Seeing and Understanding

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 43:14

Tonight we're going to talk about seeing and understanding, continuing to explore how insight works. I was looking at this material before I came down and I thought, this is way too big and way too theoretical—I'm going to explode their brains. But I'll try to make it coherent.

Yesterday we talked about how we design a practice in order to gain insight. In this lineage, the basis of the practice is directly aware-ing whatever arises in any of the six senses now. That's basically it. Mahasi structures the enterprise in terms of grounding object and secondary object. The grounding object is what we stabilise on. This is where we gain our stability, where we cultivate, in particular, samādhi.

The secondary object is different. It's about, essentially, change. We find that our meditation is unstable and the awareness slips off somewhere else. What this means is a gap, a break. What we want to do is cultivate continuity of awareness, because it's the continuity of awareness which is mindfulness. And it's the mindfulness which is going to develop the samādhi power to get us through. It's the mindfulness which is going to develop the kind of samādhi power that we want—what we talked about last night, momentary concentration.

So distraction is a problem. The way Mahasi deals with it is he simply says, well, make the distraction the meditation object. Is there something getting in the way of the practice? It will be something which arises in the body, or arises in the mind, or has elements of both. It's just another meditation object.

One way in which this was expressed very clearly was by Sayadaw U Janaka. He had a small centre, Chanmyay Yeiktha. The word yeiktha is usually translated in English as meditation centre. In Burmese, it literally means shady place—although often they're anything but shady. When the Burmese started developing meditation centres, including for lay people, which began in the early twentieth century, they had no word for meditation centre. The idea of getting a bunch of people, monastics and lay people together for the purpose of learning meditation was so alien to the culture they didn't even have a word for it. So they decided they would call them yeiktha, shady places.

Janaka's shady place didn't have a great deal of shade, but what to do? It was right on the main north-south highway leading out of Rangoon. Incredible truck traffic passing to and fro. On the other side of the street was a shopping centre, just waves of noise and pollution going right through the centre. Foreign meditators would come and sometimes they'd get a bit agitated and they would complain to the Sayadaw. They would say, "Look, I can't meditate here. It is so noisy. It is unrelentingly noisy." And the Sayadaw would smile and he would say, "You are so lucky—you have so many objects to note."

It sums up the principle. It doesn't matter what it is. It's just a meditation object. And if it's getting in the way—I can't meditate because of this—then this is an excellent meditation object. Because isn't it clear? Isn't it obvious? What more do you want?

In this way, by working with distraction, we work with the grounding object, and then we realize we're distracted, so we've lost a bit of awareness, but as soon as we realize we're distracted—bang, meditation object. We're closing the gap. We're making the awareness as continuous as possible. We're developing momentary immersion or momentary concentration. We have a continuous flow of awareness covering a discontinuous flow of events.

And as we do this, we become increasingly sensitive to the difference between what we directly encounter in awareness firsthand and what we experience secondhand through concept. This becomes clear, and we begin to recognize that concepts, by their very nature, are concepts *about* what is actually happening here and now—not what is actually happening.

Moving to this new perception is difficult because we've spent our lives training ourselves to take as real and significant the world that consists of concepts about our experience rather than the actual experience itself.

For example, I don't know if you've ever been a tourist. Let's say you're a tourist and you go to a place famous for its beautiful views. You're standing there looking at it. What am I doing? Am I simply seeing? Well, maybe I'm preoccupied by my perception of how beautiful this view is, or isn't, and how it compares to other views. Perhaps I feel that this experience of visual beauty must be captured, so I've got to take a picture of it. Then I can take it away with me, preserve it for the future, show it to my friends and maybe even my children. So the visual scene itself is actually less real to me, less salient, than the concepts I build around it.

I picked the example of a view because—and I have to confess this is particularly my experience in Korean tourist spots—there's a famous view, there's a crowd of people, and there are many more people looking at this view through cameras than there are people looking at it through their eyes. The cameras are often pointed at people looking at the view, or people in front of the view looking at the camera. It's clear that there's a lot more going on than just seeing. And this "more going on" is very much creating a conceptual world more real, more salient, than the actual direct experience.

But in this practice, we're learning to drop beneath the world of concept to the world defined by the flow of directly experienced events. This brings us to the perception of impermanence that we've been talking about, because this world of concept—one of the reasons why it's so attractive—is that it appears as permanent. Remember that for the Buddha, "permanent" means lasting unchanged over time.

