Tracking Choice: Cetanā and the Movement of Awareness

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:03:07

This morning we're going to talk about cetanā, usually translated as intention. This brings us to the subject of kamma vipāka—action and its ripening—which of course is central to the Buddha's teaching on ethics.

This doctrine of kamma (in Pali), karma (in Sanskrit or English), is a teaching that the Buddha inherited, one that was part of the Indian tradition at the time. But he gave his own particular spin on it. He says, "I declare that choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing."

Here I'm translating the Pali cetanā as "choice," although it's usually translated as "intention," and kamma is, of course, action. You'll notice the sentence begins with the Buddha saying, "I declare..." When he phrases things this way, it's a kind of emphasis. He's being emphatic. It's like he's saying, "This is serious, pay attention."

So choice is central for the Buddha in working out how we live. It's the basis of kamma. And if this is so, then as practitioners, we need to become sensitive to the choices that we're making and the results of those choices. We need to become aware of them. To put it in terms of meditation method, choice becomes a meditation object.

In different parts of his teaching, the Buddha uses a number of technical terms that center around this central concept of choice, intention, or decision. All of them involve where we direct the mind. In terms of meditation practice, we've been talking about directed awareness and undirected awareness—directing awareness, sending awareness somewhere. This is the foundation for the meditation practice, and different terms revolve around this concept.

For example, in the Eightfold Path we find sammā saṅkappa. This is the second factor in the Eightfold Path, and it's part of the wisdom group. Right view, right saṅkappa—these together make up wisdom. Saṅkappa is one of those words that gets translated in a whole number of different ways, which indicates that there is no English equivalent. People are casting about for the closest one. But in every case, the translations refer to the direction in which we send our mind.

Directing the mind can be seen from the most broad and general to the most detailed and specific. Consider the fundamental decisions of our lives: What career path will I take up? Who will I associate with? Who will I marry? Where will I live? These fundamental decisions send our lives in a certain direction. And then right down to the microscopic level: when we're meditating, do I direct awareness to

the rising movement of the abdomen or to the thought which has just arisen? From one end of the spectrum to the other, what all these have in common is the direction in which we send our minds.

Sammā saṅkappa could be translated as "right intention." Sometimes you see it translated as "right thought"—I'm not quite sure why; I've never quite understood that one. In the meditation context, you could translate it as "right aim." And of course this is absolutely central to the practice that we're doing.

As Mahāsi Sayādaw says, the source of the practice—where it comes from—is choice or intention: the choice to be aware of something and the movement of awareness toward that something. When Mahāsi Sayādaw talks about noting intention, that's what he's talking about. He's talking about directly being aware of the choice to be aware and the movement of the mind toward the object.

From Mahāsi's point of view, what is the source of each action of noting or directly being aware? It's choice, it's decision—the choice made now to be aware of this. Notice that this is not effort as such. We're not trying to decide to be aware. We're simply choosing to be aware. We're making the choice. We're always making the choice. But we could choose: instead of being aware of this, I could be aware of that.

Effort comes later on. Effort appears as the commitment to continue this choice over a period of time—this particular choice. The choice to stay with the breathing, for example. The choice to open awareness out. And sustaining that choice over a period of time. That commitment—that's where the effort comes in. But the choice itself does not involve effort.

So choice sends awareness on its journey. And in the practice, we learn to recognize the choice itself, to feel the movement of awareness, and to recognize the object of awareness. This is all part of the tracking of choice.

As the perception develops, one thing it teaches us is that we do not have a separate self noting or awaring something in the world out there. We assume that's what's going on. But when we pay attention, we realize actually that's not going on. What's going on is the choice to aware, and then whatever appears in that awareness.

I am going to elaborate, but not this morning, because this takes us into the whole area of nāma-rūpa and the arising of insight. We're going to talk about it at night, because to get into it properly takes a fair bit of time, and it's so counter-intuitive to the way we normally perceive the world.

We perceive the world as: this is me, there's the world out there, and I'm choosing to aware whatever it is. But what the Buddha is saying is no—what there is, is the choice to aware and what appears in awareness. That's what it is.

