? It's the citta. When the Buddha talks about liberation, awakening, what is it that is liberated, awakened? It's the citta. So it's quite central, and of course it's also one of the four domains of mindfulness.

Classically citta has been translated as mind, but this can easily give us the wrong idea about what it actually means. If you come out of the Western tradition, then mind is regarded as the center of rationality. This comes out of the ancient Greek tradition where the Greek philosophers debated among themselves: What is it that makes the human species different from other species, and of course superior? Well, it's reason. Human beings have reason; other species do not. And it's the possession of reason that makes us superior. Where do we look for reason, rationality? In the mind. This attitude permeates our culture today.

I suspect that for most people, if you ask them what the mind actually does, they'll probably say it thinks.

And if asked to point to where the mind is located, they would probably point to their head. In fact, in normal conversation—even normal learned conversation, academic conversation such as you get on programs on the ABC—people often use the terms mind, head, and brain interchangeably, as if they're the same thing. I've always found this astonishing. But this is quite common in our culture.

The Buddha is coming at it from a different direction. For the Buddha, citta is the center of rationality—so he agreed with that. But for him it's also the center of mood and emotion, the center of affect. Most people in the European tradition would call this the heart, and would tend to place it, in terms of a hierarchy, beneath mind. But for the Buddha, citta equally embraces both head and heart. It's both, equally.

Overall, citta is a technical term, and it's one of those multi-layered technical terms. If you look up the Pali-English dictionary—the old one, which is the one I've got—four big pages, small print, and the entry for citta goes on for several pages. When you see that, you know you're dealing with an important technical term.

And it gets variously defined, depending on context. As Buddhist philosophy developed, the understanding of what exactly is meant by citta also developed. But in its broadest sense, citta essentially refers to our inner state, what's happening within us.

One way of looking at it is that we notice there are certain aspects of our experience which are public, and certain aspects which are private. For example, if someone happened in the course of casual conversation to say, "It's really hot this morning, isn't it? The sun's just blasting down. This is the hottest summer day we've had in the retreat so far," you'd look at them and think, is this person having a go at me? Because it's pretty obviously cool and wet. And we can all agree on that. In other words, physical experience is shared, it's public. There's generally a consensus that we just take for granted.

But of course, what I think about the weather at Medlow Bath—that's private. No one knows what I am thinking. Phew. What a relief.

We completely take this for granted. There are aspects of my experience which are purely private to me. And if by some accident it somehow leaks out, I'm often very embarrassed. "Oh my God, they've found out what I really think about this."

So citta refers to that internal, private realm. And it's in this realm that thoughts and feelings and perceptions arise. Does that make sense?

Citta can be translated as "mind," and sometimes that's a good translation. In certain contexts it could be translated as "heart," and sometimes I do translate it that way, when it's clear that the affective dimension is being emphasized. Personally, I think the best translation would be "soul." But I don't use it because the word soul has been taken over by Christians, and if you use it, there are all sorts of theological implications associated with it which just get in the way. So we have to leave soul to them.

Often these days you get the compromise term "heart-mind." I think that's become increasingly popular because it covers both the affective and the cognitive. So generally, that's what I use.

As far as I can see, the way the term "soul" was originally used, it comes from the Greeks. In Latin translation, the anima or the animus, depending on male or female. I don't know the Greek term. But Aristotle, for example, wrote a book on the soul, and that's his book on psychology. So soul is the inner person, and it's not restricted to the rational. It's much broader than that. When we use it non-theologically, we include the feeling aspect. "The music was very soulful"—so it includes the affective aspect. It's in that sense that I think soul would actually be the best translation for citta.

Now, when the Buddha introduces citta in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, first of all he doesn't give it an exact definition. He's not using it, I think, as a precise technical term. He's using it in a general sense. And when he introduces it in terms of the practice, he talks about the practitioner understanding whether or not the citta is colored by obsession, aversion, or delusion.

These are the three fires or the three poisons that we talked about last night. They constitute the fundamental movements of the mind, of the citta, and they constitute the basic human problem that we've got to resolve if we want to live a satisfactory life. So what is the fundamental coloring of my heart-mind as it presents now? This is the way that he introduces it in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. And we can see that heart-mind, that citta, is very close to vedanā.

They're very close in their meanings. And in fact, in practical terms, from the point of view of the practitioner, it may be impossible to tell the difference between citta and vedanā, between heart-mind and feeling. Sometimes any given experience could be equally labelled either one or both. But it's not important what label we give to the experience. The important thing is that we are intimate with the experience. So in this case, whether we have an experience of our inner self and we label that feeling, or whether we label that our mind, doesn't really matter. They are very, very close to each other.

