On Method

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 37:16

Tonight we're going to talk about the meditation method that we're using during this retreat.

This morning we started with awareness, because everything revolves around awareness. Then we looked at mindfulness—what that is all about—which is essentially awareness continuously over time. But we didn't have much concern about method or technique. Just remember awareness now. This is mindfulness in its simplest form, and it could be aided by asking questions like: What am I aware of now? What is clear now? What is obvious now? What's happening now?

So this morning and this afternoon was all very general, but this evening we move on to the particular topic of method that we're using during this retreat. This approach to mindfulness meditation—what the Buddha calls satipaṭṭhāna—was developed by Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. He lived from 1904 to 1982 and was part of the modern revival of meditation, particularly insight meditation, for lay people. This was meant to help make meditation widely available across society. This approach was first outlined by him in a book called, in English, *Manual of Insight*, which was published in 1945. It was this book that made his reputation in Burma as an authority on the practice of cultivating insight, vipassanā, through mindfulness. And that started his career.

So that's very briefly the background. But we might ask: why do we need a method? What's it for? What's it all about?

Basically, our meditation method gives us a framework. It gives us a set of limitations within which practice can occur. We need some kind of framework, but it needs to be the right kind of framework.

If the framework is too loose—if the limitations are lacking, or even absent—this kills creativity. Because there's nothing to bump up against, nothing to challenge, nothing to be challenged by. For me, too loose a framework can be indicated by attitudes like "it's all one," or "there is no such thing as a good or a bad meditation," or "one must never judge one's practice." To me, these are all indications that the framework is too loose. And when the framework is too loose, it kills creativity.

Too tight a framework also kills creativity. If the limitations are overly constricted, there's no room for one's own decisions. The emphasis is on obedience and the endless repetition of familiar drills. But in a dynamic world there is no such thing as repetition. This move that we make right now is new, and this is something we'll be exploring during the retreat.

So too loose a framework doesn't work. Too tight a framework doesn't work.

Just as an example, let's say you take up painting. The first choice you might be faced with is: will you paint with watercolours or oils? This initial decision, whatever decision you make, presents you with a variety of demands that will condition how you paint—what specific skills you need to develop that will allow you to work within the limitations of your medium.

If you choose watercolours, you paint on paper. If you choose oils, you paint on canvas or wood. If you choose watercolours, you make quick decisions because the paint dries quickly. If you're using oils, you can take your time and remake it as much as you like. If you use watercolours, you start with the lightest colours and layer the darker colours on top. If you're using oils, you can add light colours to dark or dark colours to light.

The limitations of each medium set the conditions within which your craft develops. And craft develops by using the available materials in new ways. I respect the limits, but I develop creative ways to work within the limits. In this way the craft is developed.

So if we're looking at this particular approach, what are the limitations that shape the practice?

Well, the first one, the most important one, the essential limitation, is the felt continuity of awareness over time. That's the key. Maintaining awareness over time—that is number one. That shapes the whole project.

Basically, you could sum it up by saying: do whatever it takes to experience the continuity of awareness. That would be the essence of the method. Abandon whatever habits condition the discontinuity of awareness. And of course, this afternoon we had a sense of that. Abandon anything that conditions the discontinuity of awareness. Cultivate whatever encourages the continuity of awareness. This limitation is the distinguishing characteristic of mindfulness training.

Secondly, we use a central reference point to structure the continuity of awareness. In the standard translations of Mahasi's writings, this is called the primary object. I translate it as a grounding object. This central reference point, what I'm calling the grounding object, provides a home base in which we live and to which we return. And again, we played around with that this afternoon. It's our centre of gravity. It's what draws us back when our awareness goes walkabout. It's particularly important in the early stages of the retreat when we're developing what the Buddha calls serenity. During the early stages of this retreat, we're going to use mindfulness with breathing as our grounding object. But it doesn't have to be that. We can use other things for the grounding object, but we need a grounding object. We need a central reference point, somewhere where we can stabilise the heart and the mind.

And then finally, we learn to focus on transitions. This plays a really important role in this style of practice. As we've seen, awareness moves. It goes from one place to another. We could say awareness moves from A to B. Physically we can see the body moves from A to B. How many people have remained completely still since they walked into this room? No one. Mind moves from A to B. The mind moves a hell

of a lot faster than the body.

Now, as our practice settles, as we become more sensitive to what's going on, we become interested in these transitions. We may come to recognise that transitions are always happening. In fact, we may discover that actually there is no final position. There are only transitions. This is what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence, *anicca-saññā*.

So we become interested in the fact that we move from A to B, and then we learn how we move from A to B. By learning to maintain awareness through transitions, that's a major way in which we learn the craft of the practice.