We talked about how in particular we can see this in the sense of self. The one who comes to see the view is the same one who's enjoying the view, or alternatively disappointed by the view, and is the same one

who leaves, and is the same one who provides an image of it to their friends six months later. The same one. This is the self, and the self is steady throughout time. It is permanent.

But the Buddha might ask: is there in all of this a directly experienced, firsthand event that corresponds to this sense of me? Or, if we're directly aware of what is happening as it happens, do we instead find a flow of changing experiences—seeing, feeling, responding, thinking, and so on—that make up the broader category of "seeing a beautiful view"?

When we're not paying attention, when direct awareness slips, the dharma adventures of this I, this me, are more real than the actual experiences of hearing, seeing, feeling, and so on. When we do pay attention, these actual felt experiences become more real than the concepts we've wrapped around them.

You notice again—which we've already talked about—the practice means we are staying close to the ground. We're learning to stay close to the ground of our direct experience. This is the essential discipline of the practice. And in the process, we're learning to recognize the fact of change.

This happens. We don't have to try to do it. We suggested some exercises you could do, but you don't actually have to try to do it. It just becomes obvious. It just becomes obvious that this turns into that.

How many people here, since they've arrived at the retreat, have had a consistently same experience every day? Any takers? How many people have found that the days vary enormously? Even the morning varies enormously from the afternoon. Sometimes I can do it, sometimes I can't. Sometimes nothing seems to be getting in the way. Sometimes something's getting in the way so much I can't even do it anymore. Change. It's just obvious.

So one way of looking at it is that we're learning to recognize that this that we experience right now is already turning into that, another experience. Now, this world of direct experience is the world of the particular, the specific, the individual—this breath, that thought, this movement, and so on. But the world of insight is the world of the universal. It's not that this now is changing; that's the world of direct experience. The world of insight is: *everything* changes.

So how do we get from the particular to the universal? This is the problem we raised last night. Let's look at how the Buddha talks about this. We'll do this by having a look at the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which is the root text of our practice. The practice is divided into four trackings: body, feeling, mind, dharma. We'll just look at an example from the body, the first one.

And the Buddha describes the basic discipline of the practice, which we've talked about already: "Here a practitioner, surrendering longing and sorrow for the world, lives tracking body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful."

Now, we didn't have a look at what he means by "body as body." Why doesn't he just say "lives tracking body, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful"? Why does he say "body as body"? What's this all about?

This is about the direct, first-hand connection to physical experience. This physical sensation is just this physical sensation. It's not good, it's not bad, it's not satisfying, it's not disappointing, it's not mine, it's not somebody else's. It's just hard, soft, moving, sharp, and so on. This is the first-hand world of experienced events where one sensation segues into another.

Technically, this is the world of the dharmas. When you see the word dharma in the plural, these are the events—the experienced events that come and go. So "tracking body as body" refers to cultivating mindfulness through a whole series of events. "Surrendering longing and sorrow for the world" refers to the work of again and again dropping our slide into the world of concepts and all the emotional entanglements that this world involves. This is the basic practice.

At the end of each section, the discourse is divided into four categories, but there are thirteen separate modules that make up those four categories. At the end of each module—for example, breathing is a single module—there's a chorus.

Remember, these discourses were not written down. They were chanted. They were sung. This is an oral tradition. These are songs, and of course songs are structured with verses and chorus: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, and so on.

Now, if you're a great fan of a particular song, so that you actually remember it, and if you kind of forget about it and twenty-five years later it comes back to mind, what's the part of the song that you're most likely to remember? The chorus. In a sense, the chorus provides the essence of the song.

Here we also have a chorus, and each chorus is exactly the same—you just have a shift in one word to refer back to the previous verse. So here we have the first appearance of the chorus:

"The practitioner lives tracking the nature of arising as body, or she lives tracking the nature of ceasing as body, or she lives tracking both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body."

Now you notice the change of language. And with it, the practice has changed. The practitioner is no longer aware in body as it comes and goes—she's aware in the nature of arising and ceasing as body. This is the entry into insight, the movement from the particular to the universal.