So he doesn't talk about mind and body, although sometimes you see that in English translations. But that's a kind of mistranslation. What he talks about is nāma-rūpa. Nāma is mind, but specifically it's the activity of mind—mind reaching out to aware something. And rūpa is the appearance, what is awared.

Remember we started with thinking? The first exercise was: how does thought appear? Does it appear as words? Does it appear as visual images? Well, the appearance is rūpa. Something appears in the field of awareness, and there's the action of the mind aware of it. The Buddha is saying that's all there actually is.

Out of that we construct a world, and we construct a self within the world. But all of that is a conceptual construction, and it's happening within this process of nāma-rūpa.

A student asked for clarification, and I acknowledged: this is where the question of choice becomes challenging. When we think about it, choice seems to involve a self—someone who chooses. So perhaps "motivational drive" is better than "choice," because choice assumes a chooser, whereas motivational drive does not imply a motivational driver.

This is a problem we have in conceptualizing all this. It brings us into the whole area of what in the Western tradition is called free will. I've had people who are philosophically literate assure me with great confidence that at the center of the Buddha's teaching is the teaching of free will. And I've had equally good practitioners, equally philosophically literate, who have assured me with total confidence that the teaching of free will is entirely absent from the Buddhist teaching. Absolute confidence on both sides.

I think the problem is that the way free will is talked about always assumes a self making a choice. And it also gets tied up in theology.

But that's right—when people in the Western philosophical tradition talk about conditioning, if something is conditioned, then they assume that means it belongs to a realm separate from free will. So if the human being is conditioned, then you either get complete determinism, where nobody's making a choice anywhere and everything starts rolling on according to the laws of physics or whatever, or there is a chooser, but that chooser is outside the world of conditioning. You can't have a choice unless you have a chooser who's outside conditioning—which is the soul, of course. That's the way we tend to think about these things.

But for the Buddha, he doesn't think about it that way. He's got a whole different way of thinking about it. It's language, really. If you've found a phrase or a word that suits you, then you might stick to that—it's as good as any other. What might be helpful is thinking in terms of conscious choice, and perhaps creative choice. This is what we're going to get to.

This very morning I read a book called *The Power of Habit*—I really recommend it. This very subject came up in there. The statistics are that eighty-five percent of the decisions we make all day are habit. Another ten percent are situational—a forced choice that has to be dealt with immediately. And there's just over five percent that are truly deliberate choices. Do we have free will? Perhaps five percent of the time. I think one way of looking at it is that the meditator's job is to increase from five percent to six percent, maybe to seven percent. Possibly as far as eight percent.

So just to sum up: are all choices conditioned? Yes—this is actually one of the confusing things from the

Western point of view. The Buddha is saying that choice is conditioned. It's part of the system of conditioning. Choices arise because of conditions. But that doesn't mean we can't work on it. We can change the system of conditioning, influence the system of conditioning. But basically, all of samsara is conditioned.

One pair of terms the Buddha uses is the *sankhata* and the *asankhata*. The *sankhata* is the constructed, the conditioned. We've briefly talked about this. So for example, this body is constructed. This mind is constructed. This building is constructed. This meditation retreat is constructed. Basically everything is constructed except one thing—which you can't even call a thing. This is the *asankhata*: the not-constructed, the not-born, the not-become, and so on. And this is so mysterious that it's quite difficult; you can only talk about it in terms of poetic imagery. But that's what's outside the system of conditioning.

So we are working within the system of conditionings. It's like we're taking hold of it and conditioning ourselves to head in a certain direction—the path—such that we will stumble into the unconditioned. But we can't make that happen. This is quite important, I think, in the meditation practice when you're talking about the arising of insight.

Robert Aitken Roshi, my old Zen teacher, put it quite nicely. In Zen, meditation is zazen, and everything revolves around zazen. He once said that zazen does not bring about realization. Realization, when it happens, always happens as an accident. But zazen makes you accident-prone.

And that sums it up pretty much.

So we're working with the conditioned. If you're doing a meditation practice, you're conditioning your mind, moment by moment by moment by moment. That's the work of it. So it's still within the realm of the conditioned. But if the citta is ripened, then by accident—click—it can stumble into the unconditioned. But you can't make that happen. And then, once there's been an immersion in the unconstructed, in the unconditioned, this begins to filter back into how the conditioned works. So the conditioned world begins to change as a result.

