Why Practise?

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 45:03

Tonight I thought we'd take a little break from so much emphasis on the practice and the nature of awareness and mindfulness and what we should be doing in the practice, and instead make a little bit of room for some storytelling and considering some of the bigger philosophical questions.

So tonight's talk is exploring why we practice, the purpose of meditation, why it's something worth doing. And this is a relevant question, given the pace and busyness of modern lives. We're all pressed for time, we're all stressed and exhausted, juggling all the things that we're involved with. So to voluntarily take up something like a meditation practice, we need to have a sense that it's something worth doing. And also, in the face of so many overwhelming and overlapping social and planetary crises, sometimes we may wonder whether sitting on our meditation cushion is doing anything of benefit at all, or is it just a self-indulgent luxury?

So this question of why we practice is something that you might like to reflect on for yourself right now. What drew you to join this retreat? Why is it something that you considered valuable?

To explore this question, I'm going to go back to a story that many of you will be very familiar with, an oldie but a goodie, a story from ancient Buddhism—the story of the Buddha's own life. Because, of course, he was consumed by this very question of how to attain peace and freedom in one's life. So we can see if his quest resonates for us.

Most of the detail I'm going to give comes from the oldest Buddhist records called the Pāli Canon, which was written down in Sri Lanka around 100 BCE, about 500 years or so after the Buddha lived. But of course, he belonged to an oral non-literate tradition, so for those first 500 years, the teachings were memorized and handed down from generation to generation orally.

The Pāli Canon is vast and it contains many incredible details about the Buddha's life and also the lives and happenings of many of the people, the men and women who were in his community of practitioners at the time. And of course the teachings that were given, but also many details about the society and the world in which they lived in ancient India.

The Buddha was a historical figure. He lived about 600 BCE, two and a half thousand years ago. But we can relate to him as a character in a story that can guide our life. The style of storytelling that we find in the Pāli Canon reflects the society in which the Buddha lived, which is totally different to the secular, rationalist, post-enlightenment world that we inhabit today. So the stories are embellished with things that we would label as mythology and superstition. But this doesn't need to put us off because we're not

being asked to believe in them. Instead, we're being offered that we use them to guide and shape the way we live our lives if we find them useful.

So after that preamble, let's journey back to 600 BCE to meet the baby who became the Buddha. He was born in a small republic in the foothills of the Himalayas in what is now southern Nepal into a warrior clan called the Sakhyans. He wasn't called the Buddha when he was born. Buddha is a title and it means "awakened one," so it's a title he took on after his awakening. In the Pāli Canon, he is merely referred to by his family name, Gotama.

Gotama was the son of the chief of the Sakyan clan. So not a prince exactly, as subsequent Buddhist traditions often hold, but he certainly did live a life of great privilege and status and wealth, with summer and winter residences, clothes made of the best Benares silk, pleasure gardens, and a harem of concubines for his amusement.

Gotama grows up in this sheltered and privileged life in his father's household and he adopts the duties of the eldest son. When he's a young man he takes a suitable girl to be his wife and in time she becomes pregnant with their child. And at this point in Gotama's life he begins to really question the meaning of the life that he leads and whether it can bring true happiness. He begins to contemplate the inevitability of sickness, old age and death, and to wonder how we can truly be happy and free when we're living in the shadow of pain and suffering and death.

As he contemplates this, spiritual urgency arises in him to seek a different way of being, free from suffering. It grows stronger and stronger until eventually he feels compelled to leave his life behind and set out on his spiritual quest.

This is a detail that many of us find hard to swallow, the idea of the Buddha leaving behind his wife and child. And it's true that his family did not want him to go. But perhaps Gotama felt deep within him that despite their protests, seeking a way out of suffering was the best way that he could protect his family. We do know that once he found freedom from suffering, he did return to his birthplace, to his family. And many members of his extended family decided to leave their comfortable positions of wealth and privilege and to join him in the spiritual community, including his wife and his young son, Rāhula, who by that time was seven years old.

Gotama left his home and first went to a renowned spiritual teacher who was the leader of a meditative community in the locality, named Āḷāra Kālāma. Gotama joined the community and learned from Āḷāra Kālāma, but after becoming a disciple and practicing diligently for a few months, he found that he had quickly attained the same level of attainment as Āḷāra Kālāma himself. And so his teacher had nothing more to teach him.