Now this brings us to the subject of emotion. As we said, when we start the meditation practice, there's a great deal of emphasis on the body. We've got our particular meditation objects and we're chasing after them. We may tend to ignore or push aside the arising of any kind of strong affective feeling emerging. Practitioners often stumble into the heart-mind, the tracking of the heart-mind, when they become aware of disturbing emotions that distract them from their practice—fear, anger, anxiety, irritation, desire, and so on.

Just out of interest, has anybody here during this retreat ever become irritated by their fellow meditators? It's not unusual. These are examples of citta, of heart-mind, coloured by obsession and aversion.

Some emotions have a flavour of delusion. I would say, for example, boredom. I find boredom difficult to note, difficult to be aware of. The delusion flavour for me is found in its restlessness and the vague sense of dissatisfaction and not knowing what to do about it. For me, these are all flavours of delusion.

Normally, the emotions that are easiest to notice, and once you find them, easiest to stay with, are those that are flavoured by attraction and aversion, or obsession and aversion. These are usually the easiest ones. And the ones that really grab our attention, generally, are the ones flavoured by aversion.

So how do we attend to disturbing emotion? The essence of the practice is awareness, and a basic principle of it is that it doesn't matter what we are aware of. What matters is the quality of our awareness. If emotion is present and if it is dominant, then emotion becomes our meditation object. We become intimate with how emotion presents—as we've been saying—without getting caught up in the content of the emotion, what the emotion is about, the story that accompanies the emotion. We are not interested in that.

The other thing, closely related, that is worth keeping in mind for the context of this practice, is this: if we're working with emotion as a meditation object, what we are not trying to do is solve our emotional problems. That is not the agenda in the meditation practice. It's not that there's anything wrong with that agenda—it's a really good thing to do, and there are all sorts of ways in which we can do it. But when we come to the meditation, that's not the agenda. The agenda is only seeing and understanding the emptiness of emotion. The not-self quality of emotion. Emotions are not me, and they do not belong to me. They're just natural processes. They're just natural phenomena, and they come and go according to conditions. And that's it.

But in order to really discover this, we have to be intimate with them. Otherwise, we will construct a self out of them.

So let's begin with the fact that emotion is a very complex phenomenon. Actually, there's no word in Pali or Sanskrit that corresponds to the English word emotion. You just don't find it. And apparently, according to the Dalai Lama, there's no word in classical Tibetan that corresponds to the English word emotion.

Now this clearly indicates that ancient Indians had no emotions. No, I don't think so. The problem with the word emotion is that it's a catch-all. It's a collective term. And in fact, in English, it's a modern term.

So, for example, in Shakespeare, who has a vast vocabulary, you never find the word "emotion." It either did not exist, or it was so obscure that not even Shakespeare ever used it. The term was introduced in the 18th century and became dominant in the 19th century, part of the separation of psychology from religion—the birth of modern psychology. Psychology was classified as a science, which means it positioned itself a long, long way from religion.

But in the era before the emergence of modern psychology, who were the psychologists? Who were the people who dealt with a disturbed soul? It was the clergy. And the language of what we now call psychology was strongly influenced by theology. So when people started inventing this new science of psychology, they wanted to distance themselves as much as possible from that heritage. One of the things they did was create their own vocabulary, and one word they created was "emotion."

But it is a catch-all. And I think the reason why there's no equivalent in the Buddha's language for emotion is that the term is just too vague, too general for him. His language is quite precise. His project is often to take a given behavior or a given set of circumstances and break it down into its parts, then see how those parts connect. For example, with the body, he examines the elements, breaking things down into their elemental parts, and then seeing how they connect. He brings the same kind of project to the mind, to the heart, to the citta. And "emotion" just doesn't cut it, because it's just too broad.

Emotion is complex. It's made up of different parts, and it involves all the satipaṭṭhānas. Take, for example, the emotion of anger. When I talk about emotion as a problem, the emotions I normally discuss are anger and sorrow. These are the emotions that I tend to address in the context of meditation because these are the emotions I wrestled with during my practice.

Anger I understood to some degree. But sorrow—sadness, misery, grief, despair, depression, melancholy—I really had to work with these. So I talk about them because these are the ones I've been practicing with the most.

Let's take anger as an example. We cannot have anger without tension in the body. If our body is completely relaxed, it is impossible to be angry. So there's an inescapably physical aspect to emotion—it's part body, part physical. And since all body sensations have physical location, this means we can speak of feeling emotion in our body. We might feel it in our heart, or in our gut, or somewhere else. Usually people feel emotion somewhere in the torso area. So there's a physical aspect to it, some kind of response in the body.