So we got very metaphysical there. Getting back to what Mahasi is talking about: we make a choice to aware, or we have a motivational drive to aware, as the case may be. And this motivational drive sends awareness on its journey. So in the practice, what we want to do is to learn to see, to recognize this choice, this decision, this intention, this motivational drive—this whatever it is—to recognize it, to feel the movement of awareness, and to recognize the object of awareness. And as this perception develops, what becomes clear is that there's no separate self noting something in the world out there. What there is, is the choice to aware and whatever arises within the field of awareness. So what we take to be the world and to be real is made up of awaring and what we aware. And that dyad is essentially what there is in the realm of human experience.

Now there are other terms that revolve around this concept of choice, decision, intention. One of them is

adhiṭṭhāna. If you've done Goenka practice, you'll be familiar with this. An adhiṭṭhāna is a determination, a resolution. So it's a deliberately created, strong intention or choice or direction to perform a certain action or for a particular experience to arise. And adhiṭṭhāna is used within the meditation practice—we're going to introduce it a bit later this morning. In Goenka, I think they have adhiṭṭhāna to sit without moving for an hour. But again, it's the determination: "Oh, this is what I'm going to do." So it's a deliberately creative choice or decision to send awareness in a certain direction, or to do a certain action, for something to happen.

And then in the five aggregates that we've talked about before, the fourth one is saṅkhāra khandha, where saṅkhāra is construction. In the schema of the five aggregates—which are basically what create our identity, the raw materials from which we construct an identity—saṅkhāra represents our choices that form or construct our identity. The choices that we make, again and again and again, that construct an identity. And this, of course, brings us to karma.

And then finally we have cetanā. This is the term that we're looking at today. Cetanā is normally translated as intention, but the way the Buddha uses it, I don't think intention quite fits the bill. For example, in English, we believe—apparently, judging from the way that we speak—that it is possible to act against our intentions. We have the saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." You've heard that one? And you know what it's getting at. It's coherent, it's understandable. But for the Buddha, if he heard that, I think what he'd be hearing is the statement that our actions take us in one direction while our cetanā is heading in another direction. And for him, that's nonsense. It's incoherent. If our cetanā is heading in this direction, our actions are heading in that direction. And that's it. There's no way that there could be a conflict between them.

So there's a very tight relationship between cetanā and action—tighter than intention in the sense that we normally use the word. Intention, I think, is too wide in its meaning to capture what the Buddha means. Intention is quite general. So, for example, I'm walking down here to this room and I intend to give a good talk this morning. That's my intention.

And that makes sense, doesn't it?

But while I'm speaking, I am making multiple specific decisions. I'll look at my notes now. I'll look up now. I'll look in this direction. I'll look in that direction. I'll wave my hand like this to make a point, or I'll make a big circle with my hand to make another point. There are multiple individual decisions being made. That's the cetanā. This is what the Buddha is getting at.

And finally, cetanā goes a lot deeper than we normally assume intention goes. A classic example is our intention to think. Sometimes meditators feel oppressed, harassed by their thinking. They believe that if only they could stop thinking, then they could meditate, and their life would be better. Have you ever had that thought pop up in your mind? They feel trapped by their thinking. The experience they're having is not that "I am thinking," but that "thinking is happening to me."

Now, if we go to a meditation master and say, "I want to know how to stop thinking," and the meditation master says, "No problem. I know exactly what you can do, and the effect is instant." You say, "What? What do I do?" And they reply, "All you've got to do is stop choosing to think."

If you were having a really hard time on a meditation retreat and someone seriously gave you this advice, would you think, "I've found my answer at last"? Or would you think, "What the hell is this person trying to do with me?" You'd get really upset about it. If it was me, I'd get very upset.

But if we actually look at how the mind works—how can I stop thinking in my meditation practice? Very simple. Just stop choosing to think. That really is it. Because when we choose to stop, the thinking stops immediately. And it will not arise again until we choose to think. Then it will arise.