Clearly the man who was to become the Buddha had a prodigious talent for meditation. But he also realised that despite reaching this pinnacle of Āḷāra Kālāma's path, he wasn't yet fully liberated from

suffering, which was what his quest was in aid of. And so although Āḷāra Kālāma offered to share the leadership of the community with him, Gotama decided he must continue his search elsewhere. He's not going to find what he's looking for here.

He next went to another renowned teacher who had a spiritual community in the area and basically the exact same thing happened there. Realising that neither practice was going to lead him to final liberation, he struck out on his own and decided to become a wandering ascetic. He heads off into the forest to practice on his own and gradually joins up with some other ascetics who are doing similar extreme practices in the forest. They form a sort of loose community, a little band of them, each inspiring the others to become more and more extreme in their ascetic practice and their mastery of the flesh.

So this is the phase that he was describing in the passage that I read out the other night, where he was crushing mind with mind and sweat ran from his armpits. The kinds of practices that they were doing involved sustained efforts to deny themselves of food and even to deny themselves of breath, in order to face and conquer the excruciating physical pain that these practices caused.

And like when he was in the other two communities earlier on, Gotama is the most conscientious and the most accomplished practitioner, taking the austerities to such extremes that he nearly dies. And finally, when he's actually on the brink of starvation, he realizes that this path also isn't going to lead to final liberation. It's actually just going to kill him.

And in this moment he asks himself: might there be another way to awakening? He famously remembers a time when he was a child, resting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree, watching his father working. And he spontaneously entered the first jhana, which is a very peaceful and pleasurable concentration state. As he reviews the memory, he realizes that it was his pleasure lying in the shade, with his mind and body relaxed, that conditioned this spontaneous jhana state. And in that moment he understands that pleasure is not something that must be run from and mastered, as he's been trying to do with the ascetic practices, but that it has a place on the spiritual path.

This realization is the turning point in his spiritual quest that finally sets him on the path to awakening. By this time he's spent years perfecting the art of meditation. He's extremely accomplished. He's mastered all the transcendental states that his teachers could show him. But he's found that although these allow him to transcend his bodily sensory experience and reach states of sublime peace and bliss, they're only temporary states, and thus they're only a temporary escape from suffering. On top of this, he spent years mastering the most extreme practices that can be inflicted on the human mind and body in an attempt to crush and control his sensory experience. But he's found that this too doesn't bring an end to suffering.

And so now he realizes what's come to be known in the tradition as the middle path, which doesn't seek to transcend or suppress sensory experience, but refines and transforms our relationship to sensory experience. This is important for the way we practice, because the middle path that the Buddha discovered is fundamentally an embodied path. The two other paths that he tried before seek liberation

by escaping the body—by transcending the physical realm in the case of the esoteric concentration practices taught by his first two spiritual teachers, and by mastering physical pain and weakness in the case of the ascetic practices. But the middle path is an embodied path. It's liberation through the body, through intimacy with our embodied experience.

So to the utter disdain of his ascetic companions, he eats some rice and milk to regain his strength. And since his companions are disgusted with what they see as his weakness and capitulation, he strikes out on his own once again. He wanders off and settles himself down under a huge old Bodhi tree, vowing not to move until he's attained awakening. Over the course of the next night, he enters into ever deeper and deeper meditation states, until by the time the dawn is breaking, he's fully liberated from suffering. He's a Buddha.

Up until now, his spiritual quest has taken seven years. After his awakening, he spent a number of weeks absorbed in meditation at the root of several great trees in the area, reviewing and savoring what he's realized. And then he begins to contemplate who he might be able to share this understanding with. He decides on his five former ascetic companions, who of course are still relatively close by in the forest, continuing their practices.

He walks back to where they're camped out. And when he arrives, he proclaims, "I've done it. I'm awakened now, and I've come to show you the way." But they are not the slightest bit interested, because they think he's gone soft, that he couldn't hack the austerities that they were all doing together, and he'd given up. They saw him eating some rice milk and slinking off into the forest. So when he turns up a few weeks later and claims that he's awakened, at first they completely ignore him.

