# Tracking Choice: Cetanā and the Practice of Intention

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 54:49

This morning we're going to talk about tracking intention or choice. This, again, is part of the third satipaṭṭhāna, the tracking of the citta, the heart-mind. But we're going to focus today on one of the central teachings of the Buddha, the foundation for his ethics: the idea of kamma-vipāka, action and its ripening. In Pāli it's kamma; in Sanskrit, and these days in English, karma. Action and its ripening.

We won't go into the details of this because the text moves off in a different direction, but the question is: what is the basis, the foundation for the Buddha's understanding of karma or action? It's choice, or decision, or intention—in Pāli, cetanā. The Buddha says, "I declare that choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing."

When the Buddha starts off a teaching saying "I declare," he's basically highlighting it. It's like italics, bold. This is important. Pay attention to this one. Choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing.

The idea of choice is really foundational to the Buddha's teaching because we construct our lives through the choices we make. One thing about the Buddha's understanding of the human condition is that it's quite optimistic. He rejects views that give priority to the past—the idea that we are prisoners of the past. Any kind of doctrine based on that assumption he completely rejects, in part because if we actually believed this, transformation would be impossible. We'd be trapped, basically. We couldn't do anything. But he always feels that although the past is fixed, the future is open.

In this interplay between past and future, he zeroes in on what he calls cetanā, because this is the way we construct our lives. This is the way we get hold of the steering and start to move away from the iceberg.

You find this concept popping up in different ways throughout his teaching, and there's a series of technical terms that centre around these concepts of choice, intention, or decision. What they all have in common is that they're all about how we direct the mind, how we send the mind somewhere.

In the Eightfold Path, for example, the second factor is sammā-saṅkappa. This is one of those interesting terms that gets different translations from different people. Sometimes you see it translated as "right intention." Often you see it translated as "right thought." When you see these different translations, what it shows us is that there is no English equivalent. This is something different, and people are groping for a concept. Saṅkappa, in every case, refers to the direction in which we send the mind. Of course, if you send

the mind somewhere, the body goes along as well.

These directions can range from the fundamental decisions of our life—the really basic life decisions that send the mind off in a certain direction—right down to microscopic decisions. For example, some young, bright, enthusiastic person finishes school and contemplates going to university. What will I study? I could study economics or law or commerce or something like that. Or I could study the Buddha. And they choose, let's say, economics, and their life is ruined. I'm exaggerating. And also, of course, in Australian universities these days, you can't choose to study the Buddha because he's been wiped from the curriculum. There's no money in him, apparently.

So the really fundamental life decisions send us in particular directions, and an enormous amount follows from that, right down to the microscopic decisions. For example, when I'm meditating, where do I send my awareness? Where do I aim my awareness? Do I aim it at this or at that? Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, when he translates this second path factor in the context of meditation practice, translates it as "right aim," which I think really captures it, particularly in the meditation context.

We also have the term adhiṭṭhāna. If you've done Goenka courses, you know about adhiṭṭhāna—where you make an adhiṭṭhāna to sit for an hour without moving, or two hours.

Two hours, good. A bit weak, that should be at least three.

But adhiṭṭhāna could be translated as resolution or determination. So this is a deliberately created intention, choice, or direction. It implies a certain oomph behind it—this comes from the *adhi* at the beginning. To perform a specific action, you make a determination: I'm going to do this. Or in the context of meditation practice, you might make an adhiṭṭhāna for a specific experience to arise. We haven't talked about that because it's pretty advanced, although we're going to play with it this morning.

And then, of course, there are the five aggregates. This is one of the Buddha's basic templates for the human condition, and the fourth one is saṅkhāra. The aggregates are the khandhas, so we have saṅkhāra khandha. Saṅkhāra can be translated as construction or fabrication. In the schema of the five aggregates—and the five aggregates are the raw materials from which we construct an identity—saṅkhāra represents the choices that we make that form or construct our identity, that develop who we are or who we become over time.

And finally, we have this term cetanā. This is the one that we're focusing on this morning.

