Practice for Insight

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 51:25

Tonight we're going to talk about practice for insight—how this practice is meant to actually work.

We start with the meditation method. We talked about how we need a framework for the practice. If you start doing a meditation practice, we need some kind of framework, a system that tells us what's important to cultivate in the practice and what's important to abandon in the practice. As we discussed, the first and central quality that we need to cultivate is the continuity of awareness—in other words, mindfulness. From this, everything else flows.

We talked about awareness and how awareness is part of nature, how the fact is we are already aware. Is there anybody in this room who's not aware? No? But nevertheless, it's very easy to forget our awareness, which we've talked about. So the first thing that we have to train is the capacity to remember our awareness. Of course, as we saw, mindfulness translates the Pali word *sati*, from the verb *sarati*, to remember. In mindfulness training, we train ourselves to remember the present rather than the past. This remembering is active. It does require engagement. It reminds us that awareness is not just a noun, it's a verb. Awareness is an action. We aware what's going on.

We could describe the essence of this practice as facing the question: What is happening now? It's clear that investigation is central. Not taking anything for granted is central. What is this experience now? When we take nothing for granted, that's when we can cut through our habitual, conditioned, conceptual view of what's going on, of reality. We're training to cut through our conceptual habits and instead see things for what they are. This seeing is new, because we're not used to it, because it's difficult.

The practice is very simple. Be aware. That's it. But it's difficult. The major reason why it's difficult is because we tend to get lost in our concepts about our experience rather than be intimate with the experience itself.

For example, have you ever been in a situation in which you've tried to meditate but given up because it's just too difficult? One or two, I'm sure. Well done. What happened? There's some kind of discontent and restlessness which takes over. Did this appear in the form of "I don't like this," "I can't do this," "Others can do this, but I can't"? Notice that in this perception, what dominates is "I"—the one who doesn't like this, or can't do this.

One reason why "I" is central in this perception is because if we ask, "What is this practice actually about? What's it for?"—isn't it for me? Isn't that why I came? But this "I" and this "me," does it correspond to a distinct, discrete experience? Or is it just a convenient way of interpreting experience? In other words, is it

real or is it a concept?

What we're training to do is drop our habitual concepts about our discontent and discover where and what is the felt experience that I call discontent. Where is it exactly? How is it present? Is it in the body? Is it in the mind?

Is it both? What's the relationship between bodily unease and psychological discontent? And if you want to take this further, do I actually encounter an "I" who is discontented?

You notice that in this example we begin with a normal, ordinary, everyday situation: I don't like this. But we refuse to take it for granted. We refuse to accept it as an accurate account of what's going on. Instead, we are interested, we are curious. There's a degree of skepticism. We're directly aware of what is happening, with curiosity—because this situation may not be what we think it is.

So we could say that in this practice of awaring, we're moving away from what we think is real, what we assume is real, which the Buddha would summarize as "me and my world." And we're moving away from that toward how this experienced event, here and now, presents what it does. For example, does this experienced event right now change in ways that are beyond my control?

But of course, we might then have the question: why is this important? Why should we move away from what we think is happening or what we assume is happening? The reason is that if we don't, we tend to get lost in judgment about what is happening. What is happening now is good. No, it's not—it's bad. It's satisfying. No, it's not—it's disappointing. And so on and so forth.

But if we stay with what this experienced event does, with how we are experiencing, one thing we notice is its dynamism. We allow ourselves to become interested in it as a new event, something inherently dynamic, something which has arisen from somewhere unknown and then disappears, to be replaced by something else. And over time, we may realize that this second way of experiencing feels more authentic than the first.

This takes us to the idea of dharmas, or in Pali, dhammas. This concept of dharmas characterizes the Buddha's way of looking at the world. In the Theravada tradition, Mahasi Sayadaw follows this tradition when he says that reality—and by reality we simply mean what's really happening, what's really going on—comes to us in two forms.

The first is what we directly experience firsthand through the senses, including mind as a sense. The second form is what comes to us indirectly, secondhand, through concepts about what we directly experience. These are the two ways in which reality comes to us: what we directly experience firsthand, and what we experience secondhand, mediated through concepts—concepts that are about the first-person experience.

For the Buddha, firsthand direct experience is associated with understanding and insight, while

experience made up of secondhand concepts is associated with delusion or illusion, and the suffering that comes along with delusion and illusion. In the Theravada, firsthand experience is called ultimate reality, *paramattha*. You might have a question: is the Sydney suburb of Parramatta named after this? The answer is yes—one of the early pioneers was a devout Buddhist. He just snuck it in there.