But eventually he says to them, "In all the time that you've known me, have I ever claimed to be awakened?" And they say, "Well, no." And he says, "Well, I'm making that claim now." So he finally has their attention, and they sit down to listen to a teaching.

In this first ever teaching the Buddha gives, he presents what are famously now known as the Four Noble Truths. And this is where we're going to depart from the Buddha's story tonight, although it's just the beginning of his story as the Buddha, of course. He goes on to found a hugely popular and successful community of thousands of lay and ordained practitioners, men and women, supported by some of the wealthiest patrons in the region, including historical kings and queens. He roamed the forests and outskirts of the towns and villages in northern India for the next forty-five years, living as a forest-dwelling monk and teaching tirelessly until his death at the age of eighty.

But we're going to turn now to look at the Four Noble Truths, where we find the answer to the question of why we practice. We've already got a hint about this from the purpose of the Buddha's own spiritual quest—to find a way out of suffering. But the Four Noble Truths elaborate on why meditation can help to remove suffering from our lives.

In summary, the Four Noble Truths are: first, the fact of dukkha, or suffering; second, the origin of suffering; third, the ending of suffering; and fourth, the path leading to the ending of suffering.

Now this is the noble truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.

Now this is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: It is this craving which leads to re-becoming, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there—that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, craving for extermination.

Now this is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it.

Now this is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: It is this noble eightfold path—that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

So the first noble truth is the fact of suffering, dukkha. Dukkha is most often translated as suffering, though probably a better translation is unsatisfactoriness. Many people prefer to leave it untranslated, which is what I'll do from here on, because there's really no English word that encapsulates the full range of experience that dukkha refers to.

On the one hand, dukkha refers to obvious suffering—ill health and injury, the losses and pain associated with aging, the suffering of death and dying, the pain of losing a loved one. But dukkha also encompasses the whole spectrum of unpleasant experience. At one extreme, there's the suffering of losing a loved one, which we can all agree is suffering at its worst. But at the other, there's the experience of stopping by your favourite cafe, full of anticipation because they make great coffee and you're really craving one, only to be a bit disappointed when you sip your first mouthful and discover that today's coffee isn't excellent. It's a little too hot and a little too bitter. Not terrible—just mediocre. Perfectly drinkable, but it doesn't live up to your expectations of the superb coffee you were hoping for, and it doesn't satisfy your craving in the way you had anticipated. This is also dukkha. But you wouldn't really say it's suffering to have a pretty okay barista-made coffee. In this case, it's more like unsatisfactoriness. The experience is not completely satisfactory.

Dukkha is also evident in enjoyable experiences, in their nature not to stay the same forever. The dukkha in the perfect coffee is that there's just one cup of it. And there's no guarantee that when you go back to the same cafe the next day, the cup of coffee you'll get will be just as good. Even a moment that you can't imagine being any better still contains the quality of dukkha within it, because it will necessarily pass away and be followed by less satisfactory experiences.

In fact, dukkha is present in every moment. I once heard dukkha described as anything you would change

right now about your present experience, even the smallest thing. Are you feeling a bit tired or a bit uncomfortable, or wishing you wore a slightly warmer jumper? That's dukkha. Dukkha is ever-present. It's part of how we experience the world. The word comes from the Pali prefix *du*, which means bad, and *kha*, which is the hub of a wheel. So dukkha is like an ill-fitting wheel that doesn't roll smoothly through life.

So there's the first noble truth, the fact of dukkha, which we all experience because it's inescapable. And then there are the next two truths: that there is an origin or cause of dukkha, and therefore there's a way to end it. This gets to the heart of why we practice. We're all here because of our dukkha and because we're looking for a path out of it.

People are drawn to meditation because of their dukkha. For some, this is very explicit because they're going through a painful time in their lives. For others less so, because the dukkha they're suffering may not be so obvious. But we're all drawn to meditation because we're searching for something more out of life, something better. We may be hoping for a bit more peace and calm, or we may be going for full awakening. Either way, we're motivated by a desire to escape our dukkha.