"Arising and ceasing" is code for change, for impermanence. Something arises, it begins; it ceases, it ends. Change. What's happening is I'm tracking my experience, keeping to the ground: just this, just this, just this. This is the basic boot camp. And as I do this, I notice things change. The experience changes. It's unstable.

One way of looking at this is we could say that attention has a certain structure—a foreground and a background. Let's say my meditation object is breathing. I'm directly aware of the breathing, but other things are present as well within the field of awareness. There's the other sensations of the body, there's the sounds, there's the thoughts, but they're in the background. In the foreground is the meditation object,

say the breathing. In the background is everything else. I'm actively aware in the foreground; I'm deliberately going to it. All the stuff in the background is coming to me.

I'm not going up to it. So my awareness is undirected, receptive. The meditation object receives active awareness; everything else receives receptive awareness. This is the basic structure.

But every now and again, you get a foreground-background shift. Let's say you're with the breathing, and a truck rumbles up this narrow road. It's very loud, moving slowly. At first you register it receptively, and then you become more preoccupied by it. You begin to wonder how they could have such a noisy truck right next to a meditation hall. When they were actually working on this road, it was fantastic—the hall itself would shake because they had all this equipment pounding the road. It was quite alarming.

Anyway, the noise occupies a greater and greater space until suddenly you realize that actually, what you're directly aware of is the truck, the noise, while the breathing has slipped away into the background, or possibly disappeared altogether. There's been a foreground-background shift. What was in the foreground has gone into the background. What was in the background has come to the foreground.

The same happens with thinking. I'm following my meditation object. I notice there's a bit of thought in the background, but no worries. And then I realize, no, I'm completely preoccupied by my thinking, and the meditation object has receded to the background. Again, a foreground-background shift. So what do I do? Reverse it. Bring the meditation object to the foreground, let the thinking drop to the background. This structure of foreground and background is part of the field of awareness, and this field is big enough to take both.

Now, what the Buddha is talking about in the Insight Chorus is precisely this foreground-background shift. The practitioner lives tracking the nature of arising and ceasing as body. Before, the meditation object is whatever the verse is about—let's say breathing. And in the background, I notice that the experience is changing. The experience of the breath is changing, the experience of sitting here following the breath is changing, the experience of the weather is changing, and so on. Foreground, background.

So the foreground is this now—dynamic, never still, already changing into something else. The background is the fact of change itself. And then there's the shift, the reversal, where what comes to the foreground is the fact of change, and in the background is now the particular this-now which is changing. That is the entry into insight.

One way of looking at this is in terms of the relationship between uniqueness and patterns. The unique, the particularities of experience—this right now, which could not have happened before and will never happen in the future. We talked about this in the sense of sometimes getting a feeling for the newness of things. I've been in this hall before, I've listened to dharma talks before, but my experience of it now is different from what it was before or what it will be later. It's unique, specific, particular. This is the boot camp training we're doing.

And then there's the patterns of experience—how the particularities, as they flow, form different patterns, and the patterns are consistent over time.

Before we practice, we don't really appreciate the unique, the specific, the new. We tend to miss it or gloss over it because of our habit of viewing our present experience as an expression of what has always been here, always the same. "Yep, yet another dharma talk. Same." But what we're training to do is cut through this habitual concept to see the particularities.

Normally, this day is just like yesterday. The perception of sameness is the perception of identity. There's a stability in this perception—the same thing popping up again and again. This is our normal everyday perception of permanence. The practice subverts this by drawing our attention to uniqueness.

And as we settle into this, at some point we begin to notice that there is a stability within experience after all. But it's not in the experienced things themselves.

It's in the patterns of their movements. It's what the Buddha calls their arising and ceasing. So it's not that this right now is the same—it isn't. It's new, it's unique. But there is a pattern in the regularities of its movements, how things arise and cease. And these patterns are dynamic and they are causal. They show how one thing gives rise to another.

It's not the regularities of identity, of sameness. It's the regularities of causation, of conditionality. Roughly speaking, it's like the weather. Our experience of the weather here now is unique—particularly around here, where it's constantly changing. But the patterns of hot and cold, wet and dry endlessly reproduce themselves. Each individual experience is unique, but it's part of a broader patterning, and the patterns are relatively stable over time. This is what the Buddha is getting at when he's talking about the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing—he's talking about the general patterns of experience.