Now, I'm speaking as someone who is completely ignorant about Western psychology. I've never studied it. I've never had the slightest interest in it. So if I'm technically wrong, that's, as far as I'm concerned, perfectly understandable. But to me, the way the word "emotion" is used, emotion always has a strong feeling charge. And it's either pleasant or it's painful.

Some emotions are pleasant and some emotions are painful. I find it difficult, if not impossible, to think of an emotion that is neither painful nor pleasant. Mood, certainly—mood would fit into that third category—but not emotion.

In the case of anger, for instance, anger can be experienced as pleasant and it can be experienced as painful. In my experience, it's pleasant when it gives me a sense of power. If I'm really pissed off, then I run the fantasy of marching over there and smashing through and doing this and that. That sense of power is very pleasant. But anger is acute and painful when it's accompanied by a sense of powerlessness. We have the expression "impotent rage"—very, very painful. So it can be painful, it can be pleasant. There's the vedana, the feeling charge. Emotion is part body, part feeling.

And emotion normally includes a narrative in the mind. This narrative, this story, provides the intentionality of emotion. For example, if I am angry, I am angry *at* someone or some situation *about*

something. This intentionality appears as a story I'm telling myself in my mind—a story that paints me as the victim of some kind of injustice. So emotion includes the thought stream we were exploring yesterday. Emotion is complex, and when we work with it, we basically break it down into its parts.

Here I'll share what I've found useful in my own practice. In Burma, I found that the Sayadaws were not interested in working with emotion. They were interested in the fine-tuning of details—the rising and falling, the lifting, moving, placing, the coming and going of mind states.

Someone asked about states like compassion and grace, whether I would call those emotions. I think the word "emotion" is a bit vague—you could call them that. The Buddha calls them dhammas: qualities or states. Whether or not you'd call them emotions, who knows? From the Buddha's perspective, the main thing he's interested in is whether any given psychological event or state could be seen as wholesome or unwholesome. If it's wholesome, cultivate it. If it's unwholesome, abandon it. This is his fundamental ethical stance.

In the context we're discussing now—emotion as a disturbance that takes me away from the practice—then pretty much by definition it's unwholesome, and the job would be abandonment. But if compassion arises, well, that's wholesome. I could cultivate it, and in fact I could turn it into a meditation, as in the Brahma Viharas.

But again, the context here is emotion as a problem. The Sayadaws just didn't want to go there. If you stumbled into an interview and said, "I can't meditate, I'm just full of rage," the response would be, "Did you know that? Next, please." If you couldn't meditate because you were overwhelmed by whatever storm had hit you, they would simply wait for the storm to blow over and then start again.

So how to work with emotion is something I developed for myself. And since it doesn't come from the tradition as such, please feel free to dismiss it completely as being totally eccentric and not worthy of your attention.

What I found useful is making my meditation object the felt essence of the emotion as revealed in its elemental quality. Here we go back to the elements. When the Buddha talks about the elements—earth, air, fire, water—he talks about them only in terms of body. But I find them very useful in the context of citta.

What are the elements that characterize the nature of this particular emotion? I begin by locating the emotion in the body.

So where is it? And if I can't find any particular location, I just settle awareness in the heart area. Then I note, I'm directly aware—not the sensation itself, but I'm aiming at the sensation while going through it. Here a certain amount of imagination might be applicable. I go through the sensation looking for the felt elemental quality of the emotion that lies beneath.

So, for example, anger. I've found it to be usually hot, but sometimes cold. It's hard, energetic, restless, moving, dry, rough, sharp. And as I said, sometimes pleasant and sometimes painful. If I had to put a colour onto it, I'd say red.

In contrast, sorrow I've found to be cool, moist, even wet, soft, gentle, smooth—and often, very strangely, pleasant. There were periods where I really enjoyed my sorrow. At the time I thought this was really bizarre, but it was what was happening. If I had to put a colour on it, I would say blue.

So what's the elemental quality of the emotions? Where is it in the body? How does it present elementally?

Throughout all of this, what I'm not interested in—at all—are the stories I am telling myself. Now, that's where the interest and the awareness tends to go: the story of my life, the story about these people who are doing these things, the story of the tragedy of my existence. But I'm not interested in these stories. Again and again and again, I'm dropping awareness from the story into the body, into the sentient body.

The story tells me nothing useful, except it can name what emotion currently possesses me. That is the only useful data it presents. The rest is rubbish at best.

