Practising Toward Insight

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 43:15

So tonight we start a series of talks on insight. And this one is practicing toward insight. In other words, what's the connection between the practice that we're doing and this mysterious entity called insight?

We start at the beginning, which is what we've been talking about and what we've been practicing over these days: awareing. This is the basic activity of the practice. We could sum it up by saying, what is happening now? When we are aware, we are investigating. And this sense of curiosity, of investigation, is fundamental to meditation for insight. We don't take anything for granted. What we're trying to do is to cut through our habitual, conditioned, conceptual view of reality. We're trying to see present experience for what it is.

This, we discover, is difficult because we tend to get lost in our concepts about our experience rather than be intimate with the experience itself. To give a fairly common example: have you ever begun a meditation session and given up because it's just too difficult? If we ask, well, what happened? Our sense of discontent and restlessness—did it appear as "I don't like this" or "I can't do this"?

Notice that in this perception what dominates is "I," the one who doesn't like this or the one who can't do this. And of course I am extremely important in this situation because this practice is all about me. It's for me, the practitioner. So it's obvious that this is the way I perceive the situation. I'm having problems. I can't do this. But does this "I," who is absolutely central to this experience—does this "I" correspond to a distinct, discrete experience? Or is it just a convenient way of interpreting experience?

What we're training to do in this practice is to drop our habitual concepts about our discontent, in this instance, in this example. What we're trying to discover is: what is the felt experience of this discontent? Discontent is dominating the experience. So what is it exactly? Where is it? How does it present? For example, is it in the body? Does it have physical characteristics? Is it in the mind? Is it psychological? Is it both? And if it's both, what's the relationship between bodily unease and psychological discontent? And in all of this, do I actually encounter an "I" who is discontented?

Notice how we start with what is a very normal situation—I don't like this—but we refuse to take it for granted. We refuse to assume it's an accurate account of what is going on. Instead, we're interested, we're curious. And of course, this is investigation, which is the second of the awakening factors that lives right next door to mindfulness. We are directly aware of what is happening now, with curiosity. And the curiosity is really important. The situation may not be what we think it is. It may be something different. And the only way we can find out is by awareing it.

We could say that in this practice of awareing, we're moving away from what we think or assume is real—me and my world and all that gets caught up in it. We're moving away from that to how this experienced event, here and now, presents what it does, how it behaves.

But why is it important that we do this? Why should we move away from what we think is happening or assume is happening and start to dig deeper? Because if we stay in the habitual world of concept, we tend to become lost in judgment about what is happening.

What is happening now is good. What is happening now is not good. What is happening now is satisfying. What is happening now is disappointing—and so on and so forth.

But when we stay with what this experienced event does, with how we are experiencing, with how we are aware *in*, one thing we notice is the dynamism of the experience. We might allow ourselves to become interested in it as a new event—not something from the past—inherently dynamic, coming from somewhere and then disappearing, to be replaced by something else. And we may come to realise that this second way of experiencing feels more authentic than the first way.

So let's go to how Mahasi Sayadaw talks about this. Mahasi Sayadaw follows the Theravāda tradition when he says that reality, "quote unquote," comes to us in two forms. The first is what we directly experience firsthand through the senses—and this includes mind. The second is what comes to us indirectly, secondhand, through concepts *about* what we directly experience. These are the two ways that we experience.

In the Buddhist tradition, firsthand direct experience is associated with understanding and insight, while experience made up of secondhand concepts is associated with delusion or illusion—and the suffering that comes along with them. In the Theravāda, direct firsthand experience is called ultimate reality, while secondhand experience, concepts about, is called conventional reality.

We tend to live in the conventional world. In practising awareing, we are training ourselves to ground our perception in ultimate reality. This is the world of directly experienced events. This is the world where insight arises.

Normally, we live in the conventional world, the world of concepts. For the Buddha, this is problematic because this conventional world is a product of habitual conditioning from the past—conditioning that has been shaping us since at least birth, if not, for the Buddha, a lot longer. When we ask what forces accomplish this conditioning, for the Buddha these are the three akusala mūla, the three roots of the unwholesome: the famous greed, hatred, and ignorance. What this means is that the world presented to us in conventional reality is not just wrong, but it entangles us in pain and misery.