From the Buddhist perspective, our determination to think, the choices we are making to think—they go very, very deep. But fundamentally, it is a matter of choice. This is what meditators discover when they, in fact, stop thinking or even reduce the level of thinking.

And this brings us to what we've been talking about before: the problem of habit. Cetanā is part of dependent arising, paṭicca samuppāda, which is the basic framework for the Buddha's teaching. In other words, our choices are conditioned. They are the product of habit, and in turn they produce new habits. We are caught up in our habits and our addictions because we have constructed them from the choices we have made over a long period of time.

Actually, looking back, I can remember when I was a little kid and I made the discovery that whatever unpleasant situation I was in, I could catapult out of it immediately by creating a fantasy—and going into the fantasy. It was fantastic. It was magic. I remember one instance when I was walking home from school. There was about a couple of kilometres to walk, and towards the end there was a hill just before I reached home. Walking up that hill there was a big staircase. I always experienced it as hard work, and I didn't really like it. I can remember approaching the staircase and deciding, "Okay, I'm out of here." I went into a fantasy and came out of it about a block later, when I was already descending. And I thought, "That was pretty good. I've got to keep doing this."

And so, of course, as an adult, when I start meditating, it's obsessive.

I can't stop. It's a habit. But it's a habit I created. And I created it through making choice. What's the way out of the habit? Make the other choice. So habits remain habitual choices. And if choice is involved, which it is, there is always an alternative. You can always make another decision. This is why understanding cetanā is so important.

And we can also see how the Buddha's teaching is essentially optimistic. He's got a reputation as an old misery bag because he's constantly banging on about dukkha. But what he emphasises is that we can always intervene into the situation. We can always do something to make things better.

So, for example, the teaching of dukkha: pain is inherent to samsara. It's just built in. And the teaching says, and the meditator discovers, that we can never find a place of rest within samsara. Understanding this is part of understanding the universal characteristic of dukkha. Yet there is something we can do. And more intimately, there is something we are already doing. We aware this situation.

And awareing, as we've said, has a twofold quality. There's a sense in which we do not do awareing, because the mind is already awareing. Simply, that's what it does. And that's not a question of choice. But we can choose to be present to our awareing of, for example, pain, and not try to hide somewhere else. And this awareing is very powerful and very healing. So the sense of "there's always something I can do" is really central to the Buddha's understanding of the situation.

This is why I translate cetanā as choice. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as volition, and Thanissaro, I think, uses decision—he sees it as the decision to act. So decision is another possibility. But I'm just using choice.

Now, if you're practising and you want to aware cetanā, how does it present? Sometimes, and this is based on what people have said in their practice, sometimes it presents as an impulse. And the impulse can be physical or it can be mental. If it's physical, that means impelled by the body. If it's mental, it means impelled by the mind. So for example, the impulse to look at something, the impulse to reach for something, the impulse to listen to something, the impulse to think something. Have you ever noticed that impulse? That's where you find the choice.

And sometimes it presents as a decision between possibilities. Suddenly we're faced with a situation and we know I could do this, or this, or that. And I'll do that one. Now, that is incredibly quick, and often, usually, we don't notice it. But when we're meditating and we're a lot clearer, we can start to notice it.

So if we're talking about thinking in the meditation practice: have you ever had the experience where you're minding your own business doing the meditation, suddenly you slide into thinking and you don't know that you're thinking, and then there comes that moment when you know that you're thinking, and you're faced with a choice? I could get back to the meditation object, or I could just finish this off first. I think I'll just finish it off first. Have you ever gone through that? It goes incredibly fast, but it's a decision between possibilities. And we just made a choice. And if we chose to just finish that off, we've just put another layer of habit.

And finally, and this is what Mahasi emphasises, we can see choice as the movement of awareness towards the object.

We can feel, having made that choice, that awareness goes off to where it goes.

So if we're looking for choice, if we're going to incorporate this into the practice, where might we look? One classic instance that the tradition talks about is in changes of posture. Let's say I'm sitting in meditation and at some point—in a situation like this where basically I'm the one who decides when to end it—at some point I end the session and I move. Can I see the decision to end the session and to move?

Or do I just move?

