Review

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 28:47

This morning we're going to review the practice that we've been doing this past week.

I'm reminded of a retreat I did in Bodh Gaya decades ago with Christopher Titmuss. We had this huge crowd, ninety people, most of them English as a second language. One time he got up on the stage to give a Dhamma talk and he said, "I will give you the complete instructions for the practice. Be aware." Then he turned around and headed for the door. But feeling the ripples of discombobulation, he stopped and explained. He said, "That is it. That is the complete instruction for the practice. But the problem is concepts. What do you mean, be aware? What does it even mean? Be aware of what? Be aware when? Why? How?" And from all this questioning comes the meditation method. But basically: be aware. Or you could make it more complicated: be present to what is happening now. That's it. That is the complete practice.

And if we do this, what we discover at some point, what we kind of bump into—or what bumps into us—is the observation that what is happening now is already changing into something else. This brings us to what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence, *anicca saññā*. He tells his son Rahula—this is in Majjhima 62, if anybody wants to look it up—"Cultivate the perception of impermanence, for when you cultivate the perception of impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned."

We talked about this last night. Rather than "conceit," we could literally translate it as "the measuring"—the separate sense of "I am," in brackets, separate from the rest of the world. Cultivate the perception of impermanence, because that will take you to abandoning that sense of separation. And abandoning the conceit "I am" is code for full awakening. So it takes us all the way.

Be attentive to what is happening now, and in particular, be attentive to transitions. The intersections of experience, the places where one thing becomes another—these are always of particular interest to anybody practising for insight. You notice that these transitions, it doesn't matter whether things are going well and changing for the worse, or changing for the better. It's completely irrelevant. The fact is, they're changing. That's the interesting point.

And that, of course, is more complicated than that in practice, so this brings us to the role of technique. Probably the expression that covers what we would call meditation method or technique in Pali would be *yoniso manasikāra*, which is variously translated. Again, it's one of these terms that has no exact English equivalent. I like Ṭhānissaro's translation, "appropriate attention." Everybody agrees that *manasikāra* is attention. It's just the question of what does *yoniso* do to it. But he has "appropriate attention," and I think that really works—directing awareness in a way which is appropriate to the situation. This is what we've

been calling the craft of the practice. This is what we've been doing.

As we're going through a transition from the retreat to the alleged real world, we might begin by looking at the last words of the Buddha. He said, *Vaya dhammā saṅkhārā appamādena sampādetha*. So don't forget those words. Roughly translated: everything constructed decays; stay awake. I think this pretty much sums up the whole deal.

This staying awake—in the old translations, this is translated, very Victorian Christianity, as "strive on with heedfulness." When I first read that, I thought, what the hell is heedfulness? Anyway, I prefer "stay awake" to get at what the Buddha is talking about. And we get a sense of this in the Pali word *appamāda*. It's a negative term—*a* is the "not."

So not pamada. And we get a sense of the meaning of appamada when we look at its opposite, pamada. We are familiar with this word from our chanting of the five ways of training. The fifth way of training, we commit to abstaining from the carelessness caused by intoxicants. And this carelessness is pamada. So appamada is the opposite.

Pamada, the carelessness, represents forgotten mindfulness that we've been talking about. We don't know what's going on. We're stumbling about in the dark, crashing into things, blind, driven by our fears, our drives, and our obsessions. In this state, we harm ourselves and we harm the people around us. And this is, for the Buddha, pretty much the normal human condition.

Appamada, its opposite, represents a stable wakefulness. It keeps us real, keeps us authentic, and it's a guard rail, as it were, to prevent us from being sucked into the affective conceptual world of obsession and misery created by concepts. Wakefulness keeps us clear and present here and now. This is the key point.

Wakefulness is interesting in that it's both something that we train, cultivate, and develop, and equally it's an expression of the natural state of the mind. Because as we've talked about, it is the mind's nature to be aware. Mind is already aware, mind is already awake. But do we notice this or do we forget it?