Secondhand experience, concepts about what we directly experience, is called conventional reality, *samm uti-paññatti*. We'll drop the Pali and just use "ultimate" and "conventional." In the practice of awaring, what we're training ourselves to do is to ground our perception in ultimate reality. This is the world of directly experienced events, of dharmas. This is the world in which insight arises.

Normally, where we live is the world of conventional reality, a world of concepts about what we are directly encountering. For the Buddha, one of the things that characterizes this conventional world is that it is a product of habitual conditioning from the past. This conditioning has been shaping us since at least birth—for the Buddha, since way before birth. But let's look at it in modern materialist terms: since at least birth, if not before.

When we ask what forces accomplish this conditioning, the Buddha's answer would be the three *akusala mūla*, the three roots of the unwholesome: greed, hatred, and ignorance. This means the conventional world—the world of habit conditioned by the past, presented to us in our concepts—is not just wrong, but it entangles us in pain and misery.

So the job of the practice is to get us out of this second-hand conceptual world into a world of ultimate reality, of direct first-hand experience. And this is, again, the world of dharmas, and this is the world where insight and awakening can appear.

So this is the job: to go from the world of conventional reality, second-hand experience, to the world of ultimate reality, first-hand experience. But how do we do this?

Well, we do it by directly aware-ing this now, what's happening right now. But we need to cultivate a great deal of power and penetration if we're going to cut through decades of conditioned habit. How do we generate that power, that penetration? It's through what the Buddha calls samādhi.

Now samādhi, classically translated as concentration—these days I'm using Sujato's translation of immersion. But it's derived from the root *dā*, to put or to place. The prefix *ā*, toward; the prefix *sam*, together. To put toward together, to bring together, to collect, to integrate, to unify, to make into one. So concentration is really, I think, a pretty poor translation. Immersion is definitely better. But you could translate it as absorption, immersion, integration, unification.

Now, the thing about this is that when we are in samādhi, all of our mind, all of our being is engaged in directly experiencing this now. All of us is engaged in this task. The opposite of samādhi is division—part of me is practising, part of me is resisting, part of me is hoping for something better in the future. In samādhi, all of me is engaged in just this now.

And if we ask the question, when do we experience samādhi in our ordinary lives, not as meditators? I think the closest we get is when we do something that we enjoy, like play. Because that's where we relax and we allow ourselves to become fully absorbed. And this is one reason why we talk about the importance of relaxation in the practice, because relaxation encourages the arising of samādhi.

Now there are different ways to cultivate samādhi; there's not one right way. And there are different types of samādhi that emerge from different types of practice. It doesn't always present in exactly the same way. In this tradition, the form of samādhi that we're cultivating is called *khaṇika samādhi*, or momentary immersion.

So, roughly speaking, we could say we can cultivate samādhi by becoming absorbed in a single experience, a single aspect of experience, like breathing, for example—where we reject any experience other than the movements of our breathing, just push it aside, just absorb into one thing.

Or, we can cultivate samādhi by becoming absorbed into a whole series of different and discrete experiences. This would be rather like playing a complex game, where you've got to keep your mind on one thing after another after another, but you've got to be right there all the way through. Or like practicing mindfulness in ordinary activities. When you get up from the cushion, you're not really focusing on one thing. You walk out, have a look at the sky, check the weather, think about tea or coffee time. Head up, discover there's only instant coffee, feel bitterly disappointed, realise that as a yogi I should transcend such things. And just stay with that experience all the way through. So it's a whole series of discrete, separate experiences, but each one is being aware-ed.

So what's the difference between these two ways of cultivating samādhi? Well, the first one, absorption samādhi, comes from an exclusive interest in our grounding object. We ground awareness on a single, clear, obvious aspect of experience. We settle into this. We ignore everything else. So the mind becomes unified around this project and this single aspect of experience. And this results in a state of absorption. This is *appanā samādhi*. We're so fully absorbed in our meditation object, we forget everything else. Everything else simply disappears. Have you ever had an experience where you're absorbed in something in your meditation and the bell goes and you think, "What? We only just started"? And you realise that you just forgot everything except the meditation object. This is absorption samādhi.

Momentary samādhi has a different dynamic because we're not trying to exclude the world apart from our grounding object. We include, for example, distraction—which is what we've been talking about as a way of getting into this.

When we realise we are distracted, we don't drop the distraction and race back to the grounding object. We aware our distraction. And our distraction becomes a meditation object—it becomes what Mahasi calls the secondary object.

