What is Real

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 34:25

Tonight we're going to talk about the question: what is real?

We're asking this question because the kind of meditation we're practicing is what in the tradition is called vipassanā bhāvanā, the cultivation of insight, or what we call insight meditation. If we are practicing for insight, the motive that we have is that we want to know what is really going on. And this project assumes that right now we do not know what is going on, that we are mistaken in how we see ourselves and how we see our world.

From the Buddha's perspective, how we see ourselves and our world is conditioned by multiple events which are out of our control. There are the circumstances in which we were born, including the place, gender, native intelligence, and so forth. Then there's the particular mix of sensitivities and capabilities that each one of us brings with us. And of course, as we progress through life, our view is also being conditioned by the choices that we've made over time and the kind of life that we have led. This last one is all about what the Buddha calls kamma vipāka, action and its ripening.

For the Buddha, one major thing that conditions our view and our way of life is what he calls moha or avijjā, which gets translated as ignorance or delusion or illusion. Because of this condition—and we have no choice in the matter, this is simply human nature—we tend to believe things that are not true. For example, in our culture most people are conditioned to believe that our happiness and welfare are based on our income. But are they? Or does the dedicated pursuit of consumerism tend to lead in another direction?

If we are deluded, or if we live in an illusion, which is what the Buddha assumes, this means that we think we know what's going on, but we don't. As a result, we chase after what is not real, thinking that it is real. We chase after what does not satisfy, thinking it does satisfy. But for the Buddha, what we think is real is not.

There are a number of passages where he talks about this, but we'll just have this one. This comes from the Dvayatānupassanā Sutta, the Twofold Consideration. The Buddha says: "Whatever the world regards as 'this is true,' cultivated practitioners have clearly seen realistically and with complete understanding as 'this is false.' This is the first consideration. Whatever the world regards as 'this is false,' cultivated practitioners have clearly seen realistically and with complete understanding as 'this is true.' This is the second consideration."

This is one example of how the Buddha says that we don't know what's going on. This is the normal

human condition. And this implies that what's actually happening may be what we least expect. This further implies that if we are to discover what is really going on, we have to be wary of our assumption that we already know, that we know what's going to happen next, for example. We need to be very careful in our practice because what we think will happen won't, and what we think is happening is not. As the practice matures, we are taken by surprise. Personally, I think a willingness to be surprised is essential for this practice.

So that's the problem that the Buddha lays out. What can we do about it? How do we find out what's going on?

We do this by practicing presence. We've been talking about this from the very beginning. This is sati, mindfulness practice—the felt continuity of awareness, or we could call it sustained presence. What we're learning to do is to be deeply, intimately present to what is happening now without being led astray by any assumption that we already know what's going on. We train ourselves to be alert only to what is present. We train to stay with this which is present now and track it over time to see what it does.

When we start doing this, we quickly make certain discoveries. We learn, for example, that staying present is very difficult. In fact, most of the time, we are absent. We do something very simple, like following our breathing, and we find ourselves caught up in a fantasy. Gradually, we come to realize that most of the time, we are not here. A very important part of what we've called the secondary object is to show us, to demonstrate to us, that most of the time we are absent. No wonder we don't know what's going on.

Most of the time, or at least certainly a lot of the time, we are caught up in fantasy—in a situation that we take to be real, and right now we take it to be real. But then later we realise it was not real; it was fantasy. It can take a long time for us to accept that our fantasies are not real, because when we're caught up in them, they seem real. We may be filled with anticipation about what will happen in the future. Our fears...

About the future, our hopes, our expectations. But when we are clear, we can see that none of this is real. It's obvious that this is today, not sometime in the future. Yet when we are lost in fantasy about next week, we are convinced—because we are absent—that next week is real, even more real than today. And then at some point we realise, no, that's just a fantasy. We know that it really is today, not next week. But for a while, we were fooled.

We are fooled especially when our fantasies are fed by the power of emotion. That makes them seem particularly real. I might be fantasising a story about the future, and it's fairly easy to recognise that's not real—that's just a story I'm telling myself. But the emotion generated by the fantasy, or the emotion that feeds the fantasy, that is real because we are experiencing it now in the present. The fantasy is about the future, but the emotion is being directly experienced here and now in the sentient body. And the fantasy gets its sense of reality from the power of present emotion.

Even when we snap out of the fantasy, the emotion may stick around for some time before it fades away. And because it does eventually cease, we can look back and appreciate that that too was not real. So we were fooled again, but this time for longer.

We tend to get caught up in fantasy. So how do we know what's actually going on? How do we know what is real? For the purposes of this practice, we could say that what is real is what survives the practice of presence. When we come to working with the elements, we'll get a sense of this. But take, for example, the distraction of random thoughts, which is pretty common. The moment we realise we're caught in them, they just evaporate immediately. They cannot survive presence, even for a moment. So they're definitely not real.

But when thoughts are charged by emotion, they survive longer. There's a sense in which we could say emotion is more real than just thoughts. But even emotion cannot survive presence for very long. When we are present, the false evaporates. What survives presence is real.