So we start by having a meditation object at the centre, studying it, noticing its changes, and then at some point there's a shift, and what we're actually looking at are the patterns of change as they appear in this particular experience. Now, this shift is subtle—very subtle. Sometimes it's big, but usually it's quite subtle. And it's not something that we can do. What we're doing is the practice. And so to do it, we make a choice to do it. We sustain that choice. We develop effort. We work at it. This is the realm of choice, of our agenda, of what we are doing.

But we do not do insight. Insight just happens. Insight is not part of our agenda. It always arrives from outside, as grace. We cannot make it happen; it just happens. Or alternatively, it just does not happen. But we don't do it. All we can do is set up the conditions that make insight possible, or even likely.

My old Zen teacher, Robert Aitken Roshi, once said that meditation does not produce insight. Insight always comes about as an accident. But meditation makes us accident prone. So this is what we're doing—we're creating the circumstances in which we might possibly have an accident.

Krishnamurti expressed the same thing. He said insight is like the breeze that blows. You can't control the breeze. You can't make the breeze blow. But what you could do is open the window, stand in front of it, and wait.

So this shift—this foreground-background shift from seeing this and noticing that it changes, to seeing change and noticing it happens with this—this is not something that we can do. And the movement into insight is subtle. Usually it does not announce itself with bells and whistles, although often when we start we have this fantasy that it will. It's quite unusual for that to happen. In fact, it can be so subtle that the practitioner doesn't even notice it. It happens, for example, that practitioners can develop a vague sense that something has changed in the practice, but they don't really know what. And then maybe one day they're hearing about impermanence, or they're thinking about the changes that they've been experiencing, when it occurs to them: Oh, that's what's happening. I'm recognizing change itself. Change itself is my meditation object. And this perception can be so subtle that once having been recognized, it then disappears.

Only to reappear when it thinks no one is looking. But over time it begins to weave its way into our habitual perceptions until it just becomes part of the furniture. It can be a gradual and very subtle process that we don't really recognize all that much as it's happening. Then simply at some point, for some reason, it clicks, and we realize that something has changed.

So this is how the Buddha describes the emergence of insight.

Let us look at another discourse. This one is called "Grounds for Understanding," and it's one of these very complicated technical discourses that nobody in their right minds ever reads. But these discourses are particularly interesting because they're basically designed for an oral tradition. Again, these are chants. You have certain discourses that go through different categories meant to be sung and memorized. And by memorizing them, you begin to absorb what is being spoken about in terms of patterns—not of individual things, but of patterns. So this is one of the discourses that reveals a pattern.

What it does is take two fundamental templates that the Buddha uses. One is the four truths—everybody's heard of the four noble truths? Dukkha, the arising of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, and the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. One, two, three, four. This is the subject of the Buddha's first formal teaching.

The other formula is the twelve-fold formula of dependent arising. Dependent arising is his basic way of looking at the universe and experience. There are multiple versions of it, but the standard one is the twelve-fold formula.

In this discourse, he takes these two templates and brings them together. He presents forty-four different situations in which, first of all, we are presented with an experienced event—a dhamma, a this-now—and then along with how we understand it. The pattern is exactly the same regardless of the event. So we can

just look at one of these events and get a sense of the pattern.

In the twelve-fold formula, you start with ignorance and move on until at some point you come to craving, and then from craving to clinging, and so on. "When a cultivated student understands craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation"—you notice that four-fold structure comes from the four truths. A cultivated student is a mature practitioner. When they understand craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation, "this is understanding into the experienced event."

In Pali this is *dhammañāṇa*. What he's talking about is direct, firsthand awareness. But there's an ambiguity in the Pali that does not come out in the English. The translation here is "understanding into the experienced event." *Dhamme ñāṇa—ñāṇa* is understanding, *dhamme* is "into dhamma." And this can be read as a single experienced event, which is how I've translated it, or it could equally refer to the universal law of nature itself. It could mean the particular; it could mean the universal. This ambiguity is built into this word *dhamma*, which has both of these meanings, and different translators will pick different meanings.

So Bhikkhu Sujato chooses the first meaning—he translates it as "knowledge of the present phenomenon," this this-now which we've been talking about. Bhikkhu Bodhi chooses the second meaning, so he translates it as "knowledge of the principle"—the principle as in the universal.

