Open Awareness (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 38:10

When we started the retreat about a week ago, we began with awareness, and then we went from awareness to mindfulness, and then we introduced the meditation method. The meditation method revolves around what Mahasi Sayadaw calls noting and noticing—what we could call active awareness and receptive awareness.

Throughout the week we've been working largely with active awareness, where we're learning how to send awareness to particular meditation objects, particular aspects of human experience. One thing that distinguishes this approach is that every aspect of human experience is a meditation object. Nothing is excluded.

I'm reminded of the first time Sayadaw U Pandita taught a retreat in Australia. He taught a six-week retreat at a Catholic retreat center in the southern highlands, south of Sydney. A lot of people turned up because he had developed this reputation and people were curious. You could say there were waves of shock running through the meditators as they were actually exposed to U Pandita and his approach to the meditation, which was absolutely relentless. As a result, there was a certain amount of discombobulation among the meditators.

The manager of the retreat was John Hale, who I'd met originally in India but got to know in Burma at Mahasi Centre, and who was even then the most advanced practitioner I'd ever known. Once a day, there was a time we'd go and see John in order to request anything we really needed—if we ran out of toothpaste or shampoo or chocolate or some absolute necessity. This turned into impromptu dharma counselling sessions, where the most agitated meditators would come and talk to him.

I found out about this because there was a breezeway in the building, and against one wall there was a sofa where he would talk to people. He'd be on one end and the meditator would be on the other end. To get to my favourite walking meditation place, I used to go down and come back up through the breezeway, and so each day I'd be walking down, and each day John would be there, talking to a distressed meditator. Sometimes when I came back, there was another distressed meditator. He was still there, still going. Sometimes not.

But the conversations always took exactly the same form: the meditator talking, and John saying absolutely nothing, but listening with total attention and total compassion. Finally, the meditator would stop talking, and John would say, "And did you note that?"

As far as I could tell, that was the only thing he ever said. And of course he meant it. What he was

illustrating was the utter simplicity of the practice. And what the meditators were illustrating was the determination to make it more complicated.

This is what the practice is all about: the simplicity of awareness.

The word that John was using was, "Did you note it?" Were you deliberately turning towards it? Did you actively engage it? When we look at Mahasi's approach, sometimes in the lineage they talk about noting, and sometimes they talk about noticing. We've talked about this before. Noting is active awareness. It's sending awareness to its object, and it's characterized by its active nature. Then you have noticing, or receptive awareness, where you're not sending awareness anywhere, but rather the meditation object is coming to you. In active awareness, I go out to the meditation object. In receptive awareness, the meditation object comes to me.

These lie on a spectrum. In the early stages of the practice, what tends to be emphasized is the active. U Pandita, in particular, really strongly emphasized the active. Generally, that's probably the most common approach, because active awareness first of all gives the practitioner something to do. If you say, "Well, just sit there and be aware," no problem. But what? What do you mean, be aware? What does that even mean? How do I do it? What am I supposed to be aware of? Why am I doing this? And the questions start piling up.

But if you have a specific project—sit here and just see if you can follow the in-breath and the out-breath—then the practitioner has something to do, something to engage with, something to get the process started.

But of course, the noticing of receptive awareness is always there. And over time, it may actually become much more important. So when we're practicing the noting and the active awareness, there's always something in the background. I can feel my body. I can hear sounds. I notice there's thinking going on. There's sensations in the body. So I'm actively aware of the meditation object while receptively noticing everything else around it. Foreground, background, as we talked about before.

Now, this noticing—the receptive aspect of the practice—has an enormous amount to teach us. We practice mindfulness because we want to know what's going on. Mindfulness for the Buddha is always associated with wisdom, with understanding, which is essentially finding out what's really going on. The noting, the active awareness, cultivates energy, strengthens the mindfulness, and develops concentration. It's like a specialized exercise regime in a gym. You go through, repeat certain exercises, and get better at them over time.

But of course, at some point, we leave the gymnasium and re-enter the ordinary world. And the question then is: I've developed this strength, now what do I do with it? What we do with it in our ordinary lives is very largely through receptive awareness rather than active awareness. And how do we do that when receptive awareness is characterized by an absence of doing? Active awareness, we do it. But how do we

cultivate receptive awareness when its characteristic is that it's not doing?