I might make a point of deliberately extending the normal sitting period until discomfort or pain impels me to move, and then see if I can be aware of the moment I make that decision. To catch that moment. That's one possibility.

Another possibility is non-routine movement, changes of movement. If I'm doing walking meditation up and down a track, for example, I'm standing and I am about to move. Have you ever had that experience in your meditation? How do you know you're about to move? I'm walking and I'm about to stop. How do I know I'm about to stop? This is where the choice or decision to move or to stop is located. This is where I might find it.

Sometimes you can tell that someone's practicing this in walking meditation, when they're doing the standing before the walking and they're looking for the decision to move. You can tell because they just stand there for an hour. They've got the spotlight on, waiting for this decision to arise, and it hides away and doesn't turn up. So weird things can happen.

We can also see choice in routine movements. In walking, I'm noting the movement of my feet or legs, or using the classic language of the Mahasi tradition, I could note the intention to move. In the classic slow walking meditation—the lift of the foot, pushing, placing—I could note the intention to lift, push, and place. The choice to do it. The number of choices involved in walking.

Yes, that's why I'm standing. So I'm actually choosing to stand, waiting for the choice to move. And this may explain why it never turns up.

It is tricky. You don't want to get too caught up in this. At this point you just start walking. It's very simple once you get it, but it can be very curly when you're looking for it. Because why are you looking? You're making the choice to look. The choice doesn't come. Or the choice to fight. Let's wait for the choice to arise spontaneously.

Question: What about when there's a strong outside stimulus creating a reaction internally? Is there cetanā in that?

It depends on how sensitive you are. If you can see in real time the stimulus, if you can actually see it in real time, then within that seeing there's the possibility of choosing: No, I won't do that. No, I'm not going to get annoyed by this. The mind will be annoyed, but I'm not going to lash out. I'm not going to respond. I'm not going to do my usual response.

But the annoyance arises, and that can become the object to watch. You can't choose to not have the aversive response. So part of this is recognizing: what is the field of experience within which I actually do have a choice?

The more habit there is, the smaller that area becomes. But the more habit is reduced, the wider the area.

And it comes out in basic but important ways.

One time, years ago, I was teaching a retreat here, and one of the meditators was a young woman who had taken up meditation as part of her recovery from drug addiction. At the end of the retreat, she was just really happy because she had seen, really, really clearly, that it's her choice. She really saw it—that she's not the victim of circumstances beyond her control. It really is her choice. And she felt free for the first time in years. Very simple. But she saw it.

When you're working with choice, that's what you want. You want the sensitivity to what's going on in the mind so you see it—that moment, that turning point. Because if you see it, you can do something about it. But if you don't see it, there's nothing you can do.

A retreatant shares: "It reminds me of the first retreat I did with you. It was in the middle of winter in Victoria, a sunny couple of days. In the first two or three days, there was a blowfly in the hall. I'm surrounded by Buddhist meditators who aren't going to kill the fly. What do you do? Two weeks of this? And I would just notice it—the frustration, the annoyance, the fly, the annoyance. Then the fly went away after three days and it got really cold. Towards the end of the retreat, it got really sunny again and the fly came back. But my initial response was, 'Oh, it's back!' I would never have guessed that I would have a pleasant response to this previously very negative stimulus. You know, it was like seeing a friend."

Yes, we're seeing what's going on. When the awareness gets into the citta and you can actually see what's happening, then you're not driven. And then the possibility of something else arising is there. In this case, it was your old mate. Or as I used to say in Burma, being haunted by the flies and the mosquitoes and so on: "May all beings enter and be happy." I didn't really mean it at first.

There's something about the way the time it takes to form an intention is shorter than the time it takes to complete the action, so that you can be making the intention, sending off the impulse to do the action, and you're already on the second intention before the first one is complete. Could be. It's very quick. The mind is really, really, really fast. And that's one of the things that makes it so difficult to actually get in there and really see what's going on. A lot of what the mind does is simply invisible to us, in part because it's so quick that it's over before we even notice it. And we're already in the situation.