Saṅkhāra comes from—the *kāra* is the stem of the verb that comes from the root *kṛ*, to make, to do. So a *kā ra* is a maker, a doer, or making and doing. For example, a builder would be a house-*kāra*, one who does a house, one who makes a house. Then you have *saṃ* in front as a prefix, and this implies together—to bring together, to bring raw materials together to construct something. So a saṅkhāra is anything put together out of parts. This hall is a saṅkhāra. This body is a saṅkhāra. This retreat is a saṅkhāra. But in the context of the five aggregates—and the aggregates are all about how we construct an identity, how we construct a

self—there the saṅkhāra is in particular the choices that we make.

So let's look at cetanā. Now, this is a word classically translated as intention. The early translators used this term, and people still use it today. But the way the Buddha uses cetanā doesn't quite fit the way we use the English word *intention*.

For example, we believe that it is possible to act against our intentions. We have the saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." In other words, our intentions are taking us in one direction, but we are going in another. Now, for the Buddha, if you think cetanā is intention, that is not only wrong—it's incoherent. It just doesn't make any sense. If the cetanā is going that way, we are going that way. We can't possibly be going in another direction. It's just completely incoherent.

Also, intention, the way we usually use it, is too wide to fit what the Buddha means by cetanā. Intention is quite general. I come down the stairs this morning with the intention to give a good talk about cetanā. But while I'm speaking, I am making multiple specific decisions. I'll look at my script now, not later. I'll wave my hand in a circle rather than chopping it in the air in order to emphasize a point. I'll walk over in that direction rather than in this direction. I'll choose this word rather than that word. Each of these decisions is an example of cetanā.

And of course, finally—and this I think is probably the most important—cetanā goes much deeper than words.

what we normally assume intention does.

So, for example, take thinking. Let's say that one is trapped in obsessive thinking. You're trying to meditate and you just can't—the mind will not shut up. And so you go to the teacher for advice: "What is the magic bullet by which I can overcome this obsession? Preferably quickly and without pain."

And the teacher smiles and says, "As a matter of fact, I've got the perfect solution. It is guaranteed. It'll solve your problem instantly with barely any effort whatsoever."

"What is it? What is it? Tell me, tell me!"

"Just choose to stop thinking."

Would you find that advice useful? But it's absolutely true. Thought arises because of a decision, a chaitanya, to think. This makes no sense to us because we feel trapped by our thinking. But for the Buddha, the determination to think goes very, very deep and has become habitual. At its heart, though, it's a choice. It's a habitual choice, but it is a choice. And all we have to do is choose to stop. As soon as we choose to stop, it stops.

*A student asks: Doesn't that conflict with the idea of non-self? The idea that the mind, at least at our stage, is not under our control? It's generating thoughts the same way your heart is generating heartbeats. Does the*

*heart choose to beat?*

This brings us to the problem of habit, which I think is the key to what you're talking about. Chaitanya, choice or intention, is part of dependent arising. It's conditioned. So our choices are conditioned. They are a product of habit, and in turn they make new habits. When we're really locked into a habit or an addiction, we are locked into it because we have carefully constructed it from the choices we have made over time. So it's deeply conditioned.

But because habit and addiction emerge from choice, there is always the possibility of making another choice—that's just built into the situation. Old habits go very deep and are very persistent, but they remain habitual choices. And if choice is involved, there's always an alternative. The Buddha is very strong on this.

So this is a paradox that in European culture we find particularly difficult to grasp: choice is conditioned, but it's always possible to make another choice.

This brings us to the question of free will, which sometimes unfortunately pops up in these discussions because it's one of these things that spins around in circles and never gets anywhere. I know people who are quite experienced in Buddhist practice, quite learned in Buddhism and in the Western European tradition, who have explained to me in all earnestness that free will is at the very heart of the Buddhist teaching. And I've had other people who are equally learned and experienced in Buddhism and European tradition who have explained to me in all earnestness that there is no place for free will in the Buddhist teaching.

It's astonishing. I can't think of any other issue on which people have completely opposite approaches and understandings—and these are people who know what they're talking about. It's very interesting.

But I think it's got something to do with the way free will is talked about in the European tradition. What we have absorbed unconsciously, even if we know nothing about philosophy, are the attitudes and the language that have been developed by philosophical debates. In the European tradition, the concept comes out of the idea of God, creator of the universe, from which we get the scientific notion of the laws of nature—which are thinly disguised laws of God. The idea is that if God decides something, we can do nothing about it. It's already decided.

