Introducing Natural Awareness (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 56:28

Good morning.

Here we are at the beginning of a nine-day retreat. This may be stirring up various feelings—anticipation, excitement, trepidation perhaps, a sense of the beginning of some kind of journey or adventure. And perhaps also a sense of expectation, a sense of what we want to get out of the retreat. Maybe this is to taste more fully something that we've glimpsed in our practice previously, or maybe it's to come away from this retreat with a surer sense that we're progressing on the path.

All of this is perfectly normal, of course, but it's not a particularly helpful basis for the practice. If we have a sense of anticipation or expectation, then we're already reaching into the future. And of course, the basis for the practice is here and now. It's letting the moment-to-moment flow of experience unfold around us. So the sense of anticipation and expectation is something to notice and be cautious about. In the early part of a retreat, it can catapult us straight into too much effort in our eagerness to make the most of this precious opportunity. And if we apply too much effort early in the retreat, then we may well have to deal with the fallout of this in a few days' time.

This is something I know very well from many repeated experiences, actually in this very hall. Arriving on a retreat, determined to really get stuck into it—go, go, go, go—and then coming up for interviews after a few days, collapsing into the room and saying, "I don't know what's happened. It seemed to be going well, and now there's been an explosion of thought and I just can't meditate." And Patrick would look at me wisely and say, "You've generated too much energy too fast. Go out and go for a walk." And so off I would go, and things would gradually settle.

So I want to invite you with this retreat to relax into the practice—to relax into it rather than launch into it. Spend the next few days not doing, and allow awareness to naturally settle in the present experience and to gradually build momentum. Get out of the way, relax, and let the practice take care of itself.

"A tangle within, a tangle without. People are entangled in a tangle." That's how the Buddha put it, and that's how we have arrived on this retreat—like a cat tangled in string, all the different strings of our lives. So rather than thrashing and struggling to try to free ourselves from the tangle of our lives in these first few days of retreat, let's instead relax, be still, and allow the tangle to naturally loosen and fall away.

This morning I'm going to introduce the introductory instructions to this approach that I call natural awareness. A caveat here: I know many of you are experienced meditators, so take these instructions and do with them what you will. You can ignore them completely and continue to do your own practice. You

can play with them, play with integrating them into what you're already doing. Or you can throw yourself wholeheartedly into them and take this opportunity to really give this approach a good go, since we have a decent amount of time to practice.

Basically, the natural awareness instructions are very simple. We relax body and mind and let awareness do its job. We don't have to do awareness because it simply arises naturally. Are you aware now? Are you aware now? I should hope that we are aware. We're aware of sitting here in this hall, the other yogis, the sound of my voice. Awareness happens naturally.

So now, could you please stop being aware, just for ten seconds or so? Ah, sounds like someone was successful—an advanced practitioner out the back. But no, awareness happens. It's what the mind does. The mind knows objects.

Our job is to simply tune into this natural awareness, to know that I am aware. We start by relaxing, resting back, and finding a sense of ease or not-doing, a sense of getting out of the way and just letting experience unfold and knowing that it's unfolding. We allow this body, this heart, all the movements of the mind—we're just allowing them to be here as they are. And our job is to simply be aware of them. Am I aware? What am I aware of?

If you're new to this approach, it can help to visualize a spectrum of meditation techniques from directed to undirected. Most meditation techniques that we're taught, particularly the introductory techniques, are directed techniques in that we're given or we choose a meditation object—something like the breathing, or a different sensation in the body, or a mantra, or a visualization.

And the effort in meditation comes from placing our attention on that object, and then whenever it wanders away, whenever we're distracted and we notice, we place the attention back on the object. So that's a directed approach.

An undirected approach is where we don't choose the object we are aware of or investigating, but we let it choose us because it is what presents itself to our awareness. This doesn't mean we're trying to be aware of many objects all at once. If I open up to what I'm aware of right now, I'm aware of the sound of the rain, the sound of my voice, the sight of you all sitting here, various physical sensations—the touch of my clothes, the pressure of the cushion, and so on. But it's not the job in natural awareness to try and hold all of these things, but instead to notice which one is interesting, which one catches my curiosity, which one is the primary distraction that keeps getting in the way. And then follow that, be interested in that, know that I am aware of that.

So we're not trying to control our experience. And because of this, we can practice in any posture and any activity, because there's always something available to be aware of, no matter what we're doing. This is what I mean by being aware: simply noticing what is going on in my experience right now.