One of the effects—and this comes out in everyday mindfulness—let's say you're doing a retreat and you're developing better and better samādhi power, seeing deeper and deeper into the movements of the mind. You might think, "Well, I can do it now because I'm in the middle of a retreat and I've got the samādhi power. But what happens when I go back to work?" What you find is that having seen it once, the mind now is sensitive to it. Even in normal circumstances—bang—you see things that previously you would have been completely oblivious to. It's just vividly there. Incredibly quick, but there. And a response is possible.

We're creating a sheltered workshop, basically, where we get the opportunity to go into aspects of human

experience that normally we would not have access to. But once the mind goes there, once the mind recognizes, "Oh, this is what's happening," it doesn't forget. So it's available in everyday life. And there in everyday life, we cooperate with it by practicing mindfulness, awareness in everyday activity. We're present to whatever the mind will throw up—whatever insight, whatever understanding the mind will offer.

We're ready for it. We're ready to catch it.

So can those changes occur because you do the work here and they're there—can they get lost from not keeping up, from not continuing a sitting practice? Can that awareness of the changes in habits get lost through neglect? Can we allow the weeds to climb back over things?

They can. But I think what's crucial is mindfulness in everyday activity, not so much the formal sitting. It certainly helps if you have a regular meditation practice because that provides a stability that assists with the seeing and the understanding. But the most important thing is mindfulness in everyday activity—just being awake as I go through the day. That's the most important thing.

My colleague Emma likes to say that in this tradition, in this lineage, meditation between retreats consists mostly of guilt—guilt that I'm not meditating enough. And from her perspective, this is a complete waste of energy. Rather, just be aware of life as it unfolds.

And in fact, I've got students who are quite dedicated meditators. They come to retreats year after year, not necessarily with me but with other teachers as well—a decade, two decades, whatever. And during that period, they will confess rather sheepishly that they never meditate at home. They just don't do it. They never quite get around to it. Yet you can see their practice getting deeper and deeper, and they will say, "My life is transformed." Because they're practicing mindfulness in everyday activity. That's the key. That's why it's so important here, because you've got an opportunity to get into it. But that's the most important thing.

This is what Sayadaw U Tejaniya really hammers, really emphasizes. He's been out to Australia twice, and I did retreats with him in Western Australia. They were classic residential retreats, except that all the rules were thrown into the air. But it turned out, according to his interpreter, that what he would actually prefer to do would be to have a retreat in which you have a central place and people come at night. They meditate and have group interviews, then go home. They go to work and do what they do. They come the next night, meditate, have a group interview, and go home. For him, that's more real—because every day, you're dealing with it.

I teach online retreats, and that's one of the advantages of that format. People will turn up in the Zoom room and then go back to their ordinary life, and come back to the Zoom room. People talk about how powerful it is, how practical it is.

The Mahasi approach is very much retreat-oriented—very much about going deep, deep, deep in order to

transform everything. And although they pay lip service to everyday mindfulness, there's not really the emphasis on it, except with U Tejaniya. For him, that's the central thing.

But what we're doing here, we're doing for the purpose of when we get out. You can have a situation in which people create a kind of silo—the practice is what I do when I'm on retreat, with little reminders occasionally when I do my daily meditation practice. But no, the practice is the whole thing. And seeing the choices that we make is really central to that. What am I doing? Literally, what am I doing? Now. Being interested in that as I go through the day. I can take that with me.

I think that's why it's really useful to belong to a sangha.

Because you can support the network outside of you. It's the strength of the sangha, the first of the supportive factors. It's like finding right-minded, good people that you can meet with.

And this doesn't mean that in ordinary everyday life you're going to become some kind of super yogi. I've got a friend who is a longtime meditator, and his normal routine would be to meditate four hours every day. This is his standard practice. I mean, he gets up ridiculously early in the morning.

One time I was running a retreat here, and at the end of it, we were having a chat, and one of the perennial questions came up: "In my daily life, how much should I sit?" And I must have been feeling a bit frisky because I thought of my friend, and I said, "Oh, four hours is good." And the poor woman just completely lost it. But it was too late. I'd made the choice. The words had come out. I couldn't pull them back in again.

But we do have this sense that we're supposed to be the super yogi. I'm not supposed to be the super yogi. What I'm supposed to do is be aware. And there's nothing more natural than to be aware. What we're doing here is learning techniques. We're going deeper into it and we're learning how to play the game. But basically, it's really simple. Just be aware. That's it.