The job of the practice is to get us out of this secondhand conceptual world into a world that the tradition calls ultimate reality. I find this label a bit overblown, but what to do? It is the world of direct, firsthand experience—the world where insight and awakening can appear.

So we've got to make a journey. We have to get from the world of secondhand experience, of concept, to the world of firsthand experience, of events coming and going according to conditions. We do this through directly awareing this now—always coming back to the present, to what's happening now.

But this conventional world goes very deep. We've been working on it for a long time. So how do we cultivate the power and penetration that we need to cut through decades of conditioned habit? We do this through what the Buddha calls samādhi.

This is a term we've used a few times but haven't actually closely looked at. Samādhi is a key technical term, classically translated as concentration, although personally I'm not especially satisfied with that translation. It comes from the root *dā*, to put or to place, preceded by the prefix *ā*, toward, and before that the prefix *sam*, together. So: sam-ā-dā becomes samādhi. In other words, samādhi means to bring together, to collect.

It can be translated as absorption—a good translation, except that you have another term, jhāna, for specific samādhi states, which could probably also be translated as absorption. Bhikkhu Sujato uses "immersion," which I find really interesting. Imagine diving into a swimming pool—you are immersed in the water. So samādhi is a state of immersion within the experience. It could be translated as integration, or unification. Everything comes together as one.

The key point is that if we are in samādhi, all of our mind, all of our being, is engaged in directly experiencing this now. We're fully committed to it, fully in it, immersed in it.

We tend to think the opposite of samādhi is distraction. But essentially, the opposite of samādhi is division. Part of me is practicing, part of me is resisting, part of me is hoping for something better in the future—the heart-mind is divided. In samādhi, all of me is engaged in just this now.

And in our ordinary lives, we're most likely to experience samādhi when we do something that we enjoy, like play, where we relax and allow ourselves to become fully absorbed. It's one reason, I think, why sports are so popular—people experience samādhi on the playing field when they're really in the zone, as it were.

Now there are different ways to cultivate samādhi. There are all sorts of different techniques, and there are different types of samādhi that emerge out of these different ways of practice. This is really important: samādhi doesn't necessarily present always in exactly the same way. It depends on the conditions. And one of the conditions is what style of practice we are doing.

In this tradition, the kind of samādhi we cultivate is in the tradition called khaṇika samādhi—momentary immersion. So, roughly speaking, we could look at two basic categories of samādhi. We can cultivate samādhi by becoming absorbed into a single experience, like, for example, the breathing. We just absorb into this one thing and we reject anything other than the movements of the breathing. Something else pops up, just drop it immediately, absorb into the breathing. That's one way to develop it.

Or we could cultivate samādhi by becoming absorbed—and again, absorbed, immersed, this is in common to all forms of samādhi—but becoming absorbed into a whole series of different and discrete experiences, coming one after the other. Like, for example, playing a complex game. Or like mindfulness of ordinary everyday activity. Broadly speaking, these are two ways of developing samādhi.

Now, what's the difference between them? Absorption samādhi comes from an exclusive interest in what we call the grounding object, or the primary object. When we began, we really emphasised the importance of the grounding object because this is where we ground and settle awareness on a single, clear, obvious aspect of experience. We settle into this single experience and we ignore everything else. The mind becomes unified around this project and around this single experience. And this results in a state of absorption—what the tradition calls appanā samādhi.

We are so fully absorbed in our meditation object that we forget everything else. Remember we talked about forgetting in terms of the loss of mindfulness. Well, here we're so absorbed in doing something that we forget everything else. Have you ever had an experience, for example, where the practice is going very well and you hear the bell for lunch, so you think, "That's odd. I thought I began sitting some time ago and I must be making a mistake." And you look at your watch and you realise, no, time slipped by very quickly without noticing anything—because we forgot everything else, because we're so absorbed. This is absorption samādhi.

Momentary samādhi, momentary immersion, has a different dynamic. We do not try to exclude the world outside the grounding object. And we've been practicing this by including distraction. When we realise we're distracted, we don't just drop the distraction immediately and get back to the grounding object. We aware our distraction. We directly encounter it. And this becomes our secondary object.