But to end our dukkha, we need to understand its cause. According to the second noble truth, the origin of dukkha is our craving. Craving is the feeling of wanting something I don't have—or, the flip side, not wanting something I have. That's aversion, but these are equal and opposite movements. And if you watch your actions closely, as we do in insight meditation, you soon see that craving and aversion are what motivate us pretty much every time we move our bodies.

They're ever-present. We feel uncomfortable in our sitting posture, aversion arises, and then we change position. We see a delicious-looking dish on the lunch table, craving arises, and we reach for the spoon. We feel tired, we think of our cozy bed, craving arises, and we get up off our cushion and head out the door.

So craving and aversion are usually what move us to act. But they're also what creates dukkha, because it's unpleasant not to get what we want or to have to endure what we don't want. This is what causes the inherent unsatisfactoriness of experience.

And whenever there's craving or aversion, there's also clinging. Clinging is our tendency to grab hold of our experience and use it to begin weaving a story, a self, a world. We cling to things we like and things we don't like. Clinging has this quality of not letting things go. And as we all know, we can refuse to let go of things that we don't like just as much as we can cling to things that we do like.

There's a very famous teaching that demonstrates this: the parable of the two arrows. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it. It's called the Sallatha Sutta, and in it the Buddha says:

When touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed ordinary person sorrows, grieves and laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical and mental, just as if they were to shoot a man

with an arrow and right afterward were to shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pains of two arrows.

And the Buddha contrasts this with those whose minds and hearts are free:

Now the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones, when touched with a feeling of pain, does not sorrow, grieve or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught. So he feels one pain, physical but not mental, just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and right afterward did not shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pain of only one arrow.

The difference here is that this second person, who is a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—basically a meditation practitioner—feels pain but doesn't cling to it and doesn't heap additional suffering on top of the pain.

This is an incredibly insightful observation about human experience. We encounter painful situations every day, no matter what our circumstances. We stub our toe, we lose a treasured possession, we get annoyed with someone, we face financial worries or health problems, we lose people we love. In all of these situations, big or small, we're struck with the arrow of physical or emotional pain. It's just part of life. It's what we face in life.

But it's what we do next that causes the real suffering—the reactions and the judgment and the spinning of a story about how terrible it is. This is the second arrow, the mental suffering that doesn't just happen in the moment but goes on and on.

Take, for example, the experience of chronic pain. It's very hard in our habitual state of mind to relate to the direct experience of chronic pain, because as soon as it starts, our habitual reactions have already begun. "Oh, not this pain again. I'm so sick of it troubling me. It's going to wreck the retreat, or the holiday happening afterward, or the marathon I'm training for." "I can never escape from it."

There's a movement here from the actual experience of pain in the moment—this is the first arrow—to an imagined future or an imagined past, which isn't real. It's just a story in our mind, but we're completely wrapped up in this story, identifying with it, and it's causing us great suffering. By clinging to our pain, we're letting it define us. This is the second arrow.

Basically, the Buddha is saying that life shoots arrows at you. Life is like that. And they hurt. But when we resist them desperately, when we cling to our own made-up stories about them, then we are shooting ourselves with a second arrow. If we can simply allow painful feelings to move through us without clinging to them or getting caught up in the story about them, then we can avoid the suffering of the second arrow.

I hope this is resonating. I hope this is something we can all identify with—the many ways and many times in which we shoot this second arrow at ourselves.

The way to end dukkha, according to the third noble truth, is to let go of our craving, aversion, and clinging. When we let go, we refrain from shooting ourselves with a second arrow.

With the coffee example, it's pretty obvious that there's nothing inherent in that nice barista-made coffee that makes it unsatisfactory. It's the clinging to the perfect coffee we had last time that causes the dukkha. If we were to let go of the idea of a particular experience of coffee, then maybe we could find this second coffee very satisfactory. Because actually, it's still quite a good coffee.

We could thoroughly enjoy it.

So the Buddha is not saying, as is sometimes believed, that we shouldn't enjoy things. Sometimes non-clinging or non-attachment is taken to mean not caring, or not feeling, or feeling neutral towards others or towards things in our lives. But that's not what the Buddha is getting at. What he's saying is that we need to cut the craving, aversion and clinging that usually flavor our experience of the world and lead to dukkha. It's the relationship of craving and clinging that's the problem, that prevents the heart from being free.