To practice wakefulness could be described as maintaining a posture of natural awareness. We talked about awareness on a spectrum from receptive to active—what Mahasi calls noticing and noting, undirected and directed. This posture of natural awareness is perhaps closer to the undirected, receptive end of the spectrum. We were getting a sense of that at the beginning of the retreat when we were cultivating the habit of asking ourselves from time to time questions like: What am I aware of now? What is clear now? What is obvious now? What's happening now?

Developing that curiosity, possibly using the questions themselves, dropping them in every now and again—or without the questions—but developing this curiosity about what's going on now. What is this now? This question grounds us in the present. And the present, as we've been talking about, is where the practice takes place, and it's also where awakening takes place. Awakening does not take place sometime

in the future. It takes place in the present. It takes place now.

So this is our summary of what we've been doing. As we head out, you may be wondering: what have I gotten from this retreat? And of course, the best and most enlightened answer to that is nothing at all. But we won't go there. Let's look at this question more pragmatically.

Two things we take with us. One is an understanding of method and technique, an understanding of the craft. Meditation practice is a craft, and of course it's not easy. There are few people on this planet who are naturally gifted at it, who dive into it relatively quickly and relatively easily. But most of us struggle. At times it seems impossible. But we plug away. And as we were talking about, we need to plug away intelligently. We are developing a craft, a skill, and it involves a degree of creativity, a degree of play, and of course persistence and commitment.

I think we can say that everybody in this room is better at it than they were a week ago. And this is progress. This is something which is going to develop over a period of a lifetime. The sooner one starts, the better, but it's never too late. As time goes on, we will get better at it. And as we get better at it, our lives will change as a result. I think that's a major thing that we take away with us.

And the other thing has to do with our insights. Here, of course, as we talked about, we cannot take our insights with us. All of them, I'm afraid, have to be checked in at the office because they're not ours. They don't belong to us. But what we take with us is the effect of having seen something.

To illustrate this, I sometimes tell the story of the fat man. Some of you have already heard it, but some of you have not, so I'll tell you the whole story.

This story is about a fat man—a very fat man. He lives at the North Pole. He's got a big beard. He doesn't like shaving for some reason. Maybe the water is a bit cold up there. And he dresses in red. Apparently when he was very young, his mother told him, "You look really good in red," and he took his mother's advice to heart.

He seems to be a man of independent wealth, and he's a very generous fellow. To fill in his time, he has a big workshop where he spends the year making toys for kitties—especially good kitties, kitties who have behaved themselves. And once a year, he goes on this massive delivery run where he circumnavigates the globe multiple times, delivering these presents.

Now, how does a fat man living at the North Pole manage this incredible logistics feat? Well, fortunately, he has a big sleigh that he can load all the stuff into. But how does he get the sleigh to move? He's got these reindeer—twelve of them—and he hitches them up, and off they go. But I can hear your rational mind storming in and saying, "There is no way a bunch of reindeer can circumnavigate the globe multiple times. It's not going to happen, mate." What you didn't know is that these reindeer fly. And this enables him to complete the trip.

Despite the fact that he only goes on one trip a year, he's incredibly skilful with this vehicle. He can land on roof peaks. You wouldn't think that a bloody great sleigh and twelve reindeer could balance on top of these roofs, but he can do it. And then he takes off perfectly.

But then, of course, he's got the problem of how to get into the houses to make the delivery. His favourite way, his traditional way, is to enter and exit via the chimney. This is quite remarkable, partly because chimneys tend to be very dirty, but when he emerges, his red suit is untouched. It's just as clean as it was before. I find that very impressive. But what I find even more impressive is that the fat man is about this wide and the chimney is about this wide, and somehow he manages to slide in and out. You've got to admit, it's pretty impressive.

He starts at the North Pole, goes around and around and around, and eventually makes it to Australia. We're at the end of his delivery run, so by the time he gets here, he's getting pretty tired. In our house in Sydney, we felt a certain amount of compassion for him. What really impressed me was the fact that he not only did this entry and exit via the chimney, but the fireplace was boarded up and it didn't even slow him down. He always left it perfectly, just like it was before. Really considerate.