So there's been earnest philosophical debate about this issue: if God knows what you're going to have for breakfast tomorrow, does that mean you don't have any free choice to choose your breakfast? You've got this world of nature which is conditioned.

But does that mean that we're just slaves? That we've got no more choice in the matter than an ant?

And so the idea of free will is that there's this faculty of will which exists outside this conditioned creation over which God reigns. Outside there, there's a free will, and therefore the possibility of making a choice.

And if you take away that outside—if you take that free will and put it back into the system—it's not free anymore. It's no more free than an ant choosing what to do today.

But for the Buddha, everything is covered by this conditioning, including choice. Although it's conditioned, there's some practical movement—we can make alternative choices. We can go against the habit. This is why cetanā is so important.

So if thoughts appear just to arise, and there's some idea that they just arise, but now we're bringing in this idea that there's choice before the arising of a thought—what there is, is this: we remember we talked about the thought stream. It's like thought bubbles, or thought sparks, are constantly being generated. Now, I don't think there's any direct choice there, but they're a product of the restlessness of the mind, and we could make choices that reduce the restlessness of the mind, so fewer of these sparks would be thrown up.

But the point is that the sparks are thrown up, and the mind is scanning the inner landscape, and it sees them, and it sees one of them: "Oh, that's interesting." And it goes there, and it grabs it, and it turns it into a story. All of that is choice.

"So it's the self that's making the choice?"

Yes. It's the choosing that gives the impression of a self. If there's a choice being made, the assumption is there's someone making the choice. And so my thinking gives me the sense of a self who's thinking. "So that's interesting"—I assume there's someone who's interested. And then I grab it and run off with it. All of these are matters of choice.

It's interesting—the whole problem of effort that we've been talking about. How much effort is involved in the meditation practice? Some people find that they're labouring away at the meditation until they feel "enough already, I've got to take a break." So you go and get a nice cuppa, sit on the veranda, look at the lovely view, and relax by having a good think.

Have you ever done that on a meditation retreat? "Get me out of here, let me just have a nice think." Have you noticed that the amount of effort you spend in having that nice think is exactly the same as the effort you make to meditate? Because it is the same process.

When the Buddha talks about the jhānas—these are the absorptions—what he does is analyse what happens in the mind as the meditation develops. At the most surface level, at the beginning, how do we approach the meditation practice? We choose a meditation object—let's say breathing. We send the awareness to the meditation object. That is initial application of the mind. And we keep doing that. We do it again and again and again. Eventually momentum builds up and the awareness stays with the breathing over a period of time. This is sustained application.

So: initial application—put it there. Sustained application—keep it there.

In Pali, this is a compound: vitakka-vicāra. Initial application, sustained application. When you start the meditation, this is the energetic, active, working aspect of the meditation—the "do it, do it, do it" part of the practice.

When the Buddha talks about thinking, in the normal sense of the word that we use, what's the term that he uses? It's a compound: vitakka-vicāra. Exactly the same. Initial thought: "Oh, that's interesting." Sustained thought: the story that follows. Send the awareness to the object and keep it there over a period of time.

It is exactly the same activity, and it takes up exactly the same amount of effort. The difference is that one of these efforts is habitual and the other is not. But the activity is the same. The energy involved is the same. The application is the same. The only difference is that one is habitual and the other is not.

And you probably have experience of this. If you get caught up in rumination, at the end of the day you're exhausted. It's like, "Oh God, I've been thinking all day." It's hard work.

So this is an indication of how the Buddha uses this concept of choice. It's conditioned—the conditioning goes very deep. But fundamentally, there's a choice involved. And the conditioning can be changed, given the right circumstances, given the right conditions.

A question arose about what lies beyond choice—is that the not-self? If the sparks just arise and you witness the spark, it's hard to say "not choose a spark" because, of course, you just chose not to choose, which is a choice in and of itself. So is the witness of the sparks the self?

In some traditions they would say the witness is the self. In the Indian yoga traditions—some of them, at least—they say the self is the witness. I think it's the purusha in those yoga traditions. What the Buddha is saying is that the fact that there is witnessing creates the illusion that there's someone who's doing the witnessing. So he doesn't go along with the self business. But if you were inclined toward a self-doctrine, that's where you would find it—in the witness. And from the Buddhist perspective, it's the chooser.