If you think about someone you love, isn't it true that love brings not only joy but also dukkha? Everyone we love, we also worry about them, or they annoy us, or they let us down, or we fear losing them. This is the relationship of craving and clinging. It can take something beautiful like love and make it into something painful. And in its worst extreme, craving and clinging can twist love into something dark and abusive, because we don't usually experience pure love. We experience love that's burning with the fire of craving and clinging.

Letting go is something the Princess Sumedha understood from a young age. When Sumedha was a young woman—she was probably still a teenager—she heard the Buddha's teachings, probably from monks and nuns, or maybe the Buddha himself, traveling to the town where she lived and teaching the lay people there. She came into contact with the Buddha's teachings and developed a deep love for the Dhamma.

But she was a princess, a young woman, and her life path was set by her social position. In fact, she was betrothed to a king from a neighboring kingdom. But she was apparently also virtuous, learned, and a brilliant speaker—this is what's recorded in the Pali Canon about her—and she was obviously very feisty as well. There was no way that Sumedha was going to let her parents marry her off when she had a deep thirst for the Dhamma.

Sumedha did eventually become a nun, and she left behind in the Pali Canon an extraordinary poem that details how she managed to join the Order of Nuns and dedicate her life to the practice. It's really quite an extraordinary poem to read. It's one of those passages from the Pali Canon that brings these people who lived two and a half thousand years ago to life—so relatable, so full of human emotion.

Most of the poem describes an exchange which takes place between herself, her parents, and her fiancé. It reads like an exchange between an angry teenage girl and her parents, who she sees as knowing nothing

and standing in the way of what she wants.

She starts by petitioning her parents with reasoned arguments about why she should become a nun. They refuse and try to reason back with her: "But Sumedha, you're a princess! You're about to marry a king. You're going to live a life of luxury." But the more they argue back, the more steadfast and insistent Sumedha becomes. The situation escalates until finally Sumedha declares a hunger strike. No food will pass her lips while she is still a laywoman.

You can imagine the situation. The parents are distraught, trying to reason with her. She's distraught and unyielding. Things are already very fraught. And then her fiancé arrives on the scene for the wedding ceremony. The parents say, "Please, can you try and talk to Sumedha?" He tries cajoling her with promises about the life they'll lead together: "You're going to be a queen. Think about the riches, the power, the luxury, this lovely life that we're going to lead together," and so on.

But instead of having the desired effect, at this point Sumedha goes ballistic. She really loses it. All of these details are in the poem. By this time, all three of them—her parents and her fiancé—are on the floor weeping. Sumedha grabs a knife, hacks off her hair, and throws it on the floor. And then, in an incredible piece of poetry that goes on for twenty-nine stanzas, she absolutely blasts all three of them about the dangers of clinging to sensual pleasures.

In the midst of this wrathful outburst—where she compares sensual desires to a snake's head, terrible poison, a skeleton, scraps of meat, a pit of glowing coals—she gives them this poetic and profound advice:

Every sensual delight is on fire, ablaze, seething. When a firebrand in your hand is alight, let go and you won't get burned.

And they do eventually listen, and they let go of Sumedha. They allow her to go forth and ordain, and she practices and attains final liberation.

So let go and you won't get burned. This is Sumedha's advice. And letting go is, of course, the opposite of clinging. To quote from the great Ajahn Chah: "If you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you'll know complete peace and freedom."

This is why we meditate—to create the conditions where letting go can happen naturally. Because of course, letting go isn't something we can force. It isn't even something we can do. If it was, we wouldn't need to be here. But letting go is something that happens naturally when we start to develop insight into our habits of craving, aversion, and clinging, when we see them clearly in the meditation practice. The irony of letting go is that it only happens when we get out of the way.

Letting go of craving, aversion, and clinging to free the heart from suffering—this is the purpose of vipassanā meditation, and it's what we're exploring on this retreat.

"Gone to the beyond of becoming, you let go of in front, let go of behind, let go of between. With a heart

everywhere let go, you don't come again to birth and aging."

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