So what this means is that awareness widens and includes the journeys the mind makes when it is

distracted. What then happens to our grounding object? Well, the grounding object becomes the entirety of the six senses. It becomes the whole flow of experience through body and mind.

Now of course, at any given time, in any given set of circumstances, we might favour one particular aspect of our practice. In the beginning, for most people, this is body. Over time, we may become much more grounded in the experience of the mind, because it's the mind that fabricates experience, including our experience of the body. But in any event, in momentary samadhi, distraction disappears because distraction is our meditation object. We don't live in a world of meditation object here and distraction there. We live in a world of meditation object everywhere.

And of course, you get this strong implication that the samadhi practice doesn't end when we get up and leave the meditation hall. Mindfulness of everyday activities becomes central to this style of practice. We couldn't possibly succeed in it without mindfulness of everyday activities. And this means that our normal everyday activities become our meditation objects. We are aware of first this movement, then that sight, then this thought, then that feeling, without any gap, without any break. Each event is an object of awareness. Each event is our meditation object.

So the objects of awareness change, but the awareness itself remains steady and continuous. We could say that there's one object after another, after another, after another. But as they flow, the awareness of them is the same. It just tracks along. The awareness is completely steady while the objects of awareness are dancing. And this is why Mahasi Sayadaw emphasises that our distractions are our meditation objects. So never be bothered by distraction.

Actually, Sayadaw U Janaka summed this up really nicely. He had a meditation centre on the main north-south highway coming into and out of Rangoon. There was massive amounts of traffic, truck traffic, coming up and down. And on the other side of the road was a shopping centre with lights and loud music. You were meditating in this small meditation centre being flooded by pollution mixed with noise all the time. And sometimes these delicate Western meditators would get upset and complain. They would say, "Sayadaw, how can I possibly meditate in such a noisy environment?" To which the Sayadaw would respond with a smile, "You are so lucky—you have so many objects to note."

And he meant it. Because you can do this kind of practice in that kind of situation. You wouldn't do serenity practice in that kind of situation. There's a saying: noise is a thorn in the side of absorption. But you can get absorbed in momentary concentration in an environment like that.

As I train in this, what I'm becoming used to gradually is the idea of awaring whatever is happening, regardless of whether or not it fits into my agenda. Because what is a distraction? A distraction is just an experience that doesn't fit my agenda. It's not supposed to be there. So my awareness becomes continuous. In other words, mindfulness develops. And as mindfulness develops, samadhi gets more powerful.

The tradition explains that mindfulness leads samadhi. So in this style of practice, we lead with

mindfulness. Samadhi comes along later as a byproduct. In other forms of practice, for example in serenity practice, we lead with samadhi and the mindfulness comes along as a byproduct. They're always linked, but it's a question of emphasis. Which one do we emphasise? In this style of practice, we emphasise mindfulness, which means we emphasise the continuity of awareness, and everything else follows along afterwards.

When momentary samadhi matures, the meditation object becomes whatever is predominant now in any of the six senses, including mind. So you get a sense of how wide this practice becomes and is meant to become.

As we cultivate momentary samadhi, what do we begin to see? What becomes clear? Of course, one thing that becomes clear is change. We develop what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence, *anicca-saññā*, which for him is important because it's the entry into insight. We're going to talk more about this in a couple of nights. We cultivate momentary samadhi because this makes the fact of change clear—clear in depth.

So why is this important? Let's return to this idea of direct first-hand experience versus indirect second-hand experience—in other words, the world of concept. What characterizes concept? Let's take one example. Let's take a concept of something we have not directly encountered. Let's say the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth, or what I prefer to call life after life. Does this actually exist? Is it real? Is this doctrine true?

Now, some people believe it, and they believe it because authoritative texts say it is true. Some people disbelieve it because it contradicts their belief in scientific materialism. And we find both of these positions among practitioners of Buddhist meditation. So these two positions—yes, there is rebirth because Buddha said so; no, there isn't because it's scientifically impossible—they are diametrically opposed to each other. But they do have one thing in common: they are both concepts.

Has anybody directly experienced rebirth? Now there certainly are people who have a memory of a previous life. This has been well documented. But these memories are themselves concepts. Like any memory, like the memory of last week, they are creations of the mind that may or may not correspond to an actually encountered first-person experience that occurred in the past. And I think every trial lawyer is intimately aware of this fact.