So awareness widens to include the journeys our mind makes when it is distracted. And as we've been talking about, this is how we could say that distraction disappears—because distraction becomes the meditation object. In the same way, the practice does not end when we get up off our meditation cushion and go about our normal activities. We practice mindfulness of everyday activities, which means that our normal everyday activities become our meditation objects. Again, it's the same process.

Samādhi develops by awaring first this, and then this, and then this, and then that, and then this—boom, boom, boom, boom. This movement, that sight, this thought, that feeling, but doing it without any break. Each event is an object of awareness. Each event is a meditation object. So the objects of awareness are changing, unlike in absorption, where it's always the same object. Here the objects of awareness are changing, but the awareness itself remains steady and continuous. And to get a sense of that—that's why we've been playing around a bit with the awaring as well as the awared.

Become sensitive to the aware-ing. And perhaps notice how the aware-ing can be continuous while what we are aware of is changing.

This practice blossoms into momentary immersion, *khaṇika samādhi*, which is absorption—but absorption into first this momentary experience, then that momentary experience, then the next momentary experience, and so on, without any break. And it's the "without any break" which is really central.

If we practice in this style, we maintain a continuous flow of awareness over a period of time. And of course, that's mindfulness. As mindfulness develops, samādhi strengthens. The tradition explains that mindfulness leads to samādhi. In other words, in this approach, we lead with mindfulness. The samādhi, the immersion, comes along as a by-product. It follows afterwards.

In other forms of practice, which we might call serenity practice, we lead with the samādhi and the mindfulness comes along as a by-product. So in every case, we're working with both the immersion and the mindfulness together, but where the emphasis lies varies. In this practice, the emphasis is on the mindfulness, and the samādhi follows behind.

When this kind of samādhi, this momentary immersion, matures, the meditation object becomes whatever is predominant now in any of the six senses. This is how it naturally opens out.

Now, we've been playing around with this by becoming familiar with the dyad of aware-ing and the aware-ed, where we can make the aware-ed our meditation object or the aware-ing. So that's an opening out. But notice the way we've been playing with it has been deliberate—hopefully playful—but deliberate. Let me check this. Let me deliberately open up. Let me see if I can aware the aware-ing itself as well as the object of aware-ing. But when the practice matures, this happens pretty much spontaneously. It simply happens.

This, of course, brings us to what we've been talking about: the perception of impermanence and why it's so important. Aware-ing momentary experience develops samādhi, momentary immersion. And momentary immersion makes the fact of change clear. It becomes obvious. This is the point where we make that transition into the world of insight and understanding.

So we're back to this dichotomy between permanence and impermanence, why it's so important, and why it's at the centre of the Buddha's approach. If we go back to the idea of direct first-hand experience versus indirect second-hand experience, let's have a look at this.

Indirect second-hand experience is concept. Let's take a Buddhist example—a concept of something we have not directly encountered, a pure concept. Let's say rebirth, or what I prefer to call life after life. This is really foundational to Buddhist teaching. Let's call it rebirth. Does rebirth actually exist? Is this doctrine true?

Some people believe it because authoritative texts say it is true, and authoritative teachers say it is true. Some people disbelieve it because it contradicts their belief in scientific materialism. We can find both of these positions among practitioners of meditation in the Buddhist traditions.

So we've got two positions that are diametrically opposed to each other. But what do they both have in common? They're both concepts—just concepts.

Has anybody directly experienced rebirth? Probably not. Now, some people claim to have memories of a previous life, but these memories are themselves concepts. Like any memory, they are creations of the mind in the present that may or may not correspond to an actually encountered first-person experience that occurred in the past. But how can we know?

So both of these positions—completely opposite, totally opposed to each other—what they have in common is that they're just concepts. And what do concepts have in common?

Even those that are totally opposed to each other, they appear as permanent. Remember, the Pali word for permanent is *nicca*. Now, they're not permanent in the sense that they last forever and ever, but in the way that the Buddha uses the term, they last unchanged over time. For the Buddha, something is permanent if it lasts unchanged over time, regardless of the unit of time.