So we would prepare for his advent. We would organise a nice bottle of beer beside my father's chair and a nice cake to put out. And by the strangest coincidence, the fat man's favourite beer was the same as my father's favourite beer, which made it even more convenient. We would set it all up and then go off to bed.

And there you are, lying in bed, and you can't sleep. There's an edge of excitement in the air. An edge of agitation. And you haven't yet developed to the point where you can just be mindful of it. So your senses are alert. And sure enough, late at night, you hear a sound. It seems like that sound is coming from the living room. So you creep out of bed and look down the hall, and sure enough—

The door to the living room is ajar, and there's light coming from it, and sound. This is your opportunity. So you creep down the hall and push the door open just a little bit and look in. There's your father in his armchair, quaffing the cake and the beer. There's your mother arranging the presents around the tree. You look at this and profound existential shock fills your entire being. You close the door very quietly, creep back down the hall into bed, and stare up at the dark ceiling. And you are faced with the first ethical problem of your life: Will I tell?

This is the moment that economists are born—because you realise, no, I will keep my mouth shut and take the goodies.

So finally you fall asleep and wake up Christmas morning. Everybody gets up, rushes to the room. There are the presents, and there's the evidence of last night's activity—empty bottle, a few crumbs. You open the presents and have a great time, but you've seen something. And Christmas will never be the same again. You can never go back. Even if you want to go back, even if you want to unsee what you've seen, you can't—because you're living in a new world. And in this world, all of that is complete bullshit.

This is the world of insight. We enter into a different world because we've seen something. And once we see something, we cannot unsee it. In the progress of insight, it is true that sometimes we rather wish we could unsee it. We rather wish we could go back sometimes, because this new world is going to be quite strange and difficult to adjust to.

So this is the insight aspect. It's not something we possess. It's not something we take with us. We find ourselves living in a different world.

In terms of how we maintain the practice, one thing that is quite useful to do, as we've been talking about, is to be open to seeing the choices that we make. Choices are very important—see the choices we make in our ordinary lives, what conditions those choices, and what are the results of those choices. Or you could say: what feeds our choices, and what do our choices feed? This is the teaching of kamma and its ripening, which is really central to the Buddha's ethics, because this is what constructs the way of life that we lead. And of course the question is: Is this the life I really want? Or is it perhaps different from what I've got?

So that's important. And of course, being guided by the five ways of training that we've been chanting each evening. Again, we're noticing that what these are about is harmony—social harmony and psychological harmony. That harmony, the absence of conflict in our lives, makes practicing the Dhamma a lot easier.

The five ways of training remind us that meditation is part of a much broader path, traditionally listed as dāna—giving, or generosity; sīla—ethics; bhāvanā—cultivation of the heart and mind, what we call meditation; and paññā—wisdom.

Now, in terms of having a daily meditation practice, I think the first thing is to drop all expectation of repeating what happened here. If you've had some really good meditations, make sure you've said goodbye, because the whole situation is already crumbling. And you can feel it, can't you? There's restlessness, agitation. It's already crumbling. Because what we accomplish in a meditation retreat is the product of a whole set of particular conditions. Change the conditions, you change the experience. This is dependent arising. So don't try to repeat the past. Just be attentive to what's new, what's happening now.

Given that meditation is a basic training, it's good to have a regular practice. As for how much—well, there are different answers to that. One time I was finishing up a retreat here. It had gone quite well, and I was feeling a bit frisky. One of the meditators asked, "In my daily meditation practice, how long should I sit each day?" And I cheerfully said, "Four hours is good." Which is unquestionably true. But she was very alarmed and agitated, and no matter how much I backtracked, I realised that I had said the wrong thing.

So that's one possible answer.

But another possible response—this is another story that was told to me in Hawaii when I was practising Zen there.

Now Hawaii is of course in the middle of the Pacific. Starting in the fifties and going through the sixties and beyond, Japanese Zen teachers would go to the US to run retreats. They would fly across the Pacific, and often they would drop in at Hawaii, run a retreat, and then take off and head on again. One of the visiting teachers who had a big influence on Hawaiian Zen in the early days was Yasutani Hakuun Roshi. He was a legend—one of these tough old samurai Zen characters of the old school. He used to run very strict, very traditional Zen retreats.