So they're concepts. That's what they have in common. And what do all concepts have in common, even those that are totally opposed to each other? Even when you have to choose one and cannot choose the other? They appear as permanent—what the Buddha would call *nitya*. They are not permanent in the sense of lasting forever and ever, but permanent in the sense of lasting unchanged over time. This is what permanent means for the Buddha: something that lasts unchanged over time, regardless of the unit of time.

Let's say, for example, that ten or twenty years ago I decided that the Buddha must be right. There is rebirth, if he says so. I am prepared to take his word for it. Or let's say, in an alternate parallel universe, that ten or twenty years ago I decided that regardless of what the Buddha says, there is no rebirth. It's just scientifically impossible. Now, has this concept and my relationship to this concept changed over the past ten or twenty years? Well, apparently not. So this concept is permanent—using permanent in the sense that the Buddha means it, lasting unchanged over time. And it can appear as permanent precisely because it is a concept. Concepts are permanent in the sense that they remain stable over time.

We don't spend all our time thinking about rebirth, but let's say you are one of those who does not believe in rebirth. And let's say you're listening to a dharma talk where the speaker says that rebirth is true, and if you don't believe it, you cannot be a Buddhist anymore, and your practice cannot end in enlightenment. Apparently there are such dharma talks. So what is going on? You're having a direct, first-hand experience of listening to the talk and a direct, first-hand experience of agitation.

A felt sense of dissatisfaction that the speaker is demanding you make an act of faith that you don't actually have, with the implied threat that if you don't, you will be excluded from the club of enlightenment.

So let's say you are one of those who does believe in rebirth, and you arrive at this same talk with this belief firmly in place. You are having a direct, first-hand experience of listening to this talk and a direct, first-hand experience of satisfaction—a felt sense of confirmation in your belief and pleasure that this truth is being put forward.

These specific experiences of listening to the talk and responding to the talk are direct, they are first-hand, and they are changing. They are not permanent. They do not last over time. So let's say the next night, as a glutton for punishment, you go to another dharma talk, and it turns out that it's about the same thing. The concepts in the dharma talk might be exactly the same, but the felt encounter with the talk and the felt responses to the talk arising in the mind and the body—these will be different from the night before. Perhaps there will be some boredom in going over the same territory again.

So the direct first-hand experiences are not permanent. The concepts are permanent. Concepts are stable; they last unchanged over a period of time. The belief you hold or reject today could well be the same belief you held or rejected ten or twenty years ago. But direct encounters with this now, the world revealed by awareness, are unstable. They do not last unchanged over time.

If you are listening to this legendary dharma talk, and if, as a practitioner, you notice an affective relationship to the words—whether approval or disapproval—you may choose to be aware of the arising of this affective response as your meditation object. And what would you find? Changing, shifting physical sensations and psychological responses. You would find impermanence.

So the practice of momentary samādhi reveals a world perceived as impermanent, a world subject to

change. Now for the Buddha, that which is anicca, impermanent, is also dukkha, inherently unsatisfactory, and that which is dukkha is anattā, is not self. Why all this is, we're going to explore in a couple of nights from now. And the recognition of these three universal characteristics of experience—this is what constitutes insight. So this is the trajectory of the practice. This is why we emphasize the continuity of awareness.

And as well, for these three universal characteristics of experience to become clear, to become a part of our world, we have to develop a calm, still, powerful mind. This is the function of samādhi. So it can help to use a central reference point, some aspect of experience that we come back to again and again—what we've been calling the grounding object.

Different traditions recommend different grounding objects, but as we said, the grounding object is more a function than a thing. Whatever works to hold our attention over time is our grounding object. For most people in the early stages of practice, this tends to be some aspect of body, but it may well mature into mind itself. It may mature into a sense of the dynamic interplay between body and mind.

But for how to get there: begin with what is clear and obvious now, and then track the wanderings of your awareness. Over time, your grounding objects will remain clear, or become clear. This is why we emphasize the importance of seeing transitions. We are not simply trying to make mind and body still. We're training to stay with the movements of awareness itself and the objects of awareness, both.

Coming back to Sayadaw U Janaka, when he was teaching in Australia, at the end of a retreat he was asked by one practitioner, "How do I know if I'm making progress in my daily meditation practice?" An interesting question. But his answer came as a surprise to me. He did not, for example, say, "If your samādhi is getting stronger, you are making progress," which is what I expected him to say. What he said was, "If your experience is changing, you're making progress."

"But my meditation has got a lot worse since the retreat!"

"Congratulations! You notice that. That's change. Stay with it. It's important."