The work is done in the sentient body. It's not done in the stories. It's not done in thinking and perception. Thinking and perception come later; they're on top. What's underneath is the raw emotion itself. This is found in the sentient body. It's here that we find the sensitivity that is the center of the citta—the raw sensitivity which is being bombarded by sense stimulus and which is reacting to that bombardment. That's where the work is done. And the story is far, far away from that.

Is there any benefit in tracking those stories—not in great depth, but noticing when this happens and when it doesn't, so that one can then see patterns?

Yeah, that's where I hammer this: don't get involved in the story, because that's our addictive response. But sometimes the story can be useful in that it leads you in a certain direction. There might be a particular traumatic event, and the thought of it spontaneously pops up. And I think, "Oh, that's interesting. Where is this taking me?" Then it's a kind of—it's not an active thinking about it, but allowing the imagery to come up while staying with the sentient body and seeing what the sentient body is doing. The story is in the background, but the attention remains in the sentient body.

Sometimes I will find the story will go boom, boom, boom, boom, boom—bang! And I'm back into that primeval traumatic event. But I'm into it in a way in which I can clearly see its emptiness. I can clearly recognize in real time: this is not me, and it's not about me. It's just an event coming and going according to conditions. Because it's deeply buried, every now and again it pops up for air, as it were. It kind of waves, and then it disappears.

As we do this, what we can see is that what presents as an emotion changes. If I'm tracking this, I can see that at some point it ceases, it ends.

Now this is obvious, but normally we don't see the cessation of an emotion in real time. For example, I know I am angry, and then later on I realise that I have already calmed down. But normally I don't see the moment that the emotion ends. And often we don't see the arising of the emotion either—we just recognize that we're already in it. Catching the arising is something we normally don't manage. In the case of anger, I just suddenly realize that I am already angry.

But with this practice, what we learn to see is the actual moment of cessation—in particular, the cessation. Now, we can be ambushed by the emotion, so we miss the beginning. We just realize, "Oh, I'm in it." Sometimes we see the beginning, but often we don't. We're in it. But if I track it, if I'm with it, then I see the moment it ends.

And when that happens, the emotion ceases cleanly, and it doesn't leave any aftertaste. Usually, after I emerge from a strong emotion, for some time my mood is disturbed in some way, and gradually that fades. But if I'm directly engaged with the impermanence of the emotion in real time, then I see it end, and in that moment it's completely finished. There's no aftertaste. It's like, "Oh, right, it's over. That's it."

What this does is weaken my determination to identify with the emotion. Seeing clearly the impermanence weakens identification. And this is how it leads to the perception of not-self. The emotion comes and goes according to nature, but I learn to not identify with it.

The result is what could be called emotional fluidity. I find that my emotions flow readily from one to the next to the next, and I don't get stuck in any of them—because I'm not identified with any of them. I'm not using them as a means of constructing an identity.

Normally there are particular emotions that I am identified with, and once they arise I feed them with my thinking, with my story, and I use them to construct an identity and a world. I'm stuck in the emotion, and it cannot express its natural impermanence. But if I just keep the awareness of the elemental flow of the emotion flowing through the citta, the emotions just flow naturally. I'm not stuck in any of them, and I do not create an identity from them.

And so emotions are experienced as empty, as not-self. When that happens, they are not problems—even the painful ones. They're not actually problems. They're just events. That's all. And they can be very interesting events, and they can teach us a lot about the nature of the citta.

You'll notice that this morning we're not doing any little meditation exercises. There are meditation exercises in which the student will be asked to conjure up an emotion—like, "Think of something that makes you really pissed off"—and then when the emotion arises, use it as a meditation object. But I have far too much respect for emotion to play with it like this. I don't do it, so I'm just talking about it.

To put it in contemporary terms, there simply isn't a market for it. It's too difficult. There's too much working world pressure. And Westerners are slower.

The Burmese teachers, early on at the Mahasi centers, concluded that when people come in for retreat, the recommendation would be two months, perhaps extended to three. This was for Burmese practitioners, and that was plenty of time for them. Then they started teaching Western students. Oh my God! For a start, their minds never shut up. The emotions are rampaging, and the sense of entitlement is completely out of control. It takes them a lot longer.

When I was there, my impression—and this is purely subjective—was that it took maybe ten months to get through. If someone completed the practice in two or three months, they were remarkably quick. And usually people come back. You do a three-month retreat, you go away, you return next year for another three-month retreat, you go away again, you come back for another one. Eventually, you get there. The amount of commitment involved is great, especially for us.