This is what we need, and this is what the different meditation methods give us. Obviously there are a hell of a lot more meditation methods than what Mahasi Sayadaw teaches, but his approach is the one we're working with. His picture is underneath the Buddha. Apparently that photograph was taken just days before his death, I was told, in Burma.

So, we start with awareness. Because any meditation method, no matter what we do, centres on our relationship with awareness. As we talked about, awareness is presence itself. If something is present, if something is happening, then awareness is involved. Which, as we've discussed, suggests I am already aware. I don't need to do anything to be aware. I don't have to make any effort to be aware—I am already aware. It's a good place to start.

However, I discover that I am in the habit of forgetting my awareness. And this is what makes the continuity of awareness so difficult. Awareness is here, now, but easily forgotten.

So our task is to remember awareness. This is essentially what we have to do.

We compared awareness to the light that illuminates a dark room at night. We realise that we are in darkness, and then we flick the switch and light appears. So our practice becomes flicking the awareness switch. Aware of what now? What is clear now?

In this practice, it does not matter how long the light of awareness stays on. That's, in a sense, not our business. What is important is that we become sensitive to when the light goes out, that we notice that, and then flick the awareness switch on again. This is what we're doing again and again and again.

Now this brings us to attention, what the Buddha calls manasikāra. In the context of meditation practice, he calls it yoniso manasikāra, which is probably the expression that would be translated as the meditation method. Thanissaro translates yoniso manasikāra as "appropriate attention." I think that pretty much fits it.

When we become familiar with awareness, we can begin to see that awareness has depth. I can be faintly aware. I can be vividly, clearly aware, or anything in between. But if awareness has depth, this suggests it can be developed. It can be increased. It can be deepened. So how do I deepen awareness? How do I make

awareness stronger? I do this by practising attention, where attention is the act of directing awareness.

We could compare it to the difference between seeing and looking. I don't have to do anything to see. I'm just seeing, even if I don't want to. But when I am looking at someone or something, or looking for someone or something, then I'm doing something. I'm directing visual awareness in a particular direction or towards a particular object. So attention actively directs awareness, and it necessarily involves some degree of engagement or effort.

We've been introduced to this idea when we spoke about awareness as a verb—to aware. When we aware, the mind moves towards its object. It engages. So awareness is active. It's more an activity than a something. And this of course brings us to how we work with awareness.

Mahasi Sayadaw spoke, wrote and taught in Burmese, and everything had to be translated into English. The people who did the translations were his Burmese students who spoke English. In their translation, they put down the three basic activities involved in awareing an object as noting, noticing, and naming—conveniently, the three N's.

The first two, noting and noticing, could be called directed and undirected awareness. Noting, what Mahasi Sayadaw calls noting, is directing awareness towards an object. It's essentially active in its nature—a reaching out to the object of awareness. I think we should simply call it directed awareness.

Let's say, for example, I want to be aware of my breathing for a period of time. So I actively direct awareness to this breath now, and then to this breath now, and then to this breath now. I do this because I want to stay with my chosen meditation object. I am actively engaged now, and again now, and again now. And you can see this brings us into the whole realm of effort.

The flip side is what Mahasi calls noticing, which is awareness receiving an object.

It's more receptive than active. We could call it receptive awareness, or we could call it undirected awareness—directed awareness, undirected awareness. That's a bit tidier. But undirected means receptive.

So I am aware, but I'm not deliberately aiming at any particular object. For example, I might be actively aware of the movements of breathing. Let's say I'm using breathing as a meditation object. So I'm actively aware of the breathing. But at the same time, I'm hearing sounds around me. Now, I'm not focused on these sounds. I'm focused on my breathing. But the sounds are coming to me. I cannot shut them out. I am awake to them. I am receiving them, but I'm not deliberately directing awareness towards them.

So there's a going out to actively engage with the meditation object, while at the same time there's a receiving of everything else that's going on. And it's very useful to get a clear sense, to be able to distinguish between noting and noticing, or directed and undirected awareness. In directed awareness we aim awareness at an object. In undirected awareness the object of awareness comes to us.

Does that make sense?

These represent two ends of a spectrum, and they point to different relationships, different possible relationships to the meditation practice. For example, within the Mahasi lineage some meditation styles emphasize directed awareness and are primarily concerned with focusing awareness on a single object like the breathing. This is typical of my main teacher in Burma, Sayadaw U Pandita. He taught a very active, directed style of meditation practice. Other meditation styles emphasize undirected awareness and are primarily concerned with simply receiving whatever sense data arises. This, in the Mahasi lineage, would be associated with Sayadaw U Tejaniya and his approach. So you get, even within a single lineage, different styles of practice, depending on the personality and the experience of the teacher, and of course depending on what works for them.