So let's say, for example, that ten years ago or twenty years ago, I decided that the Buddha must be right—there is rebirth if he says so. I trust him. He wouldn't lead us astray on this. In contrast, let's say that ten years ago or twenty years ago, I decided that regardless of what the Buddha says, there is no rebirth. It is scientifically impossible. Just get over it.

Now, has this concept and my relationship to this concept changed over the past ten or twenty years? Well, apparently not. It seems to be the same. So it's permanent in the sense that the Buddha uses it—it lasts unchanged over time. And it is permanent because it is a concept. Concepts are permanent in the sense that they remain stable over time.

Now we don't spend all our time thinking about rebirth, but let's say that you are one of those who does not believe in rebirth. You come along to a dharma talk and the speaker is sitting on the throne explaining to you that not only is rebirth true, but that if you don't believe it, you cannot be a Buddhist and your practice cannot result in enlightenment. You're out.

What's happening during this dharma talk? You are having a direct, firsthand experience of listening to this talk and a direct, firsthand experience of agitation and irritation—a felt sense of dissatisfaction that the speaker is demanding you make an act of faith that you don't actually have, with the implied threat that if you don't, then you are excluded from enlightenment. This is the direct experience.

Now let's say that you are one of those who does believe in rebirth and you arrive at the same talk with this belief firmly in place. You are at the same talk and you are having a direct, firsthand experience of listening and a direct, firsthand experience of satisfaction—a felt sense of confirmation of your belief and a great deal of satisfaction that the truth is finally being put forward without any apologetics.

These experiences—listening to and responding to this talk—are direct, firsthand, and changing. They are

not permanent. They do not last over time.

If you wandered into a different dharma talk the following night, and quite by accident someone is giving the same dharma talk you listened to last night, the concept would be exactly the same. But your felt encounter with the talk, the responses arising in mind and body as you go through it, would be different from the night before. Perhaps this time there'd be some boredom because you're going over the same territory again and you're wondering why people think this is so important in the first place.

Direct, firsthand experiences are not permanent. They're not stable over time. But in contrast, concepts are stable. They remain unchanged over a period of time. The belief you hold or reject today could be the same belief you held or rejected ten years ago or twenty years ago.

Direct encounters with this right now—the world revealed by awareing—are unstable. They do not last unchanged over time. If you are listening to this talk and if, as a practitioner, you notice an affective or emotional response to these words, you may choose to aware the arising of that affective response as your meditation object. What would you find? Changing, shifting physical sensations and psychological responses. You would find change. You would find impermanence.

The practice of awareing reveals a world perceived as impermanent, as subject to change. This is the perception of change, or the perception of impermanence. And for the Buddha, this is the world where understanding may emerge.

Once this perception arises, the other perceptions will come with it. As we talked about last night, that which is *anicca*—impermanent and therefore unreliable—is *dukkha*, inherently unsatisfactory. And that which is *dukkha* is not self. The recognition of these three universal characteristics constitutes insight.

So what is it that we've done to approach this world? Momentary samādhi—momentary immersion. Immersion in first this, then that, then the other. We are cultivating a particular kind of concentration or samādhi or immersion which opens up this world of change and makes it, basically, bleeding obvious. Whereas if we're absorbing into just a single thing—

then our meditation practice is not associated with change, not at least to anything like the same degree.

So this brings us to the world of insight. And in one famous teaching, the Buddha declares that all fabrications are impermanent. *Sabbe sankhārā aniccā.*

Now, fabrications—this is a translation of the Pali word *sankhārā*. Sometimes you see it translated as constructions, and there are other translations. But these fabrications are experienced events that are conditioned by other events and in turn condition still other events.

One example of this, which we'll have a look at later in the retreat, is what the Buddha calls *cetanā*, usually translated as intention. But for reasons we'll go into later, I prefer to translate it as choice or decision. And this is, of course, the teaching of karma—the choices that we make determine the kind of life

that we lead. They fabricate, they construct the kind of life that we lead.

So the Buddha says that all fabrications are impermanent. Now, let's look at what he's claiming. All fabrications are impermanent. You notice, from the point of view of the meditation practice, what a bold claim this is. As we've been talking about, what the Buddha is interested in is the nature of human experience. And human experience is available through this practice. We're studying our experience as it flows.