In one of these retreats there was a young man who signed on for his first ever meditation retreat and found himself plunged into this completely alien world. He saw the light, got converted, and thought, "This is fantastic. This is going to change my whole life. This is wonderful." Towards the end of the retreat, he was concerned about this question: How much meditation should I commit myself to if I'm going to be on the path of Zen? So he asked to see the teacher for a special interview to ask him this very question. And he made the determination, the resolution, that whatever the old master said, he would do it, no matter what.

The interview begins. The old roshi is in his Japanese formal robes, looking customarily fierce, and the young man is there. The Zen master says, "Yes, I understand you have a question." The young man brings up his courage and says, "Yes, Roshi, my question is: how much meditation should I do each day?" He sat back to wait for the answer that would change his life. The old man glared at him and said, "Five minutes." The young man was shocked by the answer—it wasn't what he was expecting. The old man saw the young man's shock, but misinterpreted it, and said, "Three minutes?"

So that balances the four-hour approach. You can see the answer lies somewhere in between. But I think the point is that clock time is not the issue. The issue is simply sustainability. You set something up, some kind of routine that you know you can sustain over time. That's the most important thing. How long, under what circumstances, what part of your day—all of this depends on your particular circumstances. But sustainability is central.

And it's important to become part of a community. As we said, the five ways of training are based on building a harmonious community. It's very difficult to maintain this practice alone. If you're committed to meditation practice in this society, you are part of a cultural minority, and that's unlikely ever to change. Support is necessary. So become part of some kind of community.

The Buddha talks about "association with good friends" as the foundation of the training. When he describes how people begin on the path of the Dharma, it's clear that Dharma practice does not begin with belief in certain doctrines and from there proceed to associating with people who believe these things. That's not the way it works at all. Rather, we begin with the heart being moved by people. Sometimes it's people we've met. Sometimes it's just people we've heard about—we read books about famous yogis or gurus and we are moved by that. I know people whose life has changed simply by looking at a photograph of Ramana Maharshi. That was enough to turn them towards the Dharma.

The heart is moved by either people we've actually met or people we've simply heard about, or a combination of both. And we become interested. How do they live? What's behind this way of life? What is going on here? That gets us started. Then we might look at what they believe. But belief is fairly minor, certainly in the beginning.

So that gets us started. And of course, what we find is that no matter what our good intentions are, we lose momentum. We have a good retreat, we go home, we've got our cushions set up in a nice little corner, maybe we've got a little Buddha image. Every day we meditate and we're very pleased with ourselves and things are going well. And then one day we just forget. We're going to bed and we realise, "Oh, I forgot to meditate." Never mind. Tomorrow. And then one day, sometime in the future, we realise it's actually been a few days. Never mind, we'll start again. It's okay. And then one day we're cleaning the house and we notice this thick layer of dust on the cushion. At that point we think, "Oh, it's hopeless. I'll do a retreat next year and get started again then."

But that's taking the wrong attitude. We forget—we do forget. We've been talking about this. The opposite of mindfulness is forgetfulness. We forget. That's the normal human condition. So it's hardly surprising. It is going to happen. It is guaranteed.

What's important is that we remember. That's the important thing. We remember, and so we begin again. And it doesn't matter for how long we've forgotten. We might have very good samādhi going and we forget and fall into the thought stream for a few seconds, and then we remember—"Oh, distracted"—and continue. We could have been absent for a few seconds, we could have been absent for a few minutes, for a few hours, days, weeks, months, years. It makes absolutely no difference because the moment we remember, all of that is in the past. It does not exist. What exists is this now. I just remembered. So always come back. Always start again, start again, start again.

People sometimes say, "I feel like a beginner." And I'm tempted to tell them about the Zen tradition, particularly Dōgen Zenji, and what he calls beginner's mind—which is considered the peak of meditation practice. It's very good to be a beginner.

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