When the Buddhist tradition talks about the self, one term they use could be translated as "the overlord," or "the boss"—that's a more culturally relevant term. The one who's in charge is the self. The one who decides, "Okay, I'm out of here"—it's the self who decides that.

Is that an illusion or delusion? Well, from the Buddhist perspective, it is. But for the Buddha, that's how it presents itself to us. He says that when you look closely, there's no one in charge. There's just a whole series of processes. But other traditions are saying, "No, no, there is someone in charge." And that's where you get the doctrinal disputes, which from our point of view aren't really important. Because what we're interested in is how the actual experience unfolds.

This teaching about choice is one reason why we can see the Buddha's teaching as fundamentally optimistic. Because for him, there's always an alternative. There is always something we can do to make

the situation better.

When the Buddha conducted debates with teachers from other traditions, or talked to his own students about the teachings of other traditions, the traditions that he was really down on are what he calls akiriyavāda. Vāda means teaching, and akiriya means non-action. By non-action, he means fatalism—the belief in various forms that there's nothing we can do, that we're stuck. He's really down on those teachings. And he's down on them partly because he thinks they're wrong, but in particular because if we actually believe that, if we actually internalize that, we would give up. And for the Buddha, you never do that. There's always something you can do to improve the situation. It's just a question of finding it and doing it. So he teaches kiriyavāda, the doctrine of action.

Anyway, we're getting very philosophical, which tends to happen in this talk.

Depending on the audience, some audiences are philosophically uninterested while others want to jump in and debate.

Anyway, these are the reasons why I personally translate *cetanā* as "choice" rather than "decision." Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as "volition" — he's being a bit more abstract in his language. Ajahn Ṭhānissaro translates it as "decision," which I think is very interesting: the decision to act. But I'll stick with "choice."

And this brings us to the practice, which is tracking choice, decision, intention. This is quite important because it's through the choices that we make that we construct our lives. So getting to know them is important.

Mahasi Sayadaw talks about the importance of this. His English translators translate *cetanā* as "intention," and he feels that getting to understand it is really central for the arising of insight. Now, what does he mean by *cetanā*, by intention or choice or decision?

For Mahasi, it has two parts. First is the choice to be aware of something. And the second is the movement of awareness toward that something. So for him it covers both territories — the initial decision and then the movement of awareness toward the object. If we ask what is the source of each action of being aware, for him it's *cetanā*, it's choice, it's decision: the choice made now to be aware of this.

And you notice that this is not effort. We are not trying to decide to be aware. We are choosing to be aware, or we are choosing not to be aware. Either way, we're choosing.

The classic example, I think, would be if you're meditating and you slide off into thinking. Because it's habitual, you don't notice it. And suddenly you realize you're thinking. In that moment, you're presented with a choice. I could get back to the meditation object. Or I could just finish this story off. I think I'll just finish it off first. And all of that takes place automatically, in less than a second. Bang! Because the mind is so quick. But when you look at it, it's quite clear: I've made a choice. I had two possibilities and I chose that

one. And then the awareness goes in that direction.

In that, there doesn't seem to be any effort. The effort comes later. The effort appears as the commitment to continue this choice over time. So choice sends awareness on its journey.

In the practice, we learn to see the choice, to feel the movement of awareness, and what arises as a result of that choice. So if we're looking for it, how does it present?

I think there are basically three ways in which people feel that they can see choice. One way is as an impulse — the impulse to something, the impulse to think, for example. The impulse can be physical or mental, impelled by the body or impelled by the mind. The impulse to look at something, or the impulse to reach for something, or the impulse to listen to something, the impulse to think something.

So it can present as an impulse, but it can also present, like in that example I just gave, as a decision between possibilities. Suddenly I realize I'm distracted and I'm presented with two possibilities. I could keep going with the meditation, or I could just take a break and keep thinking. For a split second, they're both there right in front of me, and I go — bang — and I choose one or the other.

So: impulse, or a decision between possibilities. And finally, the third way is as the movement of awareness as a result of that choice, the way that your awareness moves.

If we're looking for *cetanā*, where might we look for it? In terms of the body, we can find it in the movements of the body.