Shall we finish off? Because we've got one more esoteric meditation exercise to cover, which is thinking. The choice to think.

If you're interested in this, one way to play with it is doing walking meditation where you're using one of those tracks—in other words, you've got a set distance which isn't too great. You begin by standing, and then you make the adhiṭṭhāna, the determination: "From here to the end of this path, I will be aware. I will know the moment thought begins."

Now when you're working with adhiṭṭhāna, you make the determination, and it's like you just drop it into the mind, and then you forget about it. And then you just start to walk. At the end of the path, stop, stand, turn, and then review what happened just then. Did it work? Did it not work? And then make the determination again: "From here to the end of this path, I will note the moment thought begins." And off you go. You just go back and forth.

If you get comfortable with it, you could change the adhiṭṭhāna: "From here to the end of this path, I will not think." Same thing. At the end, review what happened. And the reviewing is very important, because this going back over the experience stimulates mindfulness, which remember means memory.

What people will say when they do this is that they don't necessarily stop thinking, but they become much more sensitive to the arising of thought. They catch it much sooner.

This brings us to the point that tracking choice or decision is a question of aim. And again, we've talked about aim—how important it is in practicing for insight that we practice aiming awareness to where we want it to go. We've been playing around with this with the elements, with breathing, and so on.

So when we're working with cetanā, instead of aiming awareness at the body, for example, we're aiming awareness at the stream of choices that result in the movement. It's quite subtle. Instead of aiming there, it's just over here. Instead of tracking the thoughts, we're aiming awareness at the choices producing the thoughts.

Once we recognize that this is a practice of aim, then we realize that even if we fail, we succeed. Because looking for choice cultivates our aim and our precision.

So it's like if you decide to take up archery. You pick up the bow, draw back the arrow, aim at the target, release the arrow, and the arrow goes plop—completely misses the target.

Now what would be the reasonable and rational response at that point? Possibly it would be to hurl the bow down on the ground, jump up and down on it until it's completely smashed, and storm off the range never to take up archery again. You could do that. Or you could think, "Well, yeah, my aim is complete crap because I've only just started." And you just keep going and see what happens. Over time, your aim will improve. It's just practice. That's all. So treat it as a game. You're learning to aim.

Let's say, for example, people who practice catching the choice to move when they're doing walking meditation—like the choice to lift the foot, the choice to push it, the choice to drop it. They might go through a number of sessions in which they're never satisfied that they ever caught any of these. But what they will find is that the movements themselves have become clearer because their aim is getting better.

In my case, I was instructed on noting intention when walking up and down. The Sayadaws like to do it within the first week of a retreat. Once people have settled down, I like to direct them towards intention. I always found it frustrating and somewhat embarrassing in the interviews, because whenever I was asked, "Are you noting intention in the walking meditation?" I would have to say, "No, Sayadaw, I never saw it. I can never catch it." This is embarrassing, particularly in Burma, because the interviews aren't private—people are lined up. So everybody knows I'm a failure.

This went on for years.

And then one day I was doing walking meditation before breakfast, walking up and down this hallway.

And suddenly, there it was. It wasn't the intention to lift, the intention to push, the intention to drop. It was like within each of those micro-movements there was a stream of intentions. It was like a river flowing down a hallway. A stream of choices. And it was fascinating. It was great.

Next interview: "Sayadaw, I noted the intention in walking." And he kind of went, "Yeah, yeah, sure, sure. Next." He wasn't interested at all. Presumably because for him it's so routine.

Anyway, it was a brilliant success. And I decided I have mastered intention. And from that day to this, I have never seen it again. Not once, ever.

But I am sensitive to the intention to think. I've worked on that, and to me it's generally pretty obvious—while other people are the exact opposite. So you're always working with your own particular set of sensitivities. You don't worry about whether you hit the target or not, whether you can hit this target but you always miss that target. It's irrelevant. Work with the aim. And if you work with the aim, the whole thing will get better.