Now personally I prefer Sujato's reading, so I translate it as understanding into the experienced event. But it's ambiguous. And the Buddha's audience would have recognised this ambiguity. We don't, but they would because it's their language. They would understand the subtlety of recognising that a discrete, experienced event is also presenting a universal pattern or principle. And this universal pattern or principle is not separate from the discrete experienced event—it's bound up with it.

Here the pattern is the pattern of the four truths: the event, its arising, its cessation, the path leading to its cessation. So understanding into the experienced event gives us direct first-hand encounter with this now.

The Buddha then goes on to say this experienced event, seen, understood, instantly attained, penetrated, leads to past and future in this way: "Whoever in the past directly knew craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation—all of them directly knew it in exactly the same way that I do now. Whoever in the future will directly know craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation—all of them will directly know it in exactly the same way that I do now."

This is inferential understanding, anvaya jñāna. So there are two different types of understanding being presented: individual-specific understanding and universal. The individual is directly encountered; the universal is inferred.

Now this does not mean that the practitioner moves from direct experience to thinking about. Inferential understanding indicates a recognition that while the individual events that come and go are unique—they appear only in the present—the patterns that each unique this-now presents are universal and they

extend over time. Arising, craving, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. Just as this particular event has a beginning and an end, an arising and a cessation, so every event has a beginning and an end, an arising and cessation. And to the practitioner, this appears as obvious. If events did not begin, we would never experience anything. If events did not cease, nothing new would ever happen.

And then finally we recognise a trajectory, a path, a path leading to the cessation. We realise, in other words, that these patterns of experience are normative, stable over time—which means we can learn to navigate them. Because the patterns are stable while the individual events that make up the patterns come and go in great profusion. The events within the pattern are individual; the patterns themselves are universal.

What the Buddha is talking about here is the pattern: feeling conditions craving. This is from Dependent Arising. Feeling conditions craving. What feeling is he talking about? He's talking about this feeling right now. What does he mean by craving? He means this particular sense that I must respond to this feeling.

So where I find craving, which appears as a sense of urgent necessity, I will find feeling. Now the many instances of craving vary enormously. The many different feelings vary enormously. But the pattern remains the same: feeling conditions craving.

Insight emerges as the recognition of these patterns and how they behave. And they are causal. They bring into existence certain events and not others.

So let's look at this one, between feeling and craving. All instances of craving, of urgent necessity, of drivenness, arise because of feeling. All of them, without exception. And this is a universal pattern. If there's craving, there has to be feeling. Always.

However, it is possible to have feeling without craving. This particular relationship is not inevitable. You can have the feeling without the craving.

But if you've had the craving, you've definitely had the feeling. And so this relationship is particularly important in meditation practice, because in meditation we're training to be directly aware of feeling so that it does not blossom into craving. But if there is craving, it came from feeling.

So these conditional relationships vary in their nature. They're not all the same. And the later Theravāda tradition mapped out twenty-four categories of conditional relationships. These were the scholars after the Buddha died who got together and tried to make a complete system. They said, "He's definitely talked about different kinds of conditional relationships. How many did he describe?" Research teams were trying to work it out, and they came up with twenty-four.

You are all familiar with them visually. Could anybody recognise the Indian flag, the official flag of the Indian Republic? It's a tricolour, and in the centre is a wheel. The wheel has twenty-four spokes. These are

the twenty-four conditional relationships. This is the wheel of Ashoka, the Emperor Ashoka—the Ashoka Chakra.

The conditional relationships vary. For example, in some cases you have event A causing or conditioning the arising of event B, where B arises after A. It might arise immediately after A. It might arise a long time after A. It varies. There are conditional relationships in which if you have A right now, you have B—bang—no time gap. And so on.

But what all conditional relationships have in common—every single one—is that they are impermanent, they are painful, they are not-self. All of them. This is where the characteristics come in. These three characteristics are foundational patterns. They are the patterns of what is happening here, now.

And insight emerges from the movement from the particular to the universal. It moves from seeing the arising and ceasing of this, now, to understanding the universal patterns of how arising and ceasing works.

Tonight we've had a heavily theoretical presentation of this, so you may feel your head is about to explode. Tomorrow night we'll talk about it in much more practical terms, and hopefully it will make more sense. But we had to go through the theoretical foundations first. Well, maybe we didn't have to, but I like doing it.

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