So, for example, a change of posture. One thing which is particularly evident in this kind of schedule that we've got, which is quite open: I'm sitting in meditation and at some point I decide to end the session and move. At some point I decide that's enough—I'm out of here. Can I see that decision? Can I make it quite clear that it arises right now and this is what it feels like?

We tend to move the body habitually. In the tradition they say we do that because it covers up the pain, the inherent pain of the body. At the beginning of the retreat we talked about posture and how to construct a posture, and we mentioned Patañjali's Yoga Sutras where he says posture, āsana, is steady and comfortable. To maintain a posture over a period of time that is steady and comfortable is a big challenge. And why is this? Because the body is inherently painful. Have you noticed how often we move? Even when we sleep, we move. And why do we move all the time? Mostly it's because I want to get comfortable. Well, if I move because I want to get comfortable, what does this tell me about my situation? I am uncomfortable. There's the dukkha of the body and I will cover it up by moving. And so most of these movements are habitual and we just don't notice them. We pay no attention.

So we can start to see choice if we deliberately look for those choices, and one area where it presents quite obviously is when we decide to end a meditation session and move out of our posture.

Then there are non-routine changes of movement. Let's say I'm doing walking meditation up and down

one of those paths. I start by standing and then I'm about to move. How do I know I'm about to move? There must be choice or decision in there somewhere. I'm walking down the path and I know I'm about to stop. How do I know I'm about to stop? There's something going on. I stop, stand, I'm about to turn around. How do I know that? And so on. We can start to look for choice there in non-routine movements.

We can also see it in routine movements. When I'm walking from here to there, I can feel the flow of choices that keep me going—the continual sending of awareness to move.

Then we can also see it in movements of mind. When we're directly aware of an object, we can feel the choice to be aware and the movement that follows that choice. And of course, as we mentioned before, thinking—which is the one that I personally find most interesting because I like to think.

It might be good to play with this in the form of walking on one of those paths because it gives you bite-sized pieces. I'm going to walk from here to there. So you're standing and you make the adhiṭṭhāna, you make the resolution, the determination: from here to the end of this path, I will catch the moment thought arises. And then you start walking. When you're working with adhiṭṭhāna, with determination or resolution, you just drop it into the mind. Boom. Like you would drop a stone into water. Boom. And then you forget about it. You just let it do its work. And off you go. Now you can be pretty sure that between now and there, some kind of thought is going to arise. And you've made the determination: when it does, I'm going to be right there. I'm going to catch it as soon as it arises. So you get to the end of the track, stop, stay and turn, and then review what happened during that journey. Did it work?

Did it not work? What did it feel like?

And then you're standing there and you make the determination: from now to the end of this path, I will catch the moment thought arises. And off you go again. Stop, review what happened. Keep doing that and see what happens.

If you're feeling more ambitious, you could make the determination: from here to the end of this path, I will not think. And then off you go and see what happens. And again, review what happened just then.

I was introduced to this practice many years ago in Burma, in a different form. I was going through a period of particularly obsessive thinking, and a friend of mine who was also doing the same retreat but at the branch monastery had come to the main centre for some purpose. He dropped in and asked me, "How's it going?"

Now, he was and is a very advanced meditator—way more experienced, way more talented than I am. So I thought, good, I've got someone to complain to. And so I said, "I've got all this obsessive thinking. I don't know what to do with it. I've been trying to stop, but I can't stop."

And he said, "No problem. I'll tell you exactly how to solve the problem. This is what I do—you just do the same. I get up very early in the morning, say at four o'clock. I'm standing at the beginning of the path

ready to do my two hours of walking meditation before breakfast, and I make the determination: from now until breakfast, I will not think. Then you just do two hours of walking meditation, and two hours of walking without any thought really clears the mind and sets you up for the day."

And I said, "Wow. Thanks for that."

Actually, decades later I confronted him with this. He did have the good grace to be embarrassed and said he was exaggerating a bit. But essentially that's what he would do—make the determination not to think, but not for two hours. It would be for a shorter period of time.

So it's a fun game. If you play with it, don't take it seriously. Just see what happens.

Tracking choice or decision is a question of aim. Instead of tracking the movement of the body, I'm aiming for the stream of choices generating the movement. Instead of tracking the thought stream, I'm tracking the stream of choices producing the thought stream. It's a very subtle shift in aim. And refining one's aim is very important in this practice, especially when working with the mind.