A student asked about being in a state where you're not aware of choices you're making with your body—where the body seems to be moving in a flow state, with no conscious decision around what's happening. Like playing an instrument, improvising, where what's coming up is constantly a surprise. There seems to be a pattern but you're not driving it. What is that? Is it a complete non-awareness of the cetanā, or is something else going on?

Well, there you'd be seeing the cetanā as the movement of awareness toward what you're doing. The awareness just knows to go there and to do whatever it is. So the cetanā would be in the movement itself—in the movement of awareness. Not necessarily through the mind, not through cognition. It bypasses cognition.

But this aspect of chaitanya—you can see it not just in the cognition, but in the actual movement of awareness. That's also the chaitanya. And I think that's why the Sayadaws actually introduce it quite early. They use the English word "intention," and that always creates confusion, because intention sounds like something very cognitive. But they're actually referring to something much more embodied—the movement of awareness itself.

You can have a sense of choice in the ordinary sense of the word: "I choose this." And sometimes it presents as that—it presents as a choice that is quite discrete, like a turning point, turning a corner. But sometimes you can feel it differently. That word chaitanya also covers having made that turn, having turned that corner, and then the awareness flowing in that direction. So the chaitanya includes the awareness going in that direction.

Sometimes you will see it as the awareness flowing in a certain direction, but without having seen the moment behind it—the "I think I'll try doing this one." You may not have seen the moment of determination, but you're conscious of the flow of aim or intention. This is what I didn't understand when

I was in Burma—that this is what they were getting at—because of the English word "intention." And of course they never really explained it. You've got to be very sensitive and have the awareness just so.

One of the important aspects of this is to get a feel for the awareness flowing toward the subject. And in states of flow, I think you do get a clear sense of it. It's like the awareness is just going without the sense of someone at the back. Tremendous skill and expertise and refinement operate to do their work, but they've become invisible. There's lots going on in the mind, but what you've got is just the awareness.

The mind is really active in those moments. Sometimes words just pop up. How did I do that? But when the mind is really active and the samadhi power is there, all that activity disappears from experience. Because you don't experience that there's a mind doing this. It's just the doing. So this would be an example of not-self. The mind is operating in the background, but there's no self-awareness of it. It's just the flow, just the activity.

After you turn the corner, it seems like there should be one more step—a "how did that work out?" And yes, that's part of the teaching of karma: action and its ripening. And it's part of mindfulness—tracking the experience over time. Part of that is the monitoring, the reflection: how did that work out? This is all part of the package.

But in any given experience, some of it might be obvious and other parts of it may have vanished. You just don't see it. It depends on the individual circumstances. One of the advantages of the karma part is that it's not immediate. It doesn't have to be right then. It can be later on, when you've got time to reflect on what happened in all those processes. That's part of the teaching of karma vipaka—of action and its ripening. And the ripening could be instant, or it could be very long term, or anywhere in between.

And the mindfulness is monitoring the whole flow, all the way through.

But that's what the mind does. It monitors. It awares. It processes. It's incredibly active. But when it's really absorbed and just doing it, all of this disappears from awareness. We don't notice it.

It's like when you're talking to someone and you understand what they're saying. You're not constantly going back and reviewing your English grammar and vocabulary and trying to work it out. But in fact, that's what the mind is doing. When the mind is doing it smoothly, it disappears from view.

But if you try to learn a second language, you know how much work is involved—memorization of vocabulary, understanding the framework of the grammar, how to put words together, how to extract meaning. An unusual use of a term—what is it? Is this irony? Is this humor? What is this? An incredible amount of mental processing goes on just to understand when someone says something, and you think, "Oh yeah, I know what they said." All that processing vanishes. You don't see it. But it's there.

And when we're meditating, it's like we've got a spotlight into this immensely complex system. We're aware of just a tiny fragment of it. But what the Buddha is doing is saying: if we spotlight there, it will

change the whole system. And the system will start to turn in a direction which is much more satisfactory to us. It will just do it, because that's nature.

"It seems like that's the point where a lot of failure occurs—where there is no realization that it didn't work out, and it becomes someone else's fault."

Yes. I think we have to somehow make meditation more efficient, because at the moment it seems to be very inefficient. I have to get a committee to work on this.

Okay, we're over time.

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