Seeing change opens us up to seeing how the mind fabricates our experience. We begin by assuming something is already given—me, my world. And then we learn to recognize that something is fabricated by the mind, dependent upon conditions. For example, I come to a meditation retreat: reasonable accommodation, very nice food, nice meditation hall.

Follow meditators who do not irritate me in the slightest, but instead model the depths of samādhi and mindfulness. And lo and behold, mysteriously, my samādhi deepens.

Then I go back home, and within forty-eight hours it's completely evaporated. Me and my world. But I have good samādhi—I know I had it then. This is me. I'm a good meditator. I can sit here for two hours and just be mindful. That's me. That's the self. That's permanent.

No. It's just conditions.

Does this mean I'm a bad meditator? No, it just means conditions have changed. And guess what? They always change. So the job is simply to be aware of that. Don't take it personally. It's just changing conditions, that's all. Just come back to right now. What's happening? That's it.

So as you see, it's very simple. But as this process unfolds, what we notice is that our habitual world—the world defined by our concepts and our narratives, the world that revolves around the self and its fortunes—is not as real as the world defined by the three universal characteristics of anicca, dukkha, and anattā. And it's in this new world that we discover a much more authentic and a much more satisfying way of life.

Any questions?

*Question:** When you say transitions, you mean tracking the change? The transition is the point of change?

Response: Yes. As we get interested in change, we notice first of all that things change. But then we become interested in how* things change. We become interested in the intersections where one thing becomes another. These become particularly fascinating.

So if we're working with distraction, the moment I'm distracted, something happened. The mind went off into distraction. When I realise, "Oh, wait a minute, I'm distracted," what I might do is look back and ask myself, "What happened just then?" The kind of questions I would ask: What was I aware of when the mind slid into thinking? What was the quality of my awareness when the mind slid into thinking? Just have a look.

Maybe something is there. "Oh, that's interesting"—file that away for further reference. Or maybe you don't know. Forget about it, move on. But you become interested in the dynamics of change, how change occurs, and what conditions change. Again, you're monitoring experience over time, seeing how things unfold over a period, so you come to understand.

If you're living with someone, for example, you study that person over time, and you get to know: if I want to get up his nose, this is what I can do. You just get to know the whole situation because you've been tracking it over a period of time.

When we track our experience over time, we get to see the dynamics of it. And this is impermanence.

Because at the moment I'm tracking the primary and then the secondary—just about managing that.

Very good. The understanding comes in time. That's fine.

There's a sutta that I finally stumbled into. I knew I'd seen it somewhere, but I finally found it. It's called "Urgent," if you're looking it up on Sutta Central. It's very brief. The Buddha says a farmer has three urgent duties: to sow the crop, then look after it, and then harvest it at the appropriate time. He says the farmer

has no special power by which he can declare, "May the crop be ready for harvesting next Saturday at 10 a.m." It's just with the rolling of the seasons and doing the work at the appropriate time that something happens.

The special power—the word used for that is *iddhi* in Pali, *siddhi* in Sanskrit. Have you come across *siddhi* before? The *siddhis* are the supernormal powers: that the Buddha could fly, could talk to devas. These are *siddhis*. And *siddhi* literally means success—the indications of success. So, miraculous powers. When the Buddha was giving his talk, he would have known that his audience would associate that word with these miraculous powers. A farmer isn't a miracle worker who can produce a crop on demand. He just works with the conditions. Over a period of time—boom—there's a crop.

A practitioner has three urgent duties. I forget what they are exactly. But at the end of it, with the passage of time and the rolling of the seasons, realization arises. It's not that the practitioner has any special powers. It's just that they do the work according to the conditions. As the seasons develop, they get the results.

But it's the self which is impatient. "I can't figure this out. There must be something wrong with me. There must be something wrong with the practice. Actually, I think it's the teacher." And this is the world of concept.

Any other questions?

I have a question. You said in momentary samādhi—the khaṇika samādhi—that mindfulness leads to samādhi. I can understand that. The mind, that continuity, and then the mind focuses, all comes together. That makes sense to me. But then you said it's the other way around for absorption samādhi. First there's samādhi, and that produces mindfulness. I don't understand how that would work.

It's a question of emphasis that comes out partly in the style of practice people do and the rhetoric around it. For example, in this practice, you notice the centrality of walking meditation, moving meditation. At Mahasi centers, it would be sit for an hour, walk for an hour, sit for an hour, walk for an hour. And if they saw a student neglecting the walking meditation and just doing the sitting, they'd be worried. They'd seriously question this.