I think this works through sensitivity. The active awareness, the noting, makes the mind stronger. And remember that for the Buddha, mind is one of the senses—it's the sixth sense. And a sense is a sensitivity. It's one aspect of the sentient body which is sensitive to particular forms of data. The five physical sensitivities are sensitivities toward data that come from the physical world. The eyes are sensitive to light and color. The ears are sensitive to sound. The tongue is sensitive to tastes, and so on. Mind is also a sensitivity. And as the mind becomes stronger and clearer through active awareness, it also becomes more sensitive. Because it's becoming much more sensitive, it's opening up to all sorts of forms of data that normally it doesn't catch. This is one of the reasons why we emphasize that we must be particularly careful in our interrelationships with each other—people are very sensitive when they become mindful.

Now, this sensitivity depends in part on our relationship with sammā vāyāma, right effort, right energy. Sometimes we might be making too much effort in the meditation practice. We might be straining in our effort to do something, to accomplish something, and we might lose the sensitivity to what else is happening. We might become so absorbed in our project that we become blind to anything else. That's one of the reasons why we've talked about finding right effort, the importance of right effort. And the sensitivity we're talking about here is, of course, very closely linked to vedanā, the world of affect.

I might just give an illustration. This was the first time this whole area of the practice was introduced to me explicitly, and it was by John. He gave a simile which at the time I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. But I've got to offer it up and see if you can make any sense of it.

He said, during this practice, it's rather like imagining yourself standing in a room with a big window that looks out over a garden. You're the meditator, standing there looking at the garden, and the meditation teacher is right beside you. Your companion, the meditation teacher, asks you, "What do you see?" And you answer, "The garden." And your companion says, "Look more closely."

What do you see?

And you say, "Well, I see a rose garden."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a bed of roses."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a rose bush."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a rose."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a rose petal."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see a dewdrop on the rose petal."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see the light shimmering off the dewdrop."

Look more closely. What do you see?

"I see the window."

And I thought, what on earth is he talking about?

What we're talking about here—what receptive awareness opens up—is the window. The mind is like a window. It's the medium through which we look out at the world. And the window is so obvious that we don't see it. We think what's on the other side of the window is what's important. It doesn't occur to us that what's important is the window.

But the window is absolutely essential to the whole business. If there was no window, we couldn't see anything. If the window is there but dirty, the view changes. If the window is wet, the view changes. If the window is coloured, the view changes. If the window is completely clear, the view changes—and the window just disappears.

In receptive awareness, we're learning to notice the window. We start to incorporate the window into what we see. In other words, we begin to pay attention to the state of our mind as we are being mindful. And in large part, we enter into this through the noticing of receptive awareness, rather than the noting of active awareness.

We could call this open awareness. The Buddha doesn't have a Pali term for it, as far as I know, so you encounter different words for this style of practice and its variations. Back in the last millennium—long, long ago—this was what used to be called choiceless awareness. Choiceless awareness was very fashionable at one time, and I think the term actually came from Krishnamurti. But these days, if you talk about choiceless awareness, you're just showing your age, so I advise avoiding that term.

Then open awareness became fashionable, and that's been in vogue for some time. But these days, if you want to be hip, if you want to be on the cutting edge, talk about natural awareness. That seems to be the flavour of the moment. I'm just taking the middle way and calling it open awareness.

Open awareness, or receptive awareness, or natural awareness—whatever we choose to call it—is not a

specific technique. There are different ways in which people go about it; it's not that there's one way of doing it. But this morning I'm just presenting one possibility, one game to play. We'll play with it and see what happens.

Now, during this guided practice, I'm going to use breathing as the meditation object. But if you want to use something else, just use something else. It's not dependent upon the breathing. So if I say breathing, you can simply go into whatever your chosen meditation object is.

I'm going to use an image. As we said, active awareness is when awareness goes out to take hold of the object. So the central image is this idea of reaching out and holding an object of awareness—just like our hand might reach out and hold something. As the game progresses, we're going to become interested in how tightly we're holding. In other words, we're going to become interested in the state of the mind which is doing the noting.

So, let's begin.