Some styles combine or balance these two. In fact, really every style combines and balances them to some degree or another. And it's important that when we're dealing with concepts, when we're talking about meditation practice—we can't talk about it without concepts—but the concepts are important because they help us by mapping the contours of our experience. Directed awareness, undirected awareness. But if we become entangled in the concepts, if we confuse the concept with reality, then we create problems. And of course it is our long-standing habit to identify with concepts and to take them to be real. We're going to be talking more about this as we go through.

So we talk about directed awareness, undirected awareness. We distinguish them clearly and we learn to recognise them. But they are not mutually exclusive. They represent two ends of a spectrum. Imagine a ruler. One end of the ruler we call directed. The other end of the ruler we call undirected. When we reach for the ruler to pick it up, we could pick it up at one end, or we could pick it up at the other end, or we could pick it up somewhere in the middle. But it doesn't matter where we pick it up—both ends are taken up. They're always mixed up together to some degree or another. It's very rarely that you would have a pure directed or pure undirected awareness.

Again, the concepts can be useful because they map the terrain, but as the practice develops and matures, we may well find that this whole distinction between directed and undirected awareness just dissolves. And we may find that all we've got is awareness, awareing, that's it. And putting any concept on top of it just gets in the way. So be careful with the concepts. They're useful, but don't get stuck on them.

So directed awareness, undirected awareness—what Mahasi calls noting and noticing. And then we come to naming. This is the third aspect. Naming puts a concept, a name, or a label on the object of awareness or on the act of awareing, as the case may be. And we have already used naming today.

So for example, it could be in the form of a question. "What is clear now?" This is putting a name, a concept, on top of the experience. And naming, when it works, clarifies the experience.

Let's say we're distracted by thinking, and so we move to actively aware it. We could name the experience,

and because the naming directs awareness towards it, this can be particularly useful when we're working with the mind, where it's much more subtle to aim awareness at different aspects of psychological experience than when working with the body.

So we aim awareness at thinking by naming it. The name can be very brief: "Thinking." It could be a bit longer: "A thought is just a thought." I might give it that name when I can see the urgency I have to identify with the thought and get entangled with it. "A thought is just a thought." It's both an aiming of the awareness and a stepping back.

Or the name could even be a question: "Past or future?" That's an interesting one because most of the time when we're thinking, if we pay attention to what's going on, we realise we're either thinking about the past or we're thinking about the future. Sometimes we think about the present, but a lot of the time it's past or future.

Whether it's a name, a statement, or a question, the purpose of adding a concept to awareing is to stimulate accuracy, aim. This is particularly important when we're meditating for insight. It's not so important if we're meditating simply for serenity, if we simply want to calm down and chill. Accuracy, aim, precision—they're not so important then. But if we're working for insight, it becomes very important. We won't go into it tonight, but we'll talk more about it as we go through the retreat.

So these are the three basic activities: directed awareness, undirected awareness—that's the essential structure. The optional added extra is the naming. Some people find the naming very useful, so they use it a lot. Some people find it just gets in the way, so they don't use it at all. You get many different relationships with the name, depending on the person.

I used it a lot in my early years because I found it useful, because I tend to completely forget what I'm doing. These days I don't use it every day. If I'm on retreat, I'll use it in the early days because it helps ground me. "This is what's happening. This is what's happening. This is what's happening." And then it fades away. But when things get deeper, every now and again it'll come back. When something's shifted, something has changed, and I don't quite know what's going on because it's new, I drop in a name. "Oh, that's what it is." Bingo.

So directed and undirected—this is built into the meditation practice itself. But the third one, naming, is an optional added extra. You work out your own relationship with it.

This is the process of awareing that we've been talking about. And then there's what we aware.

We start with this idea of the grounding object. We've already seen in the games we've played so far how unstable the mind is, how easily it wanders from one object of awareness to another, and how quickly the mind will slide into habitual thinking. Now, if we want to train our attention so that we can maintain a felt continuity of awareness over time, we have to learn to stabilise the mind. This is essential.

We do this by grounding our awareness. And this cultivates samādhi. Samādhi is classically translated as concentration, but I don't think it's a very good translation. It's essentially the unification of the heart.

And we'll talk more about samādhi later in the retreat.

So, we've said that awareness is awareness of something. Awareness has an object. If we're going to stabilise the mind, we need to be able to settle our awareness somewhere that will encourage it to rest and become still.