There's natural awareness, and then there's knowing that I am aware. We can contrast this to times in our

life—many times in our life—when we're not knowingly aware, when we're not really aware of what's going on in our experience.

An example that always sticks out for me is hanging out the washing at home, because it's always something I forget to do. The laundry's downstairs. We'll be about to go out and I suddenly remember, oh, I haven't hung out the washing. There's a bit of time pressure. Maybe there are other things I've got to get done before we get out the door. I run downstairs, put the washing in the basket, go out to the line, and I'm hanging the washing out. And I can catch myself. I might be in some sort of fantasy about the future—maybe just listing the other jobs I still need to get done when I get back upstairs before I get the kids in the car. Or maybe it's something even less connected, something to do with what's happening at work.

And it strikes me sometimes that that inner world is actually more real to me as I'm standing there hanging out the washing than the experience I'm having in the moment. The thing about hanging out the washing for me is that my washing line is in this beautiful spot. It's under flooded gums that sometimes have koalas in them. There's a grove of Bangalow palms, and there's a currawong who nests above the washing line and flies to the Bangalow palms to eat the little red fruits. So it's quite a rich and beautiful experience to be standing where my washing line is. It involves whole body movement—the bending down to pick up the clothes, lifting up and then seeing this canopy above me, the birds flying, and so on.

So it's really quite interesting when I catch myself in this fantasy world where something that's happening at work next week is more real to me in this moment than standing here under these magnificent trees, moving my body, connecting with the sensations of the wet washing. And I'm sure this is familiar to all of us. Habitually, this is what we do. We check out. We're not aware. We don't know what we're experiencing right now.

We can demonstrate the quality of awareness we use in a natural awareness approach with a simple exercise I learned from my teacher in this approach, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. Right now, are you seeing? Everyone seeing? Yes, we've got some definite positive seeing. So we can all agree that we're seeing. And are you aware that you are seeing? Some more nods. We're aware that we're seeing because I've directed your awareness to it. I've asked the question and now we're all thinking about it, and we realise, oh, I am seeing, and I'm aware that I'm seeing.

But before I asked you the question, were you aware that you were seeing? Most of us were not. Some of us were. So we were seeing, but most of us were not aware we were seeing, because we weren't holding that knowing in our mind. We were kind of checked out to the fact that we were seeing, even though of course we were seeing, receiving visual objects. This is the distinction between not knowing and knowing what we're aware of—experiencing and knowing what we're experiencing in the present moment, or being oblivious to it.

And it's simple, right? It's simple to know that I am seeing. It doesn't take a lot of effort, because we're not

forcing the attention here or there. We're simply receiving what's in our experience and knowing what we're seeing. But it does require that we remember to be aware.

So in this introductory stage of the practice, we're simply remembering to be aware of whatever I'm experiencing right now. We can think of awareness like a radar that receives objects. We're not trying to be aware of everything all at once, but simply noticing what objects are appearing most clearly in our radar-like awareness.

When we practice in this way, it doesn't matter what we're aware of. It doesn't matter what our experience is. We're cultivating no preference for one meditation experience over another. This becomes more important later in the practice, but even as we get into it, mindfulness and concentration are not yet well developed. So the flavor of today's practice may well be overwhelmingly one of tiredness or restlessness or boredom. If that's what shows up, then that's what we can be aware of. No preference for one object over another. We're not practicing to make something happen, and we're not practicing to make something go away. We're just noticing what is here in order to get to know it and understand it.

The effort comes from remembering to be aware. When we remember, we're immediately in touch with what's going on—just as when I asked you, "Are you seeing?" you were immediately aware that you were seeing. The light of awareness immediately comes on.

We can think of awareness like a light, and remembering to be aware is like tapping the light switch. Simply remembering—"What am I experiencing now? Am I aware now? What am I aware of now?"—we're tapping the light switch of awareness and the light momentarily comes on. We're in touch with our present moment experience.

But then, because we're so habitually accustomed to checking out, drifting back into the thought narratives of past or future, what happens is that at the beginning of practice, the light doesn't stay on for long. It's just on momentarily. Then before we realize it, we're in the darkness again. We remember, "Oh, what am I aware of? What am I experiencing right now?" And so we've tapped the light switch and the light comes back on.

Because this is a natural process, what happens is that as the momentum develops, as we get into the retreat, the light starts to stay on for longer and longer each time we tap it. But our job is just to tap it whenever we remember.

Let's do a brief guided meditation to get an experiential taste of this approach. If you'd like to get into a comfortable posture for a brief guided meditation.