What's going on? If you do much more sitting than walking, there's much more samādhi compared to the mindfulness. Because in walking, it's more mindfulness than samādhi. And of course in daily activity, the emphasis is on the mindfulness.

But you can go to places where they teach straight serenity. They won't bother with walking meditation. They have long sits. Then between the sits, they might just hang out and relax and recover and get ready for the next one.

So it's a very different approach.

I think I understand what you're saying. So there, the emphasis is on the samadhi, but the mindfulness will come along if you're open to it. For some people, it doesn't develop very much. But that's the idea. Always they work together—it's a question of which one you emphasize. And in the insight lineages, the emphasis is on the mindfulness.

*Practitioner:** Talking about the direct experience of ultimate reality—impermanence, change, and then pain, and then not-self. Conceptually, I think I can understand change and pain. But not-self? I don't know how to relate to not-self. Can you tell me?

*Teacher:** No. I used to, when I give Dharma talks on anatta, provide a guarantee. Anatta is the most counterintuitive, subtle aspect of insight—the most difficult to intellectually understand. And I provide the audience with a guarantee: if right now you do not understand anatta, I can guarantee that at the end of this talk, you will not understand anatta. Because it's not a matter of understanding.

*Practitioner:** Oh, it's not a matter of understanding?

*Teacher:** Imagine you're telling a joke to someone, and you're building up to the punchline, and you deliver the punchline, and they look at you and say, "Could you explain that?" Would you even bother? No—you either get it or you don't get it. Anatta is the Buddha's joke. It's the punchline of his joke. You either laugh or you don't.

But there is one way of looking at it that gives you an entry into it. Remember, for the Buddha, self is the one in charge. So who's in charge of your life? You are. So the self is the one in charge. But are you actually in charge of your experience? No. You can't control your meditation experience, for example. You can influence it. You can make choices that influence it. But you can't control it. You're not in charge of it. That recognition is a taste of not-self.

*Practitioner:** Now, when you see it that way, I can understand.

Teacher: But you notice that flavor of not-self is tinged with dukkha. Because you want* to be able to control it.

Any other questions?

*Practitioner:** I have a question about the breathing from this morning. I didn't get a chance to speak to you about it at our interview. But I wanted you to help me deal with something. As we were doing practice today with the breathing, I was watching the breath and noticing that. And then I noticed anxious thoughts. And then I noticed I stopped breathing. And I was like, oh, okay—because sometimes that will happen outside of retreat. And it was like, oh, what do I do with that? Because that's a reality.

*Teacher:** And what you've just seen is an aspect of dependent arising. This conditions that. The arising of

anxious thoughts conditions the stopping of the breathing.

So then you could play with it. Well, what if I simply deliberately started breathing? What would happen to the anxious thoughts? Or what if I let go of the anxious thoughts? If I can let go of them, how would that affect the breathing? How does body affect mind, mind affect body?

This is part of the understanding we're discussing. You're seeing a connection between the state of your mind and the state of your body—anxiety, anxious thoughts, breathing. And so you start to see pathways. You start to see connections. That's what you're looking for. And then you've got a choice what to do next. You can work with the body—just breathe deliberately. You can work with the mind—just feel the anxiety and let it wash through. Over time, you experiment. You try this and you try that, and that's how you develop the craft. You become a more skilled practitioner.

One participant shared that they had sticky notes everywhere on their laptop saying "breathe, stop, box breath," because in those moments of anxiety they would get wrapped up in it and then notice the reminder. They wondered if that counted as a practice. It is a practice. And as Emma likes to say, you get good at what you practice.

Another person found it helpful to grasp that anything permanent is a concept, and that conditioned states lead us away from recognizing impermanence. They asked if there were any quick bits of advice for working with this.

Well, there is, but keep in mind that time is only a concept. So, you know, two or three years in a meditation center should fix the problem. But seriously, there's no quick fix—it's part of nature. I think it's very important for understanding the Buddha that the Dharma is part of nature. It's not that I'm in here practicing diligently because one day I hope Buddha will notice. It's just nature. It's just the way nature works. And nature works in its own time, in its own rhythm.

Someone asked whether recognizing something as conditioning is different from actually dealing with the conditioning. Yes, that's the first step. What mindfulness does is it clears the deck. You can see, oh, this is what's happening. And then the decision is, what do I do about it? That's where you enter the realm of sīla, of ethics. We make decisions, but what is the basis of our decisions? Is it a clear view of what's really going on, or is it complete confusion? The meditation gives us a clear view—this is what's going on.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.