This is what Mahāsi Sayādaw calls the mūla ārammaṇa. This is a Pāli term where ārammaṇa means object and mūla literally means root. So, a root object. The root here represents our foundation, our ground. This is why I translate it as grounding object. This is where we ground our awareness. This is where our awareness makes its home.

As we said, normally mind is chasing one thing after another, after another, after another. We're constantly looking for a satisfaction that never quite arrives, so we're looking for something else. We need to stabilise mind. In practical terms, what this means is we need to learn how to keep our awareness in one place over a period of time. This is the function of the grounding object. This is what the grounding object is for. It gives us a place for our awareness to settle and stabilise over a period of time.

We could say that our grounding object is where our awareness remains unless it has a specific reason to go somewhere else.

In this retreat, we're going to begin by using breathing as our grounding object and focus on this for the first few days. We do this to build a foundation of serenity, of stability of the heart-mind, so that we can then turn towards insight. The basic pattern is serenity, then insight. This is very common. Every meditation method requires serenity. Without it, we're just bouncing around on the surface.

The different meditation approaches vary in terms of how one cultivates serenity, how much serenity we need, at what point we turn towards insight, and how we do that. All these questions pop up, and the different techniques provide different answers. Of course, over time our grounding object may change, because there is no universally compulsory grounding object.

Remember our first limitation: maintain awareness over time. What is central is awareness, not the object of awareness. There's no magical meditation object. There are just meditation objects that work or don't work, as the case may be.

However, we do want to ground our awareness, and the easiest way to do this is to find some aspect of body or mind that we can easily locate and stabilise our awareness upon. This is what we need to establish as we develop a meditation practice. Where can I most readily rest my awareness so that it will remain relatively still over time? This is my grounding object. This is what my awareness will learn to call home. And it will likely change over a period of time.

So this is the grounding object. This is where we start. Tomorrow we'll be getting into the breathing to do that.

Then we have the secondary object, which is the counterpart. We establish our grounding object and then discover that restlessness is one of the most obvious characteristics of the mind. I'm thinking, then I'm looking, then I'm wanting, then I'm moving, and so on.

As we've said, and we'll keep emphasising, it's important to realise that when we're cultivating mindfulness, we are not trying to stop our minds from moving. We're not trying to clamp down on it and control it. What we're trying to do is learn to understand that the mind moves and how it moves. Because this provides us with the gateway into insight.

We're tracking our grounding object, and the next thing we know, we're caught up in thinking or physical pain or something else. As soon as we know that we are caught up in something else, that something else becomes our meditation object. We could say that we were brought there by force, we were kidnapped. But once we arrive, we volunteer for the experience by actively being aware of it. We were dragged here. We wear it. Oh, I've been thinking. We wear it. What's going on now? We wear that too.

So we directly aware our distractions, which means that our distraction becomes our meditation object. And I think this is probably the central characteristic of Mahasi Sayadaw's approach to meditation practice. As soon as our mind rebels and our awareness is kidnapped, as soon as we know that we have been distracted, that new object of awareness becomes our meditation object. Distraction disappears because what we previously called distraction we now recognise as our secondary object. We actively aware our new secondary object, and then we return to the grounding object.

Again, we're distracted. And as soon as we know we are distracted, we actively aware our distraction. That's our secondary object. And then we come back to the grounding object. So we're moving from grounding to secondary to grounding to secondary to secondary to secondary back to grounding, and so on. And these movements open up the perception of impermanence, which is the gateway into insight.

When people hear about this approach, the first question that comes up is: how long do we stay with our secondary object? In the early stages of the practice, the answer would be briefly. Why? Because we need to stabilise the mind, and this is the job of the grounding object. So we aware our distraction only briefly and then return to the grounding object.

Now sometimes our secondary object will not let us go. For example, physical pain. Have you ever had the experience where you're trying to meditate but your body is rebelling and won't let go? Well, you've got to stay with it, because it's demanding attention. Or obsessive thinking can pop up. Same thing—you've got to stay with it, because it won't let you go.

How long we stay with our secondary object—these are questions of skill. These are questions of the craft of meditation, which we learn over time. It's not immediately obvious when we begin, but over time we

figure out how to work with these distractions.

As the practice matures, at some point this whole distinction between grounding and secondary object dissolves. Our meditation object becomes the flow of experience, where conceptual distinctions between grounding and secondary just fade away quite naturally. But in the beginning, it may be useful to use this distinction between grounding and secondary to map the movements of your mind, to get a sense of what the mind is doing over a period of time. And again, this is mindfulness—this is awareness over time. Grounding and secondary provide a framework for working with this.

So we could summarise the practice by saying: settle awareness in the body, and then see what happens. Settling awareness in the body—serenity. Seeing what happens—insight.

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