Relax into your body. There's no urgency. Give yourself permission to rest into the practice. Awareness is not difficult, and it's always available.

You can start by asking yourself: Am I relaxed? Just know this. Am I relaxed, or is there tension? Just

knowing this is enough. If I know whether or not I'm relaxed, then awareness is present.

Relax and be aware. What does it feel like to inhabit this body? There's no rush, no urgency, no need to get anywhere. Just be here now with whatever experience is unfolding.

Relax and be aware. What are you aware of? What is most clear in your experience now? It could be anything at all—a physical sensation, a sound, a feeling, thinking. It doesn't matter what it is. Whatever it is, allow it in. We can be aware of any experience.

What are you experiencing now? Has it changed? It's natural for awareness to move. You don't need to try to keep it anywhere. Just notice where it goes. Just be interested in the present moment. That's enough.

Be gentle on yourself. It doesn't matter what you're aware of. Whatever is here, you can welcome it—the tiredness, the restlessness, doubt, irritation. This practice gives you permission to be with any experience in a skillful, wise, loving way. There's no need to strive for a different experience to the one you're having now. Just notice what's happening now. What am I aware of now? What am I experiencing now?

If you find yourself getting lost or distracted, you can use a question like this to bring yourself back to awareness. Whenever you remember, tap the light switch of awareness and notice your present experience. That's all.

Awareness is always available. It's natural, not difficult. It's okay for it to feel like not much is happening, because awareness is very ordinary—just knowing what is going on now. Simply relax and be aware. It's okay to forget. That's also natural. When you remember, simply tap the light switch of awareness. That's all you need to do. By tapping the light switch of awareness, we're cultivating wakefulness.

So these are the introductory instructions for the practice. The very relaxed, open, and flexible way that we can employ this remembering to be aware—simply tapping the light switch of awareness, welcoming any experience as the object of our awareness—means that we're really inviting and encouraging you to practice throughout your waking moments while here on retreat. To practice in all postures and in all activities.

This kind of gentle, light-touch awareness that doesn't take much effort—just knowing what I'm experiencing now—is a type of awareness that is not limited to special meditation postures or formal sessions. It's something we can bring to all of our moments on retreat. When you get up and leave the hall, your awareness can be just as clear as when you're sitting here practicing.

With the open schedule, of course, it's up to you what you do between mealtimes and the teaching sessions. Whatever you do—whether you come in here to do a formal sit, or you're doing some walking, or brushing your teeth, or sitting on the veranda with a cup of tea—you can bring the same quality of awareness and the same intention to remember to be aware to all of the activities.

I'll speak a little more about this tonight, but really the invitation and the opportunity is to be as natural

while you're here on the retreat as you can be. Treat the retreat not as something separate from your life, but as part of your life. This is another nine days in your life, and you're fortunate to have particularly conducive conditions for focusing on the practice. But I invite you to think about the retreat as simply days in your life where you have more space and opportunity for practice, while essentially going about your daily life and bringing awareness to everything that you're doing.

Now, a few words about posture and relaxing the body.

Meditation is, of course, an embodied practice. We often think of meditation as something esoteric and transcendental, something we do with the mind. But we are embodied beings, and meditation is something we do in the body and through the body. The relaxation of the body is therefore fundamental to the relaxation of the mind. And when the mind is relaxed, that's when we are naturally in contact with our present experience. That's when our awareness naturally settles on unfolding present experience.

To speak about meditation posture: Patrick mentioned last night, though most people may not be aware since it's not necessarily emphasized, that the Buddha in fact taught four postures for meditation. Sitting, yes, but also standing, lying, and movement—which tends to get interpreted in the later traditions as walking, but in fact it's movement. If we think about it, these four postures encompass all human activity. Everything we do as humans, we do in one of these four postures.

During this retreat, we're going to suggest that you flow between these four postures as you need to. In these open practice periods, it's up to you to decide which posture is going to best support the light of awareness, which posture is going to best support this mind-body system to come into balance, for the energy to be in balance, so that you can most effortlessly stay connected to the unfolding present moment experience.

Check for any signs of tension or strain or dullness or drowsiness in body and mind. If they are present, particularly in these early days of the practice, I would suggest adjusting your posture. Try something different. Go for a walk. Lie under a tree if you don't mind getting a little wet. Have a cup of tea and watch the birds. But do it with the intention of remembering to be aware, noticing whether what you're doing right now is supporting this intention or actually encouraging you to be checked out—which can be equally true whether you're having a cup of tea on the veranda or sitting cross-legged in the hall. It just depends on the internal conditions.