Now, this is a gradual process because our delusion has depth. We snap out of one illusion only to find ourselves in another one. This is because we are in the habit of being absent most of the time. And this brings us to the problem of distraction.

One of my favourite examples when talking about distraction is driving down familiar streets and suddenly realising that I have no memory of the previous three blocks. If I find myself in that situation and ask, well, what happened exactly? I was driving and present to my driving, and then, without warning, suddenly I'm absent—I'm out to lunch, as they say. I continue driving in that state of absence until suddenly, again without warning, I'm present. I know I am present in part because I can look back and realise that in the past I was absent from the scene. I am now present to my previous absence. This is an experience of what we would normally call distraction. And of course, when we practice meditation, we really get a chance to study distraction.

So why are we so easily distracted? If we go back to the driving experience, if the streets were entirely unfamiliar to us, if we were carefully navigating our way and anxious to avoid getting lost, would we be so easily distracted? Probably not. The key to the example is that the streets we are driving down are familiar. We know them like the back of our hand. We don't need to make any effort to navigate. We already know where we are and where we are going. At that point, habit snaps in and we drift off into thinking.

If we look at what most often destroys the quality of our engagement with the present, I think fundamentally it's habit. People sometimes say that the problem they have when they meditate is distraction. I don't think distraction is the problem at all. It's not the obstacle to our meditation practice. It provides a great deal of the content of our meditation practice.

The obstacle is habit. And habit contains the assumed conviction that we know what is going on. It also

contains the responses that come from that assumption. So habit is central to delusion. When we're lost in habit, we react without awareness because we assume we already know what's going on. We go to sleep and then we act out of that oblivion.

So in the practice, it's very important that we refuse to take anything for granted—especially what we take to be real, to be normal. Because what is our sense of normality? It's the product of our blindness and our habitual responses. And as our practice deepens, we uncover what it is that conditions us and our sense of reality. These are our buried assumptions, our unconscious drives and needs. These are what the Buddha calls *āsavas*, which could be translated as influences. They come out of the deeper reaches of the mind, of the unconscious mind.

So our challenge when we're doing the practice is to not take anything for granted, but to stay radically present to what is happening now.

We often respond to distraction by dismissing it as an interruption to our meditation practice. We think that our meditation experience can be cleanly divided into two aspects: meditation object, which is good, and distraction, which is bad. But when we have that attitude, we're missing the point. The point is to find out what is really going on, including what's really going on with distraction. Because a lot of the time, that is what's really going on.

So it's important not to dismiss distraction, but simply return to presence. And of course, returning to presence includes distraction, because sometimes what is present is distraction. It's not a question of avoiding distraction, which is basically impossible anyway. It's a matter of cultivating presence. That's the key point. Learn to be present to distraction by recognising now what is happening. Now. The image we've been giving is: switch on the light of awareness, and switch it on now.

As we practice, one thing that structures our practice is what we've been calling directed and undirected awareness. When we direct awareness, we make a choice to turn towards and aware something. This is our meditation object. But when we do this, you probably notice that our mind fights us. It wants to roam wherever it decides. We do not decide to slide off into distraction—our mind decides. And it follows the well-worn paths of habit, habits that have been cultivated over decades. So we find ourselves in a struggle between meditation on the one hand and distraction on the other, and often we feel that we're on the losing side.

What's the alternative? One possibility, as we were playing around with this morning, is to play with the spectrum between directed and undirected awareness. When we're sensitive to the movement between these two, we find a flow between presence and absence and presence again. This flow is just part of nature. It's to be accepted as what's really going on, and it's therefore worthy of study.

When we are not sensitive to this spectrum, when we try to hold on to directed awareness exclusively, we find ourselves in a hierarchy of meditation object versus distraction, where again meditation object is

good, distraction is bad. We try to avoid distraction, and when we realise we are distracted, we run away from that experience to something more acceptable. We may end up creating a situation in which meditation is work, and we want to take regular holidays. And worse, meditation can become a war in which the enemy is ourselves, and so we're bound to be on the losing side.

But instead of that, what we could do is cultivate recognition of what we already know. Cultivate recognition of what is already here. We played around with that with the recognition of posture. So right now, am I sitting? Do I know that I am sitting? Of course I do. I already know. But perhaps I forgot. How difficult is it to remember?

Not so difficult. And once I remember, do I have to deliberately direct awareness toward sitting? Well, I could. Or I could recognize what I already know.

Do we have to get back from somewhere, or have we already arrived?

When we learn to recognize what we already know, when we remember awareness itself, we may find ourselves in a situation where we don't have to struggle to maintain a practice. We're not struggling to be present. We are simply recognizing that we are already present.

So this brings us back to presence itself. And presence involves both directed and undirected awareness. If we place too much emphasis on directed awareness, we can find ourselves bouncing between meditation object and distraction, along with the attitudes of judgment that accompany this. But when we are present to the spectrum, to the flow between directed and undirected awareness, we may find a continuity between presence and absence. They're no longer opposites, but more like different sides of the same coin.