If we see this as an exercise in aim, then even if we fail, we succeed—because looking for choice cultivates aim and precision. One very common thing that people will say in the interview, if they try tracking the choices made during walking meditation—the choice to move the foot and so on—is, "Well, I never found it. I could never quite find this mysterious choice. But the aim of my awareness on the actual movements of the body became a lot stronger." Because the aim is getting better.

So treat it as an exercise in aim. Treat it as a game. Do not take it seriously. Just play with it.

Now, if it doesn't grab your interest, then don't worry about it. Just keep doing what you're doing. If it does grab your interest and you play with it for a while but then you think that's enough, drop it. Come back later on. It is quite interesting. It can be very useful once you get the hang of it.

Any questions?

*Question: I've got a question about what happens when—you said, for example, if you're meditating, there's a choice to not follow the thought and to return to the object of meditation. If you're not practising focused meditation—if you're practising open meditation—then it's not just deciding not to follow thought, it's also trying to figure out which sensation is predominant...*

Multiple, multiple sorts of choices. Does that make sense? So sometimes you can end up thinking about what sensation is predominant and then you get lost in all those choices.

The choices are very quick. Bang, bang, bang. So you certainly can't afford to take time off to think about them. And this is one area where adhiṭṭhāna might be helpful. Let's say that you can narrow the field. Let's say you're interested in a particular aspect, like the thinking. So when you begin the sitting, you can make the determination: during this sitting, I will be particularly focused on noticing the thought arising. Or on

what is the strongest sensation. So you can use the resolution, the determination, to drop in a target during this period of time and see if that helps.

The adhiṭṭhānas are very interesting. Some people have a talent for them and they make a choice, and their mind will go there and it just happens. Some people find them very difficult. It's like they make a determination to do this and they're doing the exact opposite within five seconds. They have an effect, but it might be a very slight effect on you. So this is why it's important to explore it, not to be too heavy with it, not to expect any particular result, but just play with it and see what happens.

Many years ago, after I came back from Burma, I visited Tasmania to visit John Hale, who was living there. He had built this little primitive meditation centre in a gully outside of Hobart. I went along to a weekend retreat that he was running, and then I stayed on for my own meditation practice for about a week afterwards. Just the day before it ended, he came to visit. He said, "Check up on me." And he said, "When you're doing your last sitting, make the adhiṭṭhāna: may the best experience that I had during this week arise during the sitting."

So I said, "Oh, okay, I'll try." Anyway, I finished the retreat, went to his place for visiting. He said, "How did that adhiṭṭhāna go?" I said, "It didn't work." He looked kind of vaguely disappointed. And I said, "I have never had an adhiṭṭhāna actually work." He was shocked. He said, "I have never had an adhiṭṭhāna which did not work." But he had a talent for it.

So this is why I feel it's really important you don't get caught up in results. Because most people don't get the result that they're looking for. And the books tend to be written by the people who are really good at it. They just have a whole different set of assumptions.

A participant shared: "I've been tracking my choices, especially around choosing food and how much to have. One of the things I've been noticing is how impersonal the choices are, that the processes are. It feels as if I watch myself moving in one direction or another. I have the sense that I have an override command if I want it—I'm going to have another spoonful whether I want to or not—and I suspect that's a loser, but I don't know. But it's a very strong sense of not-self. And as such, very, very interesting. It's just watching this person, now, in this place, moving towards a second spoon of porridge or not. And it's very liberating, and there's a sense of flow. You observe underlying habits. So I noticed yesterday morning—say I'm going to have two spoons of porridge—I always have just a little bit more afterwards. I have two and a half. Or I have not just one big one, but one little one and a little bit more. Going back into my past history, I know exactly why I do that. And it was incredibly significant."

Yes. Because we assume the one making the choice is self, this is a way of seeing not-self.

"Yeah, very strongly that."

Another participant asked: "Would you be able to possibly unpack a bit—in the walking meditation, this notion that you can respond to the intention or note the intention to move, raise the foot, lower the foot,

whatever it might be?"

It is really elusive. I haven't been playing with that this retreat.

But could you unpack that a little bit, for example, how you may have experienced that and what to look for?