This is training us to have confidence in what we know about our own internal conditions and our own choices about our practice—to have independence in the practice. You might recognize: "Right now, continuing to sit here in the meditation hall is probably not the most conducive thing for continuity of awareness, for staying connected to the present moment. Because if I'm honest with myself, for the past fifteen minutes I've been chewing over something that happened at work last week. Maybe what's needed is for the body to get moving, to use up some of that excess energy. I'll try that and see how it goes."

So it doesn't matter what your body is doing; what matters is whether you're remembering to be aware. The aim is to bring this gentle and curious awareness to whatever you're doing, with no preference for one object over another. We might have an idea that we'd like to be in the meditation hall until the bell rings for lunch, resting in a state of thought-free bliss. But if that is not what is presenting to our radar-like awareness this morning, then instead we go with what is happening. We notice it, we welcome it in, and we see what we need to do to adjust the postures of mind and body to stay present to it, to not lose the thread and become checked out.

Now, the effort in this practice—if you're used to a more intensive way of generating momentum and concentration at the beginning of a retreat, this can sound quite radical. People can be skeptical: "How am I going to generate momentum in this retreat if I'm just wandering around and kind of remembering to be aware when it occurs to me?" But what this approach does is allow our natural, innate capacity for awareness to become continuous, to become effortless, and to make that the basis, the foundation, of the practice. When we can ease into the practice this way, we find right effort, wise effort—a balanced effort that sustains the practice.

I'll talk about this more later, but this approach allows a mindfulness to develop that is more flexible, that is not dependent on particular conditions, that can stay continuous even when conditions are changing.

The effort in this practice comes from the intention to develop continuity of awareness, which is different from those directed techniques I spoke of earlier. With directed techniques, the effort comes from bringing the awareness back again and again: "Breathing is my object. I bring my attention back, I keep it there, it drifts off, I bring it back." With this approach, the effort is that we're aiming ultimately for continuous awareness throughout every waking moment of consciousness, from when we wake up in the morning to when we go to sleep at night.

Do you think it's possible? The invitation is: try it and see.

This is the effort. And the really skillful thing built into this approach is that if we try it—if we decide to adopt that as our goal, if we say, "Okay, if that's the project, that's what I'm going to do; I'm going to be continuously aware from the moment I wake up to the moment I go to bed"—the only way we can come close to succeeding is if we have a genuinely relaxed and balanced approach to the practice.

I learned this when I went to sit with one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. Over the first few opportunities to have an interview with him, I did as I was...

accustomed to doing, and I was working really hard in between sessions. Then I would curate the best and most impressive meditation experiences into a short, concise summary that I could regurgitate when I got into the interview. It took several successive interviews with him before it really dawned on me that he was actually completely uninterested in my most impressive experiences on the meditation cushion.

I would go in—and they were group interviews, so I would see him doing this with other people as well

and start to learn the pattern—and I would report, "This happened and that happened." He would listen, and then at the end, he would lean over and look at you really piercingly and say, "And afterwards, were you continuously mindful?"

After a few of these repeated experiences, I started to realise he was genuinely not interested in the special meditation experiences. All he was interested in was whether I could be continuously mindful.

Being a very conscientious and goal-oriented person, I thought, "Right, I will make that my project. I can do that if that's what he wants." So I tried to do that, and what I found was that the only way I could even approach some sort of continuity over the whole day was if I dropped all of my expectations about what meditation looked like and the kinds of experiences I should be having.

I actually discovered—and luckily this was supported by the meditation center I was in—that I needed to spend hardly any time at all in the hall. I had developed a relationship of strain with the hall. I would go into the hall and have these intensive sessions, and then I would be out of the hall and awareness would fall, the continuity would go, while I kind of recovered. Then back in for another session in the hall.

So instead, I felt like I was just wandering around the meditation center. I felt like a detective, following the awareness wherever it went. "Okay, we'll go over here if this is what's needed to balance it. We'll go and walk around the stupa a few dozen times. And then we'll go and sit here."

It was summer in Yangon, so the humidity was like 150%. I ended up doing quite a lot of sitting meditation in this little bathroom that I shared with a Swiss nun. There was just a little plastic stool and a plastic cup. So the majority of my sitting meditation for some days was sitting there on this plastic stool, just tipping lukewarm water on myself. "Am I staying? Am I aware? Yeah, okay, I think I'm still aware."