Because absence is inevitable. The real issue becomes how we transition between presence and absence and back again. And in this transition there's no need for any hierarchy of superior and inferior. There's no need for any judgment of ourselves or of our experiences being adequate or inadequate. There's just the flow of awareness, recognized now.

And of course, as we talk about this, we're reminded of the principle that presence is more important than what is present. In fact, we could say that our obsession with distraction is one aspect of our obsession with the content of our experience. We think certain things should be happening and certain other things should not. But in mindfulness practice, the important thing is presence itself, not what we are present to.

So that we are distracted does not matter. What matters is that we learn to become present—for example, to our distraction, whenever that is happening.

And of course, we can only be present to what is happening now. So presence involves immediacy, and immediacy does not care what is present, whether we think of it as distraction or whether we think of it as meditation object. Our meditation object can be useful because it provides a stable point from which we can look out at what is happening now, at the flow of experience. There's a sense in which our meditation

object gives us something to do while we wait for something to happen. And what are we waiting for? We're waiting for what is already happening, which usually we're too busy to notice.

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

Which of course brings us back to where we started.

The first time I got a sense of this was in 1984, when I first went to Burma. I'd spent a couple of years in India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal because Burma had been shut down for meditators. All the meditators had been expelled in 1982, just when I was about to go. Bad karma, bad timing.

At that period, you could only enter Burma on a one-week tourist visa. There were simply no meditation visas. So eventually I gave up and arrived on my one-week tourist visa. I went to the Mahasi Centre and basically knocked on the door and said, "Here I am, let me in." And they did.

There was a new teacher for the foreign students. He was also the head teacher of the whole place, and that was Sayadaw U Pandita. Because he was busy, he had one hour a day in which to teach the foreign meditators. At the time, there was one foreign meditator. That was me. So I had an hour to hang out with him each morning. It was a very interesting introduction to the whole thing.

After a few days—I don't know why he did this—but he decided to summarize the practice for me.

He said, "Your job as a yogi is to be aware of everything that happens throughout the day, from the moment you wake up in the morning to the moment you fall asleep at night, right down to the blinking of your eyes. That's the job."

What I thought was: *That is impossible.*

What I said was: "Yes, Sayadaw."

Because I'd only been there for a few days, but I had learned that vital lesson—that this is the only appropriate response to a Sayadaw.

So I went off and gave it a go. I gave it my best shot. And after a day or two, I could conclude without any doubt that it really is impossible. But what I realised was possible is to be aware of what is happening *now* . That's possible. That's always possible. Or, to be more precise, that's possible now.

This is a crucial lesson in doing this practice. We talk about the craft of meditation and we spend time learning it. We talk about grounding object, secondary object, directed awareness, undirected awareness, awareness and the aware, and all of this. But what it comes down to is: something is happening now. That's it. What is it? It's that simple. And in a sense, that radical—so radical that actually we're very slow to

pick up that this is really what it's about.

Now, the aim of the practice, traditionally, is regarded as the experience of nibbāna. And nibbāna—or in Sanskrit and English, nirvana—is the complete cessation of dukkha, of pain.

As we've seen, the Buddha assumes that we are deluded, that we don't know what is going on. For him, that's the normal human condition. And because of our delusion, we generate suffering for ourselves and for others. Once we get a sense of this, we come to the practice of the Dhamma because we hope to do something about this situation. That's why we're here and not at the pub.

So we are driven by our dukkha, which means dukkha sets our agenda. However, the Buddha also says that dukkha is not real. This is one of the more radical aspects of his teaching. Dukkha does not survive presence. Our problem feeds on our absences. And the more continually and radically present we are, the more our problem dissolves. Ultimately, our problem is not real.

And if we ask, well, what *is* real? It's this. What's happening now. We could call it immediate intimacy, about which nothing can be said, because any words that we weave around it are just words woven around—not the fact itself. And this now is already available.

So the practice is to take refuge in the present, and when we do that, what we will discover is that our suffering dissolves.

Of course, presence cannot be postponed. Presence is not something that is going to happen tomorrow or next week or when I'm ready for it or after things calm down. Presence is happening now, or it's not happening at all.

So please use this retreat to cultivate presence. And if you want any hints about when to do this—it's now. Don't forget now. Now. But don't make a big deal out of it either. Just remember awareness. Now.

That pain arises because of conditions, and it ceases because of conditions. The chief condition that sets the whole ball rolling is presence. To be intimately present with our pain—this is powerful.

And of course, when the Buddha talks about dukkha in the dharmic sense, he's not talking about things like physical pain, like a sickness that causes physical pain. He's talking about psychological pain. He's talking about how we respond to physical pain, how we respond to the disasters of life. That's what he means when he says the problem is not real, not fundamental.

To be human is to be identified with a body which is marching relentlessly towards sickness, ageing, and death. This could make a person depressed if they thought about it. But here it is. And it's possible to live a fully flourishing life in the midst of this condition.

This is the cessation of dukkha.

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