I have been teaching in Malaysia, where the students are Chinese. These are thoroughly modern people. Often Westerners assume, "Oh yes, the Asians—they're all just peasants, aren't they? Mindlessly growing their rice, so they find concentration easy." No, no, no. These are urban, middle-class, highly educated, very hardworking people. But they find samādhi much easier than, for example, Australians. Much easier. And they're much faster to develop it. There are exceptions, of course. But for us, in contemporary Western culture, it's really hard. Because, basically, we are, as a collective, deeply disturbed.

"I still would like the opportunity to fail," someone says.

Absolutely. You should give it a go. There's no reason to think you can't do it. You've just got to commit fully.

Places like Spirit Rock and IMS are attempting exactly this—making deep practice accessible to Western practitioners. At IMS, they hold a three-month retreat every year. That's a huge undertaking. To have maintained that year after year, decade after decade, is a significant accomplishment. How often do you get a three-month retreat in Australia? You rarely even get a month. It's unusual.

"It's the money," someone observes. "You mean if I have more money, I can get enlightened faster?"

No, but financial pressure is one of the things preventing people from committing three months. When I started practice back in the seventies in Australia, the Aussie dollar was more valuable than the American dollar. When I went to Hawaii in 1980, one Australian dollar was worth $1.15 US. So it's become more expensive. But beyond that, the career pressure is greater. In my day, people would confidently walk away from a job, spend whatever time they needed meditating or wandering around Asia, return maybe years later, and be confident they could walk into another job and proceed to have a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. These days, you can't. You'd never buy a house.

If you get off the treadmill for five seconds. So economically it's much harder than it was. And psychologically it seems to be much harder. There seems to be more disturbance in the citta than there was before. So it's getting harder.

Going back to anger—sometimes I can see anger being energetic and almost life-giving. And sorrow can be so heavy that life can start feeling really impossible. And it's not always. But is that an okay perspective?

Oh yeah, I mean that's your experience and it sounds very authentic. The challenge then would be to stay with the heaviness or the sense of being drained or whatever flavor it is. The challenge is to make that a meditation object. Again, dropping the story, dropping the identification. And when working with really strong emotion, you let the body do what the body wants to do. So if the body wants to walk out and scream at the universe, go out and scream at the universe. If the body wants to roll around and weep, roll around and weep. But just keeping the awareness going all the time.

Not to nitpick at all, but just out of interest—you're talking about emotion being a catch-all and too vague. Wouldn't you also argue that citta is a catch-all?

It is, definitely. And later on, in the later Buddhist tradition, it gets very precise definitions. They kind of try to pin it down. But I think it's actually less useful when they do that. It functions better as a catch-all.

In the khandhas, the five aggregates, the term "mental formations" is often translated—

At this point we get technical. The Buddha creates this framework of human experience. The two frameworks he uses are the five aggregates and the six sense fields. Sometimes you use one, sometimes you use the other. With the five aggregates, the five collections, the fourth is sankhāra khandha. Sankhāra is another one of these multi-layered technical terms that can be variously translated depending on context.

Literally it means construction or formation. It comes from the root *kr*—to make, to do—from which we get the word *karoti*. And the word karma comes from the same root. And you get *kāra*. So, for example, a carpenter or a builder would be a house-kāra, one who makes a house. Sankhāra is *kāra*—making—and then you have the prefix *sam*, together. So, to make together, to put together.

It refers to anything which is put together, anything constructed out of parts. So for example, this body is sankhāra. This building is sankhāra. This retreat is sankhāra, because it's put together out of parts. And as part of that understanding, anything that's put together out of parts, at some point it collapses and goes back into its parts. So it's impermanent.

This is the fourth khandha. So the question is, what is the Buddha getting at when he uses this? What does he mean by sankhāra here? It's generally understood that the Buddha himself saw this one as being essentially what we're going to talk about tomorrow—choice, intention. Because choice or intention is what constructs our life. So this is the constructing aspect.

But then in the later Theravada, when the scholars were systematizing everything, they looked at these five khandhas and thought, "It's a bit untidy. It would be best if it included everything, not just these five aspects of what we identify with to construct a self." So they used the fourth one, sankhāra khandha, as a

catch-all for everything other than the others. They just put it in. And that's where you get "mental formations."

So you get two different ways in which this five aggregates model is used: the way the Buddha uses it, and the way the later tradition uses it. Body, feeling, perception, sankhāras, and awareness.

And we're going to be talking about the aggregates and the self later on in the retreat.

Sankhara is the Sanskrit term; sankhata is the Pali. They're the same word in different languages.

We've wandered rather far from our original point, but it's been quite interesting. Thank you very much.

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