So the effort comes from remembering to be aware and from having this intention. But it doesn't matter what we're aware of. It doesn't matter where we are aware. It doesn't matter what we're doing with our body while we're aware.

That's the invitation to you for this first part of the retreat: relax, be aware, and enjoy.

Any questions?

"Yes, thank you for that. It's probably a technical question, but I noticed at the beginning you used the word attention, and then you shifted for most of the talk to awareness. I'm wondering—I see there's a difference in my experience—but I'm just wondering if you're equating those two."

This is a good reminder, actually. I often use awareness, and when I'm talking about awareness, I am talking about mindfulness. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, uses the term awareness, and I do interchange the two, so this is a good clarification to make.

When I'm talking about awareness, I'm talking about mindfulness—knowing the experience in the present

moment and having a continuity of that knowing. Attention—and I think maybe Patrick will be speaking about this tomorrow or sometime soon—the way I'm using it is the deliberate or focused placing of awareness.

We can place our attention somewhere. At the moment, if we take the visual field right now, my experience of the visual field is that I'm aware of this whole visual field that extends nearly 180 degrees and incorporates the whole hall and all of you. But in answering your question, my attention, my visual attention, is focused on you.

So that's the way I'm using the distinction. Attention is something we place somewhere, or sometimes our attention is caught somewhere. It's this more focused quality of awareness—like when awareness is beamed like a torchlight, as opposed to a wide and diffuse light, which it also has this nature. It reflects the depth that awareness has, which is something I think we'll explore later.

"From here, there's a spaciousness. You were talking about the visual field, and while I have my attention on you, I'm aware of other visual objects."

Yes, and the experience—like many experiences in meditation—is one of a spectrum. At various times we can have our attention on one thing but also be aware of the spacious whole field. Sometimes we can just be really wide open and feel like the attention isn't in any one place, but we're just holding this great sense of spaciousness. And then other times, such as when concentration is particularly strong, we can go right in to the exclusion of the wider field.

So it's a spectrum that we flow through.

When we're observing thinking, the important thing is that we're observing the activity of thinking that's happening now. We're not observing the content of the thoughts. That's a key distinction. And yes, awareness encompasses the whole gamut—not necessarily what we might consider ideal, but the whole gamut nonetheless.

And that's one of the key things about this approach. Taking this open approach and not choosing particular objects means that we genuinely don't have a preference for what becomes a meditation object. So it can be thinking. It can be sleepiness. It can be boredom. When something arises, we can make it our meditation object. We can place our attention on it. We can really think, "Oh, boredom—well, that's quite interesting. What is boredom? What's the experience of boredom?" And we can work with that, but we're not having a preference. We're not spending that session trying to make the boredom go away so that we can have a different, better quality experience.

Someone mentioned "thoughtless bliss" or "thought-free bliss." Well, maybe that's something to explore—if it arises. But I think we often hold various ideas and ideals about what good meditation is. Thought-free bliss is a bit of a trope that seems to bring people to meditation retreats. But what is it? What is the actual experience? Is it an actual experience? This approach is simply that we're not chasing after

one thing or another.

One person reflected, "I'm aware that I do have preferences, so I guess I need to be aware of having preferences."

Exactly. And try to be aware without getting into that tangle of "Oh no, I'm aware that I've got preferences. I'd rather not be aware." Yes, that's right, because that's another preference. But I do. Yes, exactly. Just allow the awareness of the preferences rather than pursuing them.

We're going to do a whole morning workshop on precisely this. It's a really good question because of course we do have preferences in our practice, just like in the rest of our lives. The thing is, we often don't notice the preferences because we're so focused on the meditation object that we've chosen.

But one of the features of this approach is that it starts with this very undirected quality—whatever arises. As we get further into this approach, we do take specific meditation objects, and one of the main ones we take is precisely this preference that we have for the meditation to be different. So we work directly with the heart and mind, noticing exactly that: the preference that's here at the moment, this sense of "I don't want this current experience" or "I want a different experience."

And of course, the key to working with it is that we see it, and by seeing it we're opening up the possibility of understanding it. So we welcome that. We don't create another preference that the preference isn't there. It's not about getting rid of the preference. It's not about noticing, "Oh, I'm actually craving the experience I had yesterday, which was thought-free and blissful—I better drop that." It's not "I better drop that." It's just noticing. Oh, yeah, that's the nature of the heart. There it goes again. Craving, even here in the practice. Okay. Relax and be aware.

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