All fabrications are impermanent. Let's say I am a dedicated practitioner of insight meditation. Let's say that whenever I am aware, whenever I engage with a meditation object, I recognize that the experience I am having is impermanent—it is subject to change because of the influence of other events.

So in terms of my direct firsthand experience—and this is assuming I'm really sharp, really good at this insight meditation business—in terms of my firsthand experience, I could make the claim: whenever I am aware, whatever I am aware of turns out to be impermanent, subject to change. Okay? Great.

But what about all those experiences that I have not been aware of in my practice, which I can be pretty confident far outnumber the ones that I have been aware of? What about all those experiences, for example, that occurred before I started practicing? What about all those experiences that will occur in the future? I haven't examined them. I have no direct firsthand experience of them. Any idea that I have about them is a concept.

So doesn't that mean that I'm back where I started? I'm back into a belief. But this time, it's a Buddhist belief, which apparently is better than the other ones. So isn't it just a return to the world of concept?

Then how do I move from there, genuinely, into this world of insight and understanding? Especially since, according to the tradition, insight meditation strictly speaking begins when our meditation object is one or more of the three characteristics. But if the three characteristics are concepts, how does that work? Isn't insight meditation supposed to deconstruct concepts? Isn't it supposed to take us to a world beyond concept?

So as you can see, this is a bit of a tangle, but fortunately we're going to resolve it tomorrow night. So that's good news. Unless you're in the Zoom audience, in which case it's bad news. But what to do?

Any questions?

"You said we can look at change in terms of our direct experience, but what about the things that we haven't experienced? Do they still have the same nature? It seems to me just a funny question to ask."

It's just something that's outside of our field of experience, so why even talk about it?

If I enter into the world of insight, and it really clicks—and you find this among practitioners—there is a level of certainty. *This is the way the world is.* So what I'm inquiring about is: where does this certainty

come from? How can there be this level of certainty if it's not just a concept?

The Buddha does resolve this, and I'll give you a preview. It's basically because what he's saying is that what we're seeing is the structures of experience. It's not simply that this and this and this and this change. It's recognising that the very structure of experience itself contains change. Therefore, it doesn't matter what the content is. This is what we're going to explore next—a certain universality of that experience. It's not just of that experience, because then you're talking about a content, a specific experience, but the structure of experience itself. This is what we start to actually get a sense of.

So another question came: you said that whatever changes is not-self. Is that because all three of the characteristics are built into the fabric of experience?

In the case of dukkha, what causes pain through change is the fact that we're not in charge of it. We're not in control. So it's not simply that things change, but things change in ways that I don't want them to change, and I can't do anything about it. I'm not in charge.

In this retreat we've talked about how we start off a meditation project thinking, "I'm in charge of this meditation project," and pretty quickly we realise, "No, I'm not in charge." It doesn't operate the way I want it to operate. But also, more fundamentally, what the Buddha talks about is that birth is followed by sickness, ageing, death. These are changes, and nobody stops to ask, "Are these the changes you would prefer, or would you prefer some other changes?" It's just built in. And the absence of anyone in charge is not-self. This is how not-self is perceived within dukkha—when we begin to recognise that the changes and the dissatisfaction with these changes is built into the fabric of the universe.

A follow-up question: do you think that experience of dukkha is also just built into, and our reaction to it, built into our very existence?

Well, that's the interesting thing about dukkha. What if I don't respond to what one would regard as a painful experience with aversion? What if I just completely accept it? And there is that sense in which the cessation of dukkha, the liberation from dukkha, is possible. So that makes that second characteristic unique. There is a sense in which we can move beyond it.

Now, the same flow of experiences continues, but we would not have the response of aversion. And consequently, a lot of the dukkha would disappear. So there's always, if you've got a physical body, you're going to have physical pain. That's built in. But dukkha, in the classic sense that the Buddha talks about in the Four Noble Truths, that's, in a sense, an optional added extra.

Equanimity becomes an option—to be completely balanced throughout all the ups and downs. And to be satisfied with it. Like it's okay, like it really is okay. And that imperturbability quality develops.

So dukkha is different from the other two in that sense. We can distinguish it from the other two.

Thank you very much. Goodnight, everyone.

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