So this is the standard practice. If you go to a classic Mahasi centre with Burmese Sayadaws and so on, by about the end of the first week the instruction will be given to note intention in the walking meditation. So if you're doing the classic slow walking meditation, you are aware of or noting the lifting of the foot, the pushing of the foot, the placing of the foot—this is what I call the classic Mahasi three-step. And then you'd be told, now be aware not of the lifting, pushing, and placing of the foot, but the intention to lift, the intention to push, the intention to place.

And I have to confess, I couldn't do it. It just never happened for me, except finally one day I'm doing walking meditation before breakfast, up and down this hallway, and suddenly it was there. And there was this flow, like a stream of little intentions, flowing down the hallway, and very much not-self. There was no one walking. It was just this little stream of intentions flowing up and down. And I thought, Eureka! And I reported it, and it's never happened again.

But I think partly it was because I actually misunderstood, because I was confused by the word intention. But I think what they were getting at was feel the stream of awareness going there.

Okay, so Pannavaro is the one who really taught me this a million years ago. And he was so precise about it—you have to see the arising, it's almost like a conscious thought prior to the minimal thought. So I would find myself suspended in the air for quite some time, waiting for the impulse, and I had no impulse at all. So I'm not moving.

Yeah, that's often how you can tell someone's practising intention in walking meditation—they're just frozen. That happens quite a lot.

And when you experienced that flow of intentions, was it a bodily sensation you were aware of, or was it in your head, in your mind?

It was in the mind. It wasn't in the head. It was actually down on the floor. It was down on the floor, but it was something you were conscious of. It was the awaring itself. Not the movement, not the body, but the mind. An awareness to go forth and make the next movement.

Yeah, and they were much smaller than three. It was a boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.

But some people have the kind of mind that can do that. Pannavaro has that kind of mind. But some people just don't have that kind of mind, and it's just asking too much of them. Certainly Mahasi Sayadaw

seems to assume that people can do it, but I've come to the conclusion that Mahasi Sayadaw was an incurable optimist.

It sounds to me like it's very intertwined and strictly linked with strengthening our ability to notice vedana.

Yeah. Because if we're really aware of that, then we might be more aware, more easily aware of the choices that we make following on from that initial hit of vedana.

Feeling in general—we haven't talked about it much, but feeling is the recognition of, in broad terms, the recognition of an experience as being either pleasant, I want that; painful, I definitely don't want that; or neither—therefore either not seeing it at all because it's not worth looking at, or if I see it, I don't know what to do about it. Should I grab it? Should I reject it? And so on. But vedana is always associated with response. If there's a feeling, there is a response.

So you're talking about seeing the choice involved in the response?

Yeah. And that can often then lead to the decision that we make to take a certain action being still based on what came before that.

Yeah. So this is the area where satipatthana is so useful, because you have a specialised exercise like doing it with the walking meditation, but it's much, I think, designed just to get you used to it, open it up. But where you really find it useful is in everyday life—like at mealtime, for example, or in dealing with other people. Like in having a conversation and you've got something to say and you've got the impulse to speak, but the other person won't shut up, and you're left with this... But you can see the impulse, the intent to speak, and then you might check what's underneath it. And sometimes it's just, look at me now. Look at me, me, me, me. It's my turn.

Me, me, me, me. And then you realise it's not particularly important after all.

So it's seeing choice in everyday life, in everyday activity. I think that's the most important aspect of it. Doing it in walking meditation is a kind of specialised exercise to get you into it, to get you to see the territory.

*Question: At what point are you imagining the future? You're walking and you think, "I'm going to get to that door soon," and you're noticing the intention within that process. At what point, when you're noticing intention, are you jumping forward?*

Yes, and that's why you've got to be careful about how you do it. That's why people talk about how to use adhiṭṭhāna—you just drop it into the mind and then forget it. You let it do the work rather than thinking about it. If you're thinking about it all the time, then as you say, you get caught up. You're not simply acting; you're constantly thinking about your acting. The way to do it is just drop it in the mind and forget about it.

Okay, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to play around with choice and see if you can see it. Sometimes, as I said, adhiṭṭhāna could simply be the decision: today I'll be sensitive to the choices I'm making. Just make that decision, drop it in the mind, and carry on. But play with it rather than make a big deal of it. And if you're not interested, just forget about it.

Okay, thank you.

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