Settle awareness in your body. Construct your meditation posture. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body, and from there lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact on the ground. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame, there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Now track the movements of your breathing. Follow your breathing. Be interested in what is happening to your breathing. It is as if you are holding the movements of your breathing in your hand—keeping your hand steady and watching what you are holding.

Now relax your grip on your breathing so your hold is more gentle, less intense. Allow yourself to become sensitive to the broader field of awareness around your breathing. Become interested in the space within which being aware of breathing occurs.

Don't do anything with your breathing. Just hold your mind steady. Breathing comes and goes. Be interested in this without clinging to it.

Your mind changes all the time. Be interested in this without clinging to it. Awareness moves from one object to another. Be interested in these movements without trying to stop them.

Don't force anything. If breathing slips out of view, let it go. Just notice that it slipped away and what replaced it. Things come and go. Let them. Just stay aware that things are coming and going.

Open your awareness to the space within which things come and go.

We could see this practice as first establishing a physical posture and from there establishing a posture of

awareness. Then we hold that posture of awareness but let the objects of awareness move and change, come and go. If you get lost in thought, come back to breathing. When you feel settled and stabilized, relax your hold on your breathing and open up to the mind itself—letting objects of awareness come and go as you maintain your posture of awareness.

So how did it go? You took a nap? It didn't hold your interest? Too relaxed? Peaceful?

Were you awake?

Very aware and very peaceful.

That sounds like a good combination. What do you think made it very aware and very peaceful?

The lack of pressure. It took me a while to see what the problem was. It wasn't around the vision—I didn't understand what was going on.

So you managed to find that gentle receptivity, but as you say, it took some time and it snuck up on you. This rather points out the paradox: you can't actually *do* it. If you try to do it, you'll probably smother it. But if you let it sneak up on you...

Yes, Carolyn.

I think there's a similarity with terms that are comfortable in Christian culture. But I noticed also there's this hinge of anxiety. While I was enjoying it, there was this thing happening—these undercurrents of anxiety. Like, I don't know if I'm going to be able to maintain this for as long as I need to. Right now I'm aware, but I don't know if I'm going to be able to stay aware.

That might be a factor, because again, if you've got something to do, then as long as you keep doing it, things should be okay. But if there's not something you're specifically doing, then you've got no control over it. The habitual holding on to the breath becomes difficult—or rather, the habit of holding on to the breath becomes difficult to let go of. The mind tends to go, "Get me out of here." The mind wants to hold on. The power of habit.

It's interesting, isn't it? When we're practicing, if we do it a lot, we're creating new habits—the way that I meditate. And sometimes, over a period of time, these habits will get in the way because the practice matures. But if I'm locked into a certain way of practicing which I just default into, then I can get stuck there. It's difficult to move on.

So it's very interesting when you notice that what you're doing is simply allowing habit to take over. And it's very useful to see that, to get a sense of it. It's a better way to possibly abandon that habit.

Because the habit gives security.

Yes. Yes.

So this is one style of what you could call open awareness. People have different relationships to it. Some people find that it just doesn't work for them—there's nothing for the mind to grab onto and they just drift off or get bored. Other people find it a huge relief. They think, you know, there's no business—it's like a straitjacket has been removed and now they can finally be liberated. You get all sorts of different responses.

As I said with all these exercises, if you find it useful, do it. If it's not useful, forget about it.

But more generally, the receptive aspect of awareness—well, first of all, some people make it their entire practice. That's what they do; that's their whole approach. Some people use it particularly in everyday mindfulness. Even if you prefer a more active style of meditation when you're doing a formal practice, when you're out and about, the open awareness becomes a kind of home base. And it's quite important for staying present throughout whatever activity we're doing—staying present to it.

But this approach can also give you a sense of the whole package: the object of awareness and the awareness itself. Getting a sense of that whole package is very useful, particularly if you're meditating for the purpose of insight.

Receptive awareness can give you an entry into starting to notice that whole package of awareness itself.

And the other thing is, if you've had a good time with this practice, keep in mind that you've been meditating for a week now. The mind is sharper, clearer, stronger, more sensitive than it is under normal circumstances. What you've experienced today may not necessarily be what you would experience all the time—it may be completely different. But if you find this is something useful to add to your repertoire, then use it